

# **Guidance Fault**

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John Anthony Curran

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# Contents

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<b>Chapter One: The Consultant.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Chapter Two: New Information.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Chapter Three: Departure.....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Chapter Four: Incursion.....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Chapter Five: Consulting.....</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>Chapter Six: Collins.....</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>Chapter Seven: Terenta.....</b>	<b>107</b>
<b>Chapter Eight: Sabotage.....</b>	<b>122</b>
<b>Chapter Nine: Fire Fight.....</b>	<b>143</b>
<b>Chapter Ten: Excursion.....</b>	<b>163</b>
<b>Chapter Eleven: Collaboration .....</b>	<b>184</b>
<b>Chapter Twelve: Contained.....</b>	<b>208</b>
<b>Chapter Thirteen: Surplus to Requirements.....</b>	<b>233</b>

## Chapter One: The Consultant

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Kiranda Schaefer moved cautiously past the empty chairs and desks of the unhelpfully open-plan office, alert for any movement from the corridor on the opposite side. There was still no sign of the guard. Her plan seemed to be working.

The soft padding on her shoes let her maintain both speed and silence as she moved into a clear area. She approached the nearest of the two wide stone columns, and crouched behind it to wait and listen.

It was a full minute until she finally heard the guard's footsteps, following his usual route. The sound became unnervingly clear as he entered the room. Relying entirely on sound to track his position she eased her way around the column, ensuring the heavy mass remained between them.

Then the footsteps stopped, and she froze.

Frenzied thoughts raced through her mind. Could he have seen or heard her? Maybe a silent alarm had alerted him to her presence... The latter shouldn't be possible. Like most in the building, the room's sensors were designed to detect powered equipment like active camouflage and bugging equipment. The suit she wore was far too low-tech for such devices. The dense gray material and heat exchange hood looked dull and unimportant to their detectors.

Of course, the equipment built into the guard's helmet visor were easily capable of detecting her. If he'd stopped, he was likely using them to conduct a full aggressive sweep of the room.

Kiranda fought down the urge to run.

*He shouldn't be able to see me. This column has half the building's electrical cabling in it, the interference should hide anything...*

The silence stretched on, and then the guard simply resumed his patrol and walked out of the room. She waited for his footsteps to fade around the next corner before she risked glancing around the column.

He'd gone. The way was clear.

To reassure herself, Kiranda rested her hand on the weight in her hip bag. The hard object inside was still there.

She grinned, then left the shelter of the column to enter the corridor at an easy jog. The area had fewer sensors to worry about, and she was nearing the last stages of her planned route out of the building. There was only one more room ahead to cross, then a left turn would...

An electronic wail pierced the air, and the room she was running toward vanished behind the bulk of a security door that slammed into

place so fast she felt the floor shake through her soft shoes. A wave of cold adrenaline surged through her, and the echo of security slamming shut all over the building rang off the walls.

Instinctively, she dropped into a crouch and turned to face the way she had come. The corridor was surprisingly empty. No guards or patrol drones were visible.

She frowned. If she hadn't been seen, how had the alarm been triggered? She was sure the EM sensors hadn't detected her, she'd already fooled far superior versions on the executive level.

*Maybe the guard did see me, and pretended not to. Or could it be undocumented air density monitors in the walls?* She shook her head. *Damn it! I'll have to worry about it later.. My exit is cut off, the only option left is the roof.*

She launched herself into a run back the way she had come. As she approached the room with the columns, she caught sight of two guards moving between the desks on the far side.

They looked unhurried, methodically moving through the room as part of a sweep. They clearly didn't yet know where she was, so the alarm had evidently been some kind of general alert. Maybe the theft had already been detected somehow.

She dropped toward a desk, but the move proved futile. Even before she reached it, one of the men saw her. He looked straight at her through his visor, and grabbed for the automatic rifle at his side. His colleague was a little slower, but also went for his gun.

Kiranda jumped over the desk and sprinted toward them with a burst of speed only synthetic muscle could achieve.

The move didn't startle them as much as she'd hoped. The nearest guard finished raising his gun and squeezed the trigger before she could reach them. Kiranda veered aside as hard as she could, the pressure ripping the tough office carpet and sending her off toward a set of the stairwell doors that she slammed through at speed.

Gunfire cast a sharp silhouette of her athletic form against the white steps stretching up before her. Fragments of the artificial stone flew like shrapnel as she launched up the steps three at a time. At the top of the first flight, she grabbed the railing and swung sharply about to sprint up the next flight even faster.

Shouts echoed from the steps below, and the sound of running boots echoed up to her.

*They're fast!*

Kiranda reached the top of the second flight, and maintained top speed for the third. The building's alarm was still wailing, but through the din she could still hear the pursuing guards pounding up the steps. They were far too close, barely a flight behind her.

Rounding another turn, she found she had reached the top of the stairwell. A short passage with little more than service panels on the walls led her to a broad metal door bearing the word ROOF. Kiranda ran, and put all she had into driving her shoulder into the door.

She barely slowed at all. The steel slab flew open, scattering fragments of shattered locks and sending twisted strips of weatherproof alloy spinning. Continuing up a sunken rampway, she emerged into a cool night breeze on a flat concrete rooftop.

The building's perimeter floodlights were so bright the roof seemed to glow. The moonless sky was of no use, and her lack of active camouflage no longer seemed a wise decision.

The neighboring buildings were too far away to reach, separated from the structure beneath her by wide stretches of asphalt and dead lawn.

She ran on, and saw the building's two corner-mounted turrets lurch into life and turn their barrels toward her. They opened fire, the belt-fed cannons erupting in a blaze of white light. Kiranda accelerated to try to stay ahead of them.

The automated turrets used explosive rounds. With their headquarters in a built-up area, Tantis-Mundsen LC didn't have a lot of choice. The rounds were designed to detonate into dust at the perimeter, preventing expensive collateral damage. The company probably regarded the lethal destruction wrought on intruders like herself as simply a happy bonus.

The turrets adjusted for her increasing speed and the lines of gunfire swept toward her. From their positions on opposite corners of the wide, four-story structure, they covered both the grounds below and every inch of the roof. Even her synthetic augmentations couldn't buy her enough time to clear the roof. Behind her, she heard the guards noisily emerging from the stairs. Their arrival represented an additional problem she didn't have time to deal with.

Kiranda forced herself to move faster, squeezing all the strength she could muster from her pounding limbs. She reached the center of the roof with air whistling past her mask's one-way visor.

The approaching lines of fire from the two turrets stopped, barely a finger's breadth from her back. Hard-coded limiters prevented them from firing at each other, and she was directly between them.

Kiranda turned right so hard her shoes left half their soles as streaks on the concrete. The change in direction kept her within the narrow strip of safety between the guns, but also left her running toward the building's southeast turret.

The machine was positioned at a corner of the structure, high above the building's main entrance. It maintained aim as she approached, waiting for the first opportunity to shoot.

The guards were not so cautious, and opened fire. The first shots from their short-range blasters sliced through the air around Kiranda and tore deep gouges in the concrete. The black bag at her side tugged as a blast of charged particles took a chunk out of the fabric.

*One of them must be taking time to properly aim...*

Another shot smashed away part of her mask. The brief instant of heat so close to her face released a fresh surge of terror. She felt cool night air on her neck, and some of her blue hair spilling free of the confines of her outfit.

*That's too close...!*

Out of time, Kiranda dived and stretched her arms out ahead of her. The move presented her pursuers with a much smaller target, but she was a long way from the edge of the roof and wasn't at all sure she'd make it past the last of the concrete.

The rooftop was a blur rushing toward her. Then the turret flew past her side, and the raised edge of the rooftop grazed her breasts and toes. In the next instant she was clear of the building and falling through open air.

Four stories below were the ornate corner-entrance steps and a single floodlit car park. Behind her, she heard turret whir as it turned to regain target lock.

Kiranda studied the car park. Since it was night, there were none of the expensive ground cars it usually held. There were two of the firm's smooth white trucks, bearing *Tantis-Mundsen* in gold lettering. There was also a more recent arrival, an armored personnel carrier from one of the local private security firms. The rear doors were already disgorging the first of likely a dozen armed people.

She twisted about, and managed to plummet feet-first toward the newcomers. That meant the turret couldn't fire without endangering those on the ground below, but it also meant she was going to hit the armored vehicle. She winced.

The laminated metal layers bent inward beneath the impact, but the ceramics that reinforced her skeleton survived without damage. Kiranda suppressed the pain in her feet and legs with a mental command to the

circuitry implanted in her brain, and swiftly rolled off the roof to drop to the ground behind the vehicle. Right in the middle of the four who had already disembarked.

She rose and swung her arm at the two on her right. With the weight of armor slowing them down, the heavier figures couldn't block the blow. Her arm passed through the narrow gaps between their armored chests and the filters on their helmets, slamming into the thick material over their throats. With the impact as leverage, she kicked her left foot into the stomach of a third. She felt the man's multiple layers of armor stiffen beneath the blow, but the impact still pushed him off his feet and into a parked vehicle. The two she'd hit crumpled to the ground gasping air through damaged windpipes.

The fourth guard was female and didn't waste time trying to raise her assault rifle, instead kicking at Kiranda's single supporting leg with a speed only augmentation could achieve.

Kiranda saw the boot coming toward her vulnerable shin but had no time to dodge the blow. She relaxed her leg and let it bend with the impact, preventing damage to the knee but allowing her leg being swept from beneath her. The guard raised her rifle.

As Kiranda hit the ground, she saw the guard and the vehicle behind her, where more armed figures were making their way past the obstruction of the bent roof toward the lowered ramp. There were too many, far more than she could deal with.

With her back on the ground, Kiranda braced herself with outstretched arms and raised one leg in a desperate kick at the guard's rifle. She managed to catch a glancing blow on the barrel as it fired, and a patch of asphalt above her shoulder exploded from a near miss. The guard took an involuntary step forward to maintain her grip on the weapon, giving Kiranda the chance to straighten her other leg in a kick at her stomach.

With the leverage of the ground behind her, Kiranda's kick lifted the armored woman and threw her backwards into the transport to collide with her unprepared compatriots. The guard's sudden arrival bought Kiranda time to scramble onto her feet, grip the vehicle's lowered hatch, and swing it up. The door crunched into place against the buckled roof, wedging in place. She guessed it would take them a few good tries to kick it open.

Kiranda ran for it, hoping her escape route at the perimeter was still there.

The exit she had prepared was a stormwater inspection hatch on the other side of the car park, hidden from security sensors by a truck neatly parked above it. The operator she'd bribed had done well, leaving the

vehicle backed up against a deep drainage pit that crossed the edge of the car park. She had originally planned on a stealthy exit along the pit, enduring the foot-deep water in order to remain largely hidden by the steep concrete sides.

Unfortunately, the pit itself was no longer of use to her. The water in it would only slow her down, and the protective railing along the edge offered no cover. It was only substantial enough to prevent vehicles from driving into the pit.

She'd be completely exposed to gunfire for the entire distance to the truck, but there was no other option.

Kiranda ran alongside the pit. When the rooftop turret opened fire with a blaze of light, she jumped onto the metal guardrail and sprinted along it. There was a chance her elevated position might confuse the machine's targeting system, but to her astonishment the machine stopped firing altogether.

She didn't have long to wonder why. The answer presented itself in the form of a guard emerging from behind the parked truck. He wore a uniform similar to those who had chased her onto the roof, but with a cloth cap instead of a helmet. An attendant? As he walked between the back of the truck and the railing, he raised his gun and fired.

Kiranda dived to the asphalt, trying to present the smallest possible target as she drew her own compact sidearm. She managed only one shot, but succeeded in hitting his hand. She glimpsed blood and dark green synthetics, and his gun slipping from his grip.

She hit the ground on her outstretched left hand, and somersaulted a little awkwardly to land on her feet and rush the startled guard.

With impressive speed and dexterity, he drew his knife with his left hand and slashed at her.

Kiranda parried the blade with the barrel of her gun as she crashed into the man and drove a knee into his stomach. She felt armor and artificial muscle tensed to protect him from the blow, but he was unprepared for the weight her synthetic augmentations packed into her frame. The momentum drove him back and slammed him into the side of the truck. His unprotected head left an impressive dent in the panel, and he slumped unconscious to the ground by the edge of the pit.

Before she had time to feel pleased, a wide gash appeared on the truck's bodywork and droplets of molten alloy erupted in a bright arc. The neat, straight line was a near miss and her research into the building's security told her where the shot had come from: One of the patrol drones

from the stockyard behind the building. Somebody must have authorized them to leave their assigned patrol zone and join the fray.

As she dropped and rolled behind the protection of the truck, a second shot sliced through the space she'd just vacated. More molten alloy rained down, exposing parts of the truck's ceramic chassis. Kiranda risked a glance back toward the building. Two of the combat drones were striding toward her, both from the far side of the car park. They were rugged models, armored tripods. Her sidearm wouldn't scratch them.

Fortunately, her escape route was close.

Kiranda scrambled under the truck and toward the stormwater hatch, trying to keep the vehicle's broad wheels between her and the approaching machines.

Behind her, the guard's unconscious body began to slide. His legs were over the edge of the pit, and the weight was gradually pulling the rest of him in. The oily water he was heading for would drown him. Unless he was rescued very quickly, he'd face brain damage or death.

Kiranda lunged out of cover. With one outstretched arm, she grabbed one of his armored shoulder pads as it slipped over the edge. He felt too light, and she realized his legs were folded beneath him at the bottom of the pit and taking most of his weight. Her grip had stopped his momentum, and she could leave him safely slumped against the inside wall of the pit. She let go and drew back toward the cover of the truck.

A line of pain seared across her upper back. Her jaw clenched in agony, she blocked the pain with a command to her brain implant. The synthetic muscles reported no damage, so the wound was fortunately a shallow one. Probably just skin and some surface flesh burned away, no loss of mobility. Easy enough to get repaired at a decent clinic, if she could make it out alive.

She gripped the hatch's recessed handle and hauled it up. The hinged slab hit the truck's undercarriage, but the opening was quite large enough. The hatch provided extra cover from the approaching drones. As she turned to lower her feet, Kiranda caught a glimpse of the asphalt between the truck and the pit. Lying there in the open was a necklace of blue plastic beads. Her necklace.

She froze in horror. The string was intact but the clasp was broken... the damage to her outfit must have let it break free when she rescued the guard...

Reason told her what she should do. A single shot from her sidearm on wide beam would destroy the string of cheap plastic beads and any evidence they held. She didn't have time for any further risk.

Of course, reason had told her not to wear the necklace on a mission in the first place.

Kiranda lunged out of cover and grabbed at the string of beads as though her life depended on it.

The asphalt exploded, and Kiranda's implants reported that her arm was damaged. A cylindrical section of her forearm was gone, burned away. The ceramic bone and a backup nerve was intact, so she could feel the necklace in her grasp, through her three functioning fingers. She snatched her smoking arm back to her side and rolled through the open hatchway. As she fell into darkness, the metal hatch above burst apart, struck by gunfire from two different angles. Evidently there was at least one more security drone up there that she hadn't noticed, approaching from the other side of the truck.

*I wonder which one shot me? Good thing I didn't try for the main gate...*

She bumped and scuffed against the walls as she fell, but she managed to turn about to land feet-first in the ankle-deep stormwater. The dark gray groundbike she'd placed was still waiting for her. Kiranda hurried toward it, stuffing the string of plastic beads down the undamaged front of her outfit. A coded transmission from her implant started the groundbike's ceramic turbine. She straddled the machine and accelerated away, leaving the compound far behind as she sped along her planned escape route through the pitch black tunnels.

The one-way lenses in her mask clouded her infra-red vision, so she pulled the whole hood back to let the damaged fabric and her long blue hair ripple in the wind. As an afterthought, she touched her damaged hand to the bag on her hip. It was still there. The adrenaline was starting to fade, but she managed a grin.

The evening certainly had not gone as planned. She had no idea why the alarm had gone off, and repairs to her arm would be expensive.

But she had completed the job. For the moment, she could enjoy that much.

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Kiranda gave her client a stern look. "Calm down, will you? The arrangement was nobody would know what was done, and that's exactly what I've delivered. They haven't a clue."

The man in white drew on his cigarette so hard she half expected him to suck the whole thing into his mouth.

The smoking bothered her. He had already admitted the well dressed, mid-twenties image he used for their virtual meetings wasn't his actual appearance, and she'd confirmed it herself in her own initial investigation. So why bother with a detail as pointless as smoking?

It wasn't as if it suited the environment he'd chosen. The simulated room's cream-colored walls, ceiling and floor was one of the most basic defaults. There weren't even any doors or windows. Perhaps he liked the illusion of privacy, the suggestion they were completely sealed off from the rest of the Confederation's interstellar Network. Kiranda's own sense of security came from the arsenal of protective encryption she had in place around them. The code included routines many would happily have killed for.

"You set off the alarm!" He spat at the floor, smoke billowing with his breath. "That blew the whole deal."

She scowled. The alarm was still a sore point with her. "They believe it was simple theft. They're looking for a missing statue."

"A statue?"

"A pewter figurine from old Earth, dating from before the colonial expansion. A character from an ancient animated movie apparently. The last time it went to auction it fetched an even hundred thousand credits, so I grabbed it while I was in there."

The man clenched his teeth. "That was stupid! You told me you were a professional, but fencing rarities like that will only make it more likely you can be traced! When they find you, they find me."

She sighed. "That's why I treated the statue and dropped it into Genevieve Harbor."

He blinked, and calmed down considerably. "But... why did you take it?"

"To throw them off the scent. This way, their efforts are misdirected. They'll do a physical inventory and have security goons go over their internal network as a routine measure, but they won't think to look for planted evidence. Certainly not in Vice-President Fralin's personal datavault anyway. The rest is up to you. Use the search warrant you finally got approved last night, and go find it before the nasty fellow gets back from his inter-system jaunt and accidentally blunders across it himself." her client hesitated, gazing at the floor. He shifted his feet.

*That shut him up, she thought. Good. His rant was starting to get to me.*

"So the evidence is secure after all..."

"Yes. It's secure."

He seemed to forget about the cigarette for a moment and drew a deep, smoke-free breath. “I see. When you told me you had been detected, I feared the worst, but I see you were merely being forthright. Here is the remainder of your payment, it appears you have earned it.”

A green letter C with a slash through it appeared on the floor beneath his feet. The Credit symbol slid across to her and vanished. Her implant examined the transfer, and determined the funds were clean. It would barely cover her medical expenses alone, but she saw no reason to share that with her client. He didn't need to know she'd been injured.

The man fidgeted with his cigarette. “I apologize for losing my temper. Their lawyers have been wearing down my company for a very long time.”

Kiranda nodded sympathetically. “Well, they'll have a new use for them now. As CEO, Fralin should have known better than to gloat about the tactic at a board meeting.”

He chuckled. “The entire board could be charged as accessories with that footage.”

“It's there in his datavault now.”

“Which we will find in the search, so it will look like Fralin recorded it himself. I know.” he smiled. “I'm looking forward to seeing the expression on the judge's face when we play that footage in court. She may indict all of them.” He gestured at the wall, and a simple white door appeared. “I'm curious, how you think the board will react? Do you think they will suspect their CEO was preparing to blackmail them?”

“Their history suggests they'll put all their effort into covering their own asses. Losing the case against your firm will barely register.”

The man chuckled, and offered his hand. She shook it. “Well done. Farewell, Ms Schaefer.” He opened the door to reveal utter blackness, and walked into it. The doorway faded and vanished.

*No words of thanks, but I guess he still has a lot on his mind. At least he was decent enough to apologize for his rant.*

Kiranda concentrated, and the room around her obediently shattered. The shards faded away and the Network around her was revealed in her chosen form, a maze of data lines and exchanges that mirrored the layout of the city's data infrastructure. Varying colors and patterns reflected the current usage cost, available bandwidth, and traffic encryption level. Other divers like herself appeared as white, tiny dots so numerous in some places they formed solid shapes. There were much simpler representations that were almost as versatile, but Kiranda found the view often gave useful insights. Besides, it was faster.

She launched her viewpoint and flew through the maze, enjoying the sense of freedom after the sterile white room. Her only current job was finished, the client satisfied, the invoice paid. Her arm and back still itched where the flesh and skin had been regrown, but that was a minor annoyance that would fade in a week or so. For the first time in months, she had no deadlines weighing on her mind. Nothing specific to do.

That was a little dangerous. Her thoughts might wander where they shouldn't.

She felt an urge to yawn, and checked her implant's chronometer. The meeting had gone on longer than she'd thought. That gave her a task: Unplug and get some sleep. Her wounds needed rest.

Most people left a VR session by adopting the same pose their physical body was in, and fading across over a few seconds. Switching too quickly risked motion sickness, disorientation and even accidental self-injury. But Kiranda's fieldwork rarely allowed for such niceties, and she preferred to stay in practice. Smirking in anticipation of the discomfort, she disconnected from the VR in an instant.

Ignoring a surge of disorientation, she immediately stood up from her pale blue, two seat sofa. Her sense of balance took nearly a full second to stabilize, a good deal longer than usual. She decided that was an excellent excuse for a coffee before bed.

"Coffee, damn it!" she declared. Her apartment's kitchen recognized her tone as a verbal command. She smoothed down her dressing-gown, touched the blue necklace around her neck to reassure herself the new clasp was working, then rose and padded across her apartment's dense carpet toward her kitchen workbench. There, a large coffee machine was pouring fresh brew into a large mug.

Her stomach growled and she rubbed the pale patch of fresh skin on her arm. "Okay, maybe a sandwich is in order too."

A Siamese cat weaved between her feet as though intent on tripping her. She stepped over the animal with practiced grace and retrieved a shrink-wrapped package from the cupboard. "Dante! Garbage guts, you ate only a few hours ago."

The cat peered up at her and mewed.

She stooped to pet the animal. "Begging does not become you, girlie. No more 'til brekkie."

The Siamese appeared to accept defeat, and pressed its nose at a nearby water bowl to trigger a dribble of fresh water. Kiranda stooped to give her pet a reassuring pat as it drank.

The rippling water reflected the city outside, towers gleaming like gold in the evening light.

Her own apartment windows looked just the same from the outside. The one-way slabs of rockglass were thick enough to take a hit from a mortar. The reinforced walls were even stronger again, but when she'd chosen to refit an old corporate datavault to be her apartment, that wasn't the kind of protection she had in mind. The shielding in the walls and glass blocked signals. Bugs, probes, hostile network code, all of it was sealed off. The soundproof interior had come as an unexpected bonus.

The coffee machine finished filling her mug. Kiranda picked it up, and was about to take a mouthful when she realized something was wrong. Her good mood vanished, and the hairs on the back of her neck tingled.

Her cat stopped drinking. Kiranda glanced down at Dante, and saw the animal peering at the sofa behind her. Kiranda turned in a flash, tightening her grip on the mug to use it as an emergency weapon.

What she saw made her stare in disbelief.

Since she'd risen from it less than a minute ago, the sofa had been moved aside to make room for a luxurious, charcoal leather chair upon which sat a middle-aged and very fit-looking man.

He wore a black suit with a gray t-shirt in place of the usual collar and tie. His fingers were steepled and his legs crossed. His sharp gray eyes watched her reaction with evident interest.

Kiranda's mind raced. Instinct and habit brought her racing arm to a gentle halt. The mug didn't spill a drop.

"Good evening, Ms Schaefer." His voice was calm, confident and annoyingly relaxed. "My name is Colonel Isamu Collins, of Confederation Intelligence." He smiled in what he probably thought was a disarming way.

Kiranda shivered. *Where did that chair come from? How in the hell did he get in here?!*

The intruder looked older than the current fashion, perhaps in his early forties. His short hair was gray due to a mix of jet black and silver strands, but his build was the broad-shouldered type Kiranda associated with the military. Old enough to be her father, but under better circumstances she might have found him attractive.

Dante returned to drinking at the bowl. The man indicated her sofa with an open palm, silently inviting her to sit.

She fought back an urge to tell him exactly what he could do with the sofa. A growing sense of apprehension helped her remain silent, and she remained where she was.

“I know this must be an unwelcome intrusion. Please, take a seat and I’ll be as brief as I can.”

Kiranda established a secure link from her implant to her apartment’s sensor archives and retrieved footage of his arrival. The video superimposed over one side of her vision, and played back at several times normal speed. She saw herself sitting on the sofa, then standing, walking away, fetching coffee...

Both the man and chair simply appeared out of thin air. Her sofa ceased to be in one position and appeared in another.

That was physically impossible, but she couldn’t bring herself to believe the footage had been modified. He had to have somehow deceived the apartment’s security sensors. The right combination of projectors and field emitters could conceivably manage that, but it would have taken lots of resources and effort.

He had to be a powerful man. She decided to be cautious with any further Network use around him.

“You’re trespassing.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Your activities yesterday indicate a flexible attitude to trespassing.”

*He knows about the Tantis-Mundsen job!* She adopted a perplexed frown. “What are you talking about?”

The man smiled apologetically. “Your work has impressed me. I particularly liked the way you avoided the detection grid on the executive level. Rather acrobatic.”

*The executive level? That was where I planted the evidence...*

“You needn’t worry Ms Schaefer, I’m very good at keeping secrets. Besides, Tantis-Mundsen seems to have broken far more laws than you did. Covering your activity with a simple theft was novel misdirection. It made me wonder how you would react to a general alarm.”

Kiranda threw the mug to the floor. Despite her anger she watched the splash, and noticed some of the droplets land on the man’s sleeve. He definitely wasn’t a projection. She glared at him. “YOU triggered the alarm?”

“I’m afraid so. I had to see how you work under duress. You did well.”

Kiranda stepped toward him. “I could have been KILLED!”

He met her gaze impassively.

Kiranda realized she had admitted her guilt. Her hands shivered with combined embarrassment and rage, and she forced herself to shut up.

“I judged that to be sufficiently unlikely. You endured much worse last year on Carlos V, rescuing a hostage from a group of pirates.”

She felt a bead of sweat run from her temple and down her cheek. *This is crazy. How does he know so much?*

She forced herself to speak calmly. “What the hell do you want with me?”

“I wish to hire your services.”

“No.”

He closed his eyes and nodded understandingly.

His apparent confidence in his safety was getting to her. Part of her wanted to rush him just to see what would happen, but the inexplicable manner of his presence worried her.

Collins opened his eyes and gazed directly at her. “Ms Schaef, there are a hundred million reasons why you will be interested.”

She curled her lip in contempt. “I don’t want your money. Get out of here, and take your magic bloody chair with you.”

He leaned forward, maintaining his gaze. “The reasons I mention are not credits. They are lives. Confederation citizens who are in great danger. You are a woman who shows compassion, and I hope you’ll show it now.” He settled back. “At least that’s how you’ve been for the last five years. Before then, you operated rather differently.”

The heat of anger and fear drained from her in an instant. She felt weak, and her knees suddenly threatened to give way. Somehow, she managed to move and sit on her sofa instead of simply collapsing where she was. Her hand had moved, and was gripping her necklace so hard the beads were threatening to bruise flesh against bone.

Collins adopted an apologetic tone. “Ms Schaef, I am not attempting to coerce you. It is vital that any assistance you provide is entirely of your own volition. If I’ve misjudged and you are indeed uninterested, I will go.”

“Lives are at stake?” She felt hollow. All her anger had fled.

He nodded. “Many lives, on many Confederation worlds. I swear it.”

Kiranda admitted defeat. “What do I have to do?”

He produced a plastic card from his pocket and handed it to her. “Please rest, and think on what I’ve told you. Then come to my office for the details. You can make an informed decision then.”

Kiranda took the card. It listed his name and a network contact, but for address it said just *Confederation Intelligence Bureau*.

*Maybe this is a blessing, she thought. A chance to earn some peace of mind.*

Her right hand still gripped her necklace. The feel of the beads helped Kiranda to remember a girl barely in her teens, and to seek her advice. The girl was adamant that she take the job.

## Chapter Two: New Information

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Kiranda sat and gazed out the small window at the planet below. Sunlight reflecting off bands of cloud made the curved expanse shine in the morning light even through her sunglasses, but the spectacle failed to improve her mood. The southern hemisphere of the Confederation Capitol was dominated by bureaucracy, and she already missed the peace of her apartment on the planet's smaller northern continent.

A wall of dull gray hid most of the sight from view as the shuttle reached the orbital station. The entire craft shook as it docked.

“Thank you for traveling with Injo Domestic,” the automated vehicle announced. “Enjoy your time in orbit above NuAndrea.”

Passengers around her rose to disembark, but she hadn't heard the doors open yet. She ignored the hustle and kept staring at the small strip of planet that was still visible.

There were other worlds she'd rather live on, but her work made it necessary. Even with hyperspace technology, communication between star systems took days or weeks. Besides, the city of Djinn sprawling below her hosted around half the Confederation's data infrastructure.

The sprawling mass of city covered a quarter of the oversized continent, yet most of those living there spent their lives dedicated to the politics and power. She turned her attention away and back to the shuttle.

The doors had opened, and the line of passengers was at last starting to move. She picked up her carry-on bag and stepped neatly into the stream of people.

The station's interior was visible for only a few moments before the station projected a block of text above the head of the woman in front of her.

*Welcome to NuAndrea!*, it proclaimed.

“Check the flight log sparky, we just *left* NuAndrea,” she muttered.

The station's systems may or may not have heard her, but the image faded and her first good look at the station's concourse made her wish she'd taken an atmospheric flight. Traveling to and from orbit had cut hours off her journey, but the station was absolutely packed. *I haven't even had breakfast yet. Maybe there's...*

She had a new message. The knowledge arrived in her mind directly from her implant, bypassing the delays of sound and language.

Kiranda pressed her way toward the station's food courts as the message decrypted and passed safety checks. It confirmed as being from Collins, and unfolded in her mind.

*Ms Schaeff. New information has come to hand, forcing us to accelerate our schedule. Please report as soon as possible.*

She frowned. *That man seems to think the whole Cluster revolves around him! He could at least pretend he doesn't know he has me hooked... Well, so much for grabbing something to eat. I won't be able to stop thinking about this until I've talked to him.*

Kiranda turned away from the food courts and took a number of escalators down to a crowded level that seemed to double as baggage claim and surface shuttle departure. An overhead sign advised the claim terminals were being remodeled, and thanked everyone for their patience.

Kiranda swore beneath her breath. The few functioning claim machines had queues so long it seemed a miracle the deck managed to hold all the people.

As she pressed on toward the taxi strip, it struck her as odd that Collins had sent a message instead of simply calling. Was he too busy for a conversation? If so, why?

Hoisting her compact bag onto her shoulder, she squeezed through the queues. A drunk in a football jersey tried to grab a feel as she passed, but she managed to bat his hand aside with her elbow without slowing down.

A mental query from her implant to the local network revealed that the wait time for a surface shuttle was running at twenty minutes due to ongoing construction. A further query revealed that personal taxis offered a seven minute queue at a higher price. Limousine class taxis cost more again, but two were ready and waiting. She booked the nearest, a *Red Runners*, and followed the directions to a marked section of barriers.

It was only once the limo door sealed with a hiss that she realized how noisy the crowd had been. The limo's impeccably clean interior smelled of leather, and the curved three-person seat – like most of the interior – was bright red.

*Rather like a coffin. Probably not the impression the firm wanted to make.*

The limo's machinery chose a smooth, masculine voice. “Welcome to Red Runners, and...”

“Skip the chat thanks, and get me down to Djinn.”

The limo was no more than twice the size of an average groundcar, but as it arose and flew through a rectangular portal Kiranda concluded it had a first-rate inertial compensator. There was no shudder at all as it moved through the containment fields and out into vacuum.

“Your destination in Djinn, Miss?”

“Confed Intelligence Bureau.” There was no need to provide an address. There was only one public face for the Bureau on NuAndrea.

She relaxed on the seat as the limo accelerated toward the planet. “I’d like a coffee, please. Cappuccino, double shot.”

The gurgle of a proper coffee percolator rewarded her request. She closed her eyes and smiled at the gurgling hiss.

The bubbling peaked and died away. She opened her eyes and watched the panel on the dashboard slide open to present her with a white porcelain cup. Taking it, she held the foam under her nose and enjoyed the aroma.

*Yeah! That's the stuff..*

She drank with a blissful grin, only dimly aware of the blazing ripples of heat outside as the vehicle's deflectors cut a path through the ionosphere. The compensator ensured she felt none of the turbulence, and it was only when her cup was nearing empty did she finally look out at the view once more.

The limo was flying over a glittering inland lake, surrounded by the city's broad, gray architecture and tree-lined streets. The buildings were chaotic, every architect apparently intent on producing unique work. The result was an ugly mix of styles Kiranda found it difficult to look at. She consulted her map overlay, and was pleased to find the limo was already approaching the CIB.

The structure gradually came into view as the limo's nose dipped. The low, wide building was the center of a complex that filled most of the windscreen. Kiranda smirked.

*And this is just the public part. An intelligence branch this huge, and we still call ourselves a confederation! It's ridiculous.*

The vehicle set down on a visitor strip in front of the building. There was no sign of staff access anywhere nearby, and she guessed it was underground. Considering the size of the place, it probably had a dedicated subway.

The doors hissed open and a small increase in air pressure made Kiranda’s ears pop. The smell of summer flowers and freshly cut lawn flowed in, a welcome change from the winter air she'd left behind hours ago.

She returned the cup, and climbed out.

Neatly trimmed red and green lawns surrounded the taxi strip. Behind maples that rustled in the breeze rose the main CIB building. The wide structure looked no more than seven stories high. It was difficult to tell for sure, there were no windows.

The limo door closed. “Would you like to keep this vehicle on standby, Miss?”

“No thanks, you can go.”

The limo debited her account and gently rose off the ground before rapidly plunging up into the sky. Kiranda pressed her sunglasses further up her nose and headed along the path, through the old-fashioned rotating door and into a spacious circular foyer.

Every surface gleamed. A mezzanine circled the walls, the surprisingly high ceiling showed a projection of the sky outside. A semicircular reception desk was ahead, against the innermost wall.

A trio in suits were seated on benches patiently waiting. She ignored them and approached the desk. The orange-skinned attendant met her gaze, but said nothing.

“I’m Kiranda Schaef. Colonel Collins is expecting me.”

She kept watch on the three suits for any sudden movement as the receptionist consulted his desk’s terminal. Nobody had given any sign of recognizing the names.

The receptionist nodded. “You are registered as a visitor, Ms Schaef. This escort will show the way, please follow it.”

A bright green sphere the size of a baseball rose from behind the reception desk, and moved toward a dark glass door on her left. It was larger than it needed to be, so she concluded it was an armed escort. *Is it meant to protect me, or them?* “Thanks.”

A smoked glass door on the left opened, and she followed the machine through it. The gleaming architecture of the foyer was left behind, replaced by a corridor of more utilitarian design. Climbing plants adorned the longer stretches of wall, but aside from that it seemed to be all business.

Despite the spaciousness, there were only a few others moving about. Her implants detected minimal network traffic, though it was powerfully encrypted. She wondered if it was all an elaborate front, or simply a basic workplace.

The drone stopped by a row of six brushed steel elevators. Two were marked with horizontal yellow stripes, emblazoned *Maintenance Only*. The nearest of those two opened and her guide entered.

Kiranda hesitated a moment before following. Once the doors closed, the lift began to descend.

The only display in the brushed steel elevator was by the door. Rather unhelpfully, it showed only the word *elevator*.

*It feels like we're going down a long way. I wonder how much there is underneath this place...*

She felt herself become even lighter as the lift accelerated.

“So you people like it deep, huh?”

The escort machine remained silent.

“Cat got your synth unit?”

“This unit has limited function.”

She smirked. “Yeah, I get the same thing some mornings.”

The floor pushed against her as the elevator slowed. The sensation lasted a deal longer than she expected. *Damn, they really have dug deep.*

The doors opened to reveal a small room with pale gray walls and a dark gray floor that looked like polished granite. It ended at a door so imposing it looked like it belonged in a colonial era battlecruiser.

The slab of metal unlocked with a startling clang and then slid open, revealing a short section of passage and a second massive door. The walls held rows of sensor arrays, and a number of neat rectangular panels that Kiranda instantly recognized as concealed turrets or worse.

Her guide stopped short of entering the chamber. “Please proceed through the airlock.”

Part of her wondered if she'd been led into a trap. She shot a frown at the escort machine. “Are you not allowed any further?”

The machine remained silent. Kiranda nodded, set some of her more dubious systems into full concealment mode, and walked into the airlock. The heavy door slid shut behind her, and her implants immediately warned her she was being scanned.

Her palms felt hot, and began to itch. She couldn't be sure if it was due to nervousness or the scans themselves.

*This is no cheap spaceport system, they'll see my shielded systems. If they demand a full set of permits, I'll be in prison so fast my...*

As quickly as they had started, the scans stopped and the door in front of her slid aside. Blinking in surprise, Kiranda did her best to calm herself and walked out and into a rather ordinary office area divided into sections by partitions.

It took her a moment to realize the dark, glossy slabs served as barriers against any threats coming through the airlock. They seemed especially well-positioned to protect the room's other exits.

A man sitting on her left appeared to be expecting her. In all likelihood, he had probably been monitoring her progress since she'd arrived in the building.

“Ms Schaeff, welcome to Black Division.” He offered his hand.

*Black Division?! Oh hell, what am I getting into?*

She shook the offered hand, and felt the sureness of synthetic augmentation in his grip. His neat, dark gray outfit looked like a variation on a spacenavy uniform, but it bore no markings.

*I thought Black Division was a myth! No wonder Collins didn't want to give me details. Good grief, I wonder how many of the rumors about them are true?*

“This way please,” He led her around a partition and toward a side office with a slightly faded sign over it that read *Colonel Collins*. “The Colonel is speaking with someone right now, but he asked me to send you in as soon as you arrived.”

“Uh... Thanks.” *That's not promising. Anything done in a hurry usually breaks more than it fixes.*

The man knocked, and opened the door for her.

Kiranda entered an office that couldn't have been more different from the area outside. Genuine wood paneling covered the walls, and the single desk was barely visible beneath trays of data cartridges, terminals, and even old-fashioned paper. Both the Colonel and the man sitting opposite him wore the same dark gray. The stranger's chiseled features and tight-cropped black hair seemed mismatched with the lines around his sky-blue eyes. Kiranda put it down to genetic augmentation somewhere in his family tree, like her own dark blue mane.

Collins smiled. “Ms Schaeff! I'm glad you could join us at such short notice. Allow me to introduce Major Darius, head of infiltration operations.”

Kiranda heard the door close behind her as Darius stood and offered his hand. His powerful frame might have been natural, but Kiranda figured it had some chemical or surgical assistance. “Greetings Major,” she said, shaking his hand. His grip was warm.

She turned to Collins. “The guy outside welcomed me to Black Division?”

He nodded. “That's correct. Please take a seat, and I'll bring you up to speed.” He paused. “I imagine you've heard rumors about us?”

She settled into the only remaining chair, alongside Major Darius. It was surprising comfortable despite the metal frame and simple synthetics. “I've heard Black is a self-funded, covert division operating outside the law and without Government knowledge. But I've also heard that it monitors every processor in the Cluster, and knows if you've been naughty or nice.”

Collins grinned. “We’re certainly not so godlike as that. In truth we operate under the direction of the Senate, though in a somewhat roundabout way.”

Darius gave Collins a worried glance. “I’m sure the Colonel has explained all this is all strictly confidential? Regardless of whether you work with us or not.”

Kiranda nodded. “I understand, Major. Not that I know a thing about the job you have in mind for me, beyond a vague hint that it can save lives.”

Collins gazed at her thoughtfully for a moment. “About that. How much do you know about nanoagents?”

Kiranda hesitated. “Well, they’re nanomachines combined with genetically engineered bacteria. Essentially a more advanced version of medical nanopaste.”

Collins nodded. “The technology has been around for a long time, but as a volatile material with limited shelf life. Delivery to target tissue required intravenous injection until the last decade. Aerosol nanoagents have been developed that can be absorbed through the skin.” He turned to the space over his desk and the projected image of a space station appeared.

The design reminded her of a spinning top she played with as a child. The station was a disc, thin at the outer edge but swollen at the center. The top and bottommost points bore clusters of transceiver arrays.

“This is the CSS Ishmael, one of the larger colonial frontier stations that are still in operation. It was attacked with a nanotech bioweapon eighteen months ago.”

Kiranda nodded. “I remember the news reports. A separatist attack, high death toll.”

“Just over twenty-eight thousand people lost their lives.” The image switched to pictures of the victims, and Kiranda felt her stomach knot. “The footage you see here was not released, because the nanoagent used was military grade. All those infected died within eight hours.” He switched to a hand-held apparently shot in the medbay while the contagion was still spreading.

Kiranda gaped. “Good god... That kid’s skull is bleeding *yellow*! How can *bone* bleed yellow?”

“In that case, it’s the liquefied remains of her cerebellum. Bone becomes more permeable when compromised by nanoagent.”

Kiranda was thankful the video had no sound. One of the victims was thrashing about the treatment floor and screaming. It prompted a memory

she immediately pushed from her mind, leaving her with perspiration starting to bead on her upper lip, and a powerful urge to flee.

Thankfully, Collins switched the display to a still image of a shopping mall strewn with corpses. Her heart was still pounding, but it was easing.

Collins and Darius both watched the display stoically. She suspected they'd seen much worse.

The Colonel switched the images off. "Another item you won't find in the public record is the fact the weapon used in the attack was developed by the Confederation."

Kiranda winced. "Somehow, that bit doesn't surprise me."

"It's full designation is Spacenavy Nanoagent K4. A programmable bioweapon developed for the fleet by a private corporation. The infection rate and target selection are both adjustable, and it has since become part of the Space Navy tactical reserve. The theft of the weapon was during development, directly from the firm's own tanks." He hesitated. "The stolen batch was entirely used in the attack on the CSS Ishmael."

Major Darius interrupted. "That particular security hole has been fixed. External development got an entirely new security arrangement."

Kiranda tried to assemble the facts in her head. Collins had glossed over the theft itself, but she suspected it would have taken the resources of a major corporation or government to pull off. Maybe one of the non-Confederated empires was responsible. Colonized space – the Cluster – might cover half the galactic arm, but the Confederation accounted for less than a quarter of that. "If it's not an issue any more, why tell me?"

"Last week, the head of Spacenavy nanotech development was kidnapped." The image of a gaunt man appeared over his desk. Despite the figure's receding hair and pale complexion, his bright blue eyes were as sharp as those of Major Darius. "Even worse, he was taken along with a significant sample of his latest work."

*So with external security tight, they simply went for the internal team instead. That figures!*

Kiranda studied the text that accompanied the image. Doctor Jeremiah Astatoba, age 64. He'd undergone a basic regenerative treatment six years ago, but it was minimal. He still looked no younger than early fifties at best. He was a widower, with no surviving children. No augmentations. An impressively long list of qualifications and nanotech developments were credited to him.

*Intelligent loner, she concluded. Nobody to miss him either.*

The Major frowned at the image. "There's a lot of dangerous knowledge in this man's head," he said. "If his skills were exploited by a

hostile party, we could face an array of bioweapons against which we have no effective defense.”

Kiranda frowned. “The data says he has no brain implant. He couldn’t be mindhacked.”

Darius smirked. “Of course he could. Put him under, give him an implant, then leave him in a VR duplicate of his home or his lab. He’d think he was safe and sound, and go right back to work. There would be difficulties in maintaining a virtual world convincing enough, but a good team can do it. It’s certainly happened before. Besides, there’s always the possibility they could blackmail him, or talk him around to their point of view. We have no option but to retrieve or terminate him. Our preference is retrieval.”

Collins nodded. “It’s also vital that we recover the stolen sample, Nanoagent K6. It’s the latest iteration of the strain used at Ishmael, and represents the most stable nanoagent ever developed. Due to that stability, it might be possible for it to be examined, reverse engineered, and duplicated.”

Darius scratched his chin. “Fortunately we do have some good news. We have learned where Doctor Astatoba is, and Colonel Collins believes you are best suited to help us retrieve him.”

Kiranda hesitated. “Was he tagged with some kind of tracer?”

Darius grinned mirthlessly. “He was, but his kidnappers disabled it early on.”

Collins switched off Astatoba’s image. “We can explain the how later, and provide details we’ve gathered about the location. But only if you agree to work under my command as a consultant in our retrieval team. I can tell you the information came in only a short time ago, and we are moving to make the best of it.”

*So this is my last chance to back out. Help rescue a man who builds weapons of mass murder, to prevent those weapons from being used by whatever group gets their hands on them. Millions of lives is an exaggeration, but if it means preventing another CSS Ishmael... Damn it, I have to. I lost any right to a choice years ago.*

She met his gaze. “Count me in.”

Collins nodded. She may have imagined it, but for a moment he looked relieved. “Good; that brings us to six. We’re leaving tonight from the Westlands Spacenavy yards, transport from bay twelve. Present yourself there at twenty-two hundred hours.”

“What can I bring?”

“This is a stealth operation, so absolutely no power armor. Keep it light. I'll send an inventory of items that we'll make available to you, along with a rundown on our basic loadout.”

The list reached her implant before he'd finished speaking. It was extensive, and included a number of explanatory notes plus an appendix on military terminology. Evidently, he'd prepared it for her in advance.

“Gotcha. Westlands, bay twelve, twenty-two hundred.”

“It's good to have you on board Schaeff. The Major will see you to the airlock.”

She stood. “See you tonight then.”

Collins gave a reassuring wave, and turned his attention to a series of displays as Darius walked her out.

Once through the heavy doors, Kiranda found the green escort drone was still patiently waiting for her. As the machine accompanied her back to foyer, she called for a normal ground taxi and thought over what she'd been told.

It wasn't until she was in flight that she began to feel she had a grip on matters.

Helping a man who built weapons of mass destruction didn't sit well with her, but the mission was really about the danger of such a weapon being used. That was something she was prepared to put her life on the line for.

Collins hadn't said where they were going, but it was clear they were dealing with powerful opponents. She hoped the team would be up to the task, and that Collins knew what he was doing.

She realized the Colonel hadn't specified what skills she was meant to help with. Was it hacking? Her familiarity with customized security systems? Perhaps he wanted her there as a thief... That was an unflattering thought.

*Well, there's no point wondering about it now. There are things I need to do.*

The taxi turned down into a tunnel approach, and accelerated toward the distant tech district. Kiranda summoned her list of suppliers.

The list from Collins had minimal non-lethal weaponry, so she set that as a priority. A wrist-mounted dart gun would be the first thing to buy. She knew of a local who specialized in small arms and bomb defusing equipment, and decided to visit him too. The last time they'd spoken, he said he'd landed a batch of circuit probes with the new biogel interlinks. She'd asked him to set two aside for her.

Kiranda checked the time on her implant, and found Collins had set a tight timeframe. She needed to prioritize. Reluctantly, she instructed her implant to start a shopping list. With a list organized by priority, she could ensure she got the most vital items in the time she had.

She struggled to decide which of the dozens of items she wanted was the most important. Eventually she chose and made her first entry.

1: Freeze-dried Arabica instant coffee.

Instant coffee would be bad enough, but there was no way she was going to drink the generic junk listed in that inventory!

## Chapter Three: Departure

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Kiranda nursed her new backpack and watched the floodlit hangars zoom by as the young-looking private drove her through the dockyards. For some reason the man was driving with the windshield down and a pair of goggles protecting his eyes. Her own eyes needed no such protection, but the stinging sensation of windblown dust against her skin was less than welcome. But he seemed to be enjoying himself so much she simply put up with it.

The facility was vast. The building she could see in the moonlight and floodlamps seemed to have been built or remodeled over the decades to handle changing needs. Most of it was dedicated to atmospheric craft, since the big armored ships never left orbit.

The private steered them toward three small orbital lifters lined up in front of a hangar, and drove around behind them. The loading ramp of the furthest craft was lowered, casting a shadow in every direction from the hangar lights. If Collins was keeping their impending departure secret, he was doing so by hiding it in plain sight.

The vehicle came to a halt short of the ramp, and the young man beamed at her, his gaze again flicking involuntarily to her modest bustline. “Bay twelve Ma'am.”

She hoisted her pack onto her shoulder and hopped down before allowing herself a smile. “Thanks.”

As the private zoomed away, she studied the two figures in conversation at the top of the ramp. The outline of Collins was now familiar to her, but she didn't recognize the stocky woman with him. A head shorter than the Colonel, the hazel-haired figure seemed fairly young, possibly even a little younger than herself. She switched to thermal imaging for a moment, and found the stranger didn't appear to have any augmentation.

Collins beckoned her forward. “Schaeff! Allow me to introduce Lieutenant Calden, another member of the team. You'll meet the others at the briefing in orbit.”

The woman put on an impressively wide smile as she offered her hand. Her handshake proved to be equally enthusiastic. “Hello, Schaeff! Welcome aboard.” Her smile creased her otherwise youthful features along well-used lines.

“Pleased to meet you Calden.” She wondered if her cheerfulness was based on competence or inexperience, and hoped it was the former.

Collins led them up into the lifter. The bay's interior was basic, fold-away benches along each side and an array of lockers on the forward wall. Calden opened one apparently at random, and offered to stow her bag by extending his hand. She handed her the backpack, and noticed how easily she handled the weight. The hum of the engines built in preparation for takeoff, and Collins sat and buckled himself in. As the ramp arose and sealed with a hiss, Kiranda chose a seat next to Calden and also close to the locker with her pack in it.

The rumble of the engines grew stronger and the cross-cut metal floor vibrated beneath her feet.

The only sign of liftoff was a red light above the hatch, which added adding a crimson cast to the cabin. The lifter's basic inertial dampeners made it difficult to judge speed or direction by feel, and part of her wished for a window. As a military vessel, she figured they were probably considered as structural weaknesses. Either that or it saved money.

She shifted her position on the bench and scowled. "This is without a doubt the most uncomfortable seat I've ever had the misfortune to encounter."

Calden grinned and tapped her fingers against the plastic. "The marines reckon they were designed to be just that, a pain in the ass! To make 'em glad to get out of the ship, even if it's into a warzone." She winked.

Kiranda couldn't help but grin. "I think they might have a point."

The Lieutenant leaned back, slouching as much as the restraints allowed. "So. The boss here tells me you're a security consultant?"

*Boss, huh?* "I am. Though I spend more time breaching security than enforcing it."

"Network hacking?"

She nodded. "That too. I think of myself as a private eye of sorts. What about you?"

"I'm a sapper! That's demolitions, field defenses, construction. That stuff."

"Gotcha. So you're the one to talk to when I want to blow something up?"

She grinned. "Hell yes! Explosives work for everything, I never have the same problem twice."

Schaeff laughed. "I'll keep that in mind next time I argue with my brother."

*Damn it! Never mind my brother, I meant to call mum! I've been so busy with that stupid list that I completely forgot.* She checked for

available communications channels, and found the lifter offered a surprisingly high-bandwidth network link.

“Colonel, can I make a call?”

“Absolutely. Best time to in fact, once we dock there will be a full communications lockdown.”

“Then at the risk of seeming rude, I’ll do so.” Collins nodded, and Kiranda closed her eyes. Her VR implant took over, and she surrendered her senses to the hardware in her skull.

She hadn’t spoken to her mother in over a week, and the poor woman didn’t get many visitors. Besides, there was a chance this job would kill her, and her mother was the only person alive who loved her.

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As the data flowed, and Kiranda found herself standing in the warm familiarity of her mother’s home. Afternoon sunlight streamed through a pair of tall windows on her right, giving the oak floor and walls a rich golden hue. There seemed to be more indoor plants than last time, their foliage occupying a fair deal of space in the luxuriously furnished room. Blooming flowers were starting to outnumber the antique furniture and gigantic precolonial urns.

An elaborate stone fireplace dominated the wall opposite the windows. Standing in front of it was a woman in her hundred and fiftieth year, but by choice she looked to be in her sixties. She wore a floral print apron over a wool frock, and was concentrating on holding a brass watering can over a particularly large pot of lilies. Despite the apparent simplicity of the action, her face bore an expression of effort and determination.

Kiranda remained silent and watched her mother's hands closely. Her fingers were twitching and shuddering, as though unseen strings were trying to confound her efforts.

Her grip faltered, and the watering can slipped from her hands.

It dropped, but extremely slowly. With an effort, the woman managed to grip it again before it reached the ground.

The VR environment was clearly doing as best it could. Her brain, long since incapable of supporting even an artificial body, was still degrading.

Kiranda swallowed, and put on a smile. “Hi Mum.”

The woman turned, and her face lit up with such a delighted smile Kiranda's felt nothing but joy. “Kira dear!” She carefully set the watering can down on a mahogany side-table, and attempted to brush a few stray

silver strands from her eyes. She missed them by a more than an inch, but the hairs moved aside anyway.

They hugged. “Oh, it’s good to see you my dear.”

Kiranda held her close. Her chin cleared the top of her mother's head, but she still felt like a child in her presence. It was a feeling she hoped would never leave her.

“How are you doing Mum? I got a message that the doctors moved you to a new tank.”

The old woman chuckled, and let go in order to reassuringly pat her daughter’s shoulder. “Apparently my brain was getting too big for its glass boots. Perhaps you should put me in contact with one of your head shrinks?”

Kiranda felt herself begin to blush, and briefly considered stopping her virtual self from duplicating the coloring. She settled for a slightly reduced version of the effect. “Save yourself the trouble, they never did me much good. Just get a bigger hat.”

Her mother's smile didn't change, but her eyes showed her concern for her daughter. “I won't be clocking out for a while yet dear. How are you faring?”

“I’m doing okay.”

“Di you know Melef was here yesterday? He asked about his little sister.”

Kiranda's eyes narrowed, but she kept her voice conversational. “Nice of him to find the time.”

“He is a very busy man these days, Kira. He has his own family to worry about now, as well as the business.” She paused. “He asked me to tell you there's still a place for you in the firm. Your father would have liked that.”

Kiranda shook her head. “Not while it's still run the same way. People are not resources to be used.”

“You know it isn't all so one-sided dear. At least I've passed on his message. Coffee?”

Kiranda glanced at the four seat chesterfield, and the coffee table before it. The VR environment had already created a tray with two cups of hot brew.

Her mother gave an apologetic grin and fidgeted. “I know VR coffee doesn’t match the real thing of course...” her voice trailed off.

Kiranda felt a lump forming in her throat. She took her mother’s hands in her own, and ran her thumbs soothingly over the back of her hands.

“Mum, I love spending time with you and I want to stay and talk. But I can’t. I’ll going to lose my communications link soon.” She hesitated. “I’m going offworld, on a job. For the public sector, actually.”

“You’re working for the government now? Good for you! Very good.” She tried to maintain her smile, but her eyes betrayed her concern. “It’s dangerous, isn’t it dear?”

“Yes. But it’s important.”

The old woman’s smile returned. “You’re my good girl, and always will be. You remember that.” For a moment Kiranda thought she saw a hint of tears in her mother’s eyes. “Would you like me to look in on Dante for you?”

“Please and thank you. The apartment will feed and water her, but I’ll feel better knowing someone is making sure she’s okay from time to time.” A chime sounded, warning that her network link would disconnect soon. The lifter was already nearing its destination.

“Please be careful dear. Try to come back safely.”

Kiranda kissed her on the cheek. “I intend to. I love you, Mum.” Out of time, she reluctantly stepped back and ended the call. The house vanished.

Kiranda let herself float in darkness for a few moments wishing the lump in her throat would go away.

*It’ll be alright. Whether I come back or not, everything... will be as it should. She knows death is low on my list of fears.*

The tension in her began to ease.

*Time to work I guess. A bunch of commandos are waiting for me, and I need to be alert for the briefing Collins promised.*

She cut the link a heartbeat before the ramp began to lower.

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The destroyer’s briefing chamber had the atmosphere of a council of war even before Colonel Collins and Major Darius came in and took their places behind the broad stainless steel table.

Lieutenant Calden was seated at her right. Beyond her thick-set form were three empty steel chairs, apparently waiting for the last members of the group. Kiranda had started to wonder how long they would have to wait when all three walked in together, the door sealing behind them.

The foremost was a tall, lean man in an expensive-looking shirt and dark pants, while the other two wore the now familiar dark gray. It was these two, a male and a tall female, who most drew Kiranda’s attention.

The man looked larger than life, as though he could pick up Calden with one massive arm. His completely bald head suited him rather well, but the image of natural perfection stopped there. A thick band of black metal circled his head, covering his eyes or more likely his lack of them. His hands, which Kiranda first thought were gloved, were entirely synthetic and finished in a pragmatic dull black finish.

*Good grief, I've seen freight-handling equipment with less power. Collins isn't planning to pull punches on this job.*

As the man sat next to Calden, the line of his pants folded in unusually neat lines. Either he had no sex organs, or he'd been modified to allow them to retract. Neither possibility was at all appealing to her.

The woman sat next to him. She too was augmented, but less obviously. From her face she looked somewhere in her twenties, and her body screamed cosmetic augmentation. Her narrow waist and voluptuous hips, coupled with impossibly gravity-defying DD breasts, created a figure flesh and bone could never match. Her bright blue eyes and flowing blonde hair made her look much like a life-size doll.

It was only on more critical examination that she noticed her limbs were broader than they should have been, and that she moved with an economic efficiency borne of carefully engineered weight distribution. Despite looking like something from a fashion magazine, she was probably every bit as crammed with technology as her male colleague. Kiranda caught herself starting to puff out her own modest chest, and immediately stopped, feeling like an idiot. The urge to compete seemed to have come from nowhere.

Collins spoke as the newcomers got settled on their seats. "Alright, let's get started. First of all, I apologize to you all for the short notice. Most of you have worked together before, but as we have some new faces I believe some introductions are in order. Major, if you would be so kind? Before proceeding with your briefing."

"Sir." Darius stood up. "I believe you all know Colonel Collins and myself. The Colonel will be personally leading us on this mission, which should give you some idea of the importance of success. I will be directing the operation, albeit under his command." He paused. "Captain Sach."

The blonde stood and saluted. Kiranda couldn't help but notice the way her breasts jiggled. Despite their size, there was no sagging whatsoever.

*We'll definitely have no trouble if we need someone we can pass off as prostitute.*

“Captain Sach is a stealth specialist, and an excellent soldier. Her extensive field experience should prove most useful.” Darius nodded to Sach, who sat down. Kiranda tried to ignore the jiggle. “Lieutenant Langley.”

The walking bulldozer stood up at an easy pace, but didn't salute. Kiranda wondered if salutes were optional under Collins' command, or if it was a Black Division thing. Langley certainly didn't look like he was trying to insult anyone, his bearing implied that any such unprofessional behavior was beneath him.

“Lieutenant Langley is one of our top combat support specialists. He's fully rated for more weaponry than I care to count, including mobile armor and orbital artillery.”

Langley's chair creaked as his weight settled back into it.

“Doctor Harrison.”

The man in the designer shirt stood.

“Harrison has seen active duty with the marines, and is currently a nanotech specialist with the Confederation Space Navy. He'll be our medic, and you are all to report to him after the briefing for a physical.”

The doctor bowed, then sat back down.

“Lieutenant Calden.”

The woman she'd met planetside stood up and grinned.

“Lieutenant Calden is a master sapper, rated for tactical ordinance. She's a specialist in nanotech meltdown techniques and EM munitions elimination.”

Calden saluted energetically. “Nothing slows someone down quite like their gun blowing up in their hands! Sir!” She sat back down as Darius nodded at Kiranda.

“Kiranda Schaefer.”

Kiranda stood, grateful for the chance to stretch her legs. She still felt sore from the bench in the lifter.

“Ms Schaefer is a specialist in security systems. While she lacks military experience, her skills in stealth and Network manipulation are felt to be ideal for this mission.”

As she sat back down, Kiranda noticed Sach looking at her through narrowed eyes. *Does she think I can't cut it because I'm a civilian? Good grief, I hope she's wrong...*

The Major gazed at the table and the image of Doctor Astatoba appeared in the air over it. It was a different picture than the one she'd seen before, probably a little more recent given the lines around his eyes.

He still looked waxy and pale. Another image alongside him showed a metal cylinder akin to a can of softdrink.

“Meet Doctor Jeremiah Astatoba, developer of some of the Confederation’s most powerful nanotech bioweapons. He was kidnapped from his lab last week. The kidnappers also took a sample of his latest project, Nanoagent K6. We must retrieve both, or failing that destroy them.”

He paused, watching their faces as the image switched to a blueprint. A cylindrical asteroid, filled with concentric, torus-like chambers. An accompanying image showed it plowing through a vast cloud of interstellar gas. “This is where he's been taken. Wellspring 21, a very sturdy asteroid originally used as a home for miners in the Sol system over two centuries ago. The iron-rich rock protected them from radiation and microimpacts long before field technology was available. It was later refitted as a generation ship for a colonial era seeding program. It completed the journey from Sol, and ever since has been in use as an automated gas mining station in Colonial Alliance space. It never leaves the gas cloud.”

Sach frowned. “How do we know he's there?”

Collins leaned forward. “I'll answer that one. First, you need to know we immediately suspected the involvement of the Colonial Alliance. Two years ago, the Alliance stole a quantity of K4 nanoagent and used it to attack the CSS Ishmael, a Confed stronghold in border territory. After the attack the Confederation diverted resources into developing a technology to treat K4 infections, in case the Alliance learned how to reproduce the weapon themselves.”

Calden raised a hand. “Sir. Isn't that pretty unlikely?”

Collins nodded. “Difficult, Lieutenant, but not difficult enough. Our agents later confirmed the Alliance has created their own nanoagent based on their analysis of K4. We've given it the codename Copycat. At considerable cost, we managed to procure a small sample. Unfortunately our current treatments are ineffective against it.”

Kiranda swallowed. If the Alliance had a technology advantage over the Confederation, it was only a matter of time before they used it. They were still nursing a grudge from their defeat two centuries ago.

The Swarm War had threatened the entire Cluster, but when the Confederation formed to fight for survival, the Alliance foolishly saw the situation as an opportunity to extend their borders. The Confederation managed to defeat the Swarm before beating back the Alliance, and the border had been volatile ever since.

“Worse yet, when our agents procured the Copycat sample, they learned the Alliance has a nanoagent treatment of their own that might be effective against both their nanoagent and ours. Jeremiah Astatoba was in charge of remedying that situation. K6 is a prototype of a new nanoagent that could remedy the situation.”

Kiranda thought over what she'd heard. *I can see why the Alliance would want K6, But why Astatoba? Do they want to slow down Confed while they prepare for war? If so, Collins could be right about millions of lives being at stake. That Copycat stuff would annihilate the frontier worlds.*

“Despite our suspicions, we could not locate Astatoba and his kidnappers at all. They vanished most effectively, using a combination of surveillance sabotage and false leads. That is until early this morning, when we had a rare stroke of good fortune.”

The image of Astatoba vanished. It was replaced with a blurred image of a starship in flight, plus a range of sensor readings. It took Kiranda a moment to realize the blurring was not only due to the level of magnification, but also the fact the ship was accelerating at a dangerous rate.

The ship itself was simple, a metal framework with engines and a small cabin bolted on almost as afterthoughts. Well under a hundred metres long, so a small cargo ship. The framework had only a few containers attached. The intense glow of the engines suggested they were being pushed hard enough to inflict permanent damage.

Small-scale merchants never tortured their engines like that, but it wasn't unknown for smugglers to do so. She wondered why this particular ship has caught their attention.

Langley nodded at the columns of data. “It appears to be moving through the hubward frontier.”

Kiranda blinked in surprise. There were no coordinates shown, and with over three and a half billion stars in the cluster there was no way he could have recognized constellations without some impressive hardware.

Collins merely nodded. “Moving into Colonial Alliance territory, in fact.” He pointed to a row of figures at the bottom of the table. “Note the shipboard lifesigns. This third individual is confirmed as Astatoba. Alive, and in a state of stress judging by the waveform.”

Kiranda closed her eyes and fought down the urge to groan. *Good god, we're going to barge into Alliance territory. Never mind preventing a war, we could spark one all by ourselves...*

She opened her eyes and saw Darius gazing at the image. “People, when the Colonel said this was a stroke of luck you had better believe it. There is a limited number of drones on the border, all cloaked and patrolling random routes. The kidnapper's ship was between jumps when detected. The odds of detection were around one in nine thousand.” His expression was grim. “We must make the best of this.”

Collins nodded. “Indeed so. To answer your earlier question Captain Sach, this vessel was accelerating for a jump when it was detected. The course leads it straight to Wellspring 21's gas mining zone.”

Sach squinted at the blueprints. “Sir, mightn't they have been following a false course?”

“Their course is far too good a fit for that. The gas cloud is away from populated Alliance systems, and it contains charged particles that play merry havoc with sensor arrays and long-range communications. It's a natural cloak, ideal for nanoagent research or manufacturing. Combined with the distance from the border, they could do as they like in there and our listening posts would never detect a thing.”

Calden casually raised a hand. “Sir? If we're so sure that's the place, why don't we just bomb it? One fast strike fleet and that rock would be dust. This scientist can't be irreplaceable.”

Darius smirked. “If we were to attack the Alliance openly Lieutenant, we'd give them a perfect excuse to deploy *Copycat* on our frontier worlds. We must act while we know where Astatoba and the sample are, and a strike would take too long to organize. A small stealth team is our best option.”

Sach grinned, possibly in anticipation. “How will we be going in sir?”

“Individual swoop pods.” Kiranda winced at the thought. She'd piloted one of the tiny vehicles only once before, and the thought of flying one blind through a cloud of dust and debris seemed foolish at best. “Then for the return trip, we'll commandeer an Alliance vessel.”

Kiranda suppressed a groan. *Good grief, there's far too much that can go wrong. Does Collins really know what he's doing? I guess they can't just park a ship in Alliance space to wait for us, but what if there isn't a ship to steal?* She opened her eyes again and glanced at the others. Only Doctor Harrison seemed at all apprehensive, and even that might well be the natural lines at the side of his eyes.

Darius switched off the display. “We're already on our way to the border at flank speed. That gives us approximately sixteen hours subjective until we launch. We'll have a more exact figure for you after we drop back into normal space. Be sure to study the mission data after your

medical; it includes maps of the station and background data, plus a range of nanoagent software from the lab that includes self-destruct programs.” He paused. “Well, that’s about it. Any further questions?”

Langley raised his hand again, frowning at the image of the station. “Sir, what physical environment are we likely to be dealing with?”

“The blueprints show mostly close quarters, and it’s likely still pressurized with a breathable atmosphere. But don’t expect everything there to be in good repair. Oh, do bear in mid that Wellspring 21 does not have a gravity field! It creates an approximation of gravity by rotating along the axis. The Coriolis effect will make objects fall in a slight curve against the direction of the spin rather than straight down. Your firearms will compensate, but it may be wise to spend some time in VR to prepare yourselves.”

Langley nodded, a serene image of professionalism. Kiranda couldn’t imagine him losing his temper, and she began to feel envious. It would be nice to have that kind of zen-like mental clarity.

Sach glanced at her. “Begging the Major’s pardon sir; why do we have a civilian on a mission this sensitive? She’s a liability.”

Collins met Sach’s gaze impassively. “The Major and I have hand-picked every one of you for this mission, Captain.”

Sach’s eyes narrowed. “We have our own Network divers and security specialists.”

“It’s not a matter for debate Captain.”

Sach turned to look at Kiranda. She looked skeptical.

Kiranda did her best to look competent, but couldn’t help but wonder if she had a point. *The hell with it, if she can speak her mind, so can I.* “I have a question. This team has a hell of a lot of officers, are there no grunts in Black Division?”

Darius raised his eyebrows. “As it happens, there aren’t. Our operatives are few and highly specialized.”

She nodded. “So as civilians, where do the Doctor and I fit in rank-wise?”

“This operation has a flat command structure, and Colonel Collins is in command.”

Collins locked his gaze on her. “Always follow my orders Schaefer. Beyond that, take care and use your own judgment.”

Kiranda nodded. At least it that was easy to remember.

There were other questions she wanted to ask, but she felt it wasn’t the right time or place to raise them. For example, why did Collins want a technology specialist like her for a rescue mission? It seemed that neither

he or Darius had a clear idea what they would find on Wellspring 21. From what she could tell, their data on it was decades old at best.

The overall plan seemed somewhat fragile too. Just one screw-up might get them all killed, and she didn't want to be the one who made it. But Collins wanted her there, so he must believe she was up to it.

The Colonel stood up. "If there are no further questions, you're dismissed. Report to Doctor Harrison for your medicals, and try to get some sleep before the launch."

Kiranda sighed.

*I need a coffee, and time to think.*

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Kiranda was sitting cross-legged on the padded bench, nursing a paper cup with the foamy remains of a cappuccino in the bottom. She still has misgivings with the coming mission, but she was also determined to go through with it. She'd just have to hope she could do some good out there.

The muffled sound of approaching footsteps made her look up at the sick bay doors. They swung open, and Lieutenant Langley's imposing figure emerged. Kiranda saw her own image dimly reflected in his black sensor band as he gave her a nod. "You're up next Schaefer." He nodded at the empty benches beside her. "Lucky last I guess. Sorry about the wait, Harrison isn't leaving anything to chance. He spent a lot of time calibrating my limbs."

She uncrossed her legs and stood up from the padded bench. The top of her head barely made it to his armpits. "Between you and me, I'm glad I got the chance to sit and relax."

Langley smiled, a flawless set of teeth peeking from between his lips. "Very wise, I doubt we'll have a lot of time for that on Wellspring." He set off down the corridor without saying anything further.

As a test, she waved goodbye.

He gave a brief wave, confirming the band around his head gave him full 360 degree vision. Oddly, his dull black hand boasted only two fingers instead of the usual four. She wondered if it he'd changed hands, or if they were somehow reconfigurable.

*Maybe his fingers need to be that broad to take his full strength.*

She pushed open the doors and walked in with the cup still in hand. Harrison was sitting a desk set in a one corner of a well-appointed sick bay. There was one chair near him, a single examination bed extended from the wall, and a large ceiling-mounted dome that no doubt held the

autodoc. She was relieved to see there was no scanning ring deployed and waiting to swoop over her; Black Division already knew more than enough about her systems.

Harrison was so engrossed at his desk terminal that Kiranda wasn't sure he even knew she'd entered. She made the most of the moment to study his face.

Late thirties, most likely, and even while seated he still looked tall. His hair was completely white, but not as a result of age. "Doctor Harrison?"

He glanced up and gave an apologetic smile. "Sorry Schaeff, please take a seat. I'll be with you in just a moment."

His irises were yellow. A wide range of hair and eye colors had been long since genetically engineered into the Terran species, but yellow eyes were fairly rare. She figured it was a recessive gene, linked to his hair color.

She sat on the chair, and drank the last dregs of her coffee.

Harrison finished his work and settled back in his chair before smiling apologetically. "Right! Sorry to keep you waiting, lots to learn about my patients."

Kiranda smiled back. "No problem. You seem to be holding up okay."

He smiled. "The pressure in civilian hospitals can be much worse." He stood, broke the seal on a bag and pulled a plastic strip from it. A disposable analysis strip, but larger than any she had seen before. The rectangular patch as wide as her palm. "Neck, please." Kiranda unzipped the collar of her red suit, and exposed the side of her neck.

"This is your first job with Black Division too, Doc?"

"It is, yes. I was a good enough marine, but it's my skills in medical nanotechnology they wanted." He pressed the patch against her skin. It felt warm, and her neck tingled as the film drew blood through her skin. The sensation lasted only a few seconds before fading, then he peeled it away.

Kiranda rubbed the warm skin, and elected to leave the zip down so it could breathe. If her previous experiences were any guide, she'd have a rectangular hickey for a full day. Considerately, Harrison had placed it where her necklace wouldn't irritate it. "I thought Confed had no treatment for Copycat?"

Harrison grinned as he fed the pink strip into a small device on his desk. Graphs filled the air above it. "Nanoagents pose hazards other than direct infection. Besides, we could find anything over there. Manufacturing facilities would be the most dangerous, but a research installation would be a marvelous find."

“So you can analyze what we find?”

Harrison chuckled. “We could learn a lot just by seeing their facilities. But my primary task is keeping you all alive and well, part of which is boosting the team’s resistance to nanotech agents.” He raised an eyebrow. “Of course general health is a matter of interest too. Have you been drinking a lot of coffee lately?”

Kiranda realized she was still holding the empty cup, and self-consciously tossed it into a nearby disposal slot on the wall. “Not much more than usual.”

Doctor Harrison nodded. “You have high levels of caffeine and associated metabolites. The theobromine level is particularly high.”

“Er, yeah. That’s not unusual for me. I can go cold turkey if I need to, I’ve done it before.”

More data appeared. She wondered if it included any records from the scanners in the Black’s underground tunnel. “You still have a number of natural organs. Are you aware there will be long term health effects to them from the caffeine?”

“I know, and I’m prepared to foot the bill if it becomes a problem.”

“As long as you’re aware.” He plugged the scanner into his desk terminal, and the graphs were replaced with twenty times as much information. He reached out and turned the display around to face her. “Please look through this table, and let me know if you can identify any inaccuracies. Or if there’s anything not included that you think I should know about.”

Kiranda stared at the document. It included such a complete list of her augmentations she felt herself starting to blush. “How in the...? Who has access to this?”

“Just myself and the Colonel. He made it very clear that your records are especially confidential. He may think some members of the team would object to a civilian having advanced systems.”

“Not if they know what’s good for them.” She tried to conceal her increasing amazement as she studied the list. *Collins could have used this list to blackmail me. He still could, for that matter.* Eventually, she swallowed her pride and pointed out a single line of text. It obediently highlighted in white. “Here, ocular implants. The optics in my eyes are crysgel, not co-polymer.”

The text corrected itself, and Harrison nodded in satisfaction. “Good technology, though susceptible to certain types of acid. But I’m sure you know to watch for that.” He produced a small light, turned it on and used

it to squint into her eyes. Kiranda forced herself to keep her gaze locked on his own yellow irises as the light played over her eyes.

He frowned. "They've been well fitted. No text on the irises... I didn't know Trioptics made an unbranded version."

"They don't. Not officially."

Harrison hesitated, and for a moment he seemed surprised. "I see. Thank you." He sat back. "That should be all I need. I could add some additional nanotech buffers to your blood filtration system, but the benefit would be minimal in your case. You're in good shape for this mission."

She smiled. "That's good to hear."

The doctor hesitated. "Before you go there is one thing I'd like to ask about, though you don't need to answer if you don't wish to. The Colonel has placed a note for me in your profile. He says that you are recovering from *a trauma of a personal nature*."

Kiranda froze, and the metal armrests beneath her palms began to feel uncomfortably warm.

"Is this something you believe might affect you in the field?"

She felt a mounting sense of panic, and struggled to come up with something to say. How in the world could she answer something like that?

As she remembered the plastic beads around her neck, the panic vanished and calm descended.

She met his gaze with ease. "I'll be okay Doc."

Harrison nodded. "Thank you Schaefer. If you should wish to discuss anything, or even just vent, I'm available at any time."

She smiled, got up and headed toward the door. The medical bay uncomfortably warm. "Thanks Doc, but I have enough personal baggage to make Freud run screaming into the woods."

"Nonetheless, the offer stands."

She pushed the doors open and kept walking. The air moving over her skin helped. She wanted to be angry at Collins, but also felt he'd shown more sympathy than she had any right to expect.

He'd also done an annoyingly superb job of listing her augmentations, the very worst aspect of which was how little time he'd had to do it. It should have taken months of full-time detective work to dig out such detail.

Kiranda walked on, lost in thought.

"Catch!"

The female voice from her left caught her completely off guard. Startled, she flinched and turned toward it. She glimpsed a can of softdrink flying toward her, and discovered her flinch had placed her head directly

in the can's trajectory. Her left hand shot up, and managed to catch the drink an instant before it would have struck her temple.

Her hand hurt from the impact. She glanced at the can in her hand, and found it was bent where she'd caught it.

“You’re coming with into the field with us? God save us all.”

She looked up and saw Captain Sach standing in an alcove, one hand on her hip. The impossibly proportioned soldier had a second can of softdrink, already opened. She sipped from it.

Kiranda could feel her face starting to redden, and scowled.

“Sorry Schaef, I thought you'd be faster. Probably best if you don't open that now, it'll foam all over the place.”

Kiranda turned the damaged can until the label faced her. The slim metal container was a popular mix of light alcohol and cherry softdrink. “I don't like carbonated drinks anyhow.” She tossed the dented can back to Sach.

The soldier caught the can with her free hand, deftly avoiding the damaged part of the cylinder. “Your choice. Just do me a favor and try not to get us all killed out there, okay?” She walked past Kiranda, taking a long swig of her drink.

Kiranda rubbed her hand as the woman vanished down the corridor. “As long as you return the favor,” she muttered.

With a resigned sigh, she set off in search of her assigned cabin. She hadn't seen it yet, but her backpack was apparently already there along with all the equipment she had requested from Collins.

Most of the doors she passed were blank, and the few that had markings appeared to use some sort of shipboard code.

She stared at the codes in bewilderment before realizing they indicated deck and orientation. Her cabin was behind her, and one deck up.

*Sach is right, I don't belong here. Will I really be able to prevent deaths instead of causing them?*

## Chapter Four: Incursion

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Kiranda found some sleep in her left eye that she'd missed when getting up, and wiped it away. The launch bay around her echoed with activity, everyone apparently busy checking equipment, driving loaders, preparing the awful swoop pods...

She wished she'd managed to get more sleep. The mission data had proven lengthier than she expected, and she had made a special effort to familiarize herself with the standard field equipment. The map of the station alone had also taken hours of her time, and the 2:00am start had come all too quickly.

*Get a move on, girl!* She shoved her backpack into the swoop pod's cargo niche, right behind where she'd be standing. She'd have preferred to wear it from the outset, but orders were orders. She stepped back, and looked around the launch bay.

It was roomy for such a small destroyer. Their seven matte-black swoop pods were lined up behind each other on a small armaments launch rail, filling about half the available space. The flat, hexagonal pods themselves looked disturbingly flimsy. All their protective armor had been removed to improve speed and stealth.

Kiranda wondered if there was any significance to the fact her pod was at the back of the line. She peered at the pod in front of hers, assigned to Doctor Harrison. The five rectangular thrusters on it had impressive heat sinks around them. *All that stealth seems kind of pointless in this cloud. I guess it's best to be cautious, the station may have good short range sensors.*

She turned to her own pod, and ran a gloved finger along the recess that housed the iris door. The door blades were easy to find, and felt alarmingly thin even through the unfamiliar combat suit.

She was used to full-face hoods, but wasn't looking forward to using the one that came with her suit. The air filter built into it would protect them from nanoagents, but it was bulky and looked bizarrely like a fat starfish.

Colonel Collins strode along the line of launch pods toward her. He looked at home in his own form-fitting, black combat suit. Hers still seemed to resist her every movement, as though it had been attacked by a box of starch. He wasn't wearing his hood yet either, but he looked like he could happily do so for days on end.

"How are you coping Schaeff?"

She winced. "This outfit feels like it's made of cardboard."

He flexed his gloved fingers. "It is stiff, isn't it? It's additional protection for the trip in. Once we're on Wellspring it'll revert back to combat settings." He paused, studying her. "You seem nervous."

"I'm that obvious? I'm used to working alone. Normally, if I mess up my neck is the only one on the line."

He nodded. "Your ability to work alone is one of your strengths. You can probably expect some solo work on this mission."

She shrugged. "I'm okay with that. I'll do my best in any case."

Collins grinned, and Kiranda wondered what he was so pleased about. "That's what I needed to hear. Now get a move on and finish loading your pod." He turned, and raised his voice. "People! Hurry up and get yourselves strapped in. Five minutes to launch!" He moved back along the line.

A gray border around the distant spacedoors chose that moment to light up with a pattern of yellow warning stripes. The entire floor vibrated with a deep, subsonic hum as the bay's containment field powered up.

Kiranda pulled the straps tight around her pack, and gave it a few good tugs to be sure it was secure. Then she took one last look at the pod she was trusting her life to.

The pale gray interior was a web of safety straps, the only part that looked reassuringly strong. Collins likely expected their high-speed journey through the rest of the cloud would be bumpy. She wondered if the craft had a deflector field... They needed a lot of power, but moving at such speed without one meant even a pebble would punch through both her and the pod.

"Hey Schae, you look tense."

Calden's voice. She turned, and saw her next to Harrison's pod. "Not as much as I feel, Calden. First time jitters I guess."

She grinned. "Hah! Don't worry, it's only a short trip. Besides, if your pod hits anything you won't know shit about it." She winked, and grinned even wider.

Kiranda felt herself smile. "That's so very reassuring Calden! I feel much better now." The sapper donned her hood and stepped back behind her pod.

Kiranda reached behind her head, and made sure the flat bun of hair was still in place. Reassured, she pulled the suit's hood up and over her head. The fabric tightened, and the suit signaled her implant as it sealed.

*Time to saddle up.*

She stepped into the pod's shallow interior and backed into the mesh. The pod restraints obediently weaved themselves around her. Even through the stiff suit, the straps felt strong and tight.

A metallic clang rang out across the bay, and the durasteel spacedoors began to slide open. The thick interlocking teeth made it look like a giant mouth, opening onto an utterly black expanse. Not a single star anywhere. Kiranda tried switching to infra-red, and found the view to be just as dark.

*Not a reassuring sight.*

The steps she had walked up unfolded six metal legs, and scurried out of the way. The pod's iris door then started to dilate shut.

"See you all at the rendezvous!" Calden yelled out. Her grin was audible in her voice. The door finished closing before Kiranda could reply. Radio communications were locked down for the flight, full stealth.

The pod gave a brief shudder as the launch rail below it powered up. Kiranda took a few deep, steady breaths and tried to remain relaxed in the webbing. Their entire journey was pre-programmed; all she had to do was ride it out and hope everything worked out.

A full minute passed. She told herself the ship was just making final maneuvers inside the cloud. Maybe it was also ensuring they weren't being launched into a cluster of rocks.

The moment of launch caught her by surprise. The thrusters kicked into life so suddenly that she thought there had been an explosion. The acceleration threw her into the webbing as the pod's inertial dampeners struggled at maximum.

Kiranda held her jaw clenched shut to stop herself from biting her tongue, and used her implant to view a direct link from the pod's exterior sensors.

The sight was terrifying. The ship they had just left was no longer visible, and asteroids were mere intermittent blurs streaking past the pod's passive mass detectors. The pod's course appeared as a curved line which bucked and whipped as the craft evaded new obstacles or corrected for pockets of gas and dust.

*This must be what it's like inside my food mixer.*

The view was definitely not helping, so she switched it off.

Desperate to distract herself, she brought up the mission documents on her implant.

The blueprints depicted Wellspring 21 as a short cylinder, three thousand metres long and eight hundred in diameter. The plans dated from the original colony ship refit, when it had been turned into a slow-moving

interstellar city. It had then flown for generations into what was then uncolonized space.

Once the journey was complete, Wellspring was stripped and left to drift. It was much later that the Alliance decided to re-purpose it as automated mining station. The rocky mass of the asteroid protected the machinery inside as well as it had protected the colonists.

The volcanic rock was cut with concentric torus-shaped chambers. The blueprints referred to each group of concentric rings as a *disc*, which struck her as an amusing term. Fifteen such discs made a stack that ran the length of the station. The blueprints gave each one a designated letter, starting with A at the stern running through to O at the bow.

There was a color code too, but the colors seemed to have been allocated at random.

*It's chaotic. Most of the rings don't line up properly, and some of them are incomplete or missing entirely. The builders must have been adapting as they went, working around the faultlines. Or maybe it's deliberate, to control the airflow created by the spinning.*

She turned her attention to the diagrams of the asteroid surface, since that was where she'd be landing. Most of it was bare rock, with artificial structures only clear noticeable at the bow and stern. Those at the bow included a complex array of field emitters, the station's ramscoop that gathered raw material from the cloud. The stern held three huge thrusters, fueled by the same methane the station collected. Ancient technology, but practical enough since the engines were only needed for course changes and occasional acceleration. Storage tanks were arranged in a rings around the stern. Each spherical tank was over fifty metres in diameter.

Kiranda asked her implant for a capacity calculation, and received a total storage capacity of ten thousand megalitres. That seemed a lot for such an old facility, which implied that tanker visited rarely.

The stern also boasted the dock, a circular opening sealed with conventional spacedoors. The massive thrusters surrounding it must be an unnerving sight for visiting crews.

Collins deemed the dock too likely to be monitored, so they were heading for the narrow band of maintenance superstructure surrounding the rings of storage tanks.

That would be dicey. The station rotated along its length one and a half times every minute, so the surface was moving at an effective 113 kilometers per hour. They had to match that while missing the tanks and landing on the structures.

The pod shuddered. The thrusters roared, and the inertial dampeners whined as though they were going to break.

Sweat forming on her brow, Kiranda tried to ignore the situation by looking at the station's more recent architectural changes.

It was a short list, since there was little they knew. They were sure the station had been fitted with a massive communications array capable of punching brief messages out of the cloud. There was also a short-range beacon that guided tankers and repair crews. But even with the beacon, supply ships had to know roughly where to start looking.

Their own swoop pods were searching for that beacon.

*What if we don't find it? With no way to signal for help we'd be lost forever in this muck. Or at least until we hit a rock.*

Kiranda checked via her implant, and found her pod had a lock on the beacon. She grinned in relief, and tried the external view again.

*What if the beacon's a fake?*

There seemed to be nothing to see, but then a vast, dark shape loomed out of the darkness and hurtled toward her.

The thrusters shifted up an octave and she was thrown hard against the webbing. The view tilted and banked, then station filled the view, a vast mass of gloomy black rock that kept getting closer.

The view swung until a line of titanium tanks emerged from the gloom on her left, and the metal structures beneath them became visible.

Ahead was a maze of girders, frost-covered pipes, and steel cables. She was so close she could see bright squares on the corrosion-resistant titanium tanks where they had been repaired and patched over the decades.

*This place is a bloody museum piece!*

The pod identified a pressurized chamber and selected it as her landing site.

*Damn, that's smaller than my living room...*

A metal grille stretched from the chamber to the nearby tanks. Kiranda asked her implant what it was, and found it listed as a safety floor for maintenance bots or personnel working on the superstructure. It was barely as half a metre wide, and had no handrails.

Kiranda tried to imagine a machine rolling across that narrow grille, with the bare rock of the station above it and nothing but darkness below. It made the back of her neck tingle.

As the structure rushed toward her, the pod's inertial dampeners warned her they were exceeding their design limits, then they burned out.

The webbing hit her like a speeding truck. Every part of her body felt like it was yanked in every possible direction at once, then an instant later it had all stopped.

Kiranda groaned. Blinking, and found that she was still in the pod, but on her back instead of standing upright.

*Docking successful*, the pod announced to her implant via her suit.

Kiranda opened her mouth to tell the machine what she thought of that definition of success, but was stopped by a loud thump as the pod door started to dilate open. It revealed the interior of a metal tube, which extended from the swoop pod. On the other side of the tube was a poorly lit and rather dirty-looking metal surface that she eventually realized was a ceiling.

The webbing around her began to crumble. The only thing holding her in the pod was the station's own centrifugal gravity.

Kiranda climbed to her feet, and looked around the station chamber. A mess of durasteel plating and girders lying against the left wall seemed to be what was left of a circular section of floor. The pod had punched neatly through, and the tube had sealed it airtight. A narrow set of elevator doors was on one wall, alongside an opening with a ramp which curved gradually up and out of view. The walls were bare, except for a few empty equipment racks. Opposite the elevator was a small airlock that seemed designed for drone use.

The entire chamber was thick with dirt and grime, and looked like nobody had set foot in it for decades.

*Maybe this place is just a mining station after all.*

She checked for security sensors, but the only one there seemed designed to watch the airlock. The bracket supporting it was held in place by one remaining screw, and the tiny lens was black with grime. Kiranda watched it for electromagnetic activity, but the sensor was dark in every relevant spectrum. It seemed long dead.

Satisfied, she retrieved her backpack from what was left of the straps, and put it on over her combat suit. The bag automatically changed from black to dark gray, the same color her suit had adopted to match the chamber. She retrieved the compact assault rifle from the pod, and fastened it to a tactical sling over her chest.

Climbing out of the tube and past the fast-set sealant surrounding it, she took a moment to examine the ramp. It looked to be about a hundred metres long, and at the top she could see the bottom of a bulkhead door. There was still no sign of any other sensors.

Setting her implants to constantly scan for patrols and security devices, she gripped her rifle and started set off up the ramp. She felt herself become slightly lighter as she ran, and realized it was due to running against the spin. She smiled, and exploited the situation to move a little faster.

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Collins grimly watched as the door of his pod struggled to open. The doors were bent, the result of a poor landing and a considerable amount of weight still pressing against them. In the confined space he shifted aside to peer through the stubbornly small gap, and saw dark metal beams. One was especially large, and seemed to be the cause of the difficulty...

The door suddenly emitted a squeal of tortured metal and opened wide. The heavy girder he was staring at fell toward him.

Swift reflexes moved him aside in time, despite the confined space. The beam slammed against the back wall of the pod producing an impressive clang. He paused a moment to help ease the adrenaline surging through him, then turned and checked the pod's rear wall for damage.

The metal beam had produced a dent, but the alloy could take much worse. Satisfied that he was safely protected from the vacuum outside, he turned his attention to the remaining wreckage.

The fallen beam was one of many. The cut section of floor had rebounded and fragmented. The metal was torn and twisted, but there did appear to be an opening wide enough for him to climb through.

He allowed himself a deep breath of relief, then double-checked the seal on his hood, and retrieved his pack and rifle.

As he climbed up, he paid careful attention to the thin cable spooling out from his backpack as he left the pod. When he cleared the girders and reached the height of the chamber's floor, he finally discovered why the wreckage had rebounded.

His pod had punched into in a dimly illuminated garage full of parked loaders. Eight of the broad vehicles were crammed into the room, their six-legged frames squeezed up next to each other. The pod had arrived beneath one of them.

He winced at the forest of metal legs and twisted wreckage around him.

"The blueprints didn't list these little buggers," he muttered inside his hood. "Serves me right for changing my landing coordinates I guess!"

There was no way around the hulking machines, so the Colonel continued to crawl under them in search of an exit. Checking again to

ensure the cable played out securely behind him, he slithered toward where the blueprints suggested there should be an exit.

Closer to the wall he finally had enough room to get on his feet. The stretch of vacant floor was narrow, but it included an open freight elevator shaft set in the wall.

He stopped to remove the spool from his backpack, placed it on the floor underneath the closest loader, and activated it. The rubber-coated foot of a loader hid the receiver from casual view, but he felt sure the red safety switch could be accessed easily enough by anyone who knew it was there.

Satisfied, he donned the backpack and hooked his rifle on his combat sling so the weapon hung in front of his chest where he could swiftly use it.

*Terminal: map.*

His implant detected the command, and passed it to the terminal secured in his suit. His brain implant was a basic model, unable to interfere with his vision. Keeping augmentation within his head to a minimum made him less susceptible to electronic attacks.

His terminal added a projected map of the entire Station to the vision through the hood's visor, and zoomed it in until only a single torus was shown. Two indicators glowed on it, one of which was his location.

Collins studied at the map. The second dot marked a location he'd taken care to ensure the team knew nothing about. *Terminal: show team rendezvous.*

The display zoomed out to include more parts of the station, and another marker appeared. It was even further away, on the opposite side of the station in a different torus. He would need to reach it quickly to prevent suspicion.

*Terminal: map off.*

The display vanished, and he approached the freight elevator.

It was a ruthlessly simple design. A waist-high metal grille served as a safety barrier, but the elevator itself was nowhere in sight. The walls of the shaft were old concrete, probably sprayed onto excavated rock before being smoothed off by machine.

He swung over the barrier onto the grimy floor and gazed up into the darkness. Seven squares of pale light were visible, each higher than the last. Seven floors, the closest a daunting ten metres above him. The elevator itself blocked any light from levels above the seventh.

Collins took the configuration as a stroke of good fortune. He only needed to go up two levels, and the elevator's position left that open to him. He turned his attention to the shaft walls.

There were no ladders and no cables; the lift presumably relied on gravity to pull it down as cables played out above. There was a metal rail on each wall, set inside a recess. From the look of them, they served as both guide rails and emergency brakes.

He reached inside one of his suit's cloaked pockets, and pulled out a tiny wedge-shaped winch. He squeezed it shut, pushed it inside a wall recesses, then let it snap open. Tiny wheels jammed into each side, holding it firmly in place. A small clip from the winch pulled free and hooked it onto an eyelet on the chest of his suit. The cord linking him to the device was so thin he could barely see it in the gloom. Bracing one foot against the wall, he sent the *ascend* command.

The wheels turned, and the winch silently lifted him upwards. Occasional pushes and kicks kept him from rubbing against the dusty concrete.

He instructed the winch to slow as he approached the first level, which the blueprints listed as a habitation torus. The artificial light was stronger, with a slight green due to grime on the light panels. As he rose past the opening, he saw a broad space dotted with long-dead shrubs, and neatly arranged cottages stripped of roofing and windows. A concrete road leading away from the elevator had become a mass of rubble amid long-dead tree roots. The sight dropped away as he rose, leaving only the hood-filtered scent of rotting vegetation and unseen flowers. If his nose was any guide, at least some plant life had survived.

The next level was his destination, a maintenance corridor in much better repair than the areas he'd seen so far. He slowed his ascent, and didn't stop the winch until it held him above the waist-high safety grille.

Instructing it to play out more slack, he pushed against the wall to keep the lengthening wire taut, and simply walked across the wall toward the barrier.

It was a little awkward, but he was able to grab the railing before his weight overcame his boot's grip on the wall. As more slack played out, he hauled himself over the barrier and dropped to a crouch on the corridor floor.

Two stories high and just as wide, the corridor was designed for heavy freight. The walls and ceiling were gray plascrete, and still looked smooth. The floor was harder to judge, it was black with worn-in dirt.

There were still no threats in sight, and his terminal hadn't warned him of any active sensors.

The winch detached from the shaft, and wound its way back to him along the cord. Collins returned it to the appropriate pocket and set out along the corridor.

His suit actively canceled the sound of his footsteps as he walked, leaving only the background noise of distantly rumbling machinery.

The corridor followed the station curvature up and out of view in the distance. The blueprints showed it linking numerous shafts and several large chambers.

He spotted an orange stripe running along the wall up ahead, barely visibly through the layers of dirt and grime. It served as confirmation he had reached the right level. Mindful of time constraints, he risked quickening his pace.

Following the stripe, he reached an electrical junction box set between a pair of doors so yellowed they looked like they might crumble if opened. The number stenciled on the box was A-211. He kept moving until he located a similar box a hundred metres later, marked A-210. He stopped and opened it.

A maze of ancient optical circuits were revealed, still glowing with life beneath a layer of greasy dust. Between the two lowermost circuit boards was a piece of clean, white paper. He retrieved it and read the familiar neat handwriting:

*"TDF43", Disc H, Layer Green, room 302. (#67)*

*One Transport, in Hangar Bay #3.*

*Meet at statue, Red torus, Disc D, 21:00.*

Collins instructed his implant to store the information in encrypted memory, and also did his best to memorize it himself in case he had to erase his implant. Then he pulled the breather off his hood long enough to stuff the paper into his mouth. The traces of dust from the junction box as he chewed tasted unpleasantly metallic.

He checked the time via his implant, and cursed under his breath. He was five minutes behind schedule. He swallowed the paper, and set off along the corridor.

With the weapon in hand, he began to run.

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Kiranda chose a locker from the many adorning the wall, and pulled the corroded door open. It was deeper than she expected... she could likely even squeeze into it if she tried.

Lieutenant Calden, her hood also hanging behind her head, watched from the bench on her left. “Don’t stash anything you may need in combat. I’m leaving most of my food and water, so I can carry more ordnance.”

Kiranda stuffed her bag into the locker, closed the door, and made a note of the number on her implant. *Locker 238.*

Calden grinned. “Don’t look so worried. If the Alliance comes looking, they won’t find this stuff without one hell of a search.”

Kiranda looked around the locker room. It was large enough to hold a basketball court, but the entire space was entirely crammed with rows of lockers. The fact it had only two entrances made her feel uncomfortable. “I suppose. I just wish there were more escape routes.”

She glanced down the aisle and past Calden. Major Darius was just ten paces away by the nearest entrance, but despite that he was visible only as a glowing outline added by her implant. The trioptic camouflage on his suit and rifle blended perfectly with the lockers. Even the plascrete of the floor was duplicated on his boots. Her implants were able to add the outline because of a friend-or-foe code delicately weaved into the camouflage. Her suit’s hood could have done the outlining for her, but the chance to breathe fresh air was too good to pass up.

Relatively fresh, anyway. The suit said the air was safe, but it had a stale and musty smell.

Langley and Sach were watching the other entrance, presumably just as well concealed.

“Hey Major, why are there so many lockers? They can’t be Colonial era, they’re not that old.”

Darius didn’t take his gaze off the entrance. “Wellspring 21 carried a permanent mining crew until a decade ago, it’s likely a remnant from that. They’re obviously no longer in use.”

Calden chuckled. “They wouldn’t have been much good when they were. These twin cylinder lock designs are too easy to pick.” She paused, and frowned at the open doorway. “Any clue as to where our Alliance kidnapers are hiding? I’ve only seen a handful of live sensors since I got here.”

“Oh, don’t worry Lieutenant. They’ll be sealed away where curious tanker crews can’t stumble across them. Probably close to the central hub, for easy access to the dock at the rear.”

Kiranda frowned. “So we’ll have to search for a hidden section to find Astatoba?”

“I expect so. The closer we get, the sooner we'll encounter their security. I'll bet my hazard bonus that the main hub is glowing with active sensors arrays.”

A two-inch circle of red light winked on and off on the upper part of the locker near the entrance. It was so brief only her implants had detected it.

From the position, Kiranda recognized the light as a coded message beamed from Sach. It felt odd actually noticing it. Normally the transmissions were sent directly between suits, a silent and secure line of sight communication system. But Sach was out of sight of the team, so her suit had projected the message on the wall.

Kiranda's own suit detected the signal, and gave the decrypted message to her implant. Darius reacted by switching off his camouflage and provided a verbal summary, presumably in case anyone in the group had deactivated their suit. “Head ups people, Sach says the Colonel has arrived.”

Kiranda grinned in relief. “Good! I was starting to worry he'd landed in the enemy barracks or something.” She turned, and saw Collins heading into view at the far end of the aisle. He walked toward them.

Calden nodded in greeting. “Any problems Colonel?”

“Landing was a bit rough, but didn't draw any attention. Any enemy contact?”

Darius shook his head. “None sir.”

Collins pulled two large explosive charges from his backpack, and handed them to Lieutenant Calden. “Take charge of these for me.” Calden silently accepted the explosives, and added them to an empty locker.

Collins gazed at the lockers. “You all seem to have your gear stowed. Excellent.” He looked around the room. “Where's Doctor Harrison?”

Darius winced. “I was hoping he was with you sir.”

The Colonel's eyes narrowed. “His pod's designated landing zone was one of the nearer ones; we better go find him. Everyone suit up.”

Collins turned and started back the way he had come. Langley and Darius followed behind him, leaving Kiranda to quickly pull on her much lighter backpack, don her hood, and hurry to join the assembling group.

Langley was waiting for them by the open doorway. He held his Hampton 344 heavy assault weapon as though it were a light toy. Kiranda wondered if it was a special model with reduced weight, but then noticed he had three heavy magazines slung around his shoulder. He gave her a brief nod, in what he probably thought was a chummy and reassuring manner.

Sach spoke from her position in the corridor outside, her suit relaying her voice. “Shall we split up and search?”

“No, we stick together for now. We’ll head for his designated landing site and play it from there, he may just be stuck in his pod. Sach, Langley, take point. Calden, Schaefer, rear guard.”

Kiranda took position alongside Calden and followed as the rest of the team lead the way. Their route took them through a corridor lined with pipes and cables, then into a large torus that had once been a habitation ring.

Sach and Langley identified and checked possible threats as they went, and the team changed course twice until eventually opting to use a mezzanine level built so close to the ring's smooth ceiling that the builders had painted it all in the same sky blue color.

Much of the paint had peeled free, and broad flakes covered the floor. The mezzanine even had a steel railing that still looked pretty strong, even if it was so thick with rust she couldn't tell if it had ever been painted too.

Kiranda watched the dimly lit buildings in the ring below as well as the mezzanine behind them, alert for signs of hostiles closing on them from below or the rear.

There were plenty of structures to keep an eye on. The torus was one of the larger ones, and the ground was a good sixty metres below them. Wooden houses dotted the ground like oversized mountain cabins. There were alpine trees too, although they had long since died and the few still standing were dry husks. The houses had been stripped of roofing and doors. It was such a lot to take in that it was some time before Kiranda recognized the dark, treeless strip winding along the floor was not a road, but a dry river bed. In the deepest sections she could still see pools of brackish water. They looked toxic.

Calden, visible only as an outline, nudged her. “Cheery, huh?” she whispered. “Lots of fallen logs.”

“It must have been beautiful.”

“It's potential cover. Watch for sniper drones.”

Kiranda followed in silence. Talk of snipers made her feel exposed, but the mezzanine still seemed safer than walking the dead forest below.

Darius signaled a halt, and indicated a patch of ground ahead of their position, and far below the mezzanine. Kiranda squinted into the darkness. In Ultra Violet, she could make out a patch that was darker than the rest of the ground. It was about the right size for a man, and it showed no sign of movement.

The Colonel turned toward her, and nodded at the railing. “Schaefer, Calden: Descend and recon. We’ll support you from here.”

Calden pulled out her winch seemingly by reflex, leaving her rifle to hang on her sling. Kiranda switched her own rifle's safety on, then followed her example.

The winch had a distinctive shape, and she found and retrieved it by feel. The device had wheels for use with cables or rails, plus a vacuum clamp and a traditional clip. Since the railing looked worse where she was, she opted for the vacuum clamp. The mezzanine floor was filthy with dirt, but it was solid and the winch gripped it easily. A slight groove on the back of her suit helped her locate the ring between her shoulder blades, just above the top of her pack. She clipped the winch's cord to it.

When she turned to look for Calden she found the sapper had already started her descent. Holding her rifle, Kiranda jumped over the rail to follow her.

The winch played out cable as she fell. Instead of accelerating toward the ground, she found she moved at a steady rate and the distant ground began to move beneath her.

She winced. *Collins warned me about the stupid Coriolis!*

Treetops rushed past, missing by a comfortable margin. The rough, gray rocks in the ground looked less friendly. She instructed the winch to start braking, reducing the horizontal speed she had picked up. In the last metre or so, she told the winch to brake harder.

She managed to land at an easy jogging pace, her boots producing a carefully crafted soundwave that kept her footsteps silent even on the uneven rock. As she flicked off the safety, another command detached the cable from her suit and she kept running until she reached a defensible position behind a thick log.

Calden was waiting further to the right, her outline glowing behind a large boulder. Once Schaefer was in place and able to provide cover, Calden left it and moved ahead.

The forest floor was not as dead as it had seemed from so far away. The slowly rotting trees were covered with lichen and tiny flowers, and the ground itself was scattered with various types of moss. When Calden reached cover and Kiranda moved, she found the moss wasn't something to be thankful for. Rocks lurked beneath otherwise smooth-looking stretches of moss, and footing was treacherous.

Feeling closed in by the remains of the forest, she was glad to reach a broad tree trunk festooned with orange fungus, and stop to study the next

area through the sights of her rifle. Calden moved at an impressive speed as she watched for dangers.

She began to feel the two of them were about to die, that a burst of gunfire would soon add their corpses to the array of detritus around them. When they reached the site Darius had identified without incident, she felt somewhat surprised.

Calden was the first to approach. She used a device from her pack as she closed, deactivating the camouflage of their unidentified target.

The figure on the ground wore the same combat suit as the rest of the group and seemed as tall as Harrison, but from where she was Kiranda couldn't see his face. Calden looked up at the mezzanine above and drew her finger across her throat before lowering her gun.

Since Calden seemed to have relaxed, Kiranda left her cover position and moved forward to take look at the scene for herself.

She immediately recognized Doctor Harrison's bright yellow eyes, and his shock of white hair. His hood was neatly stowed behind his neck. He lay on his back, limbs akimbo, with his head cocked sideways at an angle that made her feel ill. Calden's boots had left deep footprints in the dry moss surrounding him, but there was no sign of any others. It was clear the Doctor had not walked to where he was. Kiranda recalled the long drop from the mezzanine above, and shivered.

He still wore his backpack. His weapon, a Trodyne Blaster rather than a bulkier rifle, was still holstered at his side.

"The Colonel's coming down," Calden observed. "Looks like the others are holding position."

Kiranda knelt by the Doctor's corpse, taking care to place her knee in one of Calden's footprints. She could see no bleeding, and no bruising. She switched through every spectrum her artificial eyes supported.

A thin film of salt on his skin refracted the light. The salt was likely the remains of a thin sheen of sweat that had evaporated. Evidently he'd experienced something very stressful after removing the hood but before his death... Which would make sense if he had fallen from the mezzanine.

She leaned closer to the ground, and found a neat square on the back of his neck had no film of salt at all. The sight sent a cold surge through her veins.

The mark was the footprint of a nerve blocking device, removed after his death. He must have been conscious when pushed over the railing, but utterly unable to fight back. She knew first hand what that felt like.

"You okay Schaefer?"

She forced herself to stand. Her head felt strangely light. "I'll live, Calden. Though I can't say the same for our good doctor."

The horrific, icy sensation of a nerveblock on her own smooth neck was too easy to remember, and she struggled to shake it off.

*Damn it, there's no way in hell this is the work of the Colonial Alliance. Whoever did this had to get close without raising suspicion, someone he knew and trusted.* She glanced up at the mezzanine, and saw Collins dropping toward them. It was a terribly long way to fall. He wouldn't even have been able to scream.

The killer went to a lot of trouble to lower himself down and remove the block, then winching back up. There was no escaping it: Harrison had been murdered by a member of his own team.

Colonel Collins landed less than a yard away, his boots sinking into the moss. He pulled off his hood and gazed down at the corpse, expression impassive. "Your impression?"

Calden shook her head. "He landed hard sir, dented that patch of clay pretty well. His skin is whole but his neck and right arm are broken, along with most of the ribs on his right side I think." She glanced up at the mezzanine, and his brow knitted. "What's it like up there?"

Collins chewed at his lip. "Wet. Ruptured pipes, a layer of slick algae, and no railing." The Colonel crouched by the body.

Kiranda stepped back to give him room, and watched as his gaze moved steadily over the body. When he peered at the back of the neck, his eyes lingered for just a moment.

*He saw it.*

Collins turned the corpse over. The broken neck lolled, and the square patch was wiped away on the moss. He then pulled out his knife, and began to cut the straps of the doctor's backpack. "Calden."

"Sir."

"Retrieve your winch. Schaefer's too." He pulled the pack free and set it on the ground.

"Yes sir." Calden hurried back the way they had come.

As the Lieutenant vanished into the forest, Collins added Harrison's sidearm and a few items to his own backpack. Eventually he selected a small metal canister, twisted it until there was a click, then set it on the doctor's body. After a few seconds, a dark brown liquid began to ooze from the container. It slowly spread over the corpse, eating into flesh and clothing alike. They watched in silence as the body dissolved. Perversely, the only smell produced was a sharp tang of steel.

He whispered. "Schaefer.."

Kiranda was caught off guard, and she only just managed to limit her reaction to simply looking at him. He spoke so softly she would not have heard without her augmentation.

“Soon, I’ll send you to look for Doctor Astatoba. That’s a cover.”

She realized he was facing down to direct his whispering into the moss. The concoction eating what was left of Harrison provided a white noise of bubbling and fizzing. Did he not trust the comms system in his suit?

She followed his lead, stowing her hood and facing the ground. “What do you want me to do?”

“There’s only one ship on this station, a transport in Hangar Bay 3. I need you to disable it. Permanently and quietly.” He raised his head to look up at the trio above, and beckoned them down. They busied themselves securing their winches. He turned back to the dissolving body of the doctor. “Do not stumble into us. When you return, report you didn’t get past Disc C.”

Kiranda swallowed nervously. Commandeering a ship was supposed to be their escape route!

Before she had a chance to ask, Calden emerged from the forest with the winches. Darius, Sach and Langley joined them before she finished stowing hers.

Sach gazed at the bubbling mound that had been the Doctor, and arched an eyebrow. “I have to admit, he’s not the one I figured would screw the pooch.” She glanced pointedly at Schaef. “Keep up the good work.”

Major Darius frowned. “What now Colonel?”

Collins handed Harrison’s backpack to Langley, who accepted it without comment. “No change. Our first priority is to disable the communications array so the Alliance can’t call for help. We’ll go straight there.”

Calden grinned. “At last.”

Langley silently crossed to the suspended ropes, and began to retrieve them. The winches retracted the cables as they fell. Kiranda watched them curve through the air as they came down, pulled by the station’s spin. It looked like retracting a garden hose.

*The original colonists grew up knowing only this. How did they cope when they moved to a planet?*

Collins gazed pointedly at the remains of Harrison. “Schaef, I want you to covertly scout the forward part of the station while we take out the array. Stay clear of the hub and search for any military tech. Take no

actions, just meet us back at the locker cache in four hours. We need leads on where Astatoba is being held.”

Kiranda nodded. “Four hours. Understood.”

Sach nodded at her. “Be careful out there. Watch for sensors and security drones at all times.”

Kiranda raised an eyebrow. “Thanks Sach.”

“I don’t want our cover blown.”

Kiranda felt her cheeks flush with hot anger, but forced herself to maintain a neutral tone. “Well, at least we have that much in common.”

Darius clapped his hands. “Knock it off you two! Stick to your assigned tasks. Sach, take point.”

Calden slapped Kiranda on the shoulder. “Looks like you’ll miss the fireworks! I’ll take pictures for you.”

“Take care Calden.”

The five marched away from Kiranda and the clearing, back the way she and Calden had come. Kiranda set off the other way, toward where the station blueprints claimed there was a tunnel to the next torus. As she crested a rise, she spared one last glance over her shoulder at the dark patch of ground they were leaving behind.

Doctor Harrison’s last resting place didn’t have a human outline any more. The liquid had eaten through the moss and into the clay before finally stopping, leaving a neat oval. She remembered his smile and his offer to help. Pulling on her hood, she turned and set off alone.

The ground became smoother and drier, the hidden rocks easier to avoid. As she walked, she kept thinking over what had happened.

*How in the hell does Collins know there’s only one transport? And why send me to destroy it? Is it to make sure Astatoba can’t get out alive?*

She frowned.

*He knows the Doctor was murdered. Did he kill him? If he did, why send me to look at the body? He knows about my ocular implants.*

The tunnel loomed ahead of her, big enough to pass for a highway. She walked into it.

*There are too many unknowns, I need to make some contingency plans. Maybe I can beat the rest of the team back to the stash, and move some of my equipment to a different location.*

She sighed into her hood. “Damn it. What have I gotten myself into?”

## Chapter Five: Consulting

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Colonel Collins crouched behind the steel crate, and risked a glance around the edge.

The long cylindrical chamber ran the entire three kilometer length of the station. All of it was floor, even the ceiling a hundred metres overhead. Much of the vast floorspace held rusting cargo crates. This far from the station's outer rim, the gravity was so weak that only a grid of permanent magnets in the floor kept the crates in place.

He ducked back into cover.

A narrow beam hit his suit, a signal from Sach that decoded as sound inside his hood. "The whole damn chamber is lousy with ultrasonics and active ECM. At least it confirms this is no ordinary mining station."

He replied verbally, leaving it up to his suit to code and transmit. "There are plenty of old crates, but it doesn't look like enough to cover us."

"No, not by a long shot. They're full of holes."

Collins gazed up at the overhead rails. They ran through the center of the chamber, supported at regular intervals by massive X-shaped pylons. It looked like the Alliance used to send supplies in steel containers, but never removed the empty crates. The newest of them were decades old, possibly marking the point the military had taken over.

Lieutenant Calden's voice cut in. "Colonel. I've secured a direct view of the entire dock, including the target."

Without replying, Collins headed toward the more secure gap Calden occupied. His suit's high-friction gloves helped, but it took concentration to stay close to the floor. In such low gravity, the slightest push would send him flying up and into view of the sensors.

The sapper was lying on the floor, a small display projected before her face. A thin black cable that emerged from her suit's arm ran through a tiny gap between the next pair of crates. The Lieutenant offered a visual feed via a close-range beam. "It doesn't look good sir."

His hood projected the image in front of his visor. He saw the stern wall of the chamber, a vast circular surface with three cargo doors spaced equally around the rim. There were many smaller maintenance doors, one of which was highlighted with a blue outline. The highlighted door was their target, an access shaft to the communications array control room. Scattered around the entire wall and highlighted in red was a worrying number of sensors.

Worst of all, the floor by the door was completely clear of the metal containers.

Close by, Darius watched his reaction. "It's a;; good hardware, and there are no blind spots. We could try to hack the arrays, but that would be risky without knowing what kind of tamper detection they use."

Collins nodded grimly. "We need an alternative entry." He retreated from the cramped space, and headed to where Lieutenant Langley's boots poked out of a maintenance shaft in the concrete floor. Thanks to the microgravity, the man was easily supporting his entire weight by his toes. Occasional blinks of light from his efforts reflected on the shaft walls.

Collins steadied himself over the shaft. "Langley, status report."

The boots shifted a little as he shifted his weight. "Just gained access to the main run sir."

"Any sign of the data lines from the blueprints?"

"None. But there are a group of unlisted T6 cables, so the data lines must have been upgraded within the last few years. I'd say we can expect high-end encryption on them."

*Damn.*

Lieutenant Langley turned around and easily lifted himself back to the surface. "The good news is the T6 is more compact, the change has left more room in the conduit."

"Enough to crawl through?"

"So long as we don't mind moving slowly."

Colonel Collins consulted the station blueprints through his implant. The conduit was a possible access route... It ran beneath the chamber floor and past the stern wall, where it branched. One of those branches was a shaft that included a vent in the chamber with the communications array.

Collins looked for Darius, and discovered the man was already at his side. "What do you think?"

Darius frowned. "Security around the door is tight. I say we all give the conduit a try."

"Agreed. Langley, I want you at the rear." The Lieutenant moved away from the open shaft to give them room. "Sach? You're on point. Get over here and take us into that comms room."

"Roger."

Sach emerged from her lookout post. Her curvy figure clambered down the shaft and into the narrow cable run with enviable ease. Collins followed.

The narrow space had been drilled through rock, then sealed with a layer of resin. All the cables were fixed to the bottom, leaving the sides

and ceiling clear and reasonably smooth. Despite that, the cramped space made limited movement and he was glad for the low gravity.

No less than six times, they all had to stop and wait as Sach carefully disabled vermin monitors and anti-tampering sensors.

Despite the vermin monitors, the intersection with the shaft proved to have a large wasp hive. Fortunately it proved to be derelict, and Sach carved her way through to lead them head-first into a vertical shaft that looked disconcertingly bottomless.

Collins followed closely, noticing the air around them was warmer and there was a noticeable upward breeze. Either by design or by accident, the shaft acted as a cooling duct for the spaces further below.

As they descended, the sensation of gravity steadily grew stronger. When they drew level with the communications array, a full third of a gee was in force and the heat was worsening.

His suit did a good job of insulating him from the heat outside, but his exertions were warming him up. A bead of sweat threatened to run down into his eye, but tilting his head ensured it met his hood and soaked into the lining.

For the entire height of the communications chamber, the right side of the conduit was a series of metal grilles. As Sach carefully bypassed the last of the sensors, Collins carefully studied the room through the openings.

It was a single chamber the equivalent of ten stories tall, and most of it was occupied by a cube-shaped matrix of linked rectangular slabs. Each slab was as three metres long and two wide, a mass of gleaming black optoelectronics connected by ceramic girders and thick cables. Any one of them could have provided hyperspace communication for a starship, but inside the cloud just one was not powerful enough. The matrix has eight slabs along each edge, making a grand total of 512.

Collins winced. They would have to disable all of them to be sure the station couldn't call for help.

The chamber had no ladders or handholds. The slab-like nodes themselves did have handles, but they were for removing replaceable sub-modules. He doubted they would take the weight of an armored man, even in one-third gravity.

Lighting was meager, the only light being the blue glow of a great many fail-safe indicators. There was one green light, so far below he had to use his hood's zoom function to recognize it as an exit sign. He could see no sign of any security systems at all.

Sach folded up the device she'd been using to disable the sensors, and returned it to a pocket on her thigh. "All done sir."

"Good work. What can you detect in the chamber?"

"It looks clean. Some intermittent ultrasonics, but they're probably background noise."

"Alright, let's go in and get a closer look at those nodes. Nobody is to interact with them until instructed."

Collins carefully pushed out the lower half of the grille in front of him, gripped the edge, and then shoved the upper half until the entire panel came free. By tilting it, he was able to draw the grille back into the conduit and pass it down to Sach. She tied it in place below them as he eased himself through the opening and straight onto a girder.

He walked easily across the narrow beam toward the top of the array. The gulf below seemed bottomless, but after Black Division's tightrope training the beam felt luxuriously flat. He made a mental note to ensure the training remained compulsory.

Once on top of a suspended slab, he dropped to a crouch and checked on the rest of the group. All of them had emerged, many by making their own openings at lower levels. Only Calden was heading along the same girder he had used. Collins waited until the sapper caught up and indicated the slab beneath them. "I want to be sure the alliance won't know these are out until they try to use them."

The stocky woman peered down at the matrix, and indicated a yellow cable among the mass of them connecting each slab. "We could cut these links between the alignment relays. Without an alignment field, each node will transmit omnidirectionally."

Collins hesitated. "That sounds easy to repair."

"Not after they've burned out, which they will. It'll be obvious sabotage once they see it, but it would take days at best to replace all the damaged systems, and that's if they have the parts."

"Okay, sounds good." He switched to the team's secure channel, designed to seem like background noise to anything listening. "Take a level each, and cut the field relays on each node. Details will come from Calden. Ceramic blades only, there are high voltage cables here."

Calden broadcast a beautifully concise set of instructions which included how to identify the correct cables. She even suggested cutting the cable flush with the relay housing so they would fuse on transmission, making the nodes harder to repair.

Collins walked across a girder to the next node, the metal beneath his feet constantly humming. It was a disconcerting thought that if the alliance

powered up the array while they were there, the power released would kill them all. Or worse, make them wish it had.

He reached the next node and located the proper cable. His ceramic knife cut it flush with a single pull. The cable's core was a superconductive compound, no stronger than rubber.

Their secure channel remained silent as his team quietly and efficiently worked their way across the structure.

Collins was walking toward the last node of the top layer when Sach interrupted the silence with a sudden broadcast.

“Drone!”

“Jamming,” Langley's instantly responded.

The exchange had taken only milliseconds, and any further broadcasts either verbal or thought-based were buried in static. The jamming prevented the drone from reporting their presence, but it also blocked their own communication. They would have to rely on line of sight beams, which would be extremely difficult in such an environment.

Collins had automatically dropped to lay flat on the beam he'd been crossing. The move pinned his rifle beneath him, but his 9mm automatic was soon in his hand as he squinted into the darkness below in a vain effort to locate the threat. His hood and ocular implants briefly highlight a cloaked friendly leaping between nodes two levels below. From the speed and size, he recognized it as Lieutenant Langley.

Much further below, something else came into view. It was so far away, his implants took a moment to identify and highlighted it for him. In a fraction of a second he recognized the object as a drone, then there was a flash.

Pain lanced along his left arm, and his vision failed. He fired a single shot as quickly and precisely as he could, clenching his jaw against the pain.

He heard the high-velocity, armor-piercing round punch into an empty section of the distant floor. His vision returned as his hood recovered from the beam, but there was no longer any sign of the machine.

He hesitated. The drone had detected him, and could have taken a clean shot at his torso. But instead it had shot wide and merely hit his arm. The only explanation was it had been programmed to avoid damaging the comms array.

He tried to think of a way to transmit the information to his team through the jamming. He could simply shout, but the drone might hear and adapt... He decided to gamble that the drone was a fairly dumb model. He

switched his hood's voice suppression off, and shouted: "Enemy will not damage our target!"

"Understood!" It was the Major's voice that replied from somewhere below. There was no reply from the others, which was just as well. It meant they weren't giving away their positions.

He flexed his injured arm, and found the damage was minimal. From the way the skin tugged as he flexed it, the shot had even cauterized the flesh. He used his other arm to search for an electromagnetic grenade on his belt. Finding the familiar flat disc, he pulled it free.

A horizontal line of particle fire cut across the darkness three stories below. It was followed by a shot from the opposite corner, which lanced up toward him.

He flinched away from it, and with his hands full, began to slide off the narrow girder. Collins locked his legs around the beam, and wound up hanging from it upside-down.

"There's two!" shouted Calden.

Collins couldn't tell where the woman was; the sound seemed to bounce off every surface in the chamber. She sounded close.

The grenade he held would destroy anything electrical within a radius of five metres, which could in turn raise alarms all over the station. Was it really worth the risk?

Muttering a curse, he returned the grenade and 9mm to his belt and gripped his rifle.

A red warning appeared at the edge of his vision, neatly framing a dark shape rushing into view on the wall of the chamber. As he whipped the gun to bear, the machine leaped up toward him. A mass of black, with blade-like legs accompanied by the high-pitched whine of the drone's particle weapon charging for a quick shot.

Collins fired first.

The machine's outer shell shattered, and the remaining mass exploded as the machine's damaged weapon failed. Collins swung aside, dodging most of the debris as it flew past. His suit protected him from several impacts, but he saw one large fragment ricochet off the girder and fly past his face.

"One down!" He shouted, hauling himself back up to the girder.

Two shots rang out below, swiftly followed by another beam of white heat.

Silhouetted against the beam, he glimpsed the stocky outline of Calden jumping between nodes. In the following gloom the image

remained in his mind, as though she was frozen in mid-air over the dark gulf beneath.

He heard an armored figure hit something, hard. Calden had been jumping a long distance, surely she hadn't fallen? The sound had come too soon for that...

There was silence for a time, and Collins considered climbing further down. The drones appeared to be concentrating on the lower half...

The low-pitched thump of heavy gunfire interrupted his thoughts. The sound lasted only an instant, but it was followed by the welcome clatter of ceramic fragments spraying onto the floor far below.

"Second drone down," Langley reported. He sounded pleased with himself.

"Confirmed," said Sach. "There are only two charging bays down here."

Collins allowed himself sigh of relief. "Maintain the jamming for now. Anyone hurt? Calden?"

"Just a bit sore boss."

"Major?"

Darius stepped into view on the level below.

"I'm with Calden. She has a little way to go as a low-gee acrobat."

"Any damage to the array?"

The shot had been from Langley's Hampton 344, and could have torn through any amount of equipment.

"None sir. The drone was crossing an open area."

"Well done." He checked his arm. Around a square inch of skin was hurt, no bleeding. It didn't need immediate care. He walked across to the last node, reached down and cut the relay. "Finish the rest of the relays, weld the door and retreat to the conduit." Carefully, he climbed down to the next level. Calden was nursing her ribs as Darius finished the last node for her. She had pulled her hood off, and the dim red light glistened off a sheen of sweat on her face.

"How do you feel Lieutenant?"

"Just a few bruises, I'll be good to go once the painkillers kick in. I met one of those bloody things in mid-air; scared it off down to Langley." She grinned despite her evident pain. "They were a bit of a surprise, eh? I hope Schaf has better luck."

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Kiranda squeezed her way through the last few metres of duct. She drew closer to the grille, then at long last was finally close enough to touch it.

She pressed her gloved palm against the mesh covering the end of the duct. It flexed, but was held firmly at the corners by spot welds.

*A good punch would rip it free, but it might fall down the elevator shaft into the hangar. Besides, the impact would make noise and Collins said I should be quiet.*

Kiranda pressed her hand against the mesh until it flexed far enough for her to squeeze four fingers between the steel mesh and the smooth metal. Using those fingers for purchase, she pressed her thumb against the mesh close to the weld.

The synthetic muscles along her arm made it easy. The steel mesh stretched, then popped free of the weld. With her hand steadying it, the sound seemed inconspicuous enough. She repeated the process, leaving only one edge welded in place. She was then able to bend the grille up and out of the way with a single push.

Easing her head and shoulders through the narrow opening, she studied the massive vertical shaft she had gained access to. Above, the walls receded into darkness. The doors sealing it far above were only just visible, even to her enhanced vision.

She grinned. According to the blueprints, the central hub was on the other side of the doors. Cranes used the shaft to move cargo and even entire ships between the hub chamber and the Hangar at the bottom of the shaft. With the doors closed, she didn't have to worry about being seen from above.

Below her, a closer set of massive doors were wide open. The words *Hangar 3* were stenciled along the edge by the coarse metal teeth, brightly lit by light flooding up from the hangar beneath. The cargo ship that lay there looked very much like the one she'd seen in the briefing footage, but it no longer had the two cargo crates. For a journey of such haste, they'd likely been extra fuel.

*Bingo! Laziness is the one galactic constant, I swear. Safety regs don't require ceiling doors to be closed, so they didn't bother. Suits me just fine. I'd hate to have wormed through a hundred metres of greasy duct for nothing.*

She pushed the upper half of her torso out of the cramped duct, retrieved the winch from her backpack, and fastened it securely to the shaft wall. After convincing herself the cable was firmly attached to her suit, she trusted her weight to it and climbed out into the massive shaft.

Her first impulse was to rappel down the wall, but she opted instead for a minimal profile, wrapping her legs around the cord and letting the winch lower her down. After the darkness of the duct, the bright light from the Hangar made her feel apprehensive. As she drew nearer to the open doors, more of the hangar came into view.

There were still no people in sight... Three basic maintenance drones were there, but only one was active. It was working on one of the ship's forward landing struts with a small welding kit. Unless she got very close, it should ignore her entirely. The two inactive drones were parked by one wall.

She spotted the thin strip of black glass almost too late. Set flush within one shaft walls, it was well-hidden in the shadow cast by the open doors. The strip was only an inch wide, and she instinctively knew what it contained.

*Damn it!*

The winch obeyed and stopped immediately. She came to a jolting halt with barely a hand's breadth between the top of her head and the sensor grid that lurked behind the glass strip. From such a close vantage point, she could actually see the row of reflective prisms concealed behind the smoked surface.

*WAY too close for comfort!*

She tried several settings with her eyes until she found the spectrum that best captured the beams as they illuminated what little dust was in the air.

The sight made her wince. The beam covered a neat bootlace pattern that left gaps too small for even a finger to pass through.

Carefully, she instructed the winch to haul her up to a slightly safer height. Breathing a little easier, she analyzed the beam for patterns in the cycle. Her implant reported fluctuations at around four hundred changes per second in an apparently random sequence. At that speed, any attempt to interfere physically would trigger an alarm.

*Well, this is going to be tricky. Where did I put that probe?*

Kiranda cautiously fished inside her inverted backpack, located the cold, fist-sized lump and pulled it free. The metal box was one of the black market items she had picked up on NuAndrea, but she had not had time to test it. Judging by the price alone, it was excellent quality. Either that or she had been screwed over.

*He's always sold me good stuff in the past. I guess if it triggers an alarm I'll just have to deal with it.*

She pressed the device against the wall above the glass strip. The probe could be controlled wirelessly, but Kiranda pulled a VR cable from her suit's sleeve and plugged in to it directly. The direct link was more secure and gave greater speed.

Her suit didn't have full access to her brain implants, so the Virtual Reality headset in her hood powered up. She felt the neural transceivers around her skull as a slight sensation of warmth.

*Hey, this is a good quality headset! I wonder if Collins would let me keep it? Clients expect the best these days.*

The headset manipulated her senses, overlaying her vision with a confusing montage of images. Kiranda didn't want to lose sight of the hangar below, so she kept her eyes open and concentrated on image from the headset.

The confusion eased as she concentrated. She could see the glass strip from the perspective of the device, as well as her own view from farther above it. She chose a section of glass between two beams, and the view moved toward that point as the probe extended. It engaged an ultrasonic lance, and cut a small hole through the glass.

Kiranda instructed the probe to pull the piece of glass out, and place it in her own outstretched hand. She closed her fingers around it. From the probe's perspective her glove looked huge. It also looked filthy, and she realized the duct she'd crawled through must have been dirtier than she'd realized.

Carefully, she steered the probe through the hole and past a series of reflective prisms, searching for the main receiver.

She'd chosen the right location. The receiver was close by, mounted on very complicated optical circuit board.

*Ah hell! Sixteen discrete data processing cores? That would take me ages to hack! Maybe I can find a shortcut... The wiring looks simpler.*

She extended the probe to the optical leads rising from the circuit, and activated the photonic sensor. Delicately, she tested each cable in turn. The probe presented the signals as a graph.

*That one is an encrypted timer, the next... A carrier signal? No, probably an AC power feed. This one... Noise generator? No, a data stream.*

She checked every one, then checked them all again to see if any had changed. A smirk tugged the corner of her lip. One of the signals from the data cores matched the signal from the sensors. The system was being told what pattern to listen for!

Kiranda licked her dry lips and used the probe to hook the data signal directly to the core. Once the connection was complete, the entire grid of beams was bypassed. In theory, she could move through it as many times as she liked and it would never notice.

She retracted the probe. The other side was a simple reflector, so it should be safe to ignore. She returned the probe to her pack and carefully lowered herself toward the beams.

She poked her left hand through, but the chamber below remained silent. Ensuring her suit was still in full stealth mode, she lowered her head into the hangar. The moment her eyes cleared the edge of the shaft, she stopped the winch.

There was someone present after all. Just one man, a few paces from the furthest wall of the chamber. He was kneeling, working on another service drone that was mostly in pieces. Close to his right was the chamber's only normal doorway. It was open, and revealed part of a corridor leading away.

She could see through a window into part of the transport's single cabin. The interior was illuminated, so there might be more people inside it.

What held her attention the most was the large security drone on the opposite side of the chamber. It was stationed by the entrance to the corridor, presumably to catch anyone entering the hangar without authorization. Her eyes studied the machine with a range of filters. She found it boasted a ring of optical sensors, four impossibly black domes which could only be full-spectrum sensor arrays, and she was sure the rotating disc on top was a beam of ultrasonics. The size of the disc suggested a very strong active sensor, one her outfit's stealth abilities would be unable to deceive. She was hanging about a metre above the area covered by the sweep, but since the chamber was around four stories tall that wasn't very helpful. The ship was barely half the height of the chamber, so she would have to risk exposure simply to reach it.

After consideration, she decided her best sabotage option was via the vessel's own systems. She could do that silently, as long as she could get physical access to the vessel. The cabin itself was out of the question, and the entry door was too exposed. Another possibility was the power link on the port side, below the engines. Unfortunately that was in full view of the drone.

Kiranda swore beneath her breath. There had to be another options, but it seemed clear she would only find them by getting much closer to the ship.

She reached behind her neck and unclipped the rope. Her legs, entwined around the rope, held her aloft. She eased the pressure slightly, allowing herself to slide further down until her shoulders were inside the chamber and her face dangerously close to the sensor sweep.

She fixed her gaze on the space between the ship and hangar wall. It was the only place that offered decent cover, but it was a few metres from the edge of the shaft. The framework body of the ship offered little cover, being mostly empty space and rounded metal beams.

Listening to the echo of the ultrasonics sweep, she planned her descent. The time between passes was small, and she needed to cover considerable space.

Kiranda glanced once more at mechanic working on the service drone. Reassured, she fixed her gaze on her target and let go.

The ship's thick metal beams rushed toward her. Reaching out as she fell, she gripped the first bar as gently as she dared.

The sound dampening system in her suit masked the minimal sound of her gloves striking the metal, but it was her own effort that prevented the impact from making the beam vibrate. The bar zoomed past her face and her grip only tightened. She then swung underneath the beam, feet slicing through the air.

When she let go, Kiranda flew toward a slightly lower beam. She lifted her legs as she hurtled toward it, struck with back of her knees, and let her momentum swing her underneath.

She caught the beam with her hands as well, and used the extra grip to slow herself enough to drop to a halt behind the ship's engine blast plate. The drone's ultrasonics echoed off the plate almost instantly. She stayed crouched, listening intently for any hint that her descent had been detected.

The sweep continued uninterrupted, and she could hear the mechanic still obliviously welding.

Kiranda lowered her head. *That went pretty well, all things considered. Maybe I should have joined the school gymnastics team.*

She searched for cables, and located a number of them on a nearby landing skid. The skid had a hefty triangular mount that offered reasonable cover, so she waited for the next sweep of the sensor, and leaped easily into place.

The cables were mounted high, and reaching up to them risked exposure. As Kiranda pondered her options, she heard the welding stop.

She risked a glance between sweeps. The man had his entire head and shoulders inside the machine he was repairing.

*Good boy, you keep at it.*

She took out her probe, connected it to her suit, and steered the snake-like tendril upward behind the cover of a metal bar. It stretched just far enough to reach the cables, for which Kiranda muttered thanks to fate.

She listened to the cable signals, and identified a shielded data line. She instructed the probe to tap it, and watched as a needle-thin sliver eased through the protective cover and the alloy shielding beneath.

It then suddenly stopped, warning her it had detected tamper-sensing mono-filaments. Kiranda took control of the device manually, and delicately tilted it back and forth. Eventually, she managed to nudge past the brittle filaments and touch the surface of the glass fiber beneath.

There was an incessant stream of data, all random noise devoid of meaning. She ran her best code-breaking routines against it, and the data fell into shape. She was soon looking at a complete schematic of the vessel with status reports and command interfaces.

She checked the command structure system for potential weaknesses. Most of the ship's systems required clearance codes, but some were open to full access. Two of the unprotected systems claimed to be security nodes, which meant they were definitely traps for unwary hackers. She examined the remaining systems, and soon began to feel frustrated. There was only so much one could do with the shipboard music system, landing lights, the coffee machine in the cabin...

The thought of coffee made her mouth water. *Concentrate!* She told herself. *Maybe the monitoring circuits can carry a... Hey, the drive coil temperature is here!*

Kiranda went from there to taking full control of the drive coil subsystem in less than a second. After a small adjustment to the code, she could make the temperature sensor lie. Immediately, she lowered the temperature reported by the sensor.

The ship's systems responded automatically, boosting power to the drive coil to keep it above the recommended minimum for short term storage. Kiranda smirked, and eased the reported temperature down even further. The power feed increased again.

The coil warned that the temperature was in danger of causing an overload, but she blocked the alert. The core temperature hit the danger level, then slowly rose beyond it. Kiranda maintained a steady normal reading as the temperature passed the limits of the monitoring equipment. After another minute, the coil began to cool rapidly. She adjusted the reported temperature to make the ship lower the power back to normal, and left it steady.

*Job done. Hah!*

Her efforts had melted some of the mono-filaments in the drive coil, rendering it useless for spaceflight. Technically it was repairable, but it would take weeks for a good technician. Plus, they had to discover the fault first.

Kiranda retracted the probe and stowed the device once more. She made a note to thank her contact, the device had worked out well.

Still crouched, she studied the engines above her. There were no visible sign of the coil's demise. Her augmented vision told her the hull plating had risen four degrees, but it was already starting to cool down and the security drone hadn't budged.

*Right. How do I get out of here?*

She timed a glance at the man working on the bot, and found he wasn't there any more.

*Oh, hell! Where did he go? He better not have noticed anything...*

She thought desperately. There was no way he could have had entered the ship, his footsteps on the metal steps would have alerted her. He must have left the hangar through the corridor, perhaps to get parts or tools.

Kiranda studied the framework of the ship, and identified a long section where several beams conspired to obscure the drone's sensor sweep fairly well. She waited for the sweep, then hauled herself up to lie as flat as she could amid the beams. The sweep continued as she dragged herself toward the bow of the ship.

She reached the roof of the vessel's cabin, which provided protection from the sweep as long as she kept a low profile. It also offered a good view of the door leading to the corridor, only ten paces from the front of the ship. Worried the mechanic could return at any moment, she crawled across the top of the cabin.

She took the opportunity to take a look inside the ship, glancing upside-down through the rockglass windshield. The well-lit chamber was roomier than she expected, and quite unoccupied. She turned her attention back to the doorway. To reach it, she would have to move through the sensor sweep once more, starting from a prone position, and reach the corridor before the sweep came around again. She winced.

*This is not going to be easy.*

Gripping a ridge with both hands, she waited for the sweep to flick past, then launched herself forward.

She hit the floor, and rolled until her feet met the ground. Her legs pushed and she sprinted toward the doorway as fast as she could.

She was too slow, or the drone heard her. The ultrasonic sweep fixed on the doorway and quadrupled in strength as she shot through.

Kiranda slid to a halt.

*You saw nothing, you stupid drone! That was just sensor noise, nothing there to worry about now.* She moved her hand to her sidearm. Her rifle, still on her back, would take longer to draw. *For the love of god, just don't start a lockdown!*

After a dangerous pause, the sensor sweep dropped back to normal strength and resumed its former sweeping pattern. Grateful for her sudden good fortune, she started along the corridor.

*I think this suit saved me. I'll...*

A shadow appeared in the junction ahead, a humanoid outline she immediately recognized. The mechanic was returning to the hangar, pushing what sounded like a trolley of some kind ahead of him.

Kiranda's heart rate doubled. The corridor was too narrow; the only place she had any chance of hiding was a single open doorway on the left side of the corridor. She dashed inside just as the man rounded the corner.

She found herself inside a narrow room little wider than the corridor. The walls were lined with shelves full of boxes and spare parts. Even the floor had been pressed into service as additional storage space. It also seemed to have suffered from multiple oil spillages.

Trying to halt herself before hitting the boxes, she was forced to plant one foot on an oily patch of floor, and the other on a solid-looking metal box. To her horror, the box emitted a thin creaking sound and sagged under her weight. She lifted that foot to shift weight away from it, and lost her balance.

Desperate for support, she grabbed a support bracket with her right hand and floundered blindly with her left. Her hand found the edge of a heavy can of oil. The extra purchase allowed her to steady herself without making any further noise.

She turned to look over her shoulder at the doorway, and saw the repairman step into view. His eyes were narrowed, and his right hand held a small but powerful blaster.

Evidently, he had heard the creaking metal.

He left the trolley behind and stepped into the room. She checked his eyes in infra-red, and reassured herself they were natural. Even at close range, there was a chance he wouldn't see her actively camouflaged suit. As long as he hadn't been trained...

He evidently had, because his eyes widened and he aimed the blaster toward her.

Kiranda had no time to draw her gun, and the knockout compound in the single-shot dart gun strapped to her wrist would take a full second to knock out a grown man. He was too far away to knock the weapon from his hand, and her precarious position denied her the option of dodging.

The only weapon available was the oil can her left hand was gripping, so she threw it as hard as she could. It struck his gun hand with a loud crack.

*Two broken bones, sprained wrist,* her implant concluded.

The man's face blanched, but with sheer determination he managed to keep his grip on the gun. Kiranda used the time she'd bought to rush toward him.

He was already bringing the weapon back to bear when her hand reached his neck. Her synthetic muscle powered the tips of her gloved fingers through his skin, tearing into the hot flesh beneath. Blood spurted along her arm to spray across her torso. She felt the edge of a vertebra.

The gun fired, and the shot seared past her left side to bury itself into the wall behind her.

Kiranda gripped the front of the man's overalls before he could fall back into the corridor, and pulled the gun from his paralyzed grasp. His knees gave way and he tried to shout, but only a gurgle escaped from his torn neck. As the anguished expression on his face burned into her mind alongside other images she would never forget, Kiranda slammed the gun against the side of his head and ended his suffering.

Holding the man's blaster, she stepped toward the doorway and peered cautiously into the corridor.

Beyond the abandoned trolley, the hangar was quiet. Apparently the drone wasn't going to investigate the gunshot noise. Evidently it was programmed to monitor only the Hangar. Kiranda forced her attention back to the storeroom and steeled herself.

Her hands were trembling slightly as she lifted his corpse up onto the room's highest shelf. The shadows were darkest there, and people rarely looked upwards. But the body would bleed, even more than it already had. Blood had already spread over the floor, and her arm was red...

Her pulse quickened, and she pre-emptively clutched for the reassuring ridge of the necklace underneath her suit. The room wavered, and Kiranda had to lean on the shelving for support.

*I didn't want to kill... I didn't!*

She closed her eyes and forced herself to slow down her breathing. It didn't matter what she told herself, there was only one voice she could trust. She pictured her, a young girl with hair as blue as her own.

The girl saw what Kiranda had done, but her saddened gaze held no anger.

Relieved, Kiranda opened her eyes again and found her hands had steadied. She spared a glance at the face of the corpse as she pushed herself fully upright again.

“Sorry.”

As quickly as she dared, she rearranged the boxes to hide the worst of the bloodstains on the floor. A rag from the dead man's own overalls served to wipe the worst of it from her outfit.

As she pushed the trolley out of the corridor and into the room, she tried to think of a way to explain what had happened to Collins.

## Chapter Six: Collins

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Kiranda hesitated when she saw the entrance to the locker room. Dim light spilled through the opening, and against that light, her implants detected the friend-or-foe pattern of a cloaked teammate. It identified as Sach just before it stepped further into view, and the generously-endowed outline appeared.

*The rest of the team beat me back here? I thought I'd been pretty fast...*

Kiranda's suit camouflage was active, but she was certain Sach could see her IFF pattern clearly. She switched off the camouflage anyway, and pulled off the hood. She saw the hazy outline shake its head.

"Way to go Schaef," Sach announced. "Very stealthy."

"Come on, that bust of yours is recognizable from the Confed border." She walked through the doorway.

The cloaked figure sighed. "I was referring to the blood on your outfit." Kiranda felt her left eye twitch. "Go in and clean up, you look like crap. More than usual I mean."

Kiranda walked on past the camouflaged figure. "Go climb a locker Sach."

She headed for the locker with her equipment. As she turned into the aisle, she saw Collins and Darius sitting opposite each other. The two were talking in hushed tones, and the stocky form of Lieutenant Calden lay motionless on the bench next to them.

For a moment Kiranda's heart froze and she thought there had been another death on the team, but her chest was rising and falling at a healthy rate. The team's sapper was merely asleep.

Darius looked up as she approached. Against the dull matte of her suit, the smears of dark blood were still visible. Collins watched in silence.

Darius drew breath through his teeth. "Okay, what happened?"

"I ran into someone on my way back. We had a tussle and I won." She glanced down at the blood on her outfit, and saw the bulge of her necklace beneath the fabric. For a moment she had the crazy thought that some blood might have soaked through to the necklace, and her heartbeat began to quicken.

*No!*, she told herself. *The suit is waterproof, don't be so stupid.* She located locker 238, and pulled it open.

Darius winced. "That's unfortunate. Alliance?"

She reached inside the locker. "He was dressed as maintenance, maybe a mechanic of some sort. But he was armed, and identified active

camouflage in poor light.” She pulled out a chrome-plated item from her locker. It was the size and weight of a brick, and unfolded a spigot.

“Interesting. Where was this?”

*That's a tricky one, I need to be ambiguous.* “Disc A, well below the hub.” She shook her head. “He was alone and I hid the body as best I could, but it’s only a matter of time until he’s missed or found. I’m sorry.”

“Don't apologize Schaef, we simply observe and adapt.”

Collins finally broke his silence. “Major, I think we have to speed up the schedule.” He glanced back at Kiranda. “Are you hurt Schaef?”

Kiranda caught his gaze and knew exactly what he was asking. *You know too bloody much about me, Isamu Collins!*

“I’m fine.” She retrieved an enamel mug from her locker, and set it beneath the chrome machine. Rich, dark coffee began to dribble into it. She glanced to the sleeping figure next to them. “What’s up with Calden?”

“Just resting my eyes Schaef,” the woman murmured.

Major Darius nodded at him. “The Lieutenant is convalescing from wrestling a drone.” He paused. “I take it you found no sign of Astatoba?”

“None at all. But I didn’t even get to Disc C, this place is huge.” Her mug was only a third full, but she cut the flow and drained it in a single gulp. “Oh praise the gods, that's good.”

She closed her eyes, and enjoyed the warm feel of the liquid in her stomach, the taste lingering in her mouth. Eventually she opened her eyes, and returned the mug to the nozzle for more. The delicious aftertaste lingered.

Darius turned to Collins. “Sir, exactly how much of acceleration are we looking at?”

Collins stood up. “A lot. Everybody kit for combat! Sach, Langley, you’ll take point. We’re going to sweep this place, starting at Disc C. Schaef, I want you with me on rear guard.”

Everyone went into action, even Calden sprang up in an instant. Kiranda spared a longing gaze at her coffee machine. She had hoped to have at least one full cup.

*Damn...*

She grabbed a replacement rope-winch from her stash and stuffed it into her backpack, pleased that nobody seemed to notice amid the hubbub. Three extra magazines for her Basilisk sidearm went into her belt. In tight quarters, the compact blaster was more useful than a rifle.

Calden opened a foil sachet to produce a green cloth that smelled like kerosene, and proceeded to show her how to wipe down her suit by

demonstrating on her sleeve. The cloth barely needed to touch the suit to leave it spotless.

“Thanks Calden, I was thinking I'd have to upend a canteen over myself. I take it Black Division is aware there is such a thing as liquid repellent coatings?”

“Sure we do,” she grinned. “But the Colonel figured nanotech protection was a higher priority this time around. Water still rolls off it fine, but proteins are different.”

With the poor mechanic's blood quickly removed from her outfit, Kiranda drained the half a mug of coffee that had accumulated and returned the machine to her locker. As the team began to move out, she took up her assigned place on Collins' left.

They made their way through the station's network of maintenance corridors in stony silence.

Kiranda tugged one of the data jacks from her assault rifle, trailing a loop of fiber. Locating the matching socket on the arm of her suit, she plugged it in.

Half a dozen data streams became available, transmitted to her implant through the suit's hood. She ignored most of them, but kept the feed that showed the view through her rifle's built-in scope.

Collins, without lowering his gaze for an instant, pulled an identical cable from his own gun and silently offered it to her. She glanced at him, hoping for some hint as to why he wanted her to monitor his gun with a physical link... But he didn't meet her gaze. She realized he was making sure nobody else was watching, they were rounding a corner and the most heavily augmented soldiers were already out of sight. She silently took the cable and plugged it into her rifle.

Instead of a data feed for cooperative targeting, she found a secure communications link. His words unfolded in her mind, from his implant to hers. “It's time you knew the score.”

She tightened her grip on her rifle. “It's past time,” she replied.

Collins paused. “You know as well as I do that Doctor Harrison's death was no accident. He was murdered.”

“By you?”

“No. I had enough trouble just getting to the meeting point in time.”

“Why's that?”

“I changed my landing zone. My pod is well away from the others, at this point *here*.”

A labeled schematic accompanied the signal. Kiranda copied the marked location to her own copy of the station blueprints. The marked

location was a long way from the scheduled landing areas. Collins then sent two pictures. Kiranda superimposed them over the lower half of her vision.

They were of a loader garage, complete with wreckage caused by a pod intrusion beneath one of the loaders. A small device hidden behind one of the loader legs was circled.

“What’s that in the circle?”

“It activates a powerful beacon in my pod, one-time use only. A Confederation stealth vessel is listening for it. If the switch is hit, the ship will be here within an hour.”

*Holy...! He has a Confed ship parked in Alliance space? Well, there's our real escape route. Unless the pod is discovered... Or the ship is detected before we can call for it. Good grief, so much can go wrong!*  
“Okay, that explains some things. But Harrison must have been killed by someone he trusted.”

“Yes, there’s at least one double agent amongst us. It’s imperative they don’t find out why we’re really here.”

*At least one? Oh hell...* “Are you telling me we’re not here to rescue Doctor Astatoba?”

“That’s a cover. The Alliance believes Astatoba is loyal to them. He certainly used to be, but he turned a long time ago. He’s taking a great risk for us doing this.”

Kiranda had so many questions she didn’t know where to begin. For a time, she just kept walking, followed the team down a stone stairwell that felt like it belonged in a medieval castle. To her augmented hearing, the distant drip of water sounded strangely loud.

“Do you mean you intentionally let them steal that horrible bioweapon?”

“Not at all. This started many months ago when we learned about Copycat. Very few people know, but the sample we got was clearly part of a large batch. The Alliance has been mass-producing it, at tremendous cost. With such a short shelf life, it’s obvious they intend to use it. Likely somewhere on the border, and within the next fortnight. It became clear the only way to stop them in the time available was to procure the Alliance’s cure for Copycat.”

Kiranda winced. The Confederation border worlds had little in the way of orbital defense. Entire worlds could be entirely wiped out by such an attack.

*Aren't they afraid of the counter-attack? Hell, maybe they actually want a war. Confed has other enemies that might decide to join the fray...*

Kiranda realized she was clenching her jaw in anger. Her stomach was starting to hurt from hunger, so she pulled an energy bar from her backpack to give herself something to gnaw on. Her stupid hood initially refused to let it in, but once she aligned it properly, an opening formed long enough to push the tiny bar into her mouth.

She chewed. The bar was a blend of chocolate and coffee, but tasted slightly metallic. Fortunately, her implant let her talk with her mouth full. “So, you came up with a plan?”

“Together with Doctor Astatoba.”

“You trust him that much?”

“Completely, and you should too. He and I concocted the story that he was completing a new nanotech weapon. I leaked this information to Major Darius, because I suspected him of being an Alliance agent.”

Kiranda almost choked on her food. With a monumental effort, she managed to limit herself to a muted cough. Calden caught the convulsive movement in the corner of his eye and turned to give her an inquiring glance. She gave her an apologetic nod.

Collins continued after Calden turned away. “The information was leaked to the Alliance almost immediately. They still believed Astatoba was loyal to them so they contacted him to obtain a sample of his work. They were understandable desperate to know if this new weapon was immune to their treatment.”

“So he wasn’t kidnapped?”

“No. He went willingly, with a fake sample. The ship was detected at the border not by good fortune, but as the result of careful placement. The sample includes a surprise or two that let us track it.”

“But if you think Darius is a spy, why the hell did you bring him along?”

“Mostly to ensure nothing went wrong.”

“You have got to be kidding!”

“Not at all. He hasn't had a chance to contact the Alliance yet, but thinks he has everything under control. If I'd left him behind, we never would have made it past the border.”

“You mentioned there may be more than one Alliance Agent in the group...”

“I hope so. That’s why I let the Major draw up the shortlist, to make sure any other traitors are here with us. I wasn’t even sure about Doctor Harrison, until he was killed.”

She swallowed the chocolate. “Bloody hell. Is there anyone on this team you know you can trust?”

“Just you. That’s why you’re here.”

Kiranda blinked. “But I barely know you!”

“You’ve been tracked as a possible recruit for the last year, but it’s your lack of connection with Black Division combined with your powerful sense of ethics that I needed.”

“Oh, that’s... great.” She sighed, then smirked in an attempt to boost her mood. “So it wasn’t my good looks after all.”

“Sorry to disappoint you. Now listen up. The closer we get to the Alliance Base on this station, the sooner Darius will act. Therefore, Astatoba and I are going to force his hand at a time that suits us, in a square with a large statue in Disc D.” He sent her another map marker. “The statue itself may or may not still be there. When it happens, we’ll draw the attention of the Alliance. I want you to make use of the distraction. There will be a lot of confusion, during which Astatoba and I will leave with whatever team members prove to be loyal.”

“Believe me, the confusion started some time ago.”

“You don’t need to worry. The Doctor and I will handle it alone.”

“You want me to run solo again, don’t you?”

“I need you to secure the Alliance’s cure for their Copycat weapon. The Alliance has some on the station, ready to test Astatoba’s supposed new weapon. You want sample TDF43, held in Green layer of disc H. Chamber 302 on your map. The number 67 may help, I’m not sure how. Acquire it by any means necessary.”

Kiranda blinked. “How the hell do you know all this?”

“Astatoba left me a note. After you have the cure, head for my pod and trigger the beacon. Then meet me at Hangar 1. It should be lightly guarded, they’ll be expecting us to try for the transport in Hangar 3.” He hesitated. “If nobody else is there when our ride arrives, get the hell out with that cure. If the Confederation doesn’t get it, the Alliance will attack. That’s more important than any of us. Do you understand?”

Kiranda hesitated, walking on in silence for a moment. The dark corridor they were passing through was scattered with the dried remain of long-dead rats. They seemed to have been poisoned, as they were clustered together along the walls in contorted shapes.

She checked the locations Collins had mentioned on the blueprints. “Steal the cure, start the beacon, head for Hangar 1. Simple enough.”

“Excellent. Here are some fresh encryption keys, in case we need to communicate privately via open transmission. Any transmission would of course risk betraying your position, so it’s a last resort.”

“Of course.”

“Good. Wait for my word, it'll be soon.”

The fiber released and retracted silently into his gun.

The first section of Disc C they entered was a small torus, forty metres wide and only five high. Visibility was broken by a number of circular structures stretching from floor to ceiling, some of which looked like solid support columns. As they reached the first, Collins signaled a halt.

Langley didn't turn to face the rest of the group from his position on point, but his black metal band seemed to focus more intently on the Colonel to ensure he didn't miss any of the comms beams.

“Okay everyone. We're going to sweep from the bow toward the rear of the ship. My guess is any nanotech facilities will be well away from the big coils of the ramscoop, but not as far back as the rear hangars. I need someone to go ahead and secure whatever transport this tub has, we may need to leave in a hurry.”

Sach spoke before Kiranda could open her mouth. “I suggest Schaefer, sir. She's not accustomed to group combat.”

Collins hesitated convincingly, then nodded. “Schaefer, find us a ship that works. Bypass security, prep it as much as you dare and stand by. With luck, we'll be heading that way with Astatoba in tow when we break radio silence.”

Kiranda nodded. “One ship, warmed up. Easy enough.”

“Let's do it. Move out.”

Kiranda watched the outlines of the team move past the structure and vanish deeper into the station. She set off toward the aft of the station as a precaution as her implant plotted a course to the marker Collins had provided earlier. Once she was sure the others were well out of range, she changed direction and started toward a rust-stained concrete stairway.

It was possible Collins had lied to her, but she felt sure he hadn't. His story tallied too well with a number of things that had been worrying her. Despite that, he seemed to be taking some serious risks...

She tried to put it out of her mind and concentrate on the job at hand. Things were moving quickly.

*I just hope to hell he knows what he's doing. It'll take more than a disappearing chair to pull this all off.*

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Collins poked his head around the corner, and squinted at the street ahead. The torus they were in resembled a commercial city street. The sides were crammed with defunct shopping malls and office buildings,

long since abandoned by the colonists who once depended on them. The structure they were approaching was by far the largest, and loomed over them.

It stretched across the entire hundred-meter width of the chamber. Peeling flakes of white paint still clung to much of the surface, though the white was often hidden by a layer of gray dust. According to the blueprints, the structure surrounded a small fault in the asteroid. On the other side of it was a number of tunnels, one of which would take them closer to Doctor Astatoba. Collins had opted for an indirect route, figuring Schaefer needed all the time he could provide. Besides, Astatoba had specified a specific time for their meeting.

He moved silently away from the corner, across the curb of the street, and crouched by the eroded remains of a concrete fountain. From his new vantage point, he could clearly see into the interior of the building.

The entrance might have once admitted vehicles, but a series of bollards and a few surviving floor-to-ceiling windows ensured it no longer could. The dusty glass panels were all cracked, and two wide openings marked where revolving doors had once stood. In the gloom inside he could see the shadowy forms of abandoned mall stands and shopfronts. Most were little more than wooden frames, but some were sufficiently intact to sport unfamiliar corporate logos.

Unfortunately the floor was clad with polished stone, possibly synthetic granite. Sound will be difficult to fully suppress on such a surface.

He used his suit's comms to send his team inside the structure. The glowing outlines of Langley and Sach emerged from surprisingly lush roadside greenery and moved toward the entrance, Langley from the left and Sach the right. Calden and Darius started from points much closer to him, and moved in together through a gap in the glass. Collins opted for the old doorway.

The interior was so dark, that his hood flashed a warning that they were at maximum light amplification. He briefly tried infrared, but found that to be even worse. Everything was the same temperature.

Three levels of empty storefronts looked down on them, their mezzanines long since robbed of handrails. The escalators had also been removed, leaving only gaping holes on each mezzanine floor.

Collins pressed on with the group, and didn't pause for cover until he reached a long pit that was once a water feature. He studied the two massive chandeliers hanging above it, and decided they looked stable.

Fortunately, sound didn't seem to be as much of a problem as he'd feared. Most of the floor had helpful layers of dust.

Langley and Sach used the empty pond to forge ahead, while Darius and Calden moved were barely visible moving behind the columns supporting the mezzanine. Collins adopted the same method on the opposite side, feeling safer beneath the shelter of a mezzanine floor.

The columns he passed were well spaced, so he lingered behind each one before dashing to the next. He had just left one such column when an insect-like buzz spurred him into a hard sprint. The sound was a dampened subsonic shot, and his team were carrying only high-velocity rounds.

He'd completed barely two steps when flares hit the ceiling above the central space and ignited, flooded the mall with glaring light. His hood's optics compensated for the glare.

As he leaped toward the next pillar, loud gunfire rang out. Lots of guns, firing from what seemed like every direction. He slid behind what shelter the column offered, disabled his suit's IFF, and switched his rifle to rapid-fire. Only then did he glance around the edge of the thick column at the rest of the mall.

Sach and Langley were no longer visible, but he saw Calden hunched behind a fallen column. Her camouflaged outline sported a spreading bloodstain, and the column sheltering her sparkled with ricocheting fletcherette fire.

Major Darius had turned off his camouflage entirely. He was standing in plain sight, his gun raised toward Collins. The Major shouted something at him, but over the roar of the guns the sound was drowned out. He looked like he was issuing an order, or a demand.

With the improved light, Collins could see figures on the levels above. There were at least two dozen armed soldiers, positioned in pairs. He wasn't sure if the topmost level held more, there seemed to be a lot of old wreckage up there and it was hard to see past it. He was confident there were soldiers on the level directly above him.

Collins ducked back behind the thick column in time to evade a shot that broke away a chunk of the stone cladding. The shot hadn't come from Darius, but from the soldiers higher up. He was pinned, and couldn't even give fire support to Calden.

*Damn it! This is too well organized. These soldiers were in waiting, Darius must have managed to get a message to Alliance after our arrival. He's got us.*

A series of explosions shook the floor. A sniper shot followed, and the background din of fletcherette fire finally ceased. From the direction of the

blast, Collins knew it was Calden. He hoped she had managed to take some of the Alliance troops with her. She deserved that much.

“Surrender, Colonel. It’s hopeless.” The Major’s voice was confident, and annoyingly calm. His tone made it clear that any other members of the group loyal to the Confederation were all dead.

Collins frowned. Why was he being asked to surrender? A single rocket from the gallery would easily finish him. The Alliance evidently preferred to take him alive, which meant he had a chance. One he might improve by sowing misinformation.

He turned off his hood's sound suppression. “You might have made that offer before ripping my leg open! Show some consideration.” He stayed crouched, and searched for the best escape route. The main concourse was covered from all angles and out of the question, his only hope was the shopfronts before him.

The troops had the high ground, which was both good and bad. He'd be exposed as he ran to the storefronts, but the further he went the more he'd be protected from the mezzanine. Unfortunately all the stores nearby still had sturdy-looking doors. It would be quicker to get through one of the cracked display windows. He settled on the one directly facing him, which still had the faded words “Emma’s Florist” legible on it. Beyond the dusty window he could see a granite counter with an open doorway behind it. The store wasn't on the station blueprints, but he figured the doorway led to a stockroom and probably a rear exit.

Darius spoke again, and this time Collins could hear the grin in his voice. “If you're hurt you better come out now before you lose too much blood. Either that, or I kill you.”

Collins prepared to fire a grenade, but carefully disabled the contact fuse. He tried to sound panicked, which came very easily under the circumstances. “I want... Stay back!”

He fired the grenade at the concrete wall by the store. The grenade bounced off and flew past him and the column to detonate in the middle of the mall.

The pillar shielded him from the blast, but the store window was hit by shrapnel. The tough safety glass turned white with cracks and wavered after the blast.

A burst of gunfire ripped into the column behind him, and the floor by his feet, smashing out great chunks and filling the air with dust. The burst lasted only a second, but when it ended the column was half the width it had been. A chunk of stone the size of a basketball fell and hit the floor. The marble tile cracked beneath the impact.

Collins winced. The gunfire had been the characteristic roar of a Hampton 344 assault rifle. Langley and Sach each had one.

“Think fast Colonel.”

“Damn it Darius, it's not as if you give me much choice.” He stood, let his rifle fall into its tactical sling, and took a grenade in each hand. “It was an interesting life.” He dropped the grenades by his sides, making sure they fell in clear view on each side of the column.

They were flash grenades, but looked like high explosive. He'd planned to use them when the group met with Astatoba. With luck, everyone watching would see them as a very real threat and duck for cover.

He ran for the broken window with every ounce of strength he had. When the two grenades detonated, the burst overpowered his suit's optics and he leaped blindly into the window.

The safety glass was bent inwards, but didn't fully give way. Gunfire erupted as the Alliance soldiers realized his deception. The crazed glass shook from multiple impacts and collapsed. He clambered over the window display and into the store.

*Seems they're not too desperate to take me alive after all.*

The first rocket hit as he ducked behind the counter. The granite slabs tore themselves from the floor and swept him toward the door frame. With a strength borne of desperation, he pulled his head and legs clear of the frame just in time to prevent them being crushed by the stone desk.

He staggered to his feet in the dark storeroom, trying to keep moving and stay clear of the now obstructed doorway.

The storeroom was small, but the rear wall bore a pair of double doors and a large air vent.

The howl of another rocket cut through the dust-laden air. Collins went for the door, pulling open the vent's grille with one outstretched hand and he passed. The vent looked like it might be partially visible from outside, and the gesture may distract or divide anyone following him.

He hit the doors at full speed, breaking them open as screws tore free. A broad freight corridor was revealed, running behind the shops. Collins ran away from the incoming rocket, his boots struggling to find purchase on a floor strangely slick with brown algae.

The rocket detonated, destroying most of the shop and peppering the corridor wall behind him with high-velocity debris. Thick clouds of dust overtook him on the shockwave.

Collins ran on, searching desperately for exits.

Through the dust, he spied a stairwell on the outer wall. He ran toward it, fumbling for a proximity mine. He found one, and slapped it on the wall as he reached the steps.

The stairwell led both down and up, and Collins went down without hesitation. Up would only lead to the troops on the balconies, who were likely already on their way toward him.

He descended one flight, then a second before the steps stopped with an open doorway.

As he ran through, the mine he'd left behind detonated with a deceptively muted thump. He had no idea if his pursuers had fallen victim to it, or had seen it advance and destroyed it. Either way, they were certainly following and drawing close.

He ran past hundreds of old cardboard boxes, most of which were rotting into uneven piles of mulch. He tugged at one tall stack as he passed, creating a minor obstruction for his pursuers.

The blueprints showed only one exit from the long chamber, and there it was ahead of him. It was steel, badly rusted and only half-visible behind a collapsed stack of boxes. Collins ran towards it.

The door had a simple pull handle, and no visible lock. He gripped it and pulled, but the door was rusted shut. He gripped the rifle hanging front of his chest, and aimed at the metal frame.

It was then that a warm ceramic gun barrel pressed against the nape of his neck.

He froze.

“Drop it. Now.”

It was Sach's voice, and she didn't even sound winded. Somehow, she had entered the room before him and waited.

*That's why I didn't see anyone coming down the stairs; they had already moved into position. Stupid!*

He could hear troops kicking their way past the boxes behind him to back her up.

Before he could decide if he should risk letting them take him alive, something hit his neck and he blacked out.

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Kiranda reached behind her back, gripped the two water pipes, and hoisted herself further along them as quietly as she could manage. The metal pipes were narrow, and her weight pressed them into her as two lines of persistent pain. She did her best to ignore the discomfort; there

was no other way to avoid the motion and pressure sensors that covered the floor and walls of the narrow crawlspace above.

The metal grille above her face was only inches from her nose, providing an excellent view of the rooms she was passed beneath.

She's covered a long distance from the elevator shaft already. Tilting her head, she saw there was only another few three metres to go until the pipes entered concrete. The bright white door above it was watched by more sensor arrays and security measures than she'd ever seen in one place.

The door looked new and wasn't listed on any of the station blueprints. If Collins hadn't told her where to look, she would have assumed the chamber had never been built. The elevator didn't even list the stop, and the stairwells bypassed the whole level. The Alliance had hidden an entire torus.

With the benefit of hindsight, the location made sense. It was in the middle of the station, well away from active mining operations. The scoop and primary processing equipment was at the bow, while refined product was condensed and stored at the aft. Surrounding rock protected it, and the chance of accidental discovery was nil.

Collins said the Alliance's nanoagent cure was in Chamber 302, which the blueprint showed as a full ninety-five metres to her right and ten above. But the white door was the only point of entry she had managed to find. Getting as far as she had been taxing enough, but getting through the door without being detected was another matter altogether.

Peered up at the door and checked the sensor arrays in the narrow space around her. The pipes tended to sag a little beneath her weight, and came dangerously close to pressure sensors on the floor below them. Her progress had disturbed some dust, but too little to trigger the motion scanners. Without her suit the alarm would have been triggered some time ago.

Raising her head, she struggled to look past her feet. Her backpack was still there, dragged along the pipes by a strap around her foot. It had veered to one side again, but seemed secure enough for the moment. In the room above.

*Maybe I shouldn't have left my rifle behind... Too late now. Heck, even without it, it's too cramped under here.*

She squinted through the grille at the door above her, hoping for a spark of inspiration. Both door and frame were coated with gleaming white enamel, while the sensors protruded as smooth black domes.

There were no door controls at all. Entry might be controlled by someone on the inside, or it could require a broadcast code. One of the sensors looked to be biometric, so the door might simply open for people it recognized. She was sure getting a closer look would provide more clues, but she couldn't risk it.

She frowned, and tried to think of a way to work around the system. Perhaps she could cut into the wall and reach the wiring? That would be tricky, as the surface was sure to be wired itself.

A rumble came from the elevator shaft at the other end of the corridor. It was distant, but rapidly became louder.

*Someone coming? Cool, maybe they'll demonstrate how to open the door! As long as they don;t see me, that is. Hey, I might even be able to get an automated probe through to the other side, and...*

The door above slid open, and a boot foot struck the floor right above her face. Kiranda instinctively flinched, throwing herself dangerously off-balance. A cacophony of voices and Network traffic flooded out from the other side of the white door. After so long without Network access, the sudden noise was like voices shouting inside her head.

Kiranda struggled to regain her balance, and grappled for her sidearm.

The boot shifted as the soldier began to stride across the room. More footsteps followed, and only then did she realize they had not yet discovered her. She stopped drawing her blaster, and tried to remain as still as possible.

The sheer quantity of Network traffic told her the installation was not a small outpost. Within her skull, decryption implants considered illegal in the Confederation went to work, sorting through the many signals and attempting to decode them.

More boots stomped past as at least ten soldiers filed out. Kiranda lay stock-still as the figures walked over her. Remembering what Collins said about Darius, she belatedly disabled her suit's friend-or-foe code.

*Alliance uniforms. Not cloaked, and not heavily armed. A search party looking for Astatoba? Collins should be meeting him right about now, I hope it's going well...*

The soldiers moved out of the room toward the elevator. It opened just as the first figure reached it

*Good god, I hope they didn't find the mechanic. It's way too soon!* She glanced back up at the door as the last of the troops marched out and headed for the lift.

The door would stay open for only another second or two, there wasn't time to wait for the elevator doors to close. She decided to risk acting while the troops were present.

She snatched a pen-like object from her belt, the very automated probe she had been considering using. Directing the tip through a gap in the grille, she sent a series of instructions to it and commanded the device to fire the moment the door began to slide shut.

Kiranda glimpsed the silver, beetle-like probe as it hurtled through the air above her. Then it was gone, and the door sealed shut with an airtight hiss.

The elevator doors also closed, and she heard the old but well-maintained elevator rumble as it took the troops away to a different part of the station. As far as she could tell, none of them had noticed anything.

Kiranda closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths to calm herself. The pain of the pipes digging into her back no longer seemed relevant.

She waited.

Automated probes like the one she was relying on were both expensive and problematic. They were capable of cutting through a wide range of materials to locate and compromise security systems, but too often they alerted the very systems they were supposed to circumvent. If that happened, she'd have no way of knowing until it was too late. She could only wait, and hope her instructions would keep the device out of trouble. It shouldn't take longer than two or three minutes to find out.

Two minutes passed. Then three. She felt herself beginning to perspire beneath the hood.

Four minutes.

Five.

*Damn it, the probe must have failed. I'll have to...*

The door suddenly slid open, releasing the same torrent of Network traffic. This time the data included a coded signal, saying it had bypassed five sensors and waited until nobody was nearby before opening the door. Evidently, the outpost was busier than she'd thought.

Kiranda immediately lifted the metal grille and clambered up onto the floor to gaze through the open doorway.

It led to a short corridor, much wider than the door. The walls were the same glossy white, while the floor was a synthetic gray rubber that looked very new. It looked like the interior of a brand new starship.

She carefully hauled up her backpack and put the grille back in place. With the pack in her left hand, she stepped through the doorway and sent a

coded signal to the probe. The device obediently closed the door, and she breathed a little easier.

Kiranda pulled on the backpack with practiced ease, and headed for the T-junction ahead of her. A yard away from the junction she froze as an armed figure walked into view from her left.

The man wore a blue variant of the gray Alliance uniform, and his assault rifle was slung over his shoulder. He seemed unhurried, even bored.

It was clear he hadn't come in response to her entry, and was merely passing by. The urge to flatten herself against a wall was difficult to resist, but she was in his peripheral vision and he was more likely to notice movement than any flaws in her camouflage.

The man walked on by. Kiranda moved forward and fell into step behind him as close as she dared, in case there were more doors to get through.

They passed by two closed doors, both on her left. They were much less secure, but still lacked controls. Each more a marking, 109B and 109C respectively. Neither was on the station blueprints. According to them, she in the middle of warehouse 109. Judging by that, The alliance hadn't entirely abandoned the original room designations in their redesign.

They passed a circular hatch on the ceiling, which was clearly a ceiling turret, or possibly a bay for security drones. Kiranda winced. Every hazard she passed, she would have to pass again, possibly under less favorable circumstances.

They reached the end of the corridor and the extent of the modifications became clear. Where the blueprints showed a four-way junction with an elevator on the left, there was instead a large circular room. The passageway resumed on the far side, but a similar passage on the right was off-center and very wide, large enough for a loaded truck. There was no sign of the elevator on the blueprints, but there was a stairwell that might be using the old shaft. A thick ceramic frame meant a blast door was ready to close it off at a moment's notice. From the size of it, the door would survive a direct hit from a good sized bomb.

The room itself seemed a casual one, with a wide U-shaped bench where two women were talking over hot drinks. One wore a lab coat, while the other was dressed in the same blue as the guard.

Kiranda could smell the coffee, and spared an envious glare at the vending machine they had evidently got them from.

The guard headed for the large corridor. There were at least two more voices coming from that direction and her goal was two levels up, so she entered the stairwell.

Her augmented vision highlighted the steps with a pattern of diagonal red lines, and an array of warnings. The outline looked like one of the newer types of pressure sensors, but the heat pattern from the circuitry was entirely unfamiliar.

The directions from Collins said the sample was in Room 302, and the stairwell was probably the safest route up there. There might be alternative approaches, but the longer she lingered, the more likely it was someone would notice her active camouflage.

Kiranda avoided the floor completely by climbing onto the metal railing. It was steep and glossy, but the soles of her boots worked well enough. Despite that, she decided not to risk walking up the rail and instead reached up to the next set of railings and hauled herself up. She kept climbing from railing to railing until she reached the third floor.

Kiranda remained perched on the rail to study the room laid out before her.

It had thin carpet a slightly darker shade of gray than the rubber used downstairs. A number of square, padded seats and benches were arranged haphazardly. An immense sheet of glass hung in front of the leftmost wall, apparently an inactive display. There were a few decorative plants, four white dining tables, and an oversized vending machine which seemed to offer everything from hot tea to fresh lab coats. Of the six people present, two were guards.

The four others wore white coats and were sitting at tables, but only one was eating. The two guards were standing by a bench, talking. One wore shoulder-flashes. She didn't recognize the Alliance rank, but it didn't look very high. Perhaps a corporal.

A distant clicking noise from above made her look up the stairwell. It was moving slowly down the steps, but she couldn't figure out what it was.

Her implant identified the sound before she did, matching it to the profile of a six-legged, armored security drone. Worryingly, the model was sound dampened, meaning the approaching drone was much closer than she'd thought.

Her suit had no chance of fooling it.

She jumped off the railing, over the floor sensors, and landed in a cat-like crouch inside the room. A check for exits found only two: A closed security door on the far side of the room, and a set of ordinary double-

doors close by the stairwell that looked like they led to another corridor. She couldn't risk using them. Even if nobody in the room noticed doors swinging open on their own, the security system would.

There was nowhere to hide, and the drone was about to move into position to see her.

She leaped toward the ceiling.

The ceiling was a smooth grid of lightweight panels concealing the ducts and cables behind them. They would never support her weight. But the lights were a different matter.

The flat lighting panels were suspended a full inch below the rest of the ceiling. It was a recent fashion that Kiranda gave thanks for as she gripped the closest panel, and braced her high-friction boots against the wall. The position kept her back pressed against the ceiling panels, and offered an unsettling view of the stairwell doorway below her outstretched feet.

The ceramic light panel was warm beneath her gloves. She had taken care to spread her fingers as much as she could, to distribute her weight across a wide area. So far, it was taking the strain.

The drone walked down the stairs, and she saw two of the broad legs as it turned to continued descending. The dampened sound faded with it.

Kiranda let out her breath, and switched her attention to the room's six occupants. None of them had noticed her.

The location Collins had marked was on the other side of the room's security door.

*This will be awkward. If there was only one person here, I might be able to get them to open the door for me. Six people is too many to knock out without raising an alarm. I may need to...*

The lighting panel shattered, and Kiranda fell.

Releasing the broken lighting fragments, she pushed away from the wall and landed on all fours. The carpet and her suit helped absorb the impact noise, but the sound of the light breaking had been loud and clear.

She stayed motionless, watching the two guards.

Everyone in the room had turned to look. Most were staring in surprise at the light swinging by its cable, but the guard with the shoulder flashes was squinting at her. She stayed absolutely still, watching his eyes. They looked to be organic, which gave her hope.

His eyes widened and he reached for his holster.

Kiranda launched herself from the floor, and rushed toward him. A padded bench lay between her and him, and she pushed against it to

launch herself even faster toward the officer as he pulled the gun clear of his holster.

*If he fires I'm screwed!*

Her implant jammed three nearby broadcast attempts before they could complete. She reached the officer as his gun was being raised, slammed the edge of her hand against the back of his forearm, and felt his bones break.

Reflex opened his hand. The gun fell from limp fingers, and Kiranda let her momentum carry her into him, using her other arm to drive an uppercut into his chin. The blow lifted him, and drove him backwards to fall unconscious.

Kiranda was left falling to the floor herself. She managed to roll onto her back, and spread her legs to put her remaining momentum into a spinning scissor kick. Her left foot found the remaining guard's temple, and he too slumped senseless to the ground.

The four white-coats, still seated at a dining table to her left, were beginning to stand. One of the lab technicians - a tall blond woman - was already on her feet.

It was clear to Kiranda she couldn't reach all of them in time to prevent an alert. At most she had a second or two until the shock wore off and the yelling started. Using her blaster would only raise the alert faster.

She lurched off the floor, and managed to land on her feet to flex her left wrist toward the blond. The single-shot dart gun mounted on her wrist fired, and a tranq dart ripped through her suit and struck the woman's neck. Kiranda turned toward the other three and leaped, her hands stretched out toward the two on the closer side of the table.

The man on her left was facing her direction, the expression on his bearded face one of abject terror. To him, she probably seemed a ghost-like haze. A cloaked killer coming for him as though out of a bad dream.

She gripped his head along with his fellow's, and slammed them together. Their skulls connected with a crack that made her feel sick. Kicking jumping over the benches, she flew toward the final diner.

The remaining figure was male, his jaw open. He had just drawn in breath, and was starting to cry out. Her arms were inconveniently behind her, having only just let go of the two men's heads. Her own head was the nearest thing to him.

She struck him in the face with the top of her head, cutting his cry off with a wet crunch. She skidded over his collapsing form, hit the floor and rolled to look for the blond woman.

Apparently she was a natural sprinter, as she was already only a few paces from the exit. But she was no longer running, and could barely remain upright. She made one more hoarse attempt to cry out before her step faltered and she collapsed unconscious.

Kiranda glanced around the room searching for new threats, and found none. The man she had head-butted, had a broken nose that was bleeding freely. She flipped him on to his side to ensure the blood wouldn't choke him. His face looked a ruin.

*There's nowhere to hide them. What should I do?*

Keeping a nervous watch on the open stairwell and the doors, she gripped the sleeves of two of the techs with one hand and the collar of a third with her right. By dragging, she moved them to the corner furthest from the three points. The woman and the junior guard were the next to join them. She noticed the guard's jaw was broken, made sure she lay him with no pressure on his chin. Adding a few tranq darts made sure none of them would wake for at least the next hour.

Leaving the officer in the open for the moment, she moved a pair of benches to hide the bodies from casual view. Food was still on the table and some blood was on the floor, but she ignored it. She felt she had already been there too long.

The officer groaned, and moved his hand. Kiranda checked her tranq gun as she approached him. There was only one shot left. As his eyes began to flicker open, she grabbed him from behind, clamped one hand over his mouth and gripped his broken forearm with the other.

Her implant detected a new transmission from the man's skull. She had been expecting it, and jammed the signal before it could the local Network could pick it up.

She kept her voice conversational. "Lose the cries for help, or lose your life."

He hesitated, still trying to transmit. She squeezed his broken arm and the attempt stopped. His face was ashen.

"Smart boy. Shush." To his evident confusion, Kiranda released his mouth, and gripped the back of his shirt instead. She easily hauled him onto his feet, and guided him to the security door. As they crossed the room, he glanced about searching for the others. He couldn't see behind the benches, so to him it probably seemed they had simply vanished. She felt the pulse in his arm quicken.

She tightened her grip, pulling his shirt tight across his chest. "You're an attractive fellow," she lied. He actually looked uncomfortably like her brother. "It would be a waste to kill you, don't you agree?"

“I understand.”

Kiranda raised an eyebrow. The Alliance evidently trained their people well. He was showing excellent self-control and was watching for an opportunity. She stopped in front of the security door. “We have a lot to do. Let’s start by going though here.”

He swallowed. “I’ll have to use my implant.”

She brought her lips closer to his ear. “I know,” she lied, “and I’m listening.”

The Corporal spoke to the door. “Corporal Trent Jardis.”

Another transmission left his skull. Kiranda let it go. It was unlike the last one he’d tried to send, but it was still too heavily encrypted to actually read. He could have been saying anything.

The broad, heavy door slowly swung open.

They stood at the top of a short series of steps, gazing into a chamber at least two stories high. The air was thick with clouds of drifting white vapor. Sealed rockglass chambers covered the floorspace, looking oddly like collection of glass cubicles. Cables and insulated ducting hung from pipes on the ceiling, linking the chambers to various filtration systems. Drums of chemical stood in multiple neat stacks, and there were enough trolleys to serve a minor spaceport. Just visible inside the chambers were figures wearing transparent environment suits over their lab whites. The spaces between the chambers seemed were practically deserted. Nobody, it seemed, wanted to spend any more time breathing the white vapor than they had to.

*Is it toxic? No, it can’t be. The entrance is airtight, but not an airlock. Besides, there are no warning signs on the door. It’s just moisture and contaminants.*

The door slid shut behind them. Feeling conspicuous at the top of the steps, she herded the guard down to floor level and past the first chambers. Each was numbered, and had an airlock with a security control panel.

She released the man’s shirt to draw her sidearm and press it against the middle of his back. Her other hand maintained her grip on his injured arm.

“Let’s visit number 67. Nice and easy.”

The guard led her to the left side of the chamber. The white vapor was proving to be useful. Since she was having trouble seeing through it, sensors and drones would have the same problem.

The guard led her through a right turn, and moved toward one of the smaller rockglass chambers. It bore the number 067.

“Open it.”

“I don’t think I can.”

She shoved the gun into his spine. The moment he suspect his usefulness was over, he might do something stupid. “We have six to look at, I’m sure you can open at least one of them.”

He touched the small ID panel by the door, and transmitted a code similar to the one he’d used for the big door. The chamber remained shut.

His breathing quickened. “I told you.”

“The last one we passed, that’ll open for you,” she said, prodding once more. He relaxed a little, and started back the way they’d come.

Kiranda removed the gun from his back and slammed it against the base of his skull. A nearby stack of drums provided a reasonable place to conceal his unconscious body from view, and she used her last tranq dart make sure he’d stay there.

*I should have brought more, they're all at the locker. All I have now is the blaster.*

She turned her attention to the door. The slab of rockglass was as thick as her hand, vacuum sealed, and extremely strong. A brief examination of the control panel revealed multiple anti-tamper sensors, including an impressive lure that came close to fooling her. She stepped back and examined the rest of the enclosure. The Walls were flat slabs held together by a thick sealant. The same material held them on the floor.

She moved to the best concealed side of the enclosure, where a stack of barrels offered some cover. Standing by them, Kiranda drew her knife and pushed the blade into the sealant. Forcing the thin ceramic into the sealant was slow work, but eventually the point emerged into the interior and the knife became easier to move. She worked the knife back and forth, slowly cutting along the top and sides.

The entire wall was loose enough to be pulled outward, though the sealant on the bottom edge resisted. As the gap widened, cool, dry air rushed out.

Kiranda hoisted herself up and over the tilting edge, and squeezed into the chamber. The wall closed up quite well, which eased her worries. A significant change in the air inside the chamber might trigger an alert.

The room held a bench with three sealed boxes, all simple white steel with small glass windows in the front. From their considerable size and weight, Kiranda concluded they were test chambers.

*Maybe this is where the Alliance plans to test their cure against Astatoba’s K6 sample. When they find out it’s a fake the game is up.*

The only other item present was a large storage cabinet against the chamber’s far wall. Through the glass doors, she could see gleaming tools

and a range of small, double-insulated containers bearing prominent biohazard warnings. Kiranda wrenched the door open, tearing the locks free of the thin steel.

The cylindrical containers were surprisingly small for something so dangerous, no longer than her thumb and barely twice as wide. Curious, she picked one up.

It was cool, and so heavy she wondered if it was made of lead. There didn't seem to be any way to open it without a proper tool, which she took as reassuring. The warning logos covered most of the surface, along appropriate text. The label declared the contents to be something called "Actel 4".

Kiranda replaced the sample, and searched through the others until she found TDF43 on the bottom row. Worryingly, it had just as many warnings as the others. She zipped it into her chest pocket, figuring it was least likely to get bumped there over her stomach.

After closing the damaged cabinet doors, she returned to the wall to climb out.

Getting out proved to be more difficult than getting in. The glass was slippery, and by the time she emerged onto the roof of the chamber, the wall sagged open. It looked conspicuous, and the exchange of air worried her. She decided to move a couple of the drums, just enough to hold the wall in place for a time.

Before she could climb down, an alarm bell hanging from the ceiling above her erupted into ear-splitting life. Panic surged, her hand slipped and she fell onto her side.

The bell wasn't alone. Others around the huge chamber were also sounding, and each was accompanied by a flashing red light. Through the din, she heard a loud clang from the security door. She recognized the sound of locking bolts slamming into place. She glanced around the chamber, and found there was no other exit.

Urgent voices joined the chaos. Kiranda searched in vain for an indication of what had triggered all the noise, and noticed the control panels by the doors were all flashing red. By zooming in her vision, she could see the words SECURITY ALERT in bright letters. She winced, and concluded the people behind the benches had been discovered. The base was in lockdown and would stay that way until they found her.

Amid the white fog and the constant noise, she heard the metal-on-metal clatter of drones unfolding their limbs and scurrying out of their recharging bays. If they didn't know where she was, they would soon.

She drew her blaster, and wished to hell she still had brought her rifle.

## Chapter Seven: Terenta

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Collins studied the layout as he was led deeper into the glossy white Alliance compound. He had to admire the effort the Alliance had put into the facility. It had clearly been built to last.

A rifle barrel jabbed him in the back. Langley, unnecessarily prodding him on. Collins wondered why the man bothered; he couldn't go any faster if he wanted to. The guards bunched around him prevented it.

*There may be more going on than I know. Every security panel in the place has been flashing full alert since we entered. Is that on my account, or is Schaeff had trouble too?*

He tested the manacles once more, and the bands tightened, cutting off his circulation. Grimacing, he relaxed his arms. By the time the manacles began to return to their former state, his fingers were numb.

They stopped in front of another security door. The slab hissed open, releasing airtight seals that hissed so loudly he guessed they were designed to deal with more than ordinary airborne hazards. Darius led them through, with Langley taking the opportunity to jab him once more.

The entered what looked like a small detention area. There were only three cells, all built of a transparent material reinforced by ceramic frames. They seemed airtight, with only a tiny filtration vent to allow air to the occupants.

The concessions to human habitation were a single futon and bucket in each cell. There was no water supply, and no toilet.

He frowned. *These aren't prison cells, they're quarantine chambers for animal testing. They don't mean to keep me for long.*

A security drone stood in one corner, where it could watch all the cells. The machine looked like a recent addition, standing an imposing two metres to peer down at him, it barely fit in the room. It bore a pair of powerful stun guns, each mounted on an omnidirectional pivots per side. The primary weapon was a more conventional blaster mounted on a simple turret.

Aside from the drone there was a broad desk, at which no less than three men in dark gray Alliance uniforms were waiting. The leftmost bore the trim and shoulder flashes of a full Admiral of the Alliance Fleet. Lean and entirely bald, the man appeared to be in his sixties. His dark brown eyes caught Collin's gaze. He recognized the face, and it felt like that intense gaze was boring into him, prying his thoughts.

*Admiral Terenta! Why is the head of Alliance Special Operations here? He wouldn't bother attending the testing of a new nanotech sample, and Darius can't have warned the Alliance before we reached the station.*

Darius saluted the Admiral. "Sir. I present Colonel Collins in custody, and advise that one hostile remains at large. A female civilian security consultant sent to secure a transport for the group. I've sent three squads for her."

The Admiral turned his gaze to Darius. "Good work, Major. We will keep the security lockdown in place until she is fully accounted for." He turned back to Collins, and curled his lip in distaste. "Any variations observed since your previous dispatch?"

"No sir."

Terenta stood and walked up to Collins. "Why a transport, Colonel? Don't tell me you had no other way to return to your precious Confederation."

Collins maintained eye contact. "I thought it would make a nice souvenir."

Darius sneered. "The exit strategy for this mission was to use whatever vessel was on hand."

The admiral raised one eyebrow. "Really? How disorganized." He stepped back and signaled other two men at the table. They opened a stainless steel cantilever box, which proved to be crammed with drug vials and gleaming tools. "Search this man from his toenails to the last hair on his head, and lock him up under full guard. If he resists, kill him."

"Yes sir."

Collins heard the sound of running footsteps approaching from the corridor outside. He turned to see who it was, but Langley struck the side of his face before he could see. He moved his jaw back and forth to ease the pain.

The new arrival spoke, his voice announcing him to be male. A low ranked guard, from the sound of his nervousness. "Sir, there's a coolant leak in the Research zone. The doors have all sealed to contain it."

The Admiral's eyes narrowed, and for a time he said nothing. Collins realized he was downloading information from the compound's Network. "Major Darius, have your squads reached the transport Hangar?"

"Yes sir. They are still securing the area, but no hostiles contact so far. They found a hidden corpse, but..." He paused. "I've just been informed the cargo transport is unusable. Confirmed sabotage, sir."

The floor shook, and the thud of a distant explosion followed. The echo of far off fire alarms filled the following silence.

Collins suppressed the urge to grin. *That's the way! Don't wait about Schaeef, take that sample and get the hell out of here.*

Admiral Terenta didn't even seem surprised. "Major, see to it that this so-called consultant is hunted down. Use whatever you must, but don't move any resources currently protecting the consignment. It could be her true target."

Darius saluted. "It will be a pleasure sir." He hurried from the room.

The Admiral turned to Collins and smiled. "Well Colonel, I must take my leave of you. There are so many questions I wish to ask but duty calls, and there is so much yet to do."

"Such as?"

He chuckled. "Oh, we'll have a nice long chat in the fullness of time."

Collins scowled. "Your drugs and mind hacks won't work on me."

"Such confidence would be pitifully misplaced. Lieutenant Langley?"

Langley saluted so crisply his fingers could be heard cutting through the air. "Sir."

"Remain with our prisoner until he is securely locked away."

He. "Yes sir."

Admiral Terenta left without another word, taking depressingly few men with him. The heavy door slid shut and locked. The sound of the distant alarm was no longer audible.

The security drone rolled toward him, and gripped both his arms and legs with cold, ceramic hands.

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Kiranda raised her head and arm above the charred chamber wall and fired her last rocket propelled grenade. It kicked away from her small blaster, punched through the armored carapace of the drone rushing her position, and detonated. For a brief instant every seam of the drone's armor flashed white, then the machine slammed into the chamber she was sheltering behind. Kiranda ducked back behind the cover of the cracked rockglass, and shifted her footing on the barrel beneath her feet as black smoke spread around her.

As far as she could tell, there was only one more of the damnable machines left. It had learned from the demise of the first two, and Kiranda could only hope it didn't know she was out of grenades. She'd lost one due to the Coriolis effect, and another to the drone's impressive familiarity with the layout of the area.

She squinted through the fog and smoke, struggling to locate the last drone. It was cloaked like she was, but could move much faster... She

glimpsed a coil of spinning smoke behind a collapsed duct, a sign the machine had moved through. It seemed to be closing on her position, moving past a series of wreckage-strewn chambers.

The barrel beneath her shifted, the metal sagging as it softened and dissolved in the rising green flood.

Kiranda scowled. The corrosive coolant was flooding the room much too quickly. It was already well over a metre deep, and approaching her feet on the barrel top. She wasn't sure how long her suit would survive if she touched it. It might even stick and eat through to her flesh.

The drone emerged from the end of the fallen duct, a blur of coiling smoke. As it rushed toward her, it darted randomly from side to side. Through the haze and camouflage, she spotted two scars on the machine. Those cracks in the armor represented the most damage she had managed to inflict on any of the drones with her blaster. Precise, full-power shots that they had learned to evade.

As the machine made the final leap to the chamber before her, she fired twice at a heavy steel duct on the ceiling.

Her shots tore into steel, severing the duct from the suspension bracket. Unsupported, the heavy length of metal buckled and swung down toward the oncoming machine.

*I left it too late, it's not falling fast enough!*

The drone saw the new threat. The entire carapace shifted aside, relying on three outstretched legs to maintain balance. The tube swung over those legs, missing the machine.

*Damn it!*

Kiranda rose to open fire, and felt the barrel beneath her finally collapse. She threw herself onto the roof of the glass chamber, firing at the glass beneath the drone's legs. The rockglass crazed, and shattered. The drone fired back with a burst so rapid it looked like a beam of light and fire.

The crumbling glass knocked the drone's shot off-target, and the blazing line through the mist above her sprawled form. The recoil ruined any chance the machine might had of recovering balance. Scrambling helplessly for purchase, it fell. The corrosive liquid poured in through the cracked armor, and circuits died in two brief flashes of light. The twitching machine sank into the murky green, leaving only smoke-filled bubbles on the surface.

The steel duct reached the end of a long pendulum-like swing, and tore free of the ceiling. Kiranda scrambled to her feet and leaped away from the remains of the chamber roof, skidding to a precarious halt on the

next one as the broken end of the tube crushed the chamber she had left behind. A tsunami of green washed toward her.

Kiranda jumped, and grabbed the bundle of tubes and ducts that linked the chamber to the maze of pipes on the ceiling.

As she climbed higher above the corrosive sea, the smoke became worse. Through the haze, she could just make out the forms of panicked scientists hanging onto ducts like she was.

The flood of coolant seemed to be slowing, so they would probably be okay as long as they hung on. She spared a moment to glance at the big security door, and grinned. The coolant covered the lower third of it, ensuring the people outside wouldn't open it any time soon. They would have to drain the chamber first, which bought her valuable time.

*Oh, hell! The guard I left behind the barrels!*

She peered down into the murk, but there was no sign of him. There was a small possibility that the coolant had woken him and he'd climbed up with everyone else, but in all likelihood he'd simply never woken up at all. *Damn it.*

She gazed up at the broad coolant pipe she'd blasted to start all the flooding in the first place.

The explosion had destroyed a full section of the massive black pipe. At first, coolant had roared from both ends like two gargantuan waterfalls. Only one still leaked coolant, the end that led toward the bow of the station. According to the blueprints, it led to one of the ramscoop coolant reservoirs. The flow must have been redirected automatically. The other end seemed to have run dry. It led aft, through two hundred metres of rock before passing through the next torus. It was the only possible escape route she'd been able to come up with, and with the drones finally gone and the pipe emptied, she started climbing up toward it.

The interior turned out to be surprisingly small. The black ceramic walls were thicker than her leg. Worryingly, there were still some pools of the stuff inside the pipe that she would have to crawl through.

*Well, it's not like I have many options.*

As she cleared the broken lip, she pulled a proximity mine from her backpack and left it in place. She then shuffled through the narrow tube as quickly as she could. There was no point trying to be quiet. Besides, even the smallest sound she made seemed to echo loudly inside the pipe.

After a time, she the tube being held steady by surrounding rock. Her hands and knees were starting to feel warm, but she pressed on as fast as she could.

Her implants notified her they had finally broken some of the Alliance Network encryption. Thus far, the only data they were able to decode was part of a voice call they had recorded while she was still fighting the drones.

Kiranda listened to the decoded conversation as she moved, trying to ignore the increasing slipperiness of her gloves.

"...is secure," the unknown male voice said. "Target is not in the primary Airlock or any of the Hangars."

"Keep the area sealed," replied a second man. "Major Darius says the Confed agent is trying to overload the ramscoop at the bow by bleeding coolant."

*So Collins was right, Darius is working for the Alliance.*

"Is the scoop secure?"

"Yes, but it may be a diversion."

"You think she's after the Confederation Colonel?"

"I hope so, Collins is well guarded."

Kiranda froze.

"The drones are coming online. Where do you want them?"

"Send..."

That was the end of the decoded segment. There was no way to know when, or even if her implants would crack anything further. Alliance encryption codes were changed every thirty seconds.

The pain in her hands and knees was becoming difficult to ignore, and she struggled to increase her pace.

*Collins, you dolt! Why did you have to get yourself captured?! What happened to the others? Damn it, everything is messing up...* She wondered if any of the others had been captured, or killed. The thought made her chest ache, and she pushed it out of her mind. *First things first, I have to get out of this pipe before I turn into soup!*

The sound her hands made when they hit the pipe changed, and Kiranda concluded she had finally reached the length which passed through a large torus. According to the blueprints, there was a catwalk running beneath the pipe for the entire distance.

She reached awkwardly into her backpack, and felt with wet gloves for a wall mine. Her fingers found only empty pockets. There were no grenades, no mines... The only explosive she had left was a ceiling bomb meant for use in large spaces.

She pulled it out, set the dial to a ninety degree spread, and then threw it far ahead of her.

The bomb skidded to rest, then flared and rocketed to the top of the pipe. It stayed there for a second or so, until it determined it was as high as it was ever going to get. The bomb then popped open like an umbrella and detonated.

Kiranda was hunched with arms over her head, but she still saw the brief burst of light before the blast-wave struck her.

Feeling dizzy and light-headed, she raised her aching head and found a neat round hole had been punched out of the bottom of the pipe. She shuffled toward it as quickly as she could manage.

Reaching the opening, she poked her head through. If there were any enemies in the area, the bomb would certainly have drawn their attention.

She couldn't see anyone, but she did find the blueprints were wrong.

If it had ever been there, the catwalk had long since been removed. She faced a six-story drop onto a crumbling asphalt road. The rest of the torus had only empty slabs that had once supported buildings.

*I think this place hates me.*

It was only a matter of time until a drone entered the pipe behind her, and the burning pain in her hands and knees was getting worse.

She dived headfirst through the hole.

Air rushed past her as she carefully turned herself upright, ready to absorb the bulk of the impact with her reinforced legs. The ground began to accelerate not down but sideways, becoming a blur beneath her before she struck the road. The asphalt yanked itself from beneath her feet. She tried to roll, but only skidded across dirt and asphalt before finally being brought to a halt by a solid concrete gutter.

She groaned in pain as her systems began to list her injuries. Apparently she had a small contusion where her brain had struck the inside of her skull. That explained the headache, but it was apparently within safety parameters. A mental command added a shot of paracetamol to her bloodstream to help her think.

The awkward landing had rotated and lowered her stomach, but that just meant she'd feel queasy for an hour or until it found its way back. She ignored it.

The worst news was both her ankles had been twisted. The synthetic cartilage and muscle was intact, but the flesh was badly bruised and beginning to swell.

*Well done, Schaef. You've done more damage to yourself than the Alliance did. Time to sign up for Vaudeville.*

Swallowing her pride, she restricted blood circulation below the ankles with another command. The flesh in her feet would suffer without

the oxygen, but that was repairable and the alternative was swollen feet and limited maneuverability.

She scowled. *If I make it out of here alive, I swear I'll take another hard look at synthetic skin.* Despite herself, she knew she would end up sticking with flesh. If nothing else, further augmentation would disappoint her mother... and she never wanted to do that again. Not after the last time.

Climbing uneasily to her feet, she studied her surroundings.

The empty torus seemed free of Alliance forces. The dry, crumbling remains of dead gardens and parks suggested the surrounding slabs had once been homes. She figured the buildings would be historic relics on some Alliance world, if they still survived at all.

She peeled off her gloves, and winced at the red skin beneath. Gently flexing her fingers confirmed there was no blistering. The camouflage no longer worked and the gloves had started to liquify, so she left them off for now and stowed them in her backpack.

The knees were similarly, but seemed stable. Her boots had held up a little better.

She plotted a route to Disc D, and set off at a fast jog. There was a chance Jeremiah Astatoba was still there, waiting for a man who would never arrive.

Besides, it was on the way to Collin's pod. Kind of.

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Admiral Terenta stood just a few paces from the elliptical hole cut through the wall, watching the drones move in and out. Even the technicians were leaving plenty of room for the machines to move. The nanotech research area on the other side had still not been fully drained, and the machines were contaminated. As he watched, yet another drone returned with coolant dripping from its legs. The drops ate dark circles in the rubberized floor.

“Admiral?”

He turned toward the voice. It was Darius. “What is it Major?”

“I have a preliminary report sir.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“The research staff are all accounted for, only two fatalities. The reported injuries are minor, mostly respiratory damage. It seems Schaeff breached the compound's main entrance with a borer probe shortly after we captured Collins. She made her way to the common room on level three, overpowered six people, and forced one of them to give her entry to the research area. When the alarm was raised she destroyed all security

drones and exited through the coolant pipe. I've notified the search teams of her route."

Terenta nodded, and turned his gaze back to the hole in the wall. The chamber beyond was still thick with smoke. "Anything missing?"

"The damage is too extensive to tell as yet. Techs in suits are conducting a full inventory. But if she was looking for the Confederation K6 sample sir, she didn't get it. It's still secure in the vault."

"What of Doctor Astatoba?"

"He's definitely no longer in the compound. I've disabled his security clearance as a precaution." Darius hesitated. "Since there's no record of him leaving, it's possible Schaeff kidnapped him."

Another drone crawled through the opening, picked up a rectangular plate of black ceramic, and took it back inside.

Terenta shook his head. "Doctor Astatoba was deeply involved in Confederation bioweapon design, it would be a pity to lose him."

"If Schaeff has him, she'll probably try to keep him alive sir." He nodded toward the ruined research area. "She went out of her way to avoid killing people here, though God knows why."

The Admiral nodded, and allowed his lip to curl upward. "A personality weakness which plays to our advantage. Anything else Major?"

"That's it for now sir."

Terenta touched his wrist-mounted terminal, and an image appeared before him showing a young woman seated in the compound's control room. "Lieutenant, signal the CASC Thorn. We will proceed on schedule, no alterations."

She nodded. "Yes sir, understood." The image snapped out.

"Major, I don't like Confederation hardware lying around. Locate all the swoop pods and equipment caches, and destroy them. Dismissed."

"Yes sir." Darius saluted, and walked toward the exit.

Terenta waited until he reached the doorway. "Oh, keep one thing in mind, Major."

Darius turned. "Sir?"

"Doctor Astatoba may be a Confed double agent. If necessary, don't hesitate to kill him."

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Kiranda ran close to the torus wall, jumping over occasional chunks of rubble. The fragments still had blue and white paint on one side, fragments of the artificial sky painted on the decaying ceiling above her.

As she drew closer to the remains of a waterfall, she slowed her pace. The artificial cliff faced what had once been a wide pool, complete with a wide footbridge that formed the entrance to a plaza. She stopped behind a boulder to survey the area.

The plaza's worn pavement was gray with age, but a constant breeze kept it clean enough for the original pattern of yellow and red to show. Steel protrusions marked the locations of former benches or machines. In the middle of the plaza, an imposing statue still stood. It had been coated to look like bronze, but exposed edges had eroded to reveal simple earthenware. The bearded figure held a replica of the station in his right hand, so he had presumably been someone important. Her map didn't even record his name.

The man sitting on the platform beneath the statue was easier to recognize. Doctor Jeremiah Astatoba looked just as thin as his picture, and he clearly hadn't noticed her approaching. She wondered if he had some kind of degenerative disease Collins hadn't thought to mention.

Otherwise, the plaza seemed clear. There were no ultrasonics at all, and the few electromagnetic fields seemed to be part of the station's infrastructure. She hesitated, then instructed her eyes to zoom in on his face.

He looked a little nervous. With so many cosmetic treatments available those weathered features had to be a conscious choice, but the brown color of his hair looked less than natural. Probably the result of genetic adjustments of over-the-counter corrective drugs. Either he had financial problems, or he genuinely didn't care how old he looked.

He had a small terminal on his lap. It had a countdown displayed, which had passed zero and entered negative numbers. Each time he glanced at it, his jaw shifted nervously back and forth.

*Too Easy. I don't buy it.*

She studied the expanse behind her once more. The possible options for snipers were quite limited, the site was not well suited for an ambush. Deciding to risk it, she stood and walked toward the seated scientist.

Astatoba looked up, and gazed past her cloaked form at the empty horizon behind her. Evidently the sound dampening on her boots wasn't working too well since the fight. Still, he gave no sign of seeing her despite her exposed hands. He turned and gazed into the torus stretching away behind him, and then turned back to the display. Kiranda stopped a few steps in front of him, and switched off her camouflage. She half-expected a bullet in the back of her head from some hidden assassin, but nothing happened.

She pulled off her hood, and took a fresh breath for the first time in hours. The air smelled salty.

The sound made him look up in alarm.

She smiled. "Doctor Astatoba, I presume."

To his credit, he regained his composure pretty quickly. He seemed sad, but forced a smile.

"Quite so. You appear to be the young lady Isamu was hoping to hire. Ms Schaef, I believe?"

"Kiranda Schaef. Pleased to find you still breathing." She offered her hand. The Doctor noticed her red palms, and shook her hand with a considerably gentle grip. His hand felt dry. She glanced up at the statue. "Collins was captured before he could reach you, and this site is too open for my liking. I suggest we talk while getting the hell out of here."

The man stood. "I have just the thing." He turned to the platform he had been sitting on, gripped the top edge, and heaved.

A wide segment of stone swung up on twin hydraulic rams, exposing a metal rungs leading down a circular shaft. "An old maintenance tunnel, and the escape route Isamu and I had planned to use. It will take us down to the next torus."

Kiranda raised her eyebrows. The tunnel was clearly very old, but it didn't appear on the blueprints she'd been given. Presumably, Collins had deleted it from the map before handing it out. "Okay. I'll go first, pull it shut behind us."

Astatoba nodded and Kiranda started climbing down.

The shaft ended only three metres below ground, in a dim, cramped room. Three narrow tunnels led away from it, and when Astatoba joined her he indicated at the leftmost. Kiranda drew her blaster and they headed inside. The ceiling was so low they both had to crouch.

"Poor Isamu, I was afraid something had gone wrong." He sighed. "We should have paid more attention to the IM predictions. It gave the scheme even odds at best."

*They have an Intelligent Machine in Black division? Collins sure kept that quiet. I guess by now it's pretty clear why.*

"You know," she said, "It would have been handy if I had known some of this stuff in advance." She glanced at him over her shoulder. "You've taken plenty of risks for this. Why did you do it?"

"Why? Well, penance I suppose young lady. Redemption for one's sins can never be obtained, but I strive for it nonetheless."

"Redemption?"

"Did he not tell you? About the CSS Ishmael?"

“He said the Alliance attacked it with a Confed Nanoagent stolen from a private development facility.” She paused. “Were you involved with that?”

“I’m afraid so. I worked at that facility.”

“You developed it?”

“Then helped the Alliance to steal it. The explosive I placed at the plant killed eight people.”

Kiranda shivered. “You wanted the Alliance to have Confed bioweapons?”

“I was very sure of myself.” He drew a deep breath. “After the Swarm war, the Confederation took over systems the Colonial Alliance could no longer supply or defend. I still believe that was wrong. Unfortunately, I let anger cloud my judgment. I came to believe the Confederation was evil, and anything harming it was good. Killing around fifty thousand Confederation citizens seemed a good way to make the Senate reconsider it's position. It didn't occur to me to consider the harm I was doing.”

Kiranda swallowed. Astatoba's had uncomfortable similarities to her own, though on vastly larger scale. She had murdered only three people, just one of which had done nothing to deserve it.

Her chin trembled, and she touched the ridge of the necklace around her neck. The feel of the lumps of plastic helped calm her nerves. “I know embracing a cause can... distort you. Stop you from feeling compassion.”

“My crime cannot be forgiven, so I am spending my life in hard labor. It's the best I can do.” Astatoba seemed to be only partially listening to her, his thoughts were elsewhere.

She stopped and looked at him. “What changed? Something must have forced you to rethink.”

He tried another forced smile, then gave up on it. “I never knew where the attack would be. A necessary precaution, in case I was caught and interrogated.”

Realization began to dawn. “Someone you cared for was there.”

He nodded. “My daughter, the only family I had left. Her mother died when she was three.” He paused as he ducked under a joist. “She was on a school archeology trip with her class. Fortunately, she died more swiftly than most. About twenty minutes or so.”

Kiranda fought against the memory of a man, naked and bleeding in a room reeking of burnt flesh, a rectangular nerveblock on his neck keeping him helpless. The terrified agony in his eyes, and the ache in her face from grinning for too long. For a sickening moment she could even thought she could still feel the blood-slick knife in her hand, and clenched her fists to

dispel it. She hurried her pace, hoping movement would leave the memory behind.

Astatoba obliviously kept talking. "I blamed the Confederation for so much, and at first I even blamed them for her death. But as flawed as the Confederation is, but it values life more than the Alliance does. More than I did. I turned myself in. It was Isamu's idea for me to work on nanotech treatments, to save lives rather than taking them. I'm very grateful for that."

Kiranda shook her head. "I shouldn't have asked. I have no right to pry."

She could hear the smile in his voice when he replied. "No, don't apologize. It does me good to remember Abigail." He chuckled, and Kiranda glanced back at him. "She'd have been a teacher by now. That's what she wanted."

Kiranda remained silent, and wondered what the mechanic she'd killed had wanted to achieve.

Astatoba misinterpreted her silence. "I'm sorry Ms Schaefer, my mind should be on matters at hand. Although I suppose there's not much point now."

Kiranda shook her head. "It's not over yet, Doc. I have the Alliance cure, and there's still a chance we can get it back to Confed and head off this stupid war. Collins left a beacon that can whistle down a ride for us."

"In his pod, yes. But the cure won't do any good." He sounded perplexed. "Of course, you don't know! You can hardly be expected to, I only found out myself when I first arrived and found Admiral Terenta was here. I'm such a fool!"

Kiranda stopped so suddenly he walked into her. "What don't I know?"

"That it's all too late. The attack is imminent, a ship is arriving tomorrow to pick up the copycat stockpile. I couldn't get access to the battle plan, but I certainly don't imagine a ship full of nanoagent will be flying about for long."

"But Collins said it was weeks away!"

"I'm certain it's much sooner. Even if the Confederation had the Alliance nanotech cure right now, there wouldn't be time for each colony to replicate a sufficient quantity to protect themselves. They would need six days minimum."

Kiranda clenched her fists. "Hell, this changes things. This Terenta person, why's he so important?"

“Admiral Terenta is possibly the greatest military mind in the Cluster. If he's here, it's to supervise the operation personally.”

“Damn them all!” Kiranda straightened, and smacked her head on the ceiling. Wincing in pain, she immediately punched it and caught ancient concrete instead. A set of throbbing knuckles was added to her list of problems.

*What should I do? Call for pickup and warn Confed? They might not have time to stop it, but any warning would save some lives. Maybe I can I stop it myself? The nanoagent is right here on the station, and I've got the destruct code from Harrison. But it took all I had to get away from those drones, and the stock will be heavily guarded. Especially now that they know I'm here.*

Astatoba placed his hand on her shoulder. To her surprise, the gesture helped ease some of her tension. “I'm sorry young lady, but it may be that the best we can hope for is simply warning the Confederation. The Alliance cure might prevent repeat attacks in the future.”

“Maybe, but I want to be certain I've done all I can.” She consulted the mission data in her implant to find out how to destroy a nanoagent stockpile from a distance. The options were limited. It seemed only intense radiation or extreme heat would do the job.

“Does the Alliance have nukes on hand? Antimatter bombs, anything like that?”

“The station has no armaments like that, and there are no fission reactors. There might be some ordnance being transferred with the nanoagent, but I wouldn't pin hopes on it.”

*Well, they would have been just as well guarded anyway. What about heat? This station is a mines gas, and there are tanks of liquefied methane all over it. Can I put a match to it?*

Kiranda consulted her sabotage software and found that methane needed oxygen to burn. The station contained plenty of breathable air and stored oxygen, but to get them mixed and burning properly would take an explosion big enough to destroy the whole installation. She had her implant scan the blueprints for suitable volatiles, and to her surprise found a candidate in the product processing section.

It was part of the system dedicated to breaking down solids collected by the station's ramscoop. The torus with the equipment was immense, and had lots of entry points. She plotted an optimal route that balanced speed with stealth.

“Okay Doc, how much longer will that nanoagent be on this station?”

Astatoba blinked. "I'm afraid I don't know. Do you intend to delay the attack?"

"I intend to destroy this station before they can unload the stockpile."

To her surprise, Astatoba merely nodded.

"That's ambitious, but if successful the Alliance would need months to rebuild such a facility... Yes. I shall assist you however I can."

Kiranda grinned. "I appreciate it. Do you know anything about perchloric acid?"

His eyebrows rose. "I certainly do. What would you like to know?"

## Chapter Eight: Sabotage

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Light glared, and Captain Ackilat of the Alliance starcruiser Thorn awoke. The last remnants of a pleasant dream began to fade as he focused on the display next to his bed. The image showed the rather young, serious face of Douglas Aden, his communications officer. The image was surrounded by a border flashing orange.

“Accept call,” he said. The border switched to solid green, and Aden spoke.

“Sorry to wake you sir. I have detected a change in the Wellspring 21 beacon. The pattern matches the approach request code.”

Ackilat glanced at the time in the corner of the image. “That's early. Is it within the anticipated period?”

“Yes sir. It's early in the window, but it matches.”

He scratched his chest through his pajamas. “Have we confirmed the signal is from Wellspring?”

“Yes sir. We've been monitoring the beacon's position and strength constantly.”

Ackilat nodded, and ran his hand over his head. The short bristles of his receding hairline rustled beneath his palm. “Any unusual readings from Tactical?”

“None at all sir. It's very quiet.”

He nodded. “All right then. Helm!”

Another face appeared on the display. “Sir?”

“Take us in to Wellspring 21. I want a slow deceleration, with sentinels deployed on approach. If the Admiral is testing us, let's impress him.” He swung his feet off the bed and rose to his feet. The image rose to follow his face.

“Sentinels will require your authorization sir.”

“I'll provide launch approval from the bridge, just get them prepped. Aden, send a tight-beam signal to the Cavador. Let them know what we're doing and advise them to maintain proximity. We can't have them losing track of us in the soup.”

“Aye sir.”

“Dismissed.” The images winked off, and he strode toward the dark gray uniform hanging on his closet door.

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Kiranda Schaeff watched Astatoba as she pulled her pack back on. He was sitting on an ancient plastic oil barrel, the only item in the tiny

maintenance room that even vaguely resembled furniture. He was gazing uncertainly at her discarded equipment, barely visible on the floor in the dim light.

He frowned. "You are certain about this?"

"I need to move fast, and without ammo some of that stuff is dead weight anyway."

"You can't get more?"

"The locker room cache will be crawling with troops by now." She adjusted the straps, and noted how much lighter her pack felt. The increased freedom of movement was reassuring.

She nodded toward the assault rifle lying among the equipment, next to her spent dart launcher. "The rifle is still there if you want it Doctor. It has a full clip, and it doesn't kick at all on single shot."

Astatoba shook his head vigorously. "Goodness no, I'd be as likely to hit myself as anything I aim at."

"Suit yourself." *Maybe it's just as well. I wouldn't put it past Darius to have planted trackers on our hardware.* "You remember what to look for?"

"Absolutely: A red safety switch hidden near the pod, behind the leg of a loader." He held up the portable terminal she had given him. "With this to guide me I'm sure I'll be fine. Frankly, I'm more worried about you. Perchloric acid is extremely volatile, and the Alliance is on the alert."

"I expect they are." She stood, and eased the door open a crack. The narrow corridor looked clear in both directions.

She glanced back to Astatoba. Something in his eyes made her sure he was more concerned with her welfare than his own.

*He expects us to die here. We probably will.*

She smiled. "We'll make it work, Doc. You just hit the beacon and get yourself to the arched bridge. I'll meet you there and we'll break for the airlock together."

Astatoba nodded. "I'll do my best. I only wish I could be of more help."

She checked the corridor outside once more, and swung the door open. Astatoba stood, and she gave him a gentle shove out the doorway. "Go! I'll see you at the bridge."

Astatoba nodded. "God speed."

He left at a fast walk, following the terminal's projected directions until a turn to the left hid him from view.

Kiranda pulled the door shut, and slumped against the wall.

Well, at least she knew why Astatoba looked so frail. He was a mass murderer haunted by remorse, and it had ruined him as much as any illness. Or any punishment.

*My shrink warned me clinging to guilt just adds another mistake to the first, but I still don't buy it. Courts treat remorse as a good sign, not as a mental illness. Did Collins intentionally seek out emotional wrecks like us? If so, his judgment isn't as good as he thinks it is.*

Hauling herself to her feet, Kiranda turned her attention to a maintenance hatch on the wall. The hatch was the reason she had chosen the room after their journey through the tunnels. The blueprints showed it connecting to a series of shafts that led to acid storage.

She rubbed her palms together, then unlocked the hatch and pulled it open. The shaft was roomy, and filled with a mist that felt pleasantly cool on her exposed hands.

By poking her head cautiously through the hatchway and squinting into the haze, she managed to detect the shadowy forms of pipes and ancient electrical cables. She cycled through several optic settings, and selected one she often used when riding along foggy coastal back-roads before dawn. The setting showed little detail in the grimy shaft walls, but highlighted the pipes very well.

Wary of the damp surfaces, Kiranda climbed through onto a narrow catwalk by the hatch. There was no sign of a ladder, but the brackets holding the pipes looked strong. She tested her weight on them, then hauled herself up and began to climb.

The brackets were placed far apart, so she had to shimmy up the pipes most of the time. The greasy, vapor-slicked surface was treacherous and she took care to give her full attention. The shaft below continued all the way down to the outermost torus, a fall she doubted she could survive.

The moisture combined with layers of grease to make progress difficult, but the weakening gravity helped make up for it. By the time she reached the top of the shaft her weight was down to a mere twenty percent.

The shaft emerged into a tunnel of identical dimensions, the floor buried beneath more pipes. One that was so big she could probably have stood upright inside it. Unfortunately she was on the outside, and space was extremely limited. She crawled onto the upper side, feeling it hum beneath her. Her blueprints said it carried matter from the very processing area she wanted to reach. She slid along the pipe, hoisting herself along easily in the low gravity.

The tunnel became even more cramped as she drew nearer her goal, forcing her to slow down and move more carefully. The background noise of the station had changed, becoming louder as she progressed. Each crossbeam seemed harder to squeeze by, until she could only get through by wriggling from side to side. She began to fear the tunnel would become impassible before she reached her goal, but then she emerged into a space so huge she couldn't even see the floor.

The torus was vast, and crowded with tanks and pipes noisier than any factory. Huge tubes crossed the area, hanging in sagging loops from supports fastened to whatever was closest. Most of the pipes were a reasonably new-looking and light gray, which she put down to one of the station's more recent upgrades. Others seemed to be crumbling.

*I hope the tank is still the same...*

At least the ceiling was visible, around ten metres above her. There were a considerable number of catwalks and walkways, but none within reach. Fortunately the pipe she was on protruded some way before curving upward, so she squirmed her way free of the tunnel and followed it until she was able to easily drop down to a catwalk.

Finally on decent footing, she consulted her map and followed the maze of interlinked stairs and metal walkways to reach a large spherical tank. While the majority of the tanks around her were cylindrical and painted white somewhere beneath the dust and grime, the spherical one had the dull luster of titanium. It was about three stories high, similar dimensions to the methane tanks arranged in rings around on the station's exterior.

Kiranda grinned. The tank matched the one in the blueprints, and even looked about the right age. She searched for the tank's main feed, and finally located the foot-wide hose. It seemed small compared to the others around her. She followed the hose along a catwalk, and down two long ladders until it ended at a titanium dilution chamber. The end of the pipe was held in place with locking clamp, operated by a local control panel with a series of safety catches. The arrangement even had a small catwalk dedicated to it, though it looked like she was the first to set foot there in many years. Kiranda stepped onto the corroded metal grille cautiously, testing it for strength. After the long ladders, gravity had increased.

The metal proved stronger than it looked, and held her weight easily. Kiranda wiped the worst of the dirt off the display, located the valve lever, and pulled it.

It moved smoothly. Solenoids inside the pipe and mixing tank shut with a clang that resounded as much as a sledgehammer on steel. She winced as the noise echoed though the torus.

*Hardly stealthy... But there are lots of noises in here, maybe it'll blend in.*

Her ears still recovering, she turned the switch to empty the sealed pipe.

The long hose lurched like a gigantic snake.

The sudden movement made her flinch so much she nearly lost her footing on the narrow platform. She knew the thick hose had shifted only because of the weight of the liquid being removed from it, but after Astatoba's warnings about the acid she felt jittery.

The pipe continued to shudder for a full twenty seconds before finally falling silent and the panel showed green. Kiranda put on her damaged gloves, gripped the pipe's locking clamp, and heaved.

It refused to budge.

She re-checked the panel, ensuring sure she had completed the proper sequence. She had, and it should be ready to release.

Returning to the clamp, she doubled her efforts and the unyielding ceramic grip painfully into her palms. Eventually, the clamp emitted a shrill squeak and slowly began to move. As it lifted higher the clamp became easier to move. It then suddenly came loose and the entire hose disconnected. The weight of the pipe pulled it away until the waiting cradle caught it.

*Right! Now, there should be a steel chamber somewhere below me...* She peered down and located the tank four metres below. The catwalk before it looked identical to the one she was on, complete with an identical cradle. *Bingo.*

She gripped the sealed plug, and raised it from the cradle. Despite the reduced gravity her augmentations worked hard to raise the weight, but once it was clear of the cradle she simply let it drop over the edge of the catwalk. The hose straightened a little as it dropped, and the plug came to rest only a metre below the catwalk floor she was standing on.

Kiranda winced. *Nowhere near enough slack.*

She squinted up at the pipe. It was long enough to do the job, but most of it was hanging in sagging loops between the supports of a catwalk above. The pipe was simply too stiff for the weight of the hanging clamp to pull it free. *I take out the first support it should free enough slack. The weight of the pipe could even pull a little more free.*

She instinctively reached for the blaster holstered at her side, but then remembered Astatoba's warnings and thought better of it. Instead, she moved along the platform, grabbed hold of the pipe, and climbed up it until she reached the support beneath the catwalk.

The bracket was held in place by a steel clip on each side, clamping it to the catwalk. She reached up and grabbed the rightmost clip with her fingers. It took considerable effort, but by working the clip hard from side to side she managed to pull it free.

With only one anchor point left, the metal support bracket started to bend. The hose she was clinging to shifted, then the support pulled loose and the pipe fell free. In panic, Kiranda held on as tight as she could. The next support beneath the catwalk began to take the increased weight, then tore free from the strain.

*Oh shit!*

The falling pipe gained momentum. The remaining supports quickly gave way, and the full length of hose swung across a chamber alarmingly full of sharp obstacles. She struggled to hold on, but the downward force was strong and the surface greasy with dirt. She slipped down the tube and hit the swinging plug.

She hit hard, and lost her grip on the pipe. With only darkness and a viscous scattering of metal edges gleaming far below, she made a desperate mid-air grab for the hose's plug. Her left hand found and gripped the hard ceramic ridge. Her right hand joined it as the pipe reached the apex of its swing and began to move back the way it had come.

Kiranda managed to hold on through the pendulum-like swings, expecting at any moment to be dashed against a tank or outcropping girder. Eventually, the motion slowed to almost nothing.

Finally confident she was no longer in immediate mortal danger, she glanced around as she caught her breath. A narrow girder ran across the chasm about five metres below her, and she made a mental note of it in case she fell. The pipe she clung to was near vertical so climbing it would be a challenge.

She looked around for the steel chamber, and spotted it well above and to one side. From her new perspective, she could see a ladder leading down from it to a cluster of pipes below. If she wanted to make the sabotage work, she had to get the pipe back up to that tank.

She grimaced. *This is going to be tricky.*

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Jeremiah Astatoba slowed as he approached the junction. The long journey had taxed him more than he'd expected, and he leaned against the cool wall for a moment to rest.

A green arrow floating in the air before him indicated he should take the left branch of the junction. Just ahead

He gathered himself and pushed himself away from the wall. Stopping proved treacherous, he had to force himself to start moving again.

"How much further?", he asked the terminal as he rounded the corner.

A 3D map appeared below the arrow, depicting a section of the station. A jagged white line showed the remainder of his route. Most of it was accounted for by a single, very tall stairwell. Text above the diagram answered *seven minutes (current speed)*.

At least the stairwell went down, not up. "Not much further... Good."

The corridor he was in seemed much narrower than the others. The ceiling carried only a few pipes and cables, some of which were so old they had begun to crumble apart. He fancied some would start a fire if they ever received any power. Most of the lighting panels were dead, but there was enough life in the remaining ones to prevent him relying entirely on the terminal to illuminate the floor in front of him.

He passed by two recessed doors. The terminal indicated the next would be the stairwell that could take him much of the remaining distance to Collin's Pod. Ignoring the ache in his feet, he forced himself to walk a little faster.

As he approached the doorway, the word *STOP!* Appeared before him in bright red. Before he could say anything, the text changed to *REMAIN SILENT, GO BACK.*

Astatoba cautiously retreated the way he had come. The terminal prompted him to keep moving with another arrow, with the words *REMAIN SILENT* still glowing.

He wiped a thin film of sweat from his upper lip, and found his hand was trembling. Trying to calm himself, he took a deep breath and concentrated on following the arrow. It helped a little.

Once he was back past the junction, the terminal finally gave an explanation: *US and EMR detected on route. Probable active sensor grid.*

Astatoba leaned his back against the wall. "I must reach the pod."

*Recalculating route.*

He barely had time to read the message before it vanished and the map came back. This time, the white line traced a longer path and the arrow pointed to the right branch of the junction.

He followed the arrow and went through two corridors so badly littered he spent almost all his attention minding his footing. When he finally reached a narrow door indicated by the terminal, it took him several tries until he finally managed to pull the rusted doors open. The sight beyond made him reel.

“Dear lord!”

It was some sort of cabling shaft, a mere metre square. Yet it stretched into darkness above and below, and the climbing rungs set into the left side looked very badly corroded.

He swallowed to steel himself, and resolutely clipped the terminal to his belt. “Very well. How far down do I have to go?”

A schematic appeared, showing just the shaft. The climb down to the bottom of the shaft was the equivalent of a four-story building.

Astatoba flexed his fingers, reached inside, and gave the nearest rung a hard tug. The corroded surface provided good grip, and while the rung felt alarmingly thin, it did hold.

With heart pounding, he apprehensively stepped onto a lower rung and began to limb down.

His arms and shoulders ached after the first few yards, and the rungs were didn't protrude enough to give good footing. He felt his grip starting to weaken and paused to catch his breath, but the pain of the metal digging into his fingers spurred him on.

At the halfway point, he realized he was not going to make it. His arms felt like they were going to snap. He searched for something to take his weight for a time, and found a small hatch-like door level with his feet. He attempted to kick it open, but his shoe merely left a clean mark on the ancient coating. He kicked again, harder.

The rung in his hands snapped off the wall, his foot caught against the hatch's frame, and he began to fall. His weight wrenched his ankle, and pain lanced through it even after it pulled free of the hatch.

His head hit the wall, as did both arms and his injured foot in rapid succession. Helpless, he landed at the bottom on his back.

Jeremiah Astatoba's vision danced with white spots. So many parts of his body hurt, but none as much as his ankle. Around him, he could feel flat surfaces, twisted and broken out of shape. Tentatively exploring with his least painful hand, he found the surfaces were cardboard, apparently boxes crumpled and torn beneath him. He swallowed, and tried to sit up.

The movement worsened the pain from a number of points, but he persisted. Crawling across the smashed boxes, he found the top half of a

maintenance door buried in the boxes. He dug down to the handle, and managed to open the door.

The corridor outside was better illuminated, and very wide. The walls and floor were smooth plascrete.

Squeezing through the gap, he leaped against the wall and supported himself on one good leg. An arrow from his terminal pointed right. Reasonably sure his injuries were minor, he gave thanks the device still worked and limped in the indicated direction.

The corridor took him past an empty storage chambers, many with markings on the floor to indicate parking arrangements for some manner of long-removed machinery. Considering the apparent lack of use, the rooms looked relatively clean.

The floor eventually dipped to become a long rampway. Hobbling down, he spied the remains of an old freight drone abandoned on the left side of the ramp. The bottom of the ramp with the loader garage and Collins' pod was and his destination was a fairly short way behind it. He grinned at the thought, and managed to limp a little faster.

As he was passing the wrecked loader, his terminal produced another STOP! message before him. He complied, then he heard the danger for himself. There were voices coming from the garage ahead. Male voices, speaking in clipped military tones.

“Charge in place, sir. Hull seal verified.”

“Synch to detonator.”

“Synchronized to Detonator Alpha One.”

Astatoba shivered. Alliance soldiers had beat him to the pod, and were about to destroy it and the beacon. For a moment he thought he might run past them and hit the switch before they could stop him, but the state of his leg dashed even that hope. Even at his best, he doubted he could get near them without being gunned down. He had failed.

“Okay, everyone fall back!”

Astatoba realized they were about to come up the corridor toward him, and he had no way out.

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Kiranda was yet again holding on to the end of a fast-swinging pipe, but this time she had set it moving intentionally. Kicking her entire weight on each swing, she drew gradually nearer the platform with the steel tank.

The platform itself was much too high to reach, but the ladder beneath it seemed attainable.

With a final mighty kick, she eventually managed to pass her feet between two of the rungs. Quickly hooking her feet around the sides of the ladder, she prepared to take the strain.

The damned hose was heavier than it looked. Her implant flashed a series of warnings through her mind as the heavy mass tried to stretch her apart and pull her feet from the ladder, but she managed to hold on.

Glanced up the length of pipe, she could see it curve into the distance. There was more than enough slack to reach the tank above. All she had to do was haul it up there.

With immense care and a good measure of pain, she pulled one foot free, moved it up a rung and hooked it into place. The smooth sides of the metal ladder offered little grip, and she had to hold as firm as possible before moving her other foot. Continuing in that slow, steady pace, she hauled the load up with her to the top of the ladder.

When she drew close to the platform, she bent her legs and hooked her calves around the topmost rung. Still holding the weight of the pipe with her hands, she studied the catwalk above her.

The ladder ended as a small recess cut out of the platform. The cradle was close to that recess, which was helpful. Less helpful was the mass of cooling fins beneath the platform between her and the cradle above.

Kiranda fought her way up to the topmost rung, and held on with one leg on the ladder while she stretched the other across the surface of the catwalk. That got her just above the level of the platform, but meant she could only use her arms and torso to haul the pipe past the cooling fins onto the platform.

She managed to, using her left leg to hoist herself and the pipe up until the hose was over the cradle.

With a final downward heave, she slotted the plug into place and collapsed onto the platform.

As she lay gasping to catch her breath, she saw a drop of milky white, translucent liquid fall from the lip of the pipe. It fell through one of the holes in the metal grille-work. An instant later, she was lifted from the platform by an explosion from below.

She landed back on the platform, where the smell of burnt oil and hot metal filled her nostrils.

Shocked, Kiranda sat up and gazed down through the grille. The dusty collection of cooling fins bore a gleaming, dish-like crater. The force of the explosion had lifted her only a hand's breadth, but it had been only a single drop detonated by the hot metal fins.

Kiranda stared up at the titanium tank in the distance above. Somehow, the sphere seemed a hell of a lot bigger. Her gaze drifted back to the plug resting in the cradle. The liquid must have been caught in the ring mechanism. She mentally recounted what Astatoba had told her.

*Perchloric Acid is an oxidizing corrosive. It may explode when heated, or ignite on contact with combustibles. Can form explosive peroxides. Extremely destructive to human tissue.*

Kiranda winced. *Those fins must be hot enough to ignite it. Does flesh count as a combustible? Best not to find out.*

She hauled herself to her feet, and tugged on the cradle lever. The mechanism hauled the pipe into position and locked it in. The control panel lit up.

Feeling a little safer with the pipe locked in, she went to the controls. They were nearly identical to the ones she'd used earlier. She switched the safety, then gritted her teeth and started the flow of acid.

The pipe shook as liquid poured down and into the empty side of the tank. Kiranda tapped her knuckles against the other side, producing a solid, full sound. That side held the station's primary product, liquefied Methane gas.

She drew her blaster, and destroyed the control panel. The safety clamps would ensure her work could not be undone in time to stop the acid from eating through.

With the blaster holstered, she started a countdown on her implant. If Astatoba's calculations were correct, the acid would eat through the steel divider in anywhere from sixty to ninety minutes. The acid and methane would meet, with the dissolving steel as a catalyst.

Then, each gram of acid would instantly become six liters of gas and a whole lot of heat. The reaction would immediately run up the pipe to the main tank, and when that went up the entire station would be blown apart. The methane tanks on the exterior would burn too, but the heat from them was just a bonus. The explosion alone would generate enough heat to annihilate the entire Alliance nanotech stockpile.

Everyone on board would die, a thought which had hung over her every step of the way. There was simply no other way left.

*Time to meet up with Astatoba and get off this rock.*

Her implant plotted a route consisting mostly of corridors to improve her chances of moving unnoticed. The first leg of the journey started with a gantry twenty metres below. Kiranda crossed to the ladder, gripped the sides with her hands and insteps, and slid down.

The narrow gantry was there. As Kiranda ran along it, she hoped like hell Astatoba had activated the beacon. The ship would take time to reach them, and without it they were trapped with a time bomb that couldn't be stopped.

\*\*\*

The space beneath the abandoned loader was narrow, and Jeremiah Astatoba had barely managed to squeeze into it in time. Pressure on his sprained ankle caused waves of pain, but he managed to remain silent.

From the shadows beneath the machine, he was able to see parts of the ramp. He clearly saw the four pairs of boots as they filed past. The soldiers gave no sign of having seen him, and he felt a surge of relief.

He only began to worry again when the troops kept hurrying on, retreating to a safe distance that was evidently far away from his own position.

By the time the footsteps stopped he could barely hear them, but the voice that followed was clear enough.

“Fire in the hole!”

A burst of blinding light, followed by a cacophony of destruction. Amid the many sounds was one he suspected to be his own voice.

The burst of light eventually began to fade. His ears were ringing, and when he opened his eyes he saw nothing but a blur. The world gradually swam into focus, revealing a mass of fine white fibers radiating from the garage below. They were already starting to slacken and crumble. As they fell into dust, he noticed each gossamer-like thread ended in a small crater. Where they had hit metal, the craters bore a thin layer of black scorching. The air reeked with the smell of cordite.

Astatoba felt his grip on consciousness waver. He tried to move out of cover, and a dozen points of agony stabbed him. His vision darkened, and he realized he was badly hurt. Trying to drag himself toward the light, he found the floor slippery beneath him.

He reached toward the fading light, and collapsed.

\*\*\*

Kiranda jumped over a collapsed length of air duct, and kept running. Further down the corridor, she could see a small hatch in the floor. As she headed toward it, she double-checked her progress on the map.

The room below the hatch was listed as a seminar room. It had two main doors, both wide ones that should be on her left side once she entered. She reached the hatch, knelt and pulled it open.

The chamber had bare concrete as a floor, with a pattern of ancient glue marks that had most likely once held carpet. Cautiously, she poked her head through the hatch.

The room had been cleaned out. The two exits didn't even have door frames left. Still, at least the blueprints were accurate.

She dropped down, and hurried out of the nearest exit into the wide corridor running by. One entire side of the corridor was a continuous strip of glass, so badly cracked and clouded with it was no longer possible to see through.

On the other side, faded text on the wall confirmed she was in the fourth floor of the *Haymond* building. The corridor would lead straight to an enclosed bridge linking the building to the other side of the torus. She'd told Astatoba to wait for her there.

Kiranda ran, watching the windows as she went. They looked like one-way glass behind the grime. When she approached a gap, she slowed to examine the space outside.

It was a worse ruin than anything she'd seen yet. The street was lined with gutted or collapsed buildings and even some ruined vehicles, all rendered the same shade of gray by dirt. Only well-sheltered walls showed any of the original colors.

She wondered if that was what the border worlds would look like if the Alliance attack went ahead. She mentally added some skeletons among the debris to see if the image helped justify her decision to kill everyone on the station. She was certain those on the border would agree. The families of her victims would see it differently.

*There's no right choice, it's all wrong. So why am I sure I did right?*

The bridge finally came into sight. It was a simple continuation of the corridor, but with no more doors. The windows were still only on one side, presumably for structural strength.

She couldn't see Astatoba on the far side, but that didn't mean much. There was a junction there, and he could be just around the corner.

She ran onto the bridge toward the meeting place, and the floor suddenly shifted beneath her.

Kiranda lurched to a halt. The concrete floor was crazed with cracks, and once she took a decent look she realized it was even sagging in a few places.

Over the years, erosion or some chemical action had weakened the structure so much it was close to collapse. Her own weight might well be more than it could cope with.

She was nearly halfway across. For a moment she considered an active scan of the floor and structure beneath her, but the signal could attract the Alliance. Besides, it seemed unlikely any part of the floor was that much stronger than the rest of it.

*Not good.*

The floor dropped a little more, sagging beneath her feet. This time, she heard something beneath the floor crumble. Ever so slowly, the entire bridge began to tilt toward the windows.

Kiranda decided to run for it, and began to sprint toward Astatoba. The sudden pressure increase made the floor give way. In sudden free-fall amid a cloud of dust and rubble, she twisted about and clutched any hold she could find. One outstretched hand found the edge of a hanging slab of floor, and it took her weight. The fallen section of bridge struck the ground below.

Kiranda glanced down and winced. The area below the bridge was a mass of rubble, strewn with broken concrete and protruding lengths of rusting steel. From her suspended position, she lifted her gaze to the girders supporting the bridge.

It was a miracle the bridge was still there. Nearly all the supports were part of the deadly wreckage below her, and the remaining ones had the strength of chalk.

The slab of floor beneath her fingers began to tear free.

“Ahh crap!”

Struggling to haul herself up, she searched clutched for something to transfer her weight to. Then the slab pulled free, taking a good deal of the surrounding bridge with it.

“Double crap!”

Mindful of the deadly steel below, she held on to the slab. In an effort to hold herself in place on top of it, she gripped both sides and pressed herself against the surface.

In the next instant, the slab hit and chaos ensued and all sound stopped.

It seemed to take a very long time for the world to swim back into focus. The bizarre silence was broken by a cutting electronic tone of rising pitch.

Dazed, she dimly realized the sound was an automatic self-check in her ears. It continued through the entire register, then hearing returned as quickly as it had started.

She was lying on her back, which surprised her. Something was pressing on the back of her ribcage. It took a few moments for her to

figure out it was the edge of a concrete beam she was lying on. She tried moving her head. Four metres to her right, she spotted one half of the slab she had been holding on to. How had she ended up so far from it?

Her whole body tingled with pins and needles, which she took as good news. It implied that her body was still there and responding in some way.

Everything, even the broken bridge above her were changing color.

*Wow... It's beautiful!*

Her implants were demanding her attention, but they were too confusing to deal with. Only when her vision began to settle did their messages begin to make sense. Some were medical alerts, but one was a security warning. That was probably important.

She tried to concentrate on the security thing. Her implant had detected the subsonic hum of a compact flyer in the torus. A fair distance away, but closing.

*Hostile drone? I never get a break.*

She managed to move, pulling a foot from beneath a wooden beam. *Where did that wood come from?* With an effort, she struggled to her feet.

Swaying, she saw a blurry object soar over the bridge. Her implant identified it as a sentry drone with simple camouflage.

She would have laughed if she had the breath for it. *Guess I was a little noisy.*

The drone would already have contacted the Alliance. The machine banked through a neat turn, and took up a wide circling pattern above her.

She concluded the drone was unarmed, and simply monitoring her until armed support arrived.

She squinted at the ruined bridge above, but still couldn't see Astatoba. She opted to yell at the top of her voice. Without her hood on, he should hear her.

"Hey partner? Go! Get off this rock." The shout proved unexpectedly taxing. Dizzy, she grabbed a twisted metal beam to steady herself. The feeling began to fade, and she started moving out of the debris. "I mean it! GO!"

Her implant alerted her to a burst transmission from a cluster of ruined buildings to her left. Kiranda let her implant calculate position and angle, then simply drew and fired where it told her to.

A burst of return fire tore a neat line through the wreckage in front of her. It was where she would have been if she wasn't still lurching about like a drunk.

A drone tore into view. Flickering with failing trioptic camouflage, it was larger than the scout and trailed a thin line of smoke from a scar on the right flank.

*Bugger me, actually I hit it!*

The machine wobbled a little, struggling to get a proper weapon lock on her.

She dropped behind a smooth slab of plascrete, firing twice more at the machine. The drone hurtled on apparently untouched, then slammed into the torus wall and exploded. As the burning machine tumbled to the ground, Kiranda rose and fired once at the sentry, destroying it.

*That's two down, god knows how many to go.*

Feeling a good deal steadier, she set off at a run.

Debris limited available routes. The ruined buildings were roofless shells that offered little shelter from aerial attack, but the remains of their walls offered at least token cover.

Running behind the cover of one such building, she consulted her map for an exit. The closest was at least three hundred metres away, a large freight tunnel nestled between the foundations of two office buildings. She set off in the appropriate direction, and saw all that was left of the buildings were their foundations.

She barely begun to cover the distance when her eyes highlighted two objects emerging from her very destination. The drones long, narrow profiles were characteristic of modern battle designs. For anything they were pointed at, they were very small targets.

Most worrying, they were not bothering to use active camouflage. They had heard the fate of the older drone she had destroyed, and were devoting power to deflectors.

*Oh hell!*

The machines were already banking toward her, nose turrets swiveling.

Kiranda ducked into the closest ruin, dashing through the remains of what had once been the main entrance. The doorway's silken oak frame exploded as she passed through.

She sprinted across a tiled floor, the line of rapid-fire destruction following just below waist height. The bots were firing while closing in, so she had only a few seconds at most until they would reach the building and see their target. Without cover she would die.

She pressed past the remains of brick-walled rooms, jumped over a heap of debris, and spotted a set of concrete steps. They ended in mid-air

but looked like part of a stairwell that went further down, so she veered toward them.

There were downward steps, leading below. She rushed down them, scrambling over heaps of mortar and broken brick.

The bottom of the flight led to a single open doorway.

*Where the hell is this taking me?! It isn't on the map... It's pretty tight, but the drones might still come after me.*

A brief burst of Network traffic came from above. It was immediately answered by a second, then a third from a different direction.

*Those drones are military, they wouldn't give away their position unless... Damn it, there must be troops as well!*

She ran through the doorway and into a chamber that seemed deeper than the building above. It held hundreds of old crates and drums, arranged in haphazard stacks alongside many square support columns.

Kiranda quickly clambered up a stack of barrels to look for exits. The only other opening she could see was what looked like a freight elevator halfway along the wall on her right, where the stacks of boxes seemed most numerous.

*An old lift? It's outside the building's footprint, even outside the torus. Maybe it links to a different level.*

She hurried over the stack of barrels and ran toward the lift. The view improved as she drew closer. The lift's clean, yellow frame looked suspiciously new. Certainly much newer than the rest of the cellar.

Kiranda reached the waiting lift, and tentatively peered up into the shaft to check for possible threats. In the gloom, she recognized the thermal outline of a drones flying down toward her.

She reacted instantly, jerking her head out of the lift as fast as she could manage. She moved so fast her right heel left a shallow dent on the metal frame.

The mark wasn't there for long. A burst of gunfire from the drone tore it apart, along with a good part of the elevator.

Kiranda ran into the room, changing course to put as many boxes and barrels as she could between her and her pursuers. She searched for another exit, but all she found was an air duct so small even her cat couldn't have squeezed through it. It was quite big enough for grenades, so she opted to keep her distance from it.

There were several further bursts of Network traffic, but they no longer had a clear origin. They were using signal relays. Kiranda peered past several piles of crates at the distant stairwell.

Automatic rifles with mounted VR sensors poked into the room. They swept gently back and forth, scanning.

*Not rushing... They know they have me trapped.*

Kiranda fired a shot at the guns and ducked back behind the crates. Gunfire immediately tore through the space she had vacated and ripped into the wall beyond, showering her with hissing fragments of heated rock. She remained lying on her back considering her next move, then the ceiling above exploded with the same immense violence that had destroyed part of the elevator floor.

*The drone's here!*

A chunk of stone as big as an armchair fell toward her. She rolled aside as fast as she could, narrowly avoiding the boulder as it slammed into the floor.

A burst of small arms fire tore along the wall, and Kiranda moved behind the relative shelter of the boulder. The angle of the gunfire suggested multiple groups of soldiers were fanning out across the chamber, likely in cover formation. There might be even more on the way.

*No mines, no grenades... I have an EMP charge left. It won't get past the drone's shielding, but it might screw the targeting on the soldier's guns.*

Kiranda reached into her near-empty backpack, and located the electromagnetic grenade. A simple twist primed the charge, then she threw it toward the middle of the room and ducked. The bomb's high-pitched whine ended with a deceptively small flash of light.

A fresh burst of gunfire pounded the ceiling above her. The remains of a long-dead lighting panel fell on her along with several fragments of rock.

Kiranda frowned. *Why aren't they firing grenades, or shooting through the crates?* She took a moment to study the stack she was hiding behind.

*Fuel Cell cartridge, Type F. Contents: 48*

It look only a few years old. All the crates did, and they all contained fuel cells of compressed hydrogen. A cell like that might explode if shot, but it was more likely to simply burn. Hazardous, but not a significant threat to armored troops. She looked at the label on the nearest drum.

*Petroleum 99 RON.*

Kiranda barely suppressed the urge to groan. *That explains a few things! This is a fuel storage room, which explains why it's so far from the main hub. It was probably built for use by maintenance crews.*

They were holding back on the bug stuff because a fire would turn the room into a smelter. Once it was put out, all that would be left of them would be a few drops of molten metal from their weapons. At such temperatures, even her ceramic bones would be reduced to dust.

The wall on her left exploded, and fragments tore into nearby crates. Plastic fuel cells scattered across the floor, some of them leaking liquid that steamed as it evaporated. Kiranda backed away from the boulder, and moved behind a stack of drums.

*Well, at least I'm distracting them. Astatoba might be able to get out alive.* She touched the lump in the pocket on her chest and winced. *I still have the cure to Copycat! Damn it, I should have given it to him.* She leaned past the barrels for a moment and ventured a few shots of return fire. Gunfire was returned from three different directions with distressing accuracy.

*At least I've stopped the Alliance attack. Astatoba said the Admiral's ship won't be here until tomorrow, and the station will be destroyed by then nanoagent and all.*

Kiranda's sound filters detected dampened footsteps approaching her position.

*If I'm captured, they might mindhack me. I can't let them learn about the sabotage.*

She chose the most distant fuel drum she could see, and shot it. The resulting explosion was so deafening her auditory sensors cut out to protect themselves. The stack she was hiding behind picked her up and slammed her against the wall.

She blinked.

Every surface she could see was on fire. Her hearing had returned, and the sound of roaring flames and men and women yelling flooded in. One voice was screaming in agony so much she wasn't even sure if it was male or female. She smelled smoke and burnt hair, and realized it was hers. She wasn't wearing her hood.

The wall above her exploded in a shower of debris. The last of the working lights shattered from the heat of the flames, and the only illumination left was from the fire itself. Her implants alerted her to the fact the drone was moving away from the lift, toward her. Evidently, it had been instructed to move in and finish her off while the troops retreated.

Kiranda tightened her grip on her blaster, and grinned. *I always thought I might burn in hell. Funny how things turn out.*

Another drum exploded. A surviving stack toppled, sending a full drum toward her. She tensed herself, and endured the bruising pain as it struck her side and rolled away.

*Let's see how much of a mess I can make!*

She climbed to her feet, and ran into the flames.

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Admiral Terenta strode through the Alliance compound with Darius. The corridors were no longer neat. Grey crates were stacked at regular intervals, though he was pleased to see most of them were already packed and sealed. Even as he watched, a technician emerged from a side room to add a final crate to the nearest pile and lock the door.

Darius shook his head. "It'll be a significant loss sir. Nanoconstructors are expensive, and the staff have put a lot of effort into it."

"The running costs are high too, major."

"Understood sir."

They rounded a corner, and the door of the central command room came into view. The Admiral allowed himself a smirk as they walked toward it. "Circulate word that we intend to return after the operation."

"But when we return, won;t it be to decommission the plant?"

"That's not yet decided. You're dismissed Major."

Darius saluted, then turned and hurried back the way they had come.

Terenta reached the door, and transmitted the appropriate codes from his implant. The door slid aside and he walked through and into a short passageway. The airlock cycled, and the next door opened to reveal the central command chamber.

The semicircular room was small considering the size of the station, but as the Alliance compound occupied little space it didn't need to be any larger. Six of the nine stations were staffed, and a single 2D display stretched across the room's largest wall. The screen seemed redundant, all the staff were all using direct VR interfaces.

"Any vessel contacts yet?"

A face appeared on the huge screen. It was that of the man seated on his left, with some differences. The face on screen didn't show the VR headset the man was wearing, and in it his eyes as open. He also looked very much alert, whereas the man in the chair looked to be asleep.

"We are confirming one right now, Admiral," The face announced.

The display switched a readout from a short-range scanner. The cloud caused intense interference, with phantom contacts coming and going randomly. Against the noise, one large contact kept reappearing. Mass-

displacement data was listed alongside the contact, but the figures varied wildly. As the Admiral watched, the vessel drew closer and the readout stabilized. He nodded to himself. "It's the Thorn."

"Vessel entering IFF range... Identity confirmed sir. Vessel is the CASC Thorn, light attack cruiser."

Terenta watched the scanner. Despite the static, it was just possible to see the gas cloud swirling in the cruiser's wake. He could tell the vessel's immense engines exerting only a tiny fraction of their power.

"The transport Cavador will be close behind. Allow it into the main airlock, I want the evacuation to start as soon as docking is complete."

"Yes sir."

Terenta turned to leave, then paused. "When communications are possible, advise the Thorn not to trim her reactors. She shall load and depart within the hour."

## Chapter Nine: Fire Fight

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The hot smoke had become too dense to breathe, and Kiranda's lungs switched to her internal O2 supply.

She could see almost nothing. Even in ultraviolet, the room was a confusing mass of smoke and flame. Relying on her sense of direction and internal gyro she rushed past a stack of burning crates, to find the drone looming through the haze in front of her.

She jumped toward it as the machine fired.

Her backpack tugged. She threw her arms around the machine's smooth shell, trying to hold on while maintaining her grip on her blaster. Even through her suit, the barrel of the particle cannon pressing against her left shoulder felt unbearably hot.

The drone listed, and slammed her into a stack of drums. The heavy containers tumbled to the floor, but Kiranda maintained her hold. Trying a different tactic, the machine dragged her hanging legs through a wall of burning crates.

She kicked her legs up, and hooked her knees around the machine. It fired, annihilating what sounded like more barrels. Her knees immediately slipped free and her hands also began to lose their grip.

The sound of small arms fire interrupted, and she felt one shot ricochet off the drone.

Redoubling her efforts, she finally managed to hook one leg around the machine. With the extra purchase she was able to swing herself onto the drone's back, away from the swiveling turret beneath. The bulk of the wardrone gave her some protection from the heat and troopers below. More guns opened fire to fire, but she couldn't pinpoint their origin.

*If I can't see, neither can they. Where's that damned elevator shaft?*

Keeping her eyes open even as small slits hurt, a sign that their protective coatings were in danger. She searched for any sign of the elevator, then a second drone rushed out of the flames from her right and fired.

The single shot narrowly missed her torso and arm, punching into the drone beneath her. The confused machine went spinning across the room and into a wall as Kiranda fought to maintain her grip. The machine then simply hovered there motionless.

*Oh hell, it's going to just sit here until I cook or it's friend shoots me. I have to convince it to move!*

She searched the armor for the point the shot had struck, and found a neat hole in the ceramic. Before she had time to bring her gun to bear the drone shot upwards, and slammed her against the ceiling.

The impact stunned her. The drone increased upward thrust, trying to crush her against the stone. As she gathered her wits, she felt her ribs bend beneath the strain.

The drone then stopped, and fell away from the ceiling.

Kiranda reeled. She was certain it intended to slam her against the ceiling again.

Her blaster found the hole in the armor and fired.

The shot must have hit stored ammunition, because the resulting explosion tore the gun from her hand and sent the drone flying, scraping her against the ceiling. Sliding off, she found a ridge of torn armor and hung on by one hand as the drone dragged her through burning wreckage.

Another drum exploded, splashing fuel over her legs. Everything seemed to be on fire.

A drone fired, but this time she had no idea which one, or what it was shooting at.

Her free hand joined the first, strengthening her hold. Something threw her into the drone. It took her a few moments to realize it was another explosion.

Her lungs chose that moment to announce her internal O2 was exhausted.

*This soon? Two minutes maximum until I pass out.*

Her legs were still on fire. That was something her suit should have notified her about, so it seemed her suit's systems were dead. The fabric was still intact, and only some of the heat was reaching her skin.

Another item on the upside was the small arms fire seemed to have had stopped. Some of the noises amid the roaring sounded like a lot like choking coughs inside a combat hood. She wondered how much of the smoke around her was burning flesh. Some might even be her own.

The drone accelerated upwards again.

*Doesn't it realize I'm underneath it now?*

It kept on rising, and Kiranda realized the machine must be in the elevator shaft. The smoke around her became a blur, and she caught glimpses of passing wall. They were alarmingly close.

She tried to shift her weight to steer the rocketing drone away from the blur of concrete. The drone brushed the wall in a shower of sparks, and her right elbow caught some an unseen protrusion. The tough fabric ripped and wrenched her hand from the machine.

The drone kept hitting against the wall, producing a chalk-like screech that resonated in her skull. She wondered if it even noticed.

There was a burst of light. Kiranda immediately guessed the cause, and threw her free arm over her face. A moment later, a shockwave of flame and smoke hit from the explosion far below.

In the following moments of relative peace, she heard the drone's thrusters starting to fail. It wobbled, and her left leg scraped against the shaft wall. Through the thinning smoke, she caught an excellent view of the top of the shaft.

In the crisp light of the level above, was the silhouette of a portable drone launcher. Barely a metre above that opening was the end of the shaft, a grid of metal support beams she and the drone were hurtling toward.

She let go, and hit an unseen object before she even had time to flinch. The impact left her tumbling onward with no sense of direction.

She glimpsed the top of the shaft again when she was a mere five metres from it. Her upward movement slowed and halted, and for an instant she hung motionless.

In that moment she saw what she had hit: A collection of carbon-black elevator cables, barely visible in the smoky gloom. The drone might have been hitting the walls in an effort to avoid them.

The drone had also stopped, burying itself in deep into the metal beams at the top of the shaft. It looked likely to stay there for good.

She began to fall.

The wall offered no purchase, so she kicked away from it and sought out the cables. Her hands found a grimy, inch-thick cable and clutched it.

It slipped through her damaged gloves. Even her considerable grip failed to stop her descent.

Her lungs ached, and she began to feel faint.

Through the darkness and smoke below, she spotted the outline of some closed lift doors on the side of the shaft. She swung herself away from the cable and toward the doors.

Both hands caught the concrete ledge. Her shoulders protested but held, and an effort of will prevented the stale air in her lungs from being driven out by the impact. Feeling strangely dizzy, she hauled herself up onto the thin ledge and felt blindly for a seam between the doors.

The smoking remains of the wardrone plummeted past, creating a rush of air that tugged her toward the shaft.

But her fingers had found the seam. Forced into the soft rubber they held her in place as she hauled the doors open. The room beyond was pitch

black, but in infrared she could see it was free of threats. There were only discarded cardboard boxes, and a chair sitting amid the powered remains of what had once been cushioning. Rat droppings were everywhere, and a doorway on the far side led to a dark corridor.

Most importantly, the air felt wonderfully cool. Kiranda finally gave in to the urge to breathe.

The air was tainted with foul smoke from the shaft, and she fell forward to cough convulsively. The counter-weighted lift doors slid shut as she lay on the floor.

*Maybe they'll think I'm dead. I feel like I might be.*

The taste and odor of the smoke remained, but the coughing eventually subsided. She raised a hand before her face and muttered thanks she'd worn the gloves. She smelled burnt hair, and felt the top of her head. Crisp ashes crumbled beneath her hand, but some hair remained. Nowhere was it longer than a few inches.

She smiled at herself. *Trapped with a time bomb, and I'm worried about my looks! Well, I'm overdue for a short hairstyle.*

Her hair was one of the few parts of her body that was still natural, the same shade of blue as her mother. She'd heard some hair colors hadn't existed until genetic engineering, but in her book natural was whatever she'd been born with.

Her whole body aching, Kiranda climbed to her feet and headed into the corridor. She needed to put some distance between herself and the inferno she'd created before tending her injuries.

\*\*\*

Isamu Collins stared at the ceiling from his cell's thin futon, and considered his predicament.

They had confiscated his clothing, and given him some bright orange coveralls. All his concealed equipment was gone except for one: A hacking device concealed in one of his teeth. Unfortunately, it was of no use to him because the cells had no network access.

The door to the detention area hissed open.

He sat up, and watched the bulky form of Langley stride toward the transparent door of his cell. A guard accompanied him, with a powerful stun gun. When Langley reached his cell, the door unlocked and slid open.

Collins stayed where he was, hoping to position Langley between himself and the gun. "My honor guard returns. What's on today's agenda?"

Langley didn't fall for the bait. He entered cautiously, ensuring the guard always had a clear shot. He grabbed his shoulder with one broad hand. In the other he held a small black device with one surface of gleaming silver.

*A nerve block. I wonder if it's the same one used to kill Doctor Harrison?*

Langley's grip felt like drop-forged steel. The cool surface of the nerve block pressed against the back of his neck, and his body fell slack.

His right knee struck the wall as he fell. The resulting jolt of pain was all the more galling because he was unable to give it voice.

Nerve blocks were illegal even in the Alliance, and those on the black market versions frequently had defects that led to injury or death. But he felt sure his captors were taking no such chances. The model clamped to his neck was well made, provoking no spasms or localized pain. He tried to lash out at Langley anyway, and was surprised to feel his hand move a few inches. He still had some control of his body, albeit at a dramatically weakened level.

"On your feet," Langley instructed, destroying any hope the effect was unintentional. "You're being moved."

*Moved? That's interesting. I wonder why?*

Langley gripped the back of his jumpsuit and hoisted him to his feet as though he had a cat by the scruff of the neck.

Collins managed to stumble several bare-footed steps as they herded him through his cell door, but only Langley's grip kept him upright. If he was to escape, he had to remove the nerveblock first.

A second guard, more conventionally armed guard was waiting for them in the corridor outside the detention area. With the guards following and Langley practically carrying him, Collins was marched away.

The compound seemed strangely deserted. The hive of activity he'd seen earlier had ceased, and the empty rooms and corridors unsettled him. Perhaps their arrival had spooked the Alliance? If so, it was an evacuation they had organized in advance. Progress had been too swift for any other explanation.

They took him into a chamber half full of crates. A small automated loader and a rail-mounted crane overhead were busy transferring the cargo to an elevator platform against the far wall. They took him into the lift, and it began to rise.

For a freight elevator, had unusual features. The ceiling was solid steel instead of the simple grille used on the walls, and it a second handrail was mounted just above head height.

The reason for the arrangement became clearer as the elevator accelerated. The display showed the shaft running all the way to the central hub. In such weak gravity, momentum could easily lift both freight and people off the floor. The lift was probably old equipment, predating inertial dampening fields.

His speculation was confirmed as they approached the hub and the lift began to slow down.

The braking took quite some time. Both Langley and the guards kept one hand on a railing, but the deceleration was so gentle the gesture didn't seem necessary. Even the crates stayed put.

The doors opened, and Langley dragged him out into the central hub.

It was a chaos of low-gee activity. A dozen paces away was the bare scalp of Admiral Terenta, watching a collection of tall canisters being lifted. Each of the silver hexagonal columns was about a metre wide, and over twice his own height. Collins recognized them as Nanotech. The bright yellow biohazard symbols and warning text seemed deceptively small against so much bare metal.

There were being lifted six at a time, strapped together three by two on a dedicated frame. As Collins watched, the crane easily hoisted the canisters up, revealing a second group waiting for transport.

*At least a dozen canisters... In missiles with dispersion capability, that's enough to kill billions. The border worlds would be completely purged of human life.*

The Admiral turned, and fixed a piercing gaze on him. The corner of his mouth curled upward in an amusement. "Ah, Colonel. The Major tells me you call our little creation *Copycat*." He chuckled. "I think you'll find we've done better than simply duplicate your own precious arsenal."

A second crane picked up the remaining group of canisters, and held them on the central rail alongside the first. Slowly, the entire collection began to move toward the engines and docks at the rear of the station.

*So much produced already? We underestimated them.*

"No snappy comeback? You disappoint me. That nerve block doesn't fully prevent speech you know."

Collins tried to scowl. The effect was less than he'd hoped, he was beginning to drool. Mercifully, the arrival of an eight-seat railcar distracted the Admiral. To his surprise, Collins saw the open-topped vehicle had a driver. The system running the length of the chamber had presumably never been automated.

The driver stepped down, and hurried to an identical control seat at the opposite end for the return journey. Langley put Collins on the vehicle and sat next to him.

Terenta noticed his displeasure. "I see you still entertain hope." The Admiral sat next to him, making the three-seat bench much too cozy. The guards took up positions both behind and in front. "You'll be disappointed, I fear. Your athletic friend ran out of places to hide and burned."

He tried to not to show any reaction, but Terenta detected a change in his bearing and smirked.

Collins mustered his strength to speak. "You won't be able to hide either."

The words took every ounce of energy he had, leaving him exhausted. The vehicle began to accelerate, and gained on the slow-moving containers above.

"I have no intention of hiding Colonel. The Confederation will pay for their occupation of Alliance space with the lives of their illegal colonists."

Collins managed to raise his head, and peered at the rear of the long chamber. The massive aft bay doors were open, revealing a green Alliance transport held securely in place by clamps. The flat expanse of a black warp drive plate identified it as a long-range vehicle. Schaefer's work sabotaging the cargo ship had come to nothing, the alliance had brought in a larger ship.

He summoned his strength. "You'll start... a war."

"Please Colonel, you know better than that. The Confederation will refuse to admit the Alliance could perform such a large-scale assault. The senate will blame their favorite whipping boy, the Plass. War with the Plass Empire would give the Confederation a very bloody nose indeed, wouldn't it?"

"They've been," he struggled, "... warned."

"Rubbish, the transmitter in your pod was never used. Oh, don't look surprised! Doctor Astatoba is not a good spy. He certainly won't be running errands for you any more."

The vehicle slowed to a halt in front of the main dock, and Langley carried him into the vast bay.

The nanoagent canisters were hanging from the rail. The crane seemed designed to lower cargo directly into waiting vessels, but the transport was designed for smaller cargo and passengers. How did they intend to transport it?

Everywhere he looked, there were drones and guards. Oddly, there were only four technicians and all of them were clustered together near the front of the green cargo ship.

Major Darius dropped slowly down from the waiting lifter, and saluted the Admiral.

“Major. Why are these people still here?”

“Waiting for you sir. They want to offer their services to ensure delivery of the weapon. I thought they might be useful.”

Terenta seemed to consider it. “That will not be necessary. Get them aboard the Cavador with the rest of the compound personnel. I want them all on their way to the capital as soon as possible.”

“Yes sir.”

It was only then that Collins noticed there was a second ship in front of the first. Much smaller, and short-range only. It looked quite new, a modular design that could perform multiple roles. It was configured for cargo, and the nanotech canisters would fit into it perfectly. It was the sort of craft one would find aboard a capital ship.

*He must be a military vessel waiting outside. If the scientists are going home on the Cavador, he must intend to take the nanoagent somewhere else. There's no reason to use two ships otherwise.*

Then it all fell into place for him.

*Oh hell, he's about to launch the attack!*

Terenta watched him, his expression suggesting he could see something he didn't like. “Lieutenant Langley.”

“Sir?”

“Transport the Colonel to the Thorn's brig, and don't remove that nerve block until he's in his cell with a gun pressing his skull to the floor.”

“Yes sir.”

Langley used his magnetic boots to head toward the lifter, dragging his floating form behind him like a carnival balloon.

\*\*\*

Kiranda was lying on the floor of her old tenement, which felt a little odd. She kept her eyes shut, her knees drawn beneath her chin, lying on the cold floor. She'd been crying and her face was soaked.

She'd been there before. It was the dark time, when her life was fueled by revenge. More times than she could remember, she had returned to it in her nightmares.

The anguish was as fresh as ever, the memory of her crime sharp. *I laughed as he suffered!*

He was the final one, the last of her tormenters. Those who had tortured her. Raped too, just to make her suffer. Killing him was supposed to set her free.

How could she have known she caught the wrong man? The face was the same. Even his DNA matched the recovered sperm, the little which survived the bleach. He hadn't been registered in the Confederation databanks. Few of his kind were.

Finding them took years. He was in a walled city, an independent enclave outside Confed law. Safe from deportation. Not safe from her rebuilt body and the hatred that drove it.

*If only there had been some fingerprints! Twins might have the same DNA, but they always have different fingerprints...*

*Or if they had both been home! I would have seen, I would have known!*

She had just finished exacting her bloody revenge when she heard the man's brother arriving home. When he saw her... The look on his face as *he recognized her!*

He was the man who had hurt her, not the one she had spread over the floor. He dropped the takeaway dinner and ran.

She'd been unable to move. The implications of what she's done over the last hour horrified her.

To the man she'd killed, she was a stranger. A loathsome monster every bit as evil as those who had tried to kill her. Worst of all, he was right.

Kiranda felt the necklace digging into her palms.

Never once had she resumed the hunt. In her book she had no right.

The events after the confrontation were a haze of aimless wandering, but she did remember that at some point she decided to kill herself.

The gun was in her apartment, and it was sheer chance the necklace had been in the same drawer. An old string of blue plastic beads she had won at a carnival as ten year-old. Despite her family's wealth, she'd prized it more than anything.

It was the first time she had earned something for herself, and to a girl who had only just begun to realize not everyone was rich, that felt *good*.

That was who she had been, once. A kind soul who wished harm to nobody. She left the gun, took the necklace, and turned herself in to the police.

Unfortunately, the law had no interest in events in the enclave. She had to find her own way.

The hard floor felt like ice. Why? The tenement with the gun and the necklace had some cheap nylon carpet...

Kiranda forced her eyes open, and gazed blearily at a plastic bandage wrapper on the floor. It had bloody fingerprints on it. There were two more nearby.

*There were never bandages before.*

The floor was bare concrete, like the walls. In the distance, the rumble of machinery droned constantly. In an instant, she fully woke up.

*This is the mining station. Damn it, I fell asleep!*

Rubbing the sleepiness from her eyes with grimy fingers, she sat up. *How long was I out? How long until that tank explodes?*

Her internal chronometer reported she still had at least thirty minutes until her sabotage tore the station apart.

She tested her limbs by climbing to her feet. If the Doctor had done as she'd asked, he was already gone along with their transport, and she was trapped.

*It's possible he didn't reach the pod. There might still be time.*

She checked her map, and found the loader garage with the beacon was only two hundred metres spinward, and a level or so downward.

She eased open the small room's door, and peered into the dim corridor beyond. It seemed clear, though the light was so poor she could barely make out the numbers on each door.

*Hell with it, I don't have time to be cautious.*

She set off at an easy run, passing junction after junction.

The light improved as she approached the exit, a wide opening with no sign of the old doors.

Nervous, she slowed and watched for threats. Seeing none, she headed out and into the torus. A short run took her to a large stairwell, which she gratefully used.

The steps took her down. Her damaged boots did nothing to cancel the sound of her echoing footsteps, and she adjusted her gait to minimize noise without sacrificing much speed.

The corridor she wanted proved to be well lit. She hurried along it and reached the ramp leading to Collins' pod. Descending, the end of the corridor began to come into view and hope began to fade.

The Alliance had been there first.

She slowed to a walking pace, reluctant to see how much damage the explosives had done. Drawing level with a gutted loader on one the side of the ramp, she spied some blood droplets on the floor. Stopping, she crouched to look closer.

Someone had evidently been underneath the loader when the charge had detonated. They had been dragged out while bleeding. She winced.

“I’m sorry, Doc.”

She stood, and walked down to take a look in the garage.

It took time to locate the remains of the switch. The blackened plastic was badly warped, but the clear plastic cover was still in place, melted over a switch that had never been moved.

*Looks like he never made it past the loader. There's no ship waiting for me.*

Dropping the warped plastic, she turned and started heading back up the ramp.

*So how else can I get away from this station? The transport in hangar three has no power.*

She reached the top of the ramp and stopped.

*Spacewalk? A good hardsuit could keep me alive for maybe forty-eight hours, and an EVA kit would get me away far enough to survive the blast. But then what? Only a ship will get me out of this murk.*

She tried to think of an alternative, but none came to mind. *Well, it's better than staying here.*

“Departure in T minus five.”

The male voice, too perfectly spoken to be anything but a computer generated voice, had come from an old public console protruding from the wall on her left. She moved closer to examine it.

It was seriously old, a terminal the governments might once have placed in public areas for the very poor. The one before her seemed to have been re-purposed as part of an announcement system. The badly scratched screen displayed a hazy image. She spat on it and rubbed away some of the grime, improving the image enough to recognize what she was looking at.

It was the view from the rear the station. A wide shot showing the gigantic chemical engines, and a warship holding position.

The ship was obviously Alliance. The bright orange, rounded design could not have been more different to the blocky, gray Confederation designs. The hull was a large forward section, narrowing toward the stern. Around the stern were four engine modules, arranged in pairs on each side. The curve of the hull made the bright yellow engines seem like weapons, as though part of the hull while also ready to pounce from it.

*The Admiral's ship, here already! It has lots of engines... A fast cruiser? Or maybe just a damn big destroyer.*

She consulted her implant's alliance database. Her software found no matches, but based on the profile it predicted the vessel would carry a large number of missiles, some autonomous fighters, and at least one small transport.

*It has to be the ship Astatoba talked about, ready to take the nanotech and launch it on the border worlds.*

She noticed a smaller vessel, a green transport ship almost hidden by the bulk of the cruiser. It was slowly moving away from both the cruiser and the station.

*Probably taking Collins to an interrogation facility somewhere. Is that's what the announcement was about? Or is there a transport about to leave the main bay? She winced. If that cruiser has the nanoagent on board already, all of this will have been for nothing.*

Her implant plotted an optimum route to the main dock, and she broke into a sprint.

She might be shot dead the moment she got there, but there was a chance they were leaving and taking their drones with them. If so, she was determined to be on board.

\*\*\*

Colonel Isamu Collins watched the floor moving by beneath him. The CASC Thorn boasted a full Gee of artificial gravity, and it felt like it had drained all the strength from him. He couldn't even lift his feet.

"The brig sir," said one of the guards. Collins couldn't tell which.

With effort, he managed to raise his head a little. He was determined to see the brig from the outside before they locked him in it.

The door itself looked strong, but not enough to be a bulkhead. A guard was posted, standing by a control panel. He tapped it and the door slid open.

They carried him into a chamber with four cells per side for a total of eight. All the walls were solid alloy. Interestingly, the cells had no doors. Rectangular bars covered the doorway from top to bottom, leaving slim gaps for air. Collins recognized the bars as one-way rockglass. They were likely even stronger than the alloy walls, and prevented prisoners from seeing out of their cells.

A gun turret lurked in the middle of the ceiling, but otherwise there was nothing outside the cells.

Langley took him to the last cell on the left, presumably to there was no way to avoid the turret if he managed to get out of his cell. Once he was inside, the man then drove an elbow between his shoulder blades.

Despite his best efforts, the best Collins could manage was to merely remain conscious as his escort pressed a gun to his head, and removed the nerveblock.

The bars produced annoyingly little sound as they locked securely into place. He looked up, and found he was right. From inside, the bars looked like mirrors. The gaps were so small he would need to press his face up to one to see through.

His strength gradually returned, but the ache between his shoulders lingered. He remained lying on the floor for the moment, gazing at the bars.

With careful concentration, he could just make out Langley standing outside his cell. The Lieutenant was evidently not leaving any time soon.

He turned his attention to his cell, and noted the presence of both a toilet and sink. Both were little larger than drinking fountains, and he couldn't help but grin when he saw they had been labeled with helpful pictograms to prevent confusion. A small roll of thin paper was either toilet paper or towel, or possibly both. Positively luxurious after the Station.

There was a small bunk, merely a layer of dense foam fixed to an elevated section of floor. There was no sign of any linen. He wondered if that was to save costs or stop him from killing himself.

He felt a sudden vibration in the hull beneath him, and pressed his palm against the metal. The tremble was mild, and would have been easy to miss if he hadn't been expecting it. The CASC Thorn was preparing the reactors for departure.

There was some time yet while the ship relied on thrusters to move clear of the station, but it was clear Terenta wanted to keep him close for the assault on the Confederation border. Perhaps he thought he was too dangerous to be left in the care of others?

It didn't matter. Being on board meant he still had a chance to make a difference.

"Yes sir," Langley said, apparently to thin air. The Lieutenant strode past his cell, and out the brig doors. The brig doors closed behind him. The silence in the brig seemed to deepen, and Colonel Collins knew he was alone.

He frowned. Langley was perfectly capable of replying to his orders silently. Either he wanted to show Collins he wasn't leaving out of boredom, or he wanted him to notice that he'd left. They might be laying a trap.

Collins rose and started a series of stretches, using the movements to conceal a more methodical examination of his cell. He located two tiny sensor arrays, each behind a small sphere no larger than the tip of his little finger. One was mounted on the wall above his bunk. The second was on the other side of the room, barely a foot above the floor. Between them they could see every surface. The sensor above the bunk was the most prominent, mounted on a metal bracket with a short cable running from it to the wall.

*Exposed cabling? Probably not on the original design and added hastily. I might be able to make some use of the probe in this damned tooth after all, if I can figure out how to place it without alerting anyone.*

He winced for the cameras, and rubbed his jaw before settling on the bunk. There, he turned to face the wall and curled his legs as if to sleep. The fingers of his right hand, concealed from the sensor above as best he could manage, fished inside his mouth.

“Evil-minded bastard...” He muttered, confident the arrays would hear his whisper-quiet voice. “It’s a wonder it’s not bleeding.”

His fingers sought out a molar on the right side of his jaw, and pulled firmly. The tooth remained steadfast, but after several seconds of constant pressure it began to move. Collins eased the pressure and pulled it free without any sudden movement.

Concealing the bloodless white tooth in a closed hand, he prepared a series of detailed instructions with his implant. When he was done, he opened his fingers a crack until he could see white enamel.

A tiny blue spot of light from his eye briefly lit the tooth, configuring it with his instructions.

At first, the tooth seemed unchanged. Collins watched and waited as it processed the data, hoping there would be no need to risk re-transmitting. One databurst had been dangerous enough, the sensors in his cell would be watching for any hint of reflected light.

The device signaled success by following his instructions and turning the same dark black as the sensors. Suppressing the urge to grin, he closed his fingers around it.

*So far so good.*

He turned onto his back, and glared at the sensor above him. He stood, swayed as his body struggled to cope with the sudden movement on the soft foam, then reached up.

He gripped the sensor's bracket, ensuring his hand kept the hack-probe hidden from view while he glared at the concealed micro-lenses.

“If you bastards are watching, send me a decent meal! I need one if you're going to make a habit of beating your damned prisoner.” He felt the probe fasten to the cable, so he let go and dropped to his bunk.

He kept glaring at the sensor for a time to maintain the pretense. It was unlikely anything would come of his meal request. The Alliance never had mastered the art of interrogation, so probably expected them to starve him and deprive him of sleep for a while.

At least the probe was in place, carefully sinking microscopic taps into the cable. If successful, it would have a fair chance of reaching more than just the one sensor. Communicating with the device from the bunk would be tricky, he'd have to rely on his eye-light and color changes from the probe.

*If it can hack the cell security, I may be able to get out of this brig and send a warning to Confed. Heck, it might even be possible to get off this ship.*

Concealed behind the bracket, the hack-probe blinked gray for a moment, signaling it had successfully tapped the cable. Next, it would methodically study the encrypted signals.

His didn't rate his chances of success, but he had to try.

\*\*\*

Kiranda knew she was pushing herself too hard, but her headlong sprint had taken her through so many chambers, ramps and stairs, she was starting to feel they would never end.

The suit was no longer keeping her cool, and synthetic muscle was overheating her blood to the point she was starting to feel feverish.

Still, she ran on. Her boots pounded along steel floors with no regard for the din she was making and every door and maintenance panel seemed to rattle or shake as she passed.

Her implants warned her that continued exertion at the current level would void the warranty on her thigh muscles.

*Hah! If I don't reach the ship about to leave the airlock, I'm dead! Besides, the gravity is getting weaker the higher I go...*

She climbed another stairwell, the grimy steps a blur beneath her pounding feet. At the top, she found a long chamber with lengths of corroded pipe stacked against the walls on each side. Her headache was getting worse, but in the distance she could see the broad ramp that was one of the last checkpoints of her plotted course. She forced herself to run toward it.

As she taxed her body, a sense of déjà vu surged within her.

For a moment, she was not longer sure if she was in a space station or a factory, or if she was in her twenties or her teens. The room swayed around her, and she staggered to a halt. Only by leaning against a stack of pipes did she manage to remain upright.

The cool pipe felt reassuringly solid and real. She realized she was on Wellspring 21, and the confusion receded back into her aching head.

She knew the memory well, and it did match elements of her surroundings. The ramp ahead resembled the asphalt road, and the single overhead light was similar to waning moonlight. The stacked pipes didn't correspond to the overfilled dumpsters at all, but the desperate effort to run as fast as she could was an exact match. The same cold knowledge that death was on her heels, and the gnawing conviction her efforts were futile.

She resumed running. *Not this time!*

Part of the blame for what had happened on that moonlit road was hers. She had foolishly kept her excursion a secret, and set out to see what life was like for those who labored in her father's factories.

Despite her youth, she recognized how dangerous the trio were when they stepped out of the darkness. Her run for escape might have succeeded if she'd been more familiar with the area. They might even have been more forgiving if she hadn't fought so much when they did catch her.

But any blame on her part ended once that nerveblock touched her neck. From that point on, the choices were all theirs.

Strangely, they seemed to enjoy her tears the most. It was only once she had lost too much blood to cry any more, that they lost interest and dumped her into a garbage recycler.

When the grinder started on her legs, the pain was too much, and her prayers were answered in the form of unconscious oblivion.

She was rescued and her body repaired, but she'd woken as a different person.

One result was pain had never bothered her much since. At least, that was what she told herself as she refused to block the ache in her head as she sped on up the ramp and into a brightly lit torus.

*These legs are better than my originals anyway.*

Her muscles no longer needing to work as hard, and were finally able to start cooling down. Her headache began to ease as a result. Ahead was the opposite side of the torus, with a short exit ramp that led to the central hub. The last leg of her route.

Kiranda jumped the ramp's entire length in one low-gee leap, and flew into the central hub as though she'd been fired from a cannon.

Heading toward the rails in the middle of the cylindrical chamber, she tried to take in as much around her as she could. She hadn't expected to make it that far unchallenged.

The doors of the main hangar were open, and it was empty. No ship waiting to leave, and nobody at all in sight. There were no security ultrasonics, not even a single drone on patrol.

If there was still a functional ship aboard, it had to be in one of the smaller hangars.

She grabbed the central rail, and launched herself toward the ring of big elevator shafts radiating out by the main dock.

All the lifts were lowered, allowing her to see down each one. Only Hangar bay 3 had a ship, the transporter she had sabotaged. The Alliance had improved on her work with the same type of explosive used on Collins' pod. Even from such a height, she could see the blackened craters peppering the hull. The ship was useless.

*So... The departure must have been for the transport outside. Or maybe even both of them. Well, that leaves the spacesuit idea, if they haven't shredded all of them as well...*

She checked the station blueprints for possible suit locations. To her amazement, there was only one airlock designed for use by people. It was two levels down from the hub. There were dozens designed for drone use, but they were small and unlikely to have suits. She wondered if the Alliance ship was still outside, and reachable by a spacewalk.

*Even if they don't shoot me out of the sky, getting in would be a challenge. Still, it's my best bet. Apparently there's an access shaft with a ladder nearby...*

She spotted what she wanted as a raised platform with an opening in the top of it. Pushing away from the rail, she glided across and gripped the exposed ladder to pull herself head-first down the shaft.

She passed concrete until entering a narrow torus, stripped of machinery and systems. She kept moving down, resisting the centripetal force that kept pushing her toward the ladder as she descended. Finally reaching the bottom, she landed on her hands and allowed her arms to absorb her momentum before rolling easily to her feet.

The chamber was of similar height to the torus she had passed through, but the walls bore a range of emergency equipment racks.

Much of the more sophisticated gear proved to be missing. Welding gear, fire extinguishers, and cargo webbing were present, though they all looked to be older than she was. Heck, they were probably older than Collins.

There were several doors leading in different directions, but one bore the helpful words PERSONNEL AIRLOCK in letters that had probably once been nice and white.

She approached it and slapped the simple control. The door flew open with a shrill squeak. Inside, a dozen hardsuit lockers lined the wall. On the right was the door of the actual airlock, surrounded by black and yellow stripes. The door was a slab of rockglass, in a metal frame. There didn't appear to be any atmosphere containment fields, or other modern features. It probably hadn't been serviced in ages.

She dashed to the milky window and squinted into the airlock.

It was small, about two and a half metres square. She could see the outer door, an identical slab of rockglass. Unfortunately, it was not even close to transparent. Decades of travel through the cloud had left it black.

She checked the controls mounted next to the door, found the setting for the outer door, and switched it.

The door in front of her hissed, and for an instant she thought she had somehow opened both doors and was about to die in vacuum. Reason, and the lack of an explosive force hurling her into the void, allowed her to recover.

*It's only decompression, calm down... That said, maybe I should get into a hardsuit right now!* She walked to the nearest locker, and opened the door.

It was empty.

Remembering the state of the equipment racks outside, her heart rate doubled. She opened the next, and found it empty too. She tried all six. They seemed to have been emptied years ago.

Kiranda slowly walked back to the airlock, and peered through the glass. Without the outer door blocking the view, she could see the darkness of the cloud.

*Wait, there's something there... Navigation lights!*

Under the dim glow of the lights, she was able to confirm it was the Alliance warship. There was no sign of the smaller vessel, and the orange color of the navigation lights was a warning to nearby vessels it was preparing to get underway.

Kiranda pressed her forehead against the cool rockglass, her breath fogging the panel.

There really wasn't much choice.

She turned from the airlock. *My shrink did say I have a desire to suffer.* She moved to a clear section of floor, and knelt there with knees apart. *Maybe he had a point.*

Kiranda Schaeff took a deep breath, issued a command to her stomach, and noisily threw up.

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Admiral Terenta stood at the rear of the CASC Thorn's oval-shaped bridge, two paces behind the captain. Unlike the seven crew-members staffing the station, he ignored the VR interfaces and watched the 2D display covering the chamber's far wall. Against the earthy tones of the bridge, the image of wellspring 21 looked cold.

The rear of the station was shown, a circle dominated by the central dock and trio of huge chemical thrusters. It looked deceptively distant. The display showed the entire 360 degree view surrounding the ship, so most of the image was empty void.

Seated before him, Captain Ackilat's head of crew-cut gray nodded once. "Transport has entered hyperspace Admiral."

"Very good. It's time we did the same, I want to leave this cloud far behind us."

"Yes sir."

Data scrolled across the sides of the display as the necessary orders flew across the shipboard network. Terenta ignored the orders themselves and monitored the status readouts instead. Ackilat commanded a good crew, and the changes were swift.

The patrolling drones were recalled. Long-range sensors were brought to full power, even though they were useless while still in the cloud. Defense fields were engaged to protect the hull from high-speed debris. He noted the field integrity fluctuated due to the cloud, and made a mental note to ensure Ackilat kept speed low until they cleared it.

Matters seemed well in hand. Still, it was best to be sure. "Captain, where is the Confederation sample stored?"

Captain Ackilat quickly turned his chair until he could look up at Terenta. "It's in secure storage A, sir. It's just above Medbay, the safest part of the ship."

"Ensure it's in a hazard vault before we get underway."

"Yes sir." the Captain hesitated. "May I ask why? The container is double sealed against nanotech leakage."

"Perhaps, but nanotech breakdown would breach that."

The Captain frowned. "I'm not familiar with the term sir."

Terenta smirked. "It's peculiar to programmable nanotech ordinance. The material can essentially be sent into meltdown, possibly with

explosive results. Given Doctor Astatoba's treachery we should consider that a possibility.”

“Security is placing it in a vault now.” He hesitated. “Ah, will a vault be sufficient?”

“For a sample that small? Easily.”

Ackilat gazed into space for a moment as he listened to a report through his implant. “We have a report from Tactical sir: the missile attack program is complete, and loaded into the shipboard computer.”

Terenta smiled. “Excellent.”

It felt good to know the Thorn could complete the mission even if the crew had to abandon ship. He wanted nothing was left to chance.

## Chapter Ten: Excursion

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*I am out of my mind,* Kiranda thought to herself. *I have definitely lost whatever sanity I had left...*

She opened her eyes and felt a shiver run up her back. She was inside the air lock, with an ancient control panel before her. The readout kept dropping as the air pressure gradually lowered.

She kept breathing deep breaths, as fast as she could. The oxygen mix in the chamber was as high as the safety limits allowed, but eventually the pressure would drop so low she would be unable to get enough oxygen.

*Not long now...*

She paused her hyperventilating just long enough to pull her suit's hood over her head. It was no longer fully airtight, but it should alleviate the effect of vacuum on her body. She was already wearing the gloves in the hope they would help. With the hood in place, she picked up the ancient fire extinguisher and removed the locking ping.

*I hope this thing still works. It feels too light.*

She was starting to have trouble breathing. Leaning her head against the wall, she tried to move even more air in and out of her lungs.

She had abandoned her backpack. Her compact field medkit lay beside it, largely exhausted. All she had was the Alliance nanotech treatment in her chest pocket, her blaster, and a few items small enough to carry on her belt. Her expensive hackprobe had taken a shot during the firefight.

Her combat belt was beginning to feel tight. Cautiously, she used her right hand to flip the catch and let out some slack. *I'm swelling. I wonder if that's a bad sign.*

Her implant's medical reference said a healthy human could survive for a minute or two in vacuum, provided a medic was on hand to revive them from cardio-respiratory failure. Her own heart was artificial, but decompression sickness and lack of oxygen were unavoidable and she wasn't in the best condition.

Her internal O2 supply hadn't had time to fully recharge since the fire, but she was counting on it. Holding her breath would only make her explode, and with nothing at all in her lungs at all she would have no more than ten to fifteen seconds until the exhausted blood reached her brain and she passed out.

The lowering pressure in the chamber would ease the decompression sickness, not eliminate it. Emptying her stomach had ensured her breakfast wouldn't end up in her lungs.

It had also left her feeling absolutely ravenous.

Her lungs couldn't keep up. She hefted the fire extinguisher in the crook of her arm, gripped the airlock release lever, and pulled. The doors slid open in the blink of an eye and a rush of escaping air threw her out into the void.

Kiranda fought the impulse to hold her breath, and let the expanding air rush out of her mouth.

The airlock dropped away, becoming one part of the vast expanse of Wellspring 21. Slowly spinning in unnerving silence, Kiranda struggled to locate the Admiral's warship. She found the orange lights were still there, but they didn't seem to be getting any closer.

Her lungs ached for air, and her internal O2 supply cut in. Precious oxygen once more flowed into her bloodstream, giving her precious time.

She held the extinguisher tight against her chest, and hooked her chin over it. Her left hand located the fire hose, directed it, and she squeezed the trigger with her right.

The hose shook like a living thing, and a gush of what seemed to be more propellant than fire retardant erupted into the vacuum. With brief bursts, she stopped spinning and accelerated away from the station. Steering was difficult, but by swinging her legs as counterweights, but she managed to set off in roughly the right direction.

The thrust provided by the extinguisher was weaker than she feared, and the cylinder proved easy to hold on to. She lifted her chin from it to watch her intended destination.

The cruiser seemed a little larger, and she could make out a number of tiny objects flying beneath the ship.

*Defense drones!*

Her sense of panic eased when she saw they were in formation, vanishing one by one into the belly of the ship. *They're being recalled. Hell, that means they're about to leave!*

The pain in her hands, knees and feet was getting stronger. They felt as if she'd been attacked with a hammer. Even the saliva on her tongue and throat was boiling with expanding gas. Holding on to the extinguisher was becoming more difficult, and she realized the flesh in her hands was swelling. Her damaged gloves looked ready to burst. Her artificial eyes felt painfully dry, but when she tried to blink her eyelids burned. She compromised by adopting a constant squint, keeping her goal in sight as she hurtled toward it.

The ship was started moving, turning itself away from the station so the full left side of the vessel was exposed to her. Markings on the orange

surface became visible, thin black lines for dry-dock and narrow seams between armor plates. Kiranda searched for airlocks, and identified only one, on the stern section, right between the two port-side engines.

She looked for the drones, and felt a surge of alarm at quickly their numbers had depleted. If the ship's main engines kicked in before she was aboard, it was over. Even if she was close, she'd just become a red streak on the armor.

Kiranda turned the extinguisher toward the ship, and gave the hand a quick squeeze to start slowing down, and to aim herself at the airlock. It proved to be the last of the propellant.

*Bloody hell, is that ALL?* She tried to scowl, but her swollen face refuse to move. *Ancient piece of crap! It probably only worked because it was in vacuum.*

She was moving too fast, and the armor looked very hard. Desperate, she threw the useless extinguisher toward the ship in an attempt to reduce her speed. It set her spinning, and she lost track of the ship.

She caught sight of the hull an instant before she hit. The cold armor slammed into her left side, sending fresh pain through her arm and ribs. As she bounced away, she made a desperate grab for a vertical grip alongside the airlock she'd come so close to. Her gloved fingers touched it, and she forced her hand to squeeze shut. Her grip held.

She faced the door. It was all she could do to keep her eyes open as she searched for the controls.

There were none.

*That figures, it's military. Stupid! Stupid, stupid!*

She canceled the pain from her knees. It felt like there were creatures inside them chewing their way out.

*Don't panic, think... The drones! They're entering beneath the ship...*

There was no handy ladder, and the lowermost port-side engine was in the way. The smooth yellow ceramic was interrupted only in the final six metres before the drive plate, where a series of deep black grooves beckoned to her.

Kiranda kicked away from the airlock, toward the engine.

Even through her gloves, the black groove felt hot. Kiranda hauled her way around the engine module as quickly as she could. As the belly of the ship came into view, her implant warned her internal O2 supply was empty.

*That's just brilliant, ten seconds until oblivion.*

The last of the gleaming, bullet-like drones were returning. There were two hatchways designed to accept them, but only one was open. A much larger cargo door and a range of missile bays were likewise all shut.

The circular hatchway was only large enough to admit the drones, but they were each the size of a small car. Kiranda leaped toward the opening.

It was strangely difficult to judge distance. There was also a throbbing pain in her head which her implants couldn't block, which she suspected was a bad sign. She felt her grip on consciousness starting to weaken.

She hit the hull far short of her target, and began to float helplessly away.

A drone hurtled silently past, missing her by inches. Forcing her eyes open a little wider, she saw the hatch, too far away to reach.

She flipped the catch on her belt, pulled it off, and threw it. The belt, complete with her blaster and the last of her equipment, sailed into the abyss. But the thrust created set her drifting back toward the ship.

Barely able to see, Kiranda reached out and felt the edge of the hatchway beneath numb fingers. Hauling against the ridge, she launched herself through the opening.

There was no air waiting. She had failed.

The last drone hurtled into the tunnel toward her.

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Colonel Isamu Collins blinked, and listened intently.

The air had an unreal, slightly rubbery feel to it. He recognized the sensation as a sign the ship's inertial dampers were active, which meant they were underway.

The brig door slid open. Remaining on the bunk, he listened intently.

Footsteps entered the brig. The heavy strides sounded like Langley, but the pace was slower than usual for the Lieutenant.

A second set of footsteps accompanied them. Bare feet from the sound, an uneven pace that suggested a pronounced limp.

Concluding a new prisoner was arriving, Collins arose and moved toward the bars to peer through the gaps.

There was indeed the towering figure of Langley, with the slight frame of Doctor Astatoba clutched in his left hand.

The shuffling Doctor seemed to have had a rough time. The man wore only a thin surgical gown, and bandages covered his right forearm and most of each leg. He was at least able to walk, although with an awkward limp. Perhaps he still had abdominal injuries.

Collins felt his mood improve. Astatoba was not seriously hurt, or Langley wouldn't be forcing him to walk. The presence of an ally expanded his available resources.

Langley shoved the man into the cell on his right.

*They're keeping us close together, probably to listen to what we talk about. I can play that game.*

Collins returned to his bunk. "You must be Doctor Astatoba. Welcome to the brig of the CASC Thorn, where the fun never starts. My name is Isamu Collins." He lay down, and glanced at the hack-probe above. The recent activity would have given it more data to work with. Perhaps the device had recorded the signal used to open Astatoba's cell, or even the brig door. If it could crack the codes before the encryption changed, he might be able to open them.

"You're not fooling anyone Collins. He already squealed."

Collins felt a knot form in his stomach, but tried not to look disappointed.

He heard the bars on Astatoba's cell lock shut. "He sang like a bird. Told us all about your cozy relationship. I'm sure the Admiral will discuss it with you in depth."

Langley stepped in front of his cell and gazed at him through the bars. His lip curled in contempt. "So much for all that planning. Just relax, you aren't going anywhere." He turned away and strode out of the brig.

Collins heard the brig door slide shut, and let out a breath he hadn't realized he had been holding. If Langley had seen the hack-probe, he'd given no hint of it.

Astatoba sounded depressed. "I'm sorry Colonel. They mind-hacked me."

Collins sat up straight. "They did that quickly."

"I passed out while they were treating my wounds. I don't know if they used drugs or not, but when I woke, the autodoc had finished and you were there, wrestling a guard next to me."

"Go on."

"He was getting the better of you, and there was a pistol on the bed next to me. I took it and shot without thinking. You thanked me, said Confed marines were taking the ship, and... you asked me for an update."

Collins nodded. It was a fair scenario for such short notice. Even a trained agent could have been fooled.

"I told you... well, them... everything. I even told them Schaefer had the Alliance cure for Copycat infection. I confirmed I haven't worked on

nanoagents for years, and you supplied the sample of the new prototype weapon.” Astatoba paused. “I’m sorry,” he said.

Collins felt elated. The Alliance didn't know the sample was a fake! That was better news than Astatoba knew.

The Doctor’s voice became a little muffled, as though he had buried his face in his hands. “I should have suspected something wasn’t right. I’m a fool.”

“It takes training to deal with mind hacks. Even then, there’s only so much one can do.”

Astatoba hesitated. “It felt so real. How do they do it?”

“Basic sensory manipulation, usually with a range of drugs to impair reasoning.”

“But every time I’ve used a VR headset, I’ve had to... concentrate to use it. It takes an effort.”

Collins hesitated. Was he trying to tell him something? “For a basic tri-point headset, yes. Every brain is different, and the equipment has to adjust. The larger the rig, the better it works.” He paused. “Of course, if the subject has a brain implant you can get it to do the work for you.”

“They gave me an implant?”

“That quickly? Good lord, no. But I'm impressed. It takes time to do a full brain scan, configure equipment, and the environment needs to be convincing enough for the subject to spill their guts. It's a job for an artist.”

There was a pause while Astatoba considered this. “I wasn’t wearing a headset when they woke me.”

“I'll bet your head was held in place.”

“Yes! I thought it was something to do with spinal repair.”

“You were lying on top of the rig.”

Astatoba sighed. “I couldn’t activate the beacon like Ms Schaef asked. Perhaps she’ll manage to warn the Confederation.”

Collins tried to picture Schaef choosing to burn to death, like the Admiral said. Was it a lie? It sounded like something she would do.

He gazed up at the tiny hack-probe, and found it was still stubbornly black. He sighed.

If anyone was going to stop the attack, it would have to be them. “We’ll see.”

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Kiranda thought about it, and eventually came to the conclusion she was alive.

It felt like a true feat of deduction, and she felt rather proud of it. Only gradually did she begin to suspect she wasn't thinking quite properly.

Her body was still there, somewhere. It was cold, and ached. She really didn't want much to do with it.

After a time, she tried to open her eyes and found they refused to comply. Darkness remained absolute, and the only sound was her own breathing.

*Where am I?*

She realized something was holding her eyes shut. A hood, half-pulled off and pinning her top lip firmly against her upper teeth. Only her mouth and neck could feel the gentle flow of fresh air.

Kiranda considered the merits of removing the hood. She knew it would make her feel better and might even let her see, but it would definitely require some sort of physical motion. That was a daunting prospect. Also, at the back of her mind, she was afraid of what she might see. What if she was in an alley, surrounded by corpses, victims of Kiranda Hyde?

Her left forearm was lying on her head. With a monumental effort she moved the arm, hooked a thumb beneath the hood, and pulled it free. The mask moved easily, and came away with the sound of tearing fabric. Fresh air washed over her face.

She opened her eyes.

Instead of featureless black, there was featureless gray. Blinking, her vision began to focus. She lay still, trying to make sense of the sight before her.

*I'm hurt. What happened to me?*

Kiranda scoured her mind for clues. She remembered meeting Collins in an underground room, and... a mission. She remembered Astatoba, a man who accidentally murdered the one he loved. She remembered floating through vacuum toward an Alliance warship.

*That's right, I reached the airlock, but it wouldn't open...* She frowned. Despite her best efforts, she couldn't remember anything after that.

*Am I on board? Did I get the airlock open?*

Her brain implant judged her brain activity to have reached a sufficient level, and delivered a torrent of reports. Amongst the data was the disconcerting notification her implants had automatically resuscitated her.

She flinched.

*Well, that explains why I feel like crap. I've been dead. That makes this life number three, depending on how I count them. Maybe I have cat DNA.*

She managed to pull herself into a sitting position, and leaned against the cold wall to examine her surroundings.

The square passageway didn't look like an airlock. The wall she leaned on was uninterrupted, but the opposite side had openings at regular intervals. A smooth, ribbed coating on the floor suggested it was designed to allow the occasional crawling human. Kiranda leaned over to gaze through the nearest gap.

The sight of a gleaming defense drone made her hit her head on the ceiling. The machine was motionless, merely parked in a chamber just large enough to hold it. There was a chamber on the other side, but the drone blocked it off.

The implication was she had somehow managed to enter the ship the same way the drones did.

*Maybe I was short on oxygen... That would explain the lack of memory.*

She shifted her weight to her left arm, and immediately fell over. The arm, along with her left side, was painfully bruised. Kiranda raised herself back up, and reached to check her gun.

Her hand met her hip. There was no holster, no weapons belt.

She began to reach for her backpack, and then remembered leaving it at the mining station. Lastly, she reached for her boot knife and found only the melted remains of the scabbard. Presumably, she'd lost it in the fire and never noticed.

"Great," she muttered. "Perfect. Spiffing." She slumped against the wall, and a lock of too-short blue spilled past her cheek. She moved a hand to brush it back, and stopped with the hand in front of her.

She could remember swollen hands. Horribly swollen, inside gloves fit to burst.

Hesitantly, she flexed her fingers. Finding no unusual pain, she gingerly pulled the torn glove off, finger by finger. The skin looked pink and flushed, but her hand seemed okay. Her other hand also proved quite serviceable, and she threw the remains of the gloves into the alcove with the drone.

*Time to find an exit.*

On her left, the passageway stopped at a blank wall. To her right, it eventually began to curve to the side. She started crawling toward the curve.

The thin rubber on the floor did little to soften the hard metal underneath, and her knees felt very tender. She tried to be gentle to them.

The vibration of distant machinery could be felt through the floor. She figured the ship was underway, and wondered if it had made the jump to hyperspace yet.

A ship needed speed to make the jump, and she doubted the Alliance wouldn't risk that inside the cloud. Even a minor field problem during a jump could turn a ship into a smear of subatomic particles. She remembered that much from science class, if only because of the accompanying diagram. The early hyperdrive experiments in the Sol system looked like spikes on a ghostly sea urchin.

As she moved along the curve, one of the openings ahead looked brighter than the rest. She pressed toward it, and cautiously, peered through.

The opening was smaller than the others, and led to the chamber she'd glimpsed earlier. It was a long, with drones parked in bays on each side. She looked down on it from a passage behind the drones. Large, powerful-looking field emitters dotted the ceiling. Presumably a launch and parking system for the drones. Or perhaps they were atmosphere containment?

At the far end of the chamber was an open bulkhead. Beyond it, a steep ramp led up.

There was nobody in sight. There were sensors, but they weren't fully active. They were probably watching only for fire and other hazards.

Kiranda crawled out, and gratefully stretched herself. In the middle of the floor was a circular hatch, about a metre and a half in diameter. It was presumably where she had entered the ship, but she couldn't remember anything about it.

She walked around the hatch, and headed for the ramp.

It bore the same gray rubber as the rest of the floor, but it there were minor signs of wear. Kiranda moved up the ramp, toward an opening to a much larger chamber. She slowed and crouched as she approached.

The space beyond was cavernous. The walls on either side were curved, suggesting the chamber stretched the entire width of the ship. The angle of the wall suggested more levels below, but there was no obvious way of reaching them. A towering set of heavy-looking doors on the far wall suggested at least one more large chamber lay beyond. The text on the doors proclaimed it to be simply *Storage*. A smaller door further left seemed to be the only other exit.

A spacecraft occupied much of the deck space. The ship was clearly a short-range lifter, little more than thrusters and a cabin with a strong

beams linking them. It was facing away from her, and the bulk of the thrusters made it difficult to be sure there was no cargo on board. The lifter sat below a huge set of spacedoors in the ceiling. An overhead gantry crane was on hand for loading and unloading.

There was a tech or two, but no guards. Kiranda crept forward to check the rest of the room.

Way over against the right side of the chamber was a dark gray module that seemed designed for the lifter. It life support modules, and she concluded it allowed the lifter to double as a troop drop ship or medical transport. The module was crammed next to a surprising number of cargo containers. It seemed odd for there to be so many stacked there when a storage chamber was nearby.

Looking up, she found a control booth protruding from high on the aft wall. From where she was, the windows were barely visible.

*No patrols, either drones or armed guards. Also no gun, and no hyperdrive ship prepped for escape. Got to take the good with the bad I suppose.* She spied a line of hardsuits against the wall behind the cargo crates, and winced. *NOW there are suits. That figures!*

There were plenty of security turrets. She could see nine on the ceiling, all neatly folded in standby positions. The barrel of a high-energy particle cannon protruded from each, weapons powerful enough to tackle armored vehicles. She briefly considered using them to destroy the ship, and then realized they wouldn't scratch the ship's armor.

The sensor arrays in the chamber were a design she was familiar with, but the ship seemed to be at a low alert level so they were probably safe to ignore for the time being.

Three automated loaders were parked against the aft wall. They looked like good cover.

She kept watch until she felt sure she had identified everyone in the chamber. As far as she could tell, there were only two.

One, a male technician, was working on optical wiring at a wall panel, close by the big storage doors. The second was harder to see, concealed in the semi-circular control room above her. A single curved window ran the full length of the chamber, and a catwalk and steps seemed to be the only way to reach it.

*If I can get a message to Confed, they may be able to intercept the attack. If they can;t which is more likely, the warning might still save lives.*

*But long-range comms on a ship like this would be well protected. Is there an alternative?*

She gazed at the lifter, and grinned.

The craft lacked the necessary hyperdrive to get her to Confed space, but as a military vessel she was sure it would have long range comms. To get a message out, she'd need to get the craft away from the larger vessel's drive fields. Tricky, since they would likely blow it to a million pieces the instant it launched.

*Well, maybe things will just work out for a change.* She smiled grimly. *Yeah, and maybe the nanoagent will turn into Café Latte.*

Launching the lifter would take control of the entire hangar, so her first priority was taking out both crewmen before either got a chance to raise the alarm.

Kiranda steeled herself. In full view of the sensors and turrets, she moved quietly toward the metal steps.

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Collins glared at the sensor array above his bunk, pouring as much indignation as he could at whoever may be watching. It seemed the best way to excuse his frequent looks at the sensor, checking the probe he'd planted.

When he saw the device finally flickered white for a moment, he was so startled he had to wince theatrically and rub his head to mask his surprise. His implant decoded the compressed signal, and told him the probe had managed to decode some of the signals intercepted when Astatoba was brought in.

It included the signal used to open the cell doors. If the encryption key was still valid, the device would be able to open any door in the Brig.

He tested the validity of the encryption key by beaming an instruction the device, prompting it to access the local sensor arrays in his cell. The hack-probe immediately signaled success.

*Excellent!*

Working as quickly as he dared, he used the probe to record from all the cameras in the brig, and replace the sensor with a loop of that footage.

He rose, and pulled off his orange jumpsuit. It was so too conspicuous to keep.

*I can't access the turret. Is it depending on the sensors?*

Throwing the jumpsuit aside, he fired a command to the probe.

The bars on his cell shot open. Prepared for the worst, Collins walked out of his cell and into range of the ceiling turret.

The barrels of the deadly machine remained still. Apparently, it didn't know he'd left his cell.

He remembers a guard stationed outside the Brig. He'd have a comms implant, meaning he'd need to be taken down very quickly indeed.

He headed for the Brig door, past Astatoba's cell.

The man was peering through his one-way bars, looking quite comical from outside the cell. He raised a finger to his lips, urging silence. Astatoba stared in wonderment, but nodded firmly.

The controls by the brig door were invitingly simple, but he ignored them. Flattening himself against the wall, he extended his arm and scratched the door gently with his fingernails.

After a few moments, he repeated the gesture. Pressed against the wall, he was certain the sound was traveling through the dense ceramic.

*I wonder how good the guard's hearing is? Maybe I need to scrape harder.*

Collins repeated the gesture another six times until the door slid open.

He moved in a blur, gripping the guard's collar and pulling him into the brig while swinging his forearm and elbow into the side of his head.

The impact sent pain shooting along his arm and hand, but the man collapsed instantly went limp. A glance out of the door convinced him nobody had seen the strike, so Collins finally risked touching the controls. The door slid obediently shut.

He risked broadcasting a signal to the device in his cell, a pattern carefully crafted to seem like background noise. To his relief, Astatoba's cell bars opened. The probe's control over the cells would not last forever.

He started to pull off the guard's boots. They looked a little large for him, but at least they weren't too small to wear.

Astatoba looked on. "Er..."

"Get his jacket off."

The Doctor hobbled out of his cell, knelt, and helped remove the guard's clothes. Collins dressed as quickly as he could manage, not bothering with any garment that wouldn't show. He didn't even bother with the shirt. With the jacket fully zipped, the omission was difficult to notice.

He drew the blaster. The gun had an electronic owner recognition, and the trigger was locked in place.

Collins winced. He didn't have the time or hardware to circumvent however many systems the gun had.

*Well, at least I can look like I'm armed.*

The guard's left hand twitched, and Collins delivered a fresh blow with the butt of the gun to keep him under for a while. He dragged the unconscious man into Astatoba's cell to keep him out of view.

Jeremiah watched, frowning. “You're not going to kill him?”

“His implant will notify the ship if his vitals drop. Besides, by the time he wakes it'll all be over one way or another.” Collins left the guard in the cell, and finally took a good look at Astatoba. He was in no state to run.

“Put your hands behind you, pretend you're in handcuffs. Let me handle any talking.” The scientist responded with admirable swift thinking, obediently placing his hands behind his back and lowering his head to adopt the role of dejected prisoner.

With the useless blaster pointed at Astatoba, Collins gripped his coveralls and herded him out of the brig.

The corridor running past the brig was short, only ten metres in length. The tan-colored walls were broken by a broad stripe of green designating the part of the ship. Both ends of the corridor ended in T-junctions that looked identical, but Collins could hear conversation from the one on the right. He'd been brought in that way, so it was likely aft. That was probably the safest direction, but it didn't offer any chance of escape.

He took Astatoba the other way, toward the forward parts of the ship. The corridor they entered led only to a small door on the left, so he turned Astatoba to the right. That way led past two doors on the left side, before merging into a larger area further ahead. The green stripe continued into that area, where it was joined by identical marks in blue, red and yellow.

Collins had no idea what areas the colors represented. Hopefully they were labeled.

A crewman turned into the corridor ahead, and walked toward them. He wore coveralls instead of the dark gray guard uniform Collins wore, and he walked straight past with a preoccupied look that Collins associated with heavy network use.

They were between the two doorways when the lighting switched to red and the cutting din of an alarm bell filled the air. A synthetic, female voice spoke over the alarm. “Flash Red, General Quarters. Wellspring 21 destroyed, possible hostiles.”

He kept walking. *What the hell?*

The doors behind and in front of them opened, and crew began to emerge.

One heavy-set man immediately saw them, and turned toward Collins. He wore the same gray uniform of the CASC Thorn's Security staff. The look in his eyes made it clear he was not going to stand aside.

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Kiranda reached the top of the steps, and turned toward the control room's open entrance.

Before she could move any closer, the sound of metal on metal rang out from the ceiling above. She glanced up, expecting to see a turret about to blow her head off. Instead it was the gantry crane among the catwalks lurching into life. It started rolling along suspended rails toward a collection of gray crates beside the lifter.

She looked down at the man working below. He was still engrossed in his work, apparently accustomed to the noisy crane. Grateful for the additional noise to cover her footsteps, she returned her attention to the control booth.

The crewman was no longer visible. She crept anxiously toward the chamber entrance, gradually improving her view of the chamber interior. The small room seemed to have no other exits, so the missing crewman must have been inside.

She reached the entrance, and finally located the crewman. He was not a man after all, but a woman with tightly cropped black hair and strong shoulders. Seated at a chair close to the outer extremity of the room's curved front, she gazed out at the crane as it picked up a cargo crate.

Maintaining her silence, Kiranda crept inside.

The chair was one of two, bolted to the floor to face a broad control panel. Only the control panel in front of the woman was lit up, depicting what looked like a downward view from the crane.

"Move to port-side wall," the woman instructed. The machine complied. The verbal instructions implied she didn't have a brain implant. A smaller display to her left offered a view of a different chamber, one with a dozen large hexagonal canisters.

*That might be the storage area past the big doors.*

The woman was unarmed, which disappointed her. She felt vulnerable without a sidearm.

A plastic tool box by the back wall included a large, chrome-plated wrench. Kiranda moved into the chamber, and reached for the tool.

The hangar's lights suddenly turned red, and an alarm bell mounted on the wall just outside the control room rang so hard she instinctively ducked.

"Flash Red, General Quarters. Wellspring 21 destroyed, possible hostiles."

The woman turned toward the bell. Her deep brown eyes instantly registered Kiranda's damaged combat suit, and the fact she was reaching toward the wrench. She then grabbed at a terminal clipped to her belt.

Kiranda rushed her, but the woman's fingers closed on the device and the terminal reacted to its owner's touch by obediently listening for commands.

The woman's eyes showed fear, but determination too. Kiranda knew she had to be kept silent, and struck her throat.

The woman's windpipe and larynx crumpled beneath her fingers. She felt the stretch and tear, her fingertips ripping into muscle and the slick carotid artery.

Blood jetted from her neck, hitting Kiranda's face. Eyes wide with shock, the woman grabbed at her wound with her free hand as Kiranda's weight slammed into her and carried them into the console she'd been using only moments ago.

Fearful the other crewman might see them, Kiranda wrenched her away from the window and down toward the floor.

The woman's attempt to staunch the blood had resulted in spraying it across the room. Even the window bore a long red line of spatter that must have been clearly visible from the outside. The woman raised the terminal to her lips, but she could no longer form words. Kiranda threw a punch at her head. There was a snap of bone, and the terminal's case cracked in the woman's convulsing hand. The corpse slumped to the floor.

Kiranda climbed to her feet, and looked through the bloodstained glass at the crewman below. The man stood motionless before the fuse panel with a pair of pliers in one hand and a length of cable in the other. She zoomed on his face, and realized he was squinting up at the booth. As she watched, the squint began to give way to wide-eyed comprehension.

*Damn it!*

She snatched up the wrench from the toolbox and dashed out of the control booth. The wrench felt slippery with blood.

The moment she cleared the booth entrance, she hurled the tool. She jumped after it, catapulting herself from the catwalk toward the deck below.

The man had already dropped what he was doing and was reaching for his terminal. He tried to duck the spinning wrench, but it struck a glancing blow on the side of his head, and he staggered.

“Don't say a word!”

Kiranda hit the floor, rolled and continued toward him at a sprint. The crewman lost his wavering balance and fell to the floor. Still some distance from her, he hauled himself onto one elbow.

“Shut up!”

Her warning didn't have the desired effect, in fact it seemed to help rouse him. He touched his terminal, activating it.

Kiranda hit him just as he began to speak, her shoulder driving the air out of his lungs in an instant. She felt his ribs snap beneath the blow, their broken edges tearing into his organs. The man's expression became a mask of agonized pain, then he fell limp.

Kiranda realized his heart had stopped. He was still holding his terminal, and there was every chance the device would detect the lack of pulse and automatically call for medical assistance.

She pulled the device from his grip.

A small green light indicated it was active, but there was no sign it had taken any action. If he'd sent a message, it should have given a confirmation.

She climbed to her feet, and peered up at the red lights.

*Wellspring 21 destroyed? The sabotage must have worked, for the fat lot of good it did.*

The green light on the crewman's terminal was still on. Kiranda queried it for available data, and it provided a long list of files.

*It's still using his authentication!*

She searched for anything to do with security and found two available key codes. They were low-level, but it was a start. All other data in the terminal proved still locked. She used the keys to access all she could, and found a diagram for the turret cabling he had been working on. She stored the data in a quarantined section of her own implant.

The codes also granted maintenance access to some hangar machinery, including operation of the spacedoors. That was helpful, but it didn't give her any way to barricade the hangar.

The cabling diagram was more complicated. The turrets were good models, all linked to ship security. While the codes allowed her maintenance access to the turrets, the ship could override her any time it wanted.

*Unless I cut the links...* She studied the maintenance documentation, and discovered that without central control the turrets would fall back to locally stored settings.

*If I change those settings and then cut the link, The turrets will do what I want. That way I can barricade this place long enough to prep and launch! I better get started. I need at least something in place before someone blunders in here.*

Kiranda wiped the worst of the blood from her face and hands onto the dead crewman's coveralls. His right foot was still twitching, and she

tried not to look at it. She knew it would stop in a few minutes. It was only nerves firing, even if it was easy to imagine his enraged ghost trying to reanimate his corpse to take revenge on her.

She turned her attention to the open panel he had been working on.

*Okay... Lots of circuits here. Which ones are the turrets?*

As she studied the diagram, part of her considered risking a broadcast to Collins. Amongst so much encrypted shipboard traffic, it was unlikely that a brief transmission or two would be detected. But her situation was precarious, and he may not even be on board.

*He'd want me to get on with it.*

She tried to hurry. Somebody could walk in at any moment. Even more likely, some security subsystem may start to wonder why two of the crew were lying dead in the hangar.

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Colonel Isamu Collins pulled Astatoba to the wall, and held him there with the gun against his chest. The gesture left more room to allow people to move past, but it also kept the Doctor's unbound hands well hidden. He gave the security guard a stern look.

“What's your post?” he demanded. “The Admiral wants this man taken to the bridge, and if there's an alert I have to have a backup.”

The guard remained standing just outside the doorway, and his gaze flicked between Collins and Astatoba while other crew members hurried past them to their posts. Collins felt a trickle of sweat start to trickle down toward his hairline.

*He's suspicious, but doesn't look like he's using his implant. He's reluctant to bother a superior during an alert.* “Wake up man! I asked you a question.”

The guard seemed taken aback. “Level twelve, by the main stairwell.” A shadow of his suspicion then began to return. “The one outside the mess hall.”

*Is he testing me?* Collins shook his head. “That can wait until the prisoner's on the bridge. Consider yourself seconded.”

He pulled Astatoba away from the wall, and looked past the guard, through the open doorway and into the room behind him.

It was a small recreation room, with a bar at the rear, and tables built against the side walls. The table closest to the door still held the remnants of a card game, and three unfinished drinks of such ludicrously bright colors they had to be non-alcoholic. Nobody was left inside.

He fixed his gaze on the card table, and nodded at it. “Pick up that sidearm with you. It shouldn’t be lying about like that.”

The command was a gamble. There was no gun on the table, and he had no idea what rules the Alliance had regarding weapons in their spacenavy.

It paid off. The guard looked back at the table, and Collins took the opportunity to slam his gun against the base of his skull as hard as he could.

The man toppled into the room like a felled tree. Collins hurried inside, stepping over the guard and pulling Astatoba along. After pulling the guard fully out of the corridor, he held the back of his hand in front of the man’s mouth.

Astatoba leaned on the nearest table. He looked exhausted. “You think he has an implant as well?”

Collins nodded, and relaxed slightly. The guard was still breathing. After seeing him fall so hard, he feared he’d killed the man. He quickly dragged him behind the bar. A glance at the man’s sidearm confirmed it to be the same as the one he had. He left it holstered. The two compact grenades on this belt looked much more useful, so he transferred them his own. They were EMP charges, designed to combat enemy wardrones without damaging the ship. But they looked scary enough, and anyone he threw them at would probably assume the worst.

There was no point tying the man up. He’d simply use his implant when he woke up, and they had limited time until the guard back in the cell woke up anyway. *Good grief, there might be people on their way to the brig right now.* “Let’s go.”

Astatoba put his hands back behind him without needing to be asked, and Collins herded him out. They moved on to the large corridor, and turned towards where Collins figured the bow and command areas would be.

The mad rush of crew dashing to their stations had subsided, but there were still a half-dozen people in sight, hurrying by. Collins suppressed the urge to wince. *We look far too conspicuous.*

He adopted a bored expression to ease any suspicions, and continued evaluating the layout of the ship.

He had studied the blueprints for a new type of Alliance light cruiser about four years ago, and the Thorn seemed to be based on that design. The plans had featured two flight bays; a small long-range shuttle in the forward section, and a larger cargo bay in the aft section above the primary weapons cooling system.

He was sure they were in the forward section already. The surrounding rooms seemed to be crew quarters, which were usually placed at the bow as a protective buffer around the bridge and medbay. The shuttle, with its hyperdrive and long range communications, should be somewhere below.

Of course, the CASC Thorn could be different. It was also possible he wasn't remembering the details properly. He was simply assuming the warship had a shuttle, and he could use it to escape and send word to the Confederation.

*If I ever get back, I'll get my implant's data store expanded. Security be damned, human memory is far too unreliable.*

The corridor opened into the leftmost corner of a large room, which looked to be as far forward as they could go.

Another corridor on the rightmost corner led back the way they'd come, but between them and it was a number of elevators.

On the far wall, there was only a series of 2D images were projected from raised ridges on the floor. Whatever they normally showed was not clear, as every second one displayed the text FLASH RED while the remainder showed identical ship status screens. Collins ignored the three crew members in the room and took a moment to study the status display.

It confirmed he was at the front of the ship, and there was indeed a large chamber many decks below them that looked like a shuttle bay. Not wanting to look lost, he turned away from the display and toward the elevators.

There were stairwells too, with bulkhead frames ready to seal off the deck. The crew seemed to be avoiding the elevators in favor of the stairs, which suggested the lifts might have restricted use during an alert. But one of the elevators was larger than the others, and that looked promising.

*That's for freight, it must reach the shuttle bay.*

Collins herded Astatoba toward the elevator, and hit the panel to summon the lift. Waiting, he did his best to transform his nervousness into a mask of impatience. Hopefully, a crewman would be less likely to bother a man who looked angry.

The doors opened to reveal a large elevator. Collins herded Astatoba inside.

The 2D display on the left of the doors showed they were on Deck 12, and added that a Flash Red alert was in effect. A strip of numbers glowed in the air, listing available decks as 1 to 17 from bottom to top. All the numbers from 13 up were red, perhaps indicating a type of deck or that a security code was necessary to go there. Possibly both.

Decks 2 and 3 were not listed at all, which Collins figured meant Deck 1 was very large in this part of the ship. It was also orange, which worried him.

He stabbed at the glowing orange number with the tip of the useless gun. The doors closed and the lift began to descend.

He kept his grip on Astatoba's gown as the number on the display counted down. They passed by deck four, and descended into the space with the missing numbers.

*I hope the color doesn't mean...*

The lift came to a halt.

*Damn it!*

He jabbed the button for deck one, but the lift didn't budge. He tried Deck 4, with the same result. He winced. "I think we can assume someone just woke up."

"They stopped the lift? So they know where we are."

Collins let go of the man's gown. "If they don't, they will very soon."

*Collins, can you hear me? It's Schaef.*

He froze. The transmission had arrived as one of the thousands of signals on the cruiser's own network, but it used one of the encryption keys he'd given to Schaef through the link from his rifle.

Either Schaef had survived, or it was a ruse to trick him into betraying his location. If she was dead as Terenta claimed, they might have retrieved the encryption key from her implant.

*We need any help we can get. The moment they realize we've escaped, they'll track us. There must be dozens of sensors that logged our journey from the Brig. There may be drones on the way already.*

He sent a reply with the same encryption key. *How can I be sure it's you?*

An answer came barely a second later.

*My cat saw you before I did. Your turn, how do I know you're you?*

Collins followed her lead. *Dante was drinking*, he sent.

*Good enough for me. So, you're the man with the magic chair, and I'm a civilian with more injuries than I care to think about. Did anyone else make it?*

*Astatoba, who's with me. We're in an elevator that's refusing to respond, I think they noticed our escape from the brig.*

*No kidding, authorization to use lethal force is blaring all over the ship. Can't you hear it?*

He realized the lift must be well insulated. *No. They must know at least roughly where I am. Astatoba and I will therefore be receiving guests soon. Where are you?*

*I'm in a big cargo bay, improvising. Do either of you have any weapons?*

*Two EMP grenades.*

*I've got a wrench. You win.*

Astatoba looked at the frozen elevator display, then at Collins. He knew nothing of the silent conversation with Schaefer. "This is bad, isn't it?"

Collins frowned. *Schaefer, can you reactivate the lift to the shuttle bay?*

*From here? Hell no, this Network is tight. Best I can hope to do is damage the sensors in your area.*

*Do it, buy us some time.*

*I'll try my best, but don't bet your life on it. Good luck.*

*To you too.*

Collins drew a deep breath. "Yes Doctor, this is bad. We have to get out of this lift, fast."

## Chapter Eleven: Collaboration

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Kiranda remained kneeling in front of the panel after her conversation with Collins.

Her right forearm lay across her thigh, and a thin, glassy fiber trailed from her middle fingernail into a neat hole in one of the smaller optical cables. Through the link, she carefully probed the Hangar turrets with every hacking routine and exploit she knew. Her gaze was on a small display in the panel before her, but she paid it little attention. The flashing image said only *Security lockdown*.

It was that message, together with the announcement that intruders were to be shot on sight, which had prompted her to risk a transmission to Collins.

*Failure: Access token not granted.*

The message arrived in her mind as a concept, and it was one she was getting tired of. She was running out of things to try.

The turrets on the ceiling were refusing to upgrade her access from basic maintenance. The only attacks she had left were two untested routines she obtained only last month. They might do more harm than good. The Alliance might be searching for Collins, but they didn't yet appear to have noticed her yet.

She sighed. *Hell. I'm getting nowhere, and if the turrets aren't on my side when they find me I'm screwed. What do I have to lose?*

Kiranda ran the first of the two sequences, and bit her lip. The skin tasted salty.

*Failure: Access token not granted.*

*Just one left.* Kiranda ran the code with an air of resignation, and almost instantly a new message flashed across her mind.

*Success: Access token granted. Rerouting... Local administrative control granted.*

She blinked in surprise. In her experience, the last ditch effort never works. There was probably a sting she hadn't found yet. *List all available commands.*

The resulting list was far too short. The turrets were disappointingly simple, unable to tell friendlies from hostiles by either face or biomass recognition. They relied on a constant feed of targeting data from the main computer, and that didn't suit her purposes at all.

She studied the list anyway. There was a command to treat organic targets differently to drones, using temperature to tell the difference.

Another adjusted the rate of fire to extend the warranty... One command set defensive mode, when only aggressive targets were fired on.

Kiranda frowned. The defensive mode included a sensitivity setting. It came with a warning that when set to maximum, the presence of a weapon even as simple as a large knife would trigger the turret.

*It will have to do. I'm unarmed, so if I set the turrets to fire on anyone who's armed, it should at least slow them down.*

She assembled the necessary string of commands, then re-checked the list for anything else she could use.

There was an option for how to respond to aggressive jamming: Either stand down or fire on all targets.

*What the hell, I'll turn that on. If the Alliance bursts in, I'll be trying to hide anyway.*

She applied some of her own encryption to prevent the Alliance from undoing her work too easily, and then sent the result to every turret she could access. That included all the hangar turrets, as well as four in the storage room and three in a corridor outside the entrance.

For Collins, she released every electronic virus and trojan she had into what little of the shipboard network she could access, instructing them to target surveillance systems. It was all she could do for him.

The fiber released from the cable, and retracted back into her finger.

*Now, to cut the link to the turrets. It has multiple smart connections, but there's a way to cut them all in a hurry!*

She selected an insulated spanner from the dead crewman's tool belt, and located a high-voltage feed in the panel. After pulling back the insulating cover, she shorted it against the hull near the optical network cable.

White sparks flew, and the brilliant light fried every optical data node it reached. The turrets above immediately powered up and menacingly lowered their twin barrels. Kiranda dropped the spanner and tensed.

Light blazed and there was a deafening boom of gunfire.

The burst stopped almost as quickly as it had started. Kiranda swallowed, surprised she was still alive. Turning, she saw the remains of the automated loaders smoking by the wall. The turrets had recognized the machines as inactive drones, and responded mercilessly.

*Maybe I overdid the sensitivity setting.*

As she recovered from the shock, she heard another turret open fire, outside the hangar. The muted gunfire stopped a moment later, leaving only the muffled sound of shouting voices.

“Success.” She shook her head. “Hurray for Kiranda Schaefer, angel of peace, homicidal maniac.”

Collins chose that moment to transmit once more, his voice intruding into her mind.

*Schaefer? We're out of the lift. You said you were in a Hangar; is there a ship there?*

A sensor array on the ceiling emitted a brief shower of sparks, and even the gantry crane had a thin trail of smoke rising from it. Kiranda smirked. The viruses she had released had at least some success.

She transmitted a reply. *Yes, there's a short-range lifter here. I'm planning to launch it, try to signal Confed.*

She searched the deck for hangar controls, and found a control podium in the shadow in front of the lifter's engines. She zoomed in on the display until she could read the status display.

*It's reading empty, I'll need to fuel it. Why do you ask?*

We're heading for the forward shuttle. If we both launch soon, we can join up in the cover of the cloud.

Kiranda felt stupid. She hadn't realized the cloud could be used as cover from the cruiser's sensors. It would also block all communications to Confed, but if Collins could get a hyperdrive shuttle...

She ran to the lifter, and located a blue circle on the deck next to it. She yanked up the ceramic cap and pulled out a thick fuel hose from the revealed opening. Dragging it to the ship, she clasped it onto a matching blue opening on the ship's hull.

The control podium had a confusing layout, but she managed to locate the fuel controls and start the pump. A sharp click rang out as fuel forced the valves open, and the tanks began to fill.

*It's fueling now.*

A burst of turret-fire echoed across the Hangar, this time from the corridor outside the entrance on the catwalk. It was followed by combat boots jostling for position, and orders being barked. The orders were muffled, but she heard the word medic, and T48.

She wondered what a T48 was. Her first bicycle was a Tolton T-48, with a light green frame and white tires. Probably not what the soldiers outside had in mind.

With the memory of her spacewalk still fresh in her kind, she crossed to the rack of spacesuits and lifted a simple one from the wall. At 40 kilograms it was light, designed to be put on quickly. There was no thruster pack, so she picked up a second suit and set both of them on the deck beside the lifter. The air tank from the second suit should serve as a

source of thrust, or extra air. The tanks would provide only thirty minutes of air each, but that would be more than enough.

The floor shook, and the boom of an explosion in the corridor followed almost instantly.

*Collins? Guests are knocking at my door. I'll try to hold them off long enough to launch, but if I have to I'll bail in a spacesuit. I may be hard to find in the murk.*

*Understood. Jeremiah and I will wait for your departure, and...*

The comforting din of Network traffic stopped, along with the link to Collins. The Alliance had cut her off.

*They must be getting ready to rush me. Maybe I can seal the doors?*

The turrets outside erupted into blazing gunfire once more, but this time they kept it up. She ran to the control panel by the door, and found it to be useless. Damage from on the other side had fried it. Pulling the panel open, she studied the wiring behind it. The mass of circuitry looked far too complicated for a single door. She tried shorting two wires that looked likely to control locking bolts, and the big storage doors began to rumble open.

*Wrong ones.*

She tried another pair, and the doors in front of her locked with a reassuring clank. She left the wires twisted together.

*It may help... It sure can't hurt.*

She hurried back to the podium and checked the lifter's fuel level. She didn't need full tanks, but Collins did need time to reach the shuttle. If she launched too soon, he wouldn't be able to find her in the murk outside.

Kiranda glanced at the storage bay doors, and the four-foot gap she'd accidentally opened. The chamber beyond was a little smaller than she originally thought.

*I should make sure I didn't just open another entrance for them.*

She walked closer to take a better look.

There were turrets on the ceiling, among a maze of cables, pipes and ducting. They were hacked like the others. There were no other doors.

The only items stored in the room were big metal canisters sitting against the left wall. She'd seen footage on them from the control chamber, but hadn't realized they were so big. The hexagonal columns had a mirror-like finish, and were adorned with yellow biohazard logos.

She realized it was the Alliance nanoagent without reading the extensive warnings.

*Is it the only batch on board? Maybe, maybe not. Regardless, it's here to be used.*

She frowned.

*Can I dump them overboard? The loaders are gone, and the viruses fried the crane... Wait, I still have the code Doc Harrison prepared! The alliance stuff is based on a Confed design, so it might work. Heck, if I'm lucky it might do enough damage to take out the whole ship!*

She hurried toward the first of the towering canisters, and located the uplink port. The fiber in her fingernail fitted it perfectly.

Harrison's code was ready to go. She transferred it from her implant, waving aside a warning about radiation, and the strong possibility of explosion.

To her surprise, the Alliance nanoagent accepted the instructions blindly. Despite their improvements, the Alliance had copied the original design and security codes too well.

She left the timer on the default one hour, but changed the cancellation code to make it irreversible. The whole team had been given Harrison's code, and she didn't want Darius undoing her work and using the evil stuff to kill millions.

Outside, the gunfire intensified.

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Admiral Terenta stood at the rear of the bridge, his hands clasped behind him, studying the display through narrowed eyes.

He knew his presence on the bridge had positive and negative effects. It kept them alert and eager to impress, but was also a distraction. Because Ackilat seemed to have a disciplined crew, he had opted to remain.

*It seems I greatly underestimated Colonel Collins.*

The display was dominated by an internal schematic of the ship, showing the faults in the internal sensor network and the progress of the battle at the cargo bay. After the disastrous system failures that followed the first reported casualty, matters had finally begun to improve. He concentrated his gaze on the indicators for the cargo bay. Despite their efforts, someone inside was fueling the lifter. A female yeoman on his far left had been tasked with constantly verifying all cargo bay readings. Since losing contact with all turrets and sensors in that area, they had learned to be cautious.

“Sir, we have manual confirmation of fuel flow to the hangar. Engineers have shut down the primary pump and greatly slowed the rate, but not eliminated it.”

Captain Ackilat leaned forward in his curved, pale gray command chair. “Can we shut off the secondary pump?”

“No sir, that circuit is in the hangar and is currently isolated.”

Terenta watched the dots representing personnel around the cargo hangar. They were advancing steadily.

Lieutenant Langley’s face appeared on one side of the screen. “Captain. Search has found no sign of Collins or Astatoba. Medical are treating the Brig guard for concussion, and will have him talking sense momentarily.”

Captain Ackilat replied from his seat in front of Terenta. “Very good Lieutenant. What of the local sensor logs?”

“The techs have recovered around twenty percent sir. Analysis is ongoing, but if they were not in the aft hangar we would have found them by now.”

“Don’t be so certain! Search all decks again, including areas still covered by sensors.”

“Yes sir.”

Admiral Terenta allowed himself a nod of approval. Ackilat was dealing with the situation well enough. It seemed Collins meant to escape while they were still inside the cloud, but half the nanoagent was still in storage there with him and that was a concern. It would be unfortunate if they couldn't hit all their targets.

He was impressed Collins had done so much, and so quickly. That fascinating hacking probe he'd left behind was clearly just one of many items they had missed. That was a mistake they would not repeat. The troops had instructions to kill, and they would do so before Collins could launch the lifter.

More worrying was the possible presence of a Confederation warship. The science team was certain Wellspring 21 had been destroyed by a massive explosion, but the cloud made it impossible to determine the cause. If a Confederation warship was present, it might even be a new prototype able to operate normally in the cloud. That would explain not only the destruction of the station, but the fact Collins appeared to be trying to leave in a short-range lifter. Such a warship, if it existed, was a very real threat to the Thorn and the mission.

A different face appeared on the screen, and he recognized her as Engineer Nield. “Sir! Doors and vents are now fully sealed, and the Aft Bay can be purged at your word. Power to the hostile turrets is cut, but they’ll run on internal charge for another 10 to 12 minutes.”

The captain nodded. “Status of our Network?”

“We’ve identified the last viral codes, and purged the affected systems. Permanent damage is limited to sensors and some hangar

subsystems. With the hangar isolated, there's no possibility of any new hostile code."

"Very good." The woman vanished from the screen, and Captain Ackilat seemed to think for a moment. "Major Darius?"

The Major's image appeared. He was crouched alongside other troops. "Yes Captain?"

"Tell me you can destroy those turrets."

"We can sir. We're placing mobile deflector fields, which will give room to place the cannon. I'd say four minutes maximum. It would be faster, but we're limited by the portable generators."

"Contact engineer Nield. She has some free time now, and may be able to tap the ship's grid for you."

"Yes sir."

Terenta frowned. *This is taking too long.* "Show the locations of Sach and Langley."

Two of the moving indicators immediately brightened, and labels appeared next to them. Langley was in the armory, and Sach was approaching the warzone.

*Yes, we must end this.* "Captain Sach? You may proceed. Kill them both."

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Kiranda plugged in to the last canister, and transmitted the code. As the instructions were confirmed she heard a barely perceptible, high pitched whine.

Frowning, she tried to figure out where the sound was coming from. Eventually, she managed to narrow it down to a section of wall behind two of the huge canisters.

*Is that the corridor outside?*

The shrill tone suddenly rose and climaxed in a deafening blast. Afterward, there was less noise than usual. Some of the turrets had fallen silent.

*They've brought in the big guns. The turrets won't keep them out much longer.*

She finished coding the canister, stood up, and headed toward the lifter.

The lighting went out. The only illumination left was the glow from the distant fuel readout on the lifter's podium. Kiranda's vision switched to a combination of light amplification and infra-red.

The doors of the storage room she was in lurched into motion, closing with startling speed. Sparks flashed from their tortured guides, and she knew the Alliance had somehow boosted the power far beyond the designed specifications. The mechanism was being destroyed as the gap shrank, sealing her in.

She rushed toward the doors, propelled by instinct more than rational thought. It was clear she wouldn't make it, and the doors slammed shut before she hit them.

She managed to take the brunt of the impact with her shoulder. In darkness, she rebounded and landed in a heap on the floor.

*Collins!* She transmitted. *I'm cut off from the lifter, you have to launch now. Can you hear me?!*

The floor shuddered beneath her, and she heard a distant rush of air. She realized the spacedoors in the hangar were opening, venting it to the void.

Something above her moved, and Kiranda scrambled to her feet. A slab of metal fell toward the floor, and trailing behind it was a barely detectable blur in the light-amplified darkness.

The slab struck the floor, where it was held in place by an invisible weight. Kiranda recognized the haze above the slab as a crouched figure in active camouflage. Even with the benefit of her ocular implants, she could barely see the intruder.

*Collins, go! Get the hell out! Leave now!*

There was no reply. Her signal probably wasn't even leaving the room.

Her eyes switched to a mode she wasn't certain Collins knew about. The chamber walls darkened, but the ripple before her became a little clearer, resolving into a figure with a waist so narrow Kiranda's spirits plummeted. Given the manner of Sach's arrival, it was clear she wasn't there to help.

Sach was already rising, gazing right at her. Kiranda concluded she had examined the room, and knew she was in no danger.

“So our consultant is still with us. Looks like you've graduated from bathing in blood to drinking the stuff.”

Kiranda scowled. The reminder of the blood was definitely not welcome. She could feel the awful stuff clotting her hair.

Sach seemed to note her reaction. “More unarmed victims I assume, like that poor mechanic. You do like your victims to be helpless don't you?”

*No! She doesn't know, she has to be guessing!*

She felt her hands tremble. Sach, seeming somehow taller and more imposing, casually switched off her camouflage and pulled the hood back. The soldier's sculpted features glared at her. She had found Schaeff's a sore point and she knew it.

“Do you have *any idea* what the corridor outside looks like? The bloody mess out there? Their children are orphans thanks to you.”

Kiranda swallowed. Her mouth tasted like death.

Sach reached down to her leg, and slowly pulled out a knife. The black ceramic blade was empty space in the dark, the serrated edge only revealed by her optics.

The turrets above whirred into life.

Sach dropped the blade faster than a striking cobra. The weapon clattered to the floor, the turrets held their fire, and her eyes betrayed a flash of hatred.

“You did the same to the ones here too?! That's sick!”

The glimpse of hate broke the spell. Kiranda flexed her fingers to help the sensation drain from her.

*These people want to kill millions, out of greed. I'm not the monster here.*

She managed a grin. “Figured the turrets out all on your own did you?”

Sach's eyes narrowed. “I should have realized you were behind it. Only you would be vicious enough to kill any person with so much as a...”

“You've played that card. Maybe you should have asked for a basic logic implant instead of putting everything into padding out those watermelons.”

Sach's gaze hardened. “My, such a jealous little girl.”

The words reminded Kiranda of the necklace beneath her outfit. “Little girl? Truer than you'll ever know.”

Sach swung at her.

Schaeff had never seen anyone move so quickly. She tried her best to dodge the ceramic-reinforced fist by ducking and moving right.

Sach's fist clipped her ear at such speed it removed skin. She tried to back away, but a second blow slammed into her ribs. Her ribcage flexed and distributing the blow as best it could, and the crushed skin began to ooze blood.

Retreat didn't seem to be working, so Kiranda swung a leg in a roundhouse kick. Sach deflected it with a shove that threw her off balance.

Kiranda tumbled to the floor, rolled, and managed to rise a crouch. She still had a hand on the floor to balance her, leaving only one arm free to defend herself when Sach swung a kick at her head.

She managed to grab Sach's foot, deflecting it enough for the boot to swing over her head. Making the most of her crouch, she sprang up and drove her head into her attacker's solar plexus.

The captain's outfit automatically stiffened to reduce the impact as an anti-ballistic measure, but it proved unnecessary. Beneath the fabric, Kiranda felt strong cords of artificial muscle hold fast. Fortunately, the power of the impact still lifted the woman off the floor. Kiranda tried to throw her, but a fist slammed down hard between her shoulder blades.

Her limbs felt numb, and it took all her concentration to remain on her feet.

Sach hit the floor with elegant grace, balanced perfectly on the balls of her feet. Her eyes shone with gleeful determination. "I should have known Collins didn't escape on his own. None of you will make it off this ship alive."

*But Collins... She doesn't know where he is!* "You're too late. I only stayed on board to buy them time."

Captain Sach scowled, and flexed her fingers. "Any last words?"

Kiranda decided to play for time. Her side ached, and the blow between her shoulders seemed to have come from nowhere. She smiled. "Just this: It is possible to have too much of a good thing. Seriously, you look like a tart."

"So what?" Without another word, Sach launched herself toward her.

Kiranda ran for the cover of the canisters, but was tackled her to the ground before she made it.

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Collins finally managed to pry open the hatch, and lifted it up to reveal a gloomy shaft beneath the lift. The hatch proved to have a small handle on the bottom side, which annoyed him since there had been none on the top. Prying it had taken a lot of time, and left him with a bleeding index finger. Whoever designed the lift had not anticipated human maintenance staff.

A dim running light on the bottom of the elevator helped him identify a beam reinforcing the shaft wall well below them. Apart from that, the walls were disappointingly smooth.

He lowered his legs through and sat on the edge. "Doctor, come here."

The scientist stepped closer. Favoring his bandaged ankle, he knelt by the opening.

“I’m going to climb through and hang from the steelwork on the bottom of the lift. I want you to climb down me, and drop to the bottom of the shaft. You’ll fall about three metres, and the floor may be uneven. Keep loose and let yourself fold like a sack when you land. Then move to a wall because I’ll be dropping down soon after you.” He began to climb down.

Astatoba hesitated, but kept any reservations to himself. “Alright. How long can you take my weight?”

“Longer than you can hold on to me.”

It was risky, but they had to get out of the elevator. The only reason they hadn’t been caught yet was Schaeff’s unexpected help. *Maybe they think we’re with her in the aft hangar?*

Collins reached the lowest support on the elevator, and the Doctor started to climb through the hatch. He used Collins’ shoulders as steps, and then simply held his body like an oversized rope as he moved down. The poor man’s overtaxed muscles were quivering.

“That’s good. You’re doing fine.”

Astatoba didn’t reply. The man seemed terrified, but kept climbing down. When he finally stopped, he was gripping only Collin’s shins. “I can’t go any lower.”

“That’ll do. Just let go.”

“I can’t see the floor!”

Collins winced. His shoulders were starting to cramp, but he kept his voice calm. “It will hurt, but we’ll live. Trust me.” *At least, I hope so.*

Astatoba began to loosen his grip.

The lift shuddered. Collins felt it tug as it started to rise. Astatoba tightened his hold.

Collins drew up his right leg, breaking Astatoba’s grip. The man fell without a sound.

Hauling himself up a little, Collins reached into the lift and gripped the hatch by the handle. He held on to it as he let himself fall, letting his weight pull the hatch shut behind him. It tugged briefly at his hand and then he was falling.

Air rushed past. His shoulder brushed the shaft wall, and his foot caught the beam he’d seen earlier. The impact set him tumbling.

He struggled to get his legs beneath him in what time he had. He had trained to withstand falls from greater heights, but the thought wasn’t much comfort. He’d seen plenty of training accidents.

His left foot hit first, and it felt like the rest of him joined it an instant later. He rolled, pain lanced through his right arm and he eventually, he finished up on his back.

He lay there for a moment, catching his breath and mentally checking himself for serious injury. Far above, the elevator slowed to a halt. The small light on the bottom of the lift was barely visible. He flexed his fingers, and realized he was still holding the hatch handle. He grunted in surprise. *At least I closed it.*

His right upper arm throbbed, but it worked well enough. His left arm hurt too, right where he'd been hit back at the communications array. He touched the wound through the Alliance uniform, and felt a tear in the plastic fleshseal.

*Bleeding, but not much. I must have bumped it.*

He dropped the handle, and eased himself into a sitting position. He could hear Astatoba on his right, breathing in sharp, quivering breaths.

“Are you still with me Doctor?”

“Yes... I am.”

“How badly are you hurt?”

“Ahh...” He swallowed. “My foot hurts even more than usual and... I may have broken ribs.”

“Sharp pain or ache?”

“Sharp.”

Collins climbed to his feet. At least the scientist seemed to be breathing okay. “Does it hurt if you take a deep breath?”

“Yes... I believe I can put up with it.”

“It's a broken rib alright. It'll be fine, just keep any flexing of it to a minimum.” Collins found he could make out Astatoba's figure. That was good, his eyes were growing better accustomed to the gloom

“I'm sorry Colonel. I hesitated, and...”

“Bah, don't worry about it.”

The floor was relatively clear of obstructions, which was a pleasant surprise. He located a set of lift doors and moved closer to study them. Even in the poor light, he could see each door's rim bore a strip of fluid-filled white synthetic, which sealed the frame to keep the doors airtight. The electromagnets that operated the doors were linked with neat power lines to a circuit box mounted on the left side of the doors. Collins pulled it open. The interior was hard to make out, but there was definitely an optical circuit board with components on it, and a worrying number of wires. It was far too complicated to be merely the local elevator controls, which meant it was integrated with the ship's Network.

*Bugger.*

Far above them, the lift lurched back into life and began to rise even further. As it moved away, the shaft became darker. “Doctor, can you make any sense of this?”

Astatoba squinted, and felt his way around the junction box. “Hmm... I don’t recognize the chips. Given the complexity, I would say it’s an encryption circuit and comms link.”

Collins frowned. “Difficult to hotwire.”

“There are exposed wires for the door’s electromagnets. Perhaps we could feed power to them directly?”

“The airtight seal would hold them shut. Essential on a spacecraft, there are probably bulkheads in the shaft above us as additional safeguards. To prevent a breach on one deck from affecting others.” Collins scratched his cheek, and tried to think of a way around the problem.

*Schaef will be ready to launch soon, and I said we’d follow her immediately. I can only assume she heard me, before we were cut off. If we leave it too long, we’ll be out of the cloud and launching will only make us targets.*

Astatoba kept exploring the junction box. “There are a lot of wires here for a simple comm circuit. What do you suppose this one is for?” He pointed at a cluster of thin wires. It trailed out of the box and through a mass of sealant on the wall.

Collins blinked. “It must connect to something on the other side. Nothing to do with security unfortunately, it’s unshielded. Cheap stuff.”

“Of course... It must be the elevator panel. Sorry, I thought it might be a security console or something.”

Collins blinked. “Brilliant! I must be going senile not to have realized!” He pried at the wires, spreading them apart as much as he could to better examine them in the poor light.

“Sorry Colonel, I must be missing something. There was a panel in the elevator, and the lockdown made it useless. How is this one different?”

“This panel is in the shuttle bay. There won’t be anything to prevent people from leaving a secure area...” He hesitated. “Well, there might be. If I can identify which one of these is the door override, we can find out. Ground it, and the doors will open. Entirely local, no approval from Security.” Collins squinted at the mass of wires. “Of course if I get the wrong one and summon the lift, it’ll come and crush us.”

“Then I recommend you find the right one.”

The only wire he could easily identify was the ground; it was slightly thicker and completely black. He selected one that looked orange, and bit it. The tough plastic resisted his efforts, and he switched to his fingernails.

*What I wouldn't give for a knife right now.*

“Doctor, this shuttle bay will have protection. Hold back, and try to stay clear. We can expect gunfire the moment the doors open.”

Astatoba nodded. “I understand.”

“I intend us to take the shuttle in this hangar, and meet up with Schaefer outside the Thorn.”

Astatoba smiled. “The young lady is aboard as well? Wonderful!”

“She’ll try to escape in a cargo lifter, but she won’t be able to return to Confed space without our help.”

*I hope it's troops inside and not drones. With my uniform, I might be able to bluff enough time to reach them.*

Collins squinted at the wire, and found he had managed to expose a short length of green alloy. Carefully, he folded the wire to make it protrude and pressed it against the side of the metal junction box to ground the circuit.

The doors remained closed, and a dull metallic noise sounded high above them. He felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

Astatoba looked up, and swallowed. “I think the lift is on the way down.”

*Damn it... Maybe one of us might squeeze through that hatch when it reaches us? Or not. With our luck, it'll have a half-dozen troopers standing on it.*

Collins re-examined the wires, and tried to think as the approaching lift became steadily louder.

*Damned Alliance engineers... Override is always orange, it's the standard! There's a dozen other wires, all identical... I have time to try maybe two. This one is probably an alarm button... Those would be the 2D display, and audio... This one has an orange stripe!* He set to work on the wire's insulation.

“Um. Just so you know Colonel, the elevator will be here very soon.”

Collins didn't look up. The increasing light was a worrying enough indication of the approaching lift. It was so close he could see his efforts still hadn't entirely penetrated the plastic on the selected wire. He clawed at it.

“Colonel...!”

“Forget what I said about holding back. When this opens, get out quick as you can and find cover.”

The wire was slippery with his sweat, but he finally exposed the alloy. He pressed it against the box's metal lining and the white seals moved. Elation surged through him.

Facing the doors, he gripped one of the EM grenades on his belt. The two grenades were the only weapons he had that might actually do something.

The doors shuddered, and a crack of light appeared between them as the doors began to open. From the other side, he heard approaching footsteps.

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Kiranda slammed face-first into the deck. Sach weighed far more than she'd suspected, and the impact stunned her. Powerful arms closed around her torso and gripped her in a bear-hug so powerful it prevented her from drawing breath.

Struggling, she managed to swing an elbow behind her, into Sach's head. The woman maintained her grip. Kiranda struck again, and again.

*What the hell?! Aren't I at least bothering her?*

Her internal O2 supply cut in, keeping her from passing out.

*I need leverage.*

She squirmed against the floor, shoving them toward the sets of canisters. Once in the gap between the two racks, she reached and gripped the steel supports of the rack in front of her. She then pushed her back toward the second rack as hard as she could.

Sach's head and upper back struck steel. The soldier attempted to pull them both from the gap, but Kiranda maintained her grip. Two more times, she slammed Sach against the metal with as much strength as she could manage. Despite her O2 feed, she began to feel light-headed.

Sach released her and rolled free.

Gasping precious air, Kiranda hauled herself to her feet. Sach faced her, fists raised. A dark bruise marred her right temple.

Kiranda stayed close to the steel racks. "Lovely eyeshadow there. Quite suits you."

Captain Sach's left fist jabbed out toward her. Kiranda swerved to the right, dodging the blow. A right jab immediately followed, but she expected the move and ducked beneath it to take a swing at Sach's stomach. Kiranda's blow landed, driving into synthetic muscle that was not tensed for the impact.

To her annoyance, the impact did not slow Sach down. A quick swing forced Kiranda to take a step back. Another two kept her retreating until her back hit the rack of canisters.

Kiranda switched to the offensive, stepping forward to swing her firearm at Sach's neck.

Sach was quicker. Kiranda never saw how she did it, but it felt like a sledgehammer hit her in the face.

The blow lifted her off the floor, and the back of her head hit a flat surface that was probably a wall. Pain and disorientation made it impossible to be sure of anything else.

She could taste blood, and her tongue felt very warm. She was dizzy, which was a very bad sign because her inner ears had solid-state inertial sensors.

Amazingly, she found she was still upright. Her back was against a wall, which she slid down in a daze until her bottom hit the floor.

*Where is she? I have to move!* She rolled to her right.

A boot slammed hard against the wall she'd just left. Her dizziness began to fade, and she scrambled to her feet barely in time to dodge another lightning-fast punch.

Sach wore a grin of vindictive glee. "Nice lipstick, Schaef. Your favorite color."

She realized her chin was wet. She touched it with the back of her hand, while taking care to keep Sach in constant view. Her hand skin came away bright with fresh blood. She tongued the inside her mouth, and found a flap of skin inside her left cheek. The jagged edge mirrored the edges of her teeth. She spat, expelling more blood than saliva. "Touché."

Sach moved to one side, and they began to circle each other. Aside from the bruise, she didn't seem to have done any damage to her opponent at all. She even wore a confident smirk.

Kiranda swallowed some of the blood oozing inside her mouth. It was becoming clear this was not a fight she could win through strength or skill. Wincing, she considered her remaining assets.

*I have the turrets... Sach won't take up a weapon, but the turrets will fire if I broadcast heavy jamming. Unfortunately they'll fire at me too. Even the space between the racks is in range of two of them...*

Sach edged closer, and Kiranda noticed the ceiling behind her. The dark hole Sach had burst through was still there. It was a small supply shaft, with vertical metal walls. She could just detect the dim red glow of laser light reflecting on particles of dust. Sach had left something there to guard it.

Sach lashed out, and Kiranda managed to deflect the blow. The woman's grin remained unaltered.

*She's confident. Can I use that?* "If I surrender, will you take me alive?"

"The most you can hope for is a quick death."

Kiranda tried to look like she was seriously considering this, and steered herself closer to the overhead vent. "Is that an option? I don't see much hope of escape here."

Sach's eyes narrowed. "Sure. A quick twist of the neck and all your problems end."

Kiranda slowed, dropped to one knee and bent her head. Sach was uncomfortably close. At the top of her field of vision, she could still see her boots. Her footing was well spaced; she had not lowered her guard.

"Kneel on your hands."

Kiranda moved her hands to the floor, then used the foot still planted on the floor plus her arms to jump as high as she could.

Sach reacted with impressive speed, bracing herself and raising her arms to deflect any attack. If the deception had fooled her at all, her impassive face didn't show it.

Kiranda rose with her right leg still bent beneath her. As soon as she gained enough height, she planted her foot on Sach's shoulder and continued to leap upwards.

She didn't get as much of a boost as she needed. Sach shrank away with impressive speed, and her shoulder dropped away.

Kiranda gauged the remaining distance to the shaft on the high ceiling. She had intended to clamber into it head-first, but she simply didn't have enough momentum. Instead, she grabbed one of the narrow conduits that ran past the opening.

Her grimy hands gripped the cool, smooth pipe. Raising her legs, she swung them back, away from the vent.

For a moment she hung there motionless, her back against the ceiling and her legs roughly twenty degrees from joining it. Sach stepped aside, ensuring she could evade any further attack.

As she began to swing back down, Kiranda kicked her legs forward as hard as she could.

The conduit bent under the strain, and the supports holding it creaked. The shaft opening was very close, and she feared her feet would hit the far side.

*I won't get another try... Might as well make this count.*

She activated her jamming routine, and flooded the chamber with radio noise and corrupt electromagnetic signals.

The turrets reacted as her stored instructions dictated, assuming every target in sight to be hostile. They immediately began to rotate toward them both.

Her toes rushed past the lip of the shaft, and up into it. She swung up after them, releasing the pipe at the last possible moment. Her momentum carried her out of the chamber, upside-down. Sach was still in view, standing by the shaft with feet spaced wide.

It took the turrets less than a second to take aim. In that time Kiranda's upward momentum came to a halt, and Sach's expression became one of unbridled rage.

They opened fire, and the burst of white light made it impossible to see. Kiranda slammed her hands and boots against the smooth sides of the shaft, and struggled to hold herself in place against the cruiser's artificial gravity. The metal was smooth and greasy beneath her bloody palms. The jackhammer-like gunfire from the thundering turrets reverberated through the metal, and Kiranda felt her hands start to slip. She pressed her entire forearms against the walls in an attempt to slow her progress. It had no effect.

Her implants flashed a warning. Over the din, they had detected the sound of metal on metal from the shaft above, along with the whine of an energy weapon charging to fire. Whatever Sach had left in the shaft was still there, and the jamming had not disabled it.

Kiranda stopped the transmissions and let go. Pulling her arms to her chest, she tried to become the smallest possible target for the machine above. She had no idea how soon the turrets would remain active, but for the moment they were less dangerous than remaining in the shaft.

Pain lanced her left hip as she fell, and the turrets fell silent as she approached the floor.

She stretched her arms out, and landed on her hands. Rolling to absorb the impact, she pushed herself away from the area beneath the shaft. The rubberized flooring she had vacated darkened and bubbled, cooked in an instant by a radiation weapon.

A drone dropped through before she could rise to her feet, all six legs striking the floor in perfect unison.

The gleaming black machine was barely four feet tall, but it loomed over her as she lay sprawled. The drone's radiation gun was designed to fire through armor and cook flesh. It needed about two seconds between

shots to charge... That left Kiranda with a small window of opportunity. She scrambled forward and rushed toward the machine.

The drone reared back and raised its front legs. Unfolded, they formed jointed blades as long as the machine was tall.

The blades covered every approach she could think of, and she could see no way to retreat.

There was gunfire, and the machine burst into shrapnel. Fragments of black ceramic hit her suit, and she caught a glimpse of one piece of blade as it hurtled past her left eye. It took her a moment to realize the turrets had done their job, destroying an armed threat.

Kiranda slid to a halt behind the shattered remains of the machine. As blessed silence returned, she checked herself for damage.

Her suit had protected her, despite the state it was in. Nothing had penetrated the suit or her skin. The drone's body had become three unrecognizable lumps, and countless small fragments scattered around the room. The nanotech cylinders had some scratches, but seemed undamaged. Kiranda's optical implants helpfully highlighted what fragments were machine, and what wasn't.

She nearly threw up.

Lengths of intestine and odd-colored lumps of flesh were everywhere. She had rolled over what looked like half a stomach after falling from the shaft.

The odor was overpowering.

By her feet, a mass of blonde hair still clung to a chunk of ceramic-reinforced skull. Two glistening drops of blood lay on the otherwise spotless mane as gleaming beads. Even in death, the synthetic hair looked silky and fresh.

A slight breeze made her spin to face the shaft one more. She could neither see nor hear any threat, but the deck beneath her feet moved slightly as it took on extra weight. Her optical implants scoured the view before her, and managed to produce the erratic outline of a well-camouflaged newcomer.

The figure was tall, with powerfully thick limbs. The suggestion of a thick ridge around the head confirmed his identity. Sach had probably been in contact with Langley the entire time.

The vent above him was her only escape route. Kiranda ran up the wall between the steel racks, and jumped off it toward the conduit she'd used earlier.

The outline moved toward her at a speed she could never match or counter, and that was the last she knew.

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After the darkness of the shaft, the glare from the chamber beyond the opening doors made it difficult to see. Still, it took only a moment to recognize the broad form of the six-legged wardrone. The angular machine was facing the elevator, ready to confront whatever emerged.

He threw the grenade before the doors had finished opening, hoping to catch the machine by surprise.

The drone reacted immediately, firing a single precise shot at the tiny device arcing toward it. The shot detonated the EMP in mid-air. The machine then staggered back a few paces using only two functioning legs.

He threw his last grenade at the faltering drone, and ran into the chamber before the doors finished opening. A control desk on his left seemed to be the only cover on offer, so he ran for it.

The staggering drone fired, but at the grenade rather than him. The shot missed, hitting the wall above the lift. The grenade detonated.

The drone stopped. A thin trail of smoke began to curl up from its shielded ventilation grille, then its legs sagged and the machine collapsed.

Collins searched the bay for additional threats. He was sure at least one security guard would be stationed there, but he couldn't see any people at all.

There was certainly a shuttle. The crimson bulk of the ship stood tall, the gleaming black plate of the hyperdrive facing the elevator. Thick support legs held the vessel's curved belly high above the floor, allowing him to see beneath it to the far side of the hangar. Two large, twin-barrel turrets were mounted on the walls on either side, their guns in standby position. An overhead catwalk crossed the chamber, with a single long flight of stairs on the left the only access from the main deck.

The wall on the far side from the elevator was gently curved, and tilted so the ceiling extended several metres further than the floor. Black and yellow markings marked most of the wall as a pair of huge armored spacedoors.

*This is the bow alright. No wonder the lift has so many seals and bulkheads... If the spacedoors were open and containment fields failed, the whole hangar would be exposed to vacuum.*

Beneath the catwalk steps, a service drone sat parked. It was a large, angular model with no visible wheels or limbs. Collins concluded it was designed for repair work outside the ship. The drone seemed as inactive as the turrets.

There were three complicated-looking sensor arrays around the room. One had a thin line of smoke rising from it, which was a promising sign. Schaef had done well indeed.

The only other items of note were the curved control desk he was crouched behind, and the yellow door on the wall next to it. It seemed to be the only other exit from the chamber.

Collins hesitated. *Maybe there's a guard in active camouflage, watching...*

Something touched him from behind. The shock startled him so much he had to force himself to calm down. He already knew who it was.

Doctor Astatoba was sprawled on the floor. His ankle was swollen, but he was in one piece. He must have tried to run on it, and fallen.

Astatoba managed to speak. "Sorry. I can't move very quickly..."

The elevator Collins had accidentally called arrived, and the doors opened for a few seconds before closing again. He let himself relax a little.

"Don't worry about it Doctor."

Nothing in the hangar seemed immediately dangerous, or likely to be hiding anything that was. There were emergency equipment racks, a number of supply crates neatly lashed to the wall, and a clearly marked space with a small skycar parked in it. The vehicle was a spacious eight-seater, but good for atmospheric use only. He figured it could be loaded into the shuttle for extended surface missions.

He frowned. *This is too easy. A camouflaged guard would have acted by now. Why no people? There's not even any Network traffic, though there was in the elevator. They can't know where we are... those turrets wouldn't be so quiet if they did.*

He walked toward the shuttle to take a closer look, and all the pieces began to come together in his mind. The shuttle was not an Alliance vessel, and it wasn't a Confederation design either.

Astatoba paused to study the wardrone. "Nicely done. There's nobody else here?"

"Apparently not."

Collins walked further to get a view of the shuttle's profile. As he saw more, it became clear the catwalk above had been modified to accommodate the craft's considerable height. The metal was still bright where it had been cut and welded. The work had probably been done no more than a fortnight ago. "I think there's a good reason Admiral Terenta doesn't want his people in here."

Astatoba frowned, and followed his gaze toward the ship.

It looked over-engineered. Any one of the five ceramic landing legs would have been strong enough to take the shuttle's full weight. The power feed attaching the ship to the cruiser's power supply used a bulky adapter instead of a standard molecular seal. The flight of steps placed against the bow had been modified to deal with the ship's height, and the hatch it led to was big enough to admit a small car. The door itself was a gull-wing mechanism, hinged on the top.

Astatoba gaped. "This is not an Alliance design!"

Collins kept moving until he could see the high flight deck windows at the bow. The curvature of the hull made it difficult to see inside, even from the front. "This is a Plass shuttle," he said. "Valaam class, I think. The closest they have to a purely civilian craft."

Astatoba's eyes widened. "Plass?" He glanced around the chamber, then back at the elevator. "Does that mean...?"

"That the Alliance is working with the Plass Empire? I doubt it, Plass are fiercely independent." He grinned. "They especially dislike Admiral Terenta. If any were on board, they'd be here in the hangar. It would be cold for them, but they hate cramped spaces."

The scientist blinked. "That ship seems roomy to me."

"Picture a three metre tall mass of muscle, genetically engineered for high gravity and noon temperatures that would make your skin blister."

"I don't think I've ever met any."

"I'm impressed by this... We've been trying to capture a Plass vessel intact for the last decade."

"So this one...?"

"It's sure not here by accident."

Collins headed for the steps, and climbed over a simple barrier of tape bearing the words OFF LIMITS. Astatoba began to limp toward the steps to follow him.

"No, stay there. Keep a lookout."

The man's face betrayed his relief. His ankle was obviously causing him difficulty.

The shuttle door was open halfway. Collins ducked under the inert slab, and into the ship's oversized airlock.

*Interesting, the inner door is open. It shouldn't be possible for both to be open at once.*

He walked through the airlock and into the shuttle's interior.

The pale gray walls and charcoal floor all had a glossy finish that looked like something out of a shopping mall. Every surface was incredibly clean, from the two broad seats at the main controls, to the

many access panels and towering banks of machinery that lined the cavernous, unpartitioned chamber for the full length of the ship.

Two things stood out against such cleanliness. One of the many blocks of machinery toward the rear of the ship was badly damaged, seemingly by a powerful firearm and an equally powerful disregard for their own safety. The optical circuitry within was not only shattered, but partly melted. The second thing he couldn't help but stare at was the body lying on the floor right next to the airlock.

Even with legs folded beneath it, the dead Plass still loomed over him. Collins circled around the corpse, and found the cause of death. The torso sported a gaping hole as thick as his thigh, from which a river of blue-gray blood had long since stopped flowing. Collins tapped the thick blood with his boot, and found it had already cooled to something like soft plastic. The Plass had been dead for long enough to reach room temperature and freeze solid.

He nodded to himself. *Admiral Terenta is more devious than I've given him credit for. He even mentioned the Plass, and I thought nothing of it. The Plass Empire shares borders with both the Alliance and Confed, he wouldn't have to go far out of his way to launch the shuttle on a convincing trajectory... Probably with Darius and the other traitors on board to spin a tale of Plass aggression on the border. Confed would respond, Plass would respond, and the two would beat each other bloody in a war only the Alliance will benefit from.*

He turned to the damaged machinery, and tried to figure out what had been destroyed. There were melted power regulators, and ceramic ducting looked like powerful heating and atmosphere processing units, likely destroyed with the same gun that killed the Plass. He concluded it was the remains of the ship's life support system.

*That makes sense. Plass-friendly life support would kill a normal Terran like Darius or me.* The cabin had a lot of space, which meant a lot of air. It could take as long as a week for carbon dioxide to reach toxic levels. The airlock doors had probably been bypassed to fully ventilate the cabin before launch. The drive system would probably produce enough waste heat to stop him from freezing to death.

He located the communication system, and found it to be intact. He'd only be able to get a message through once he was clear of both the cruiser and the cloud.

*I can't leave this ship here for Terenta to use. Who knows? Maybe it's precious enough that he won't fire on it.*

He walked back toward the airlock and peered into the hangar. Astatoba was resting behind the control desk.

“Doctor?”

“Yes?”

“Take a look at that desk for me. Don’t touch anything, it’ll require codes and alert the bridge. Just look for a reading on the aft cargo bay. I want to know if Schaef has launched.”

Astatoba studied the controls. “Hmm... There’s a whole panel here for the aft bay. Most of the readings and sensor feeds are offline, but it does show the lifter is currently fueling.”

“Good. Anything on the environment outside the hull?”

He scanned the rest of the desk, his fingers hovering over the panels as though he had eyes in his palms. “Well, there are forward and aft door displays by the controls for the forward spacedoors, but they show nothing but black. Wait... I see the navigation lights outside the doors! The rest is black because we’re still well inside the cloud.”

“Keep watching them, and the lifter status. Let me know the moment anything changes. I’ll figure out how to get these doors open.”

## Chapter Twelve: Contained

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Admiral Terenta reached out and lay his hand on the hull of the CASC Thorn's cargo lifter. It felt cold from the exposure to vacuum. Stepping back, he watched the gantry crane position the habitation module over the craft. When it lowered slowly into place, the lifter became a short-range personnel carrier.

The sabotaged canisters were a significant danger to the ship. Fortunately, the crew were working quickly and were already moving to open the module's rear doors.

Major Darius emerged from the cabin and moved to his side. "No damage to the craft sir. It's fully functional, for the moment."

Terenta studied him. The Major's broad shoulders looked much more at home in the neat, navy blue Alliance uniform. "I want it immobilized."

"Already underway sir. Engineer Nield is removing the hydrogen fuel valve, he says it'll be impossible to start the reactor without it."

The admiral nodded. "Good. Drain the fuel anyway, the batteries will sustain power long enough for our purposes."

Leaving Darius to give the necessary orders, Terenta walked toward the rear of the chamber. Captain Ackilat hadn't hesitated in approving the tall, rectangular hole cut through the ruined storage room doors. No captain enjoyed damaging their vessel, but the cause was urgent.

Lieutenant Langley strode through the opening. Behind him, a female medic pushed a substantial stretcher. Her uniform was identical to the rest of the crew, with the addition of a broad orange stripe over her left shoulder.

Terenta stepped aside, giving the stretcher room to move toward the lifter. As it rolled past, Terenta peered down at the patient beneath the glowing readouts. She was surprisingly young for someone so troublesome. Her head, spilling ragged blue locks, was cradled in a white ceramic block linked to the stretcher with a thick cable. The small amount of exposed skin not covered by the suit or smears of blood looked pale.

Another medic emerged through the opening, and the Admiral immediately caught his gaze.

"Doctor, give me a report."

"Sir! Overall, it looks favorable. We have a field inducer directly stimulating her pineal gland, and a simple melatonin-based mixture keeping her under. We can directly manipulate her senses for days if need be."

"So we can mindhack her?"

“Oh yes, very much so. Given her physical condition, we shouldn't need memory dampening.”

That was good. They didn't have the time for memory manipulation. He turned to Langley. “Lieutenant! Has she been checked for weapons?”

“Yes sir. We located several offensive systems, and disabled them. The suit was already burned out, and I made certain it will stay that way.”

“Very good. Get her on board, our time is limited.”

The medics pushed the stretcher up the module's ramp, into the lifter. Langley followed.

Darius watched with a frown. “Sir, I believe Millward is an excellent hacker. He eliminated the viruses that damaged the ship's internal sensors, I believe he could manage some memory work as well...”

Terenta smiled. “Oh, I'm sure he could cobble something together, but would it convince her long enough to disable the countdown on the nanoagent?” He shook his head. “I've seen too many failures to treat mind hacking lightly. Better to stick with a simple scenario than throw together artificial memories that may fall apart under study.”

A general-purpose drone backed out of the cargo area, legs straining under the weight of a tall, gleaming canister of nanoagent. It had never been designed to handle such heavy loads, but it was proving a capable substitute for the destroyed loaders. Terenta watched as the overhead crane latched onto the canister and lifted the shining hexagonal canister toward the habitation module. Relieved of the burden, the drone hurried back through the opening to fetch the second one.

“Do you really think this will work sir?”

“I think it will get a dangerous cargo off this ship. As for whether we'll get the ordnance back in a usable state, I don't care to speculate. Given the cost of manufacture, we have to try.”

“Won't it affect our schedule?”

“I shall not allow it. We'll know soon enough if she has done as we wish. If the canisters detonate, we'll simply have to make do with forty percent fewer targets.”

An engineer in coveralls filthy with grease and dirt climbed down from the life support equipment on top of the lifter's habitation module, and saluted the pair. Darius returned the salute, but Terenta's hands remained clasped behind his back.

“Sir. I've completed connecting the gas to the module and the flight deck. It's linked via multiple lines, independent of the lifter's systems. It'll work no matter what happens on board.”

“Very good. Set it to activate in 30 minutes.”

The man saluted once more, and hurried back underneath the lifter.

Darius raised an eyebrow. "I thought the doctor had made arrangements to dispose of her?"

"Always have a backup Lieutenant. Whether she stops the countdown or not, I want to be certain she dies."

Darius watched the engineer go back to work, this time on a panel next to the hose draining the fuel. "She's no longer a threat. Nor are Collins and Astatoba, they must have left long ago."

Terenta raised an eyebrow. "You sound very sure of that."

"If Schaeff was lying, why are two suits missing?"

Terenta gazed at the two empty suit lockers. Had Collins really left the ship before they opened the spacedoors? No vessel would ever find him in the cloud.

*Unless...*

"Major, I want the search extended. Launch drones, and check the outer hull."

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Collins examined the circuitry arrayed in the panel before him. The spacedoors were operated by a complex arrangement of redundant relays. All the panel did was ensure the atmospheric containment field was on when the doors began to open. Why was it so complicated?

Among the many relays, there had to be an override from the bridge. If there wasn't, he had no way of opening the doors. Well, he probably still could... But the entire ship would know and he'd never have time to launch.

Then there were the sensors.

He looked up at the tall spacedoors. There were four movement sensors around them. If he could bypass them, only the external cameras would sense their departure. In the darkness of the cloud, even they might not see them go.

He searched the cabinets for tools.

*At least the Plass shuttle is ready to fly. The Alliance have taken good care of Darius.*

Astatoba, still watching the control desk, broke his train of thought. "The aft spacedoors are opening!"

Collins winced. Schaeff was moving too soon. "Any sign of the lifter?"

"Not yet. Nothing about it at all since it stopped fueling."

"Let me know when it launches."

The Colonel paused to think. Even with the tools he had found, it would take several minutes to bypass each door sensor. But if they didn't launch soon after Schaeff they would never find her in the cloud. He pried the cover off one of the sensors to see how it looked.

"Colonel, I think we're drawing close to the edge of the cloud. I can see some of the hull in silhouette."

*When it rains, it pours.* "Listen, if I can't bypass these by the time Schaeff launches, we'll just hit that console switch for the doors, and try like hell to launch before the bridge overrides us." He pried aside a shield from an optical relay.

"I see the lifter! It's leav... It has *left* the cargo bay!"

*Damn it!*

Collins dropped the tool he was holding. "Hit the switch and get on board!"

Astatoba moved with impressive speed considering his injury, but he had a long distance to cover. The yellow stripes surrounding the spacedoors started flashing as Collins reached the ramp.

A dispassionate, female voice echoed through the chamber. "Spacedoors opening. Stand Clear."

Collins ran up the steps into the shuttle, and dropped into one of the two broad flight deck chairs. The language and unusual icons gave his implant some difficulty, but he'd studied Plass schematics well enough to fill the gaps himself. Power flowed through the craft, and he started the drive and gravity systems.

The corrugated metal teeth of the spacedoors parted all too slowly. As the engines warmed up, he wondered how long it would take the crew of the Thorn to realize what was going on. Schaeff's work on the ship's internal sensors could only conceal the facts for so long.

Astatoba reached the top of the ramp and came on board. With some difficulty, he pulled down the exterior door until the rim sealed with a hiss. "Hull secure!"

The thruster display signaled operational status by glowing blue. Collins figured the doors looked wide enough, and pushed the throttle to full. The shuttle's chemical thrusters growled, and the ship threw him back into his seat as it leapt forward.

*What's wrong with the inertial dampers?!* "Hold on!"

The doors stopped opening, then began to close.

*We won't make it,* he thought. But he kept the thrusters on full.

Metal screamed and Collins flew through the projected displays and into the thick windshield.

The vessel shuddered while momentum and hull competed with the Thorn's armored doors. Clambering back into the seat, Collins struggled to keep the thrusters going.

With a high-pitched screech, the vessel squeezed through and lurched free.

He was ready for it that time. As the sudden G-force shoved him, he kept his outstretched hands on the controls and steered the ship into a sharp right turn. A white line blinked on and off against the darkness, a single shot from the cruiser. Then there was nothing but the darkness of the cloud and they were flying blind.

*Damn this gibberish! Where's the gyro?* He located the ship's scanners, and searched for Schaefer's lifter.

The screens were already a haze of interference. The only detectable shape was the bulk of the Alliance cruiser, which faded even as he watched. He made a note of the location and angle. It was the only point of reference he had.

He turned the shuttle into what he hoped was an intercept course with Schaefer.

There was movement from the rear of the cabin, and he turned to look. Doctor Astatoba had climbed to his feet and stood leaning against the airlock wall, one hand pressed against his forehead. A line of bright red blood ran down the face and fingers.

"You alright Jeremiah?"

"Nothing to worry about. Though I must say these walls are just as hard as they look."

Collins turned back to the scanners. "I'll help you bind that cut in a minute, I need to watch for that lifter."

"Do that. I'll see what we have on board."

Collins noticed a patch of haze on their left side that was darker than most, and eased back the throttle to squint at the shape.

It was definitely an object, but size and distance were difficult to judge. As it drew closer, it became visible. A man-made object, too small to be Schaefer's lifter.

The object accelerated toward them, and Collins recognized it as the maintenance drone from the shuttle bay. Some quick-thinking officer had sent it after them.

"Hold on Doc! This is going to get rough."

He marked their position and heading, then pushed the throttle back to full.

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Kiranda drifted, warm and free. It was rest, and rest was all she wanted. It took some time until she realized she couldn't feel her body. But for some reason, that didn't worry her. She tried to think.

*I remember... something rushing at me. Am I dead?*

She concentrated on her body. It was hazy and distant, but the more she worked at it, the more the sensation strengthened. She was lying down.

With effort, she began to open her eyes.

The slit of light was painfully bright. Her vision adjust slowly, dimming the white glare until she could see.

She was looking at a pale gray molded ceiling with the glare of two lighting strips obscuring any detail. The top of a narrow pressure door was just visible on the wall on her right. Reluctant to try any significant movement, she swiveled her eyes. The wall opposite the door had some sort of window... The surface beneath her felt warm, and her hand identified a pattern of circles set on the surface.

She winced. Every part of her body felt tired and heavy. She wanted to sleep, but she was suspected that might mean never waking up again.

*Where the hell am I?*

Her memory answered. Colonel Collins and the Alliance cruiser. Langley, rushing at her with inhuman speed over Sach's scattered remains.

She finally moved, but in involuntary spasm of fright. *I'm not a monster! I felt sorry for them...*

Her hand found her necklace, beneath the smooth fabric of her suit. The child she had once been could not hate her for what she had done. The sense of panic withdrew.

*So where am I? I remember nothing after Langley.*

She checked her internal chronometer. Apparently she had been unconscious for twelve minutes and forty-four seconds. Kiranda forced herself to rise into a sitting position, and stared at the room around her.

She was on the lifter's flight deck. The two comfortable-looking seats were empty, and the array of control panels was powered. The open hatchway showed the corridor leading to the rest of the ship. The only other exit was a pressure hatch on the ceiling, with a short ladder beneath it. Her proximity to the hatch may mean she had entered through it, one way or another.

She peered up through the glass, and saw the ship's lights shining into gloom outside.

*Did I manage to launch into the cloud? How? Good grief, I'm so tired I can barely think...*

A panel on the console winked on, and an image of Collins appeared above it. The image was rough, shuddering with noise and interference. The sound that accompanied it was just as bad, but she could make out his words.

“Schaeff? Can you hear me? The monitor says you’re conscious.”

“Collins?... Where are you?”

“Can you hear me Schaeff?”

With some difficulty, Kiranda hauled herself up and into the nearest chair. Her muscles ached. The word *Respond* glowed on the comm panel. She hit it, and the text changed to *Link Established*.

“Hi there.”

“Schaeff! How do you feel? You’ve been drugged.”

*Drugged. Why didn't I realize? That explains a lot!* “I need coffee, like you would not believe possible. Lots and lots of coffee.” She closed her eyes, and immediately regretted it. She was far too drowsy. “Frothy cappuccino, dusted with cocoa...”

“Schaeff! Time is short.” She forced herself to open her eyes. Collins looked angry. There was a flash from somewhere behind him, accompanied by the sound of gunfire.

She tried to concentrate. “I’m weak and tired, but I’m here. What’s going on?”

“Confed troops have taken the Thorn. The boarding craft was destroyed in the fighting, and the engines are disabled. We’ve sent for a transport, but it’s thirty hours away. Closer than any Alliance reinforcements.”

The fatigue was faded a little. Kiranda forced herself to pay full attention. “Troops? How did...”

“Listen! We found the nanotech canisters that you rigged to blow. The best we could do was put them in the lifter and launch it. Unfortunately the lifter is also damaged, and it’s still too close to the Thorn. When it blows, both ships will be destroyed.”

“Are you clear of the cloud?”

“Not yet, we should both drift out in an hour or two. This transmission is only possible because of the close range, but the distance is increasing. It will cut out soon, and the nerve agent will go critical. You have to stop it!”

She began to make sense of what he was saying. “I’m on the lifter... Did you put me here?”

“Yes. Our hope was you’d recover in time to disarm the nanoagent. It’s... ..ov...” Kiranda leaned closer. The message was breaking up too badly to make out everything he said. “...to you. Move fast! Or...”

The link cut out. She searched for a signal booster, and found it already set to maximum. Either the distance had simply become too great, or the damaged CASC Thorn’s communications system had failed. Whatever the cause, her only source of information was gone.

Kiranda stared at the empty screen.

*Collins never told me he had troops coming. Maybe he didn't want to risk it. Secrets within secrets...*

She turned her thoughts to the nanoagent. She still had the code encrypted in her implant, but undoing her sabotage would take time. According to her chronometer, time was something she didn't have much of.

Wincing, she forced herself to her feet. Leaning on the cabin wall for support, she moved through the open hatch and into the corridor.

The corridor looked too long, and it took Kiranda a moment to realize the lifter’s module had been fitted. The canisters were not attached to the ship’s framework, but inside the module itself where she could access them directly. Collins must have realized she needed physical access.

Still leaning against the wall, she started down the corridor. As she neared some narrow cabin doors, she discovered a small kitchenette set into one wall. The alcove held a water tank with taps for hot and cold, though it was empty. There was also a transparent hopper loaded with foil-wrapped biscuits and disposable cups. But what caught her attention was the enameled coffee machine standing next to it all.

She stopped, fumbled for a cup, and dropped it. She immediately grabbed another one, and shoved it against the machine’s nozzle.

Nothing happened. The lack of water evidently included the coffee machine. Kiranda let the cup fall to the floor, and swore at the universe for the grudge it clearly held against her. Leaning against the bench, she lifted the machine’s lid and peered inside the hopper.

Just a few tablespoons of unused coffee grounds remained. Impulsively, she grabbed a handful and then it stuffed her mouth.

The dry, stale-smelling grounds made her cough, but she kept the mixture in her mouth as it soaked up blood and saliva.

*If this doesn't wake me up, nothing will.*

The rich, bitter taste flooded across her tongue. She recognized the flavor as a coarse frontier blend, a type one could probably use to clean old spoons.

She swallowed while the mixture was still a little dry to get the caffeine into her system, and immediately started to cough as she struggled to clear the mess out of her mouth and throat.

Wincing, she ran her tongue around her mouth. The cut on her cheek throbbed from the abuse, but there was still only the taste of coffee. There was no caffeine buzz. It reminded her of the drinks she had when visiting her mother.

*Those drugs must have really screwed me up. If there's permanent brain damage, I'm... She winced. Well, too bad. There's a bomb on board.*

She resumed her journey down the passageway, feeling a little steadier on her feet. She passed four closed cabin doors, two per side. The last bore the universal green cross symbol for medical. She finally reached the largest chamber in the module.

All six of the sabotaged canisters were there. Lined up three per side, they occupied most of the available space. A toolbox with some basic hacking equipment was ready for her, along with a variety of more drastic tools that Collins evidently thought she might need. The folding shovel and pickaxe were somewhat comical offerings, and there were no explosives or welding equipment. No firearms either.

A small fire extinguisher on the wall looked like a newer version of the dry powder type she had used to escape from the station. She winced at the sight and tried to ignore it, kneeling close to the socket on the first canister.

The fiber in her finger refused to extend. She frowned, and repeated the mental command. An error message flowed across her mind.

*Brilliant, I'm in even worse shape than I thought. I'll have to do this manually.* She selected a voice interface terminal from the tools available, and plugged it in. As the terminal started, she ran a basic diagnostic over her augmentations.

Instead of a diagnostic report, she got another error message.

*Damn it!*

She tried switching her vision to active infra-red. She received a more unusual error, which inexplicably included advice that she needed to open her eyes to enable that mode.

*Grief, it's a wonder I'm still alive! It's as if...*

With cold, jarring certainly, it came to her. The coffee, the error messages, all of it became pieces of a larger picture the very thought of which made her shiver.

*This isn't real.*

Admiral Terenta glowered at the bridge display. The rearward sensors were at full power, but it was unlikely they would locate the shuttle. They couldn't afford to slow down or turn the ship around, not with the lifter and its deadly cargo still back there. Even the Thorn would be damaged if the craft was close when it all detonated.

The bridge security officer appeared on the display in front of them. "Captain. The audit of the internal sensor array is complete. Sixteen percent of the sensors show as permanently damaged, and they are being replaced. We're treating those in the Hangars as a priority."

Captain Ackilat nodded. "How's the search progressing?"

"The second pass is nearly complete now, but we've found nothing further. It appears both men escaped on the shuttle."

"Notify me on completion."

Terenta remained silent. The loss of the Plass vessel was a greater setback than anything to date. They could afford to lose the sabotaged nanoagent, but if Major Darius was forced to use a conventional transport, it would give less weight to his claim of Plass responsibility. Captain Ackilat had failed to properly secure the shuttle bay.

Terenta turned toward Darius, who was still engrossed in a recording of the shuttle's departure at one of the bridge workstations. He must have played it over twenty times. "Major. Are you absolutely certain the shuttle hyperdrive will not function?"

Darius reached into his right pocket, and produced a metal cylinder. "Not without the field processor, sir. Plass tech, and pure luck Engineering had it for examination. Without this component, the shuttle has no hyperdrive or long range communications."

Terenta nodded. *Collins must have meant to use it to warn Confed... I expect he'll be quite peeved when he finds he's still trapped in Alliance space, unable to call anyone further away than us.*

Darius paused the footage of the shuttle on one of the last frames before it vanished into the cloud. "Sir. What shall we do if he doesn't come out after us, but stays inside the cloud?"

"We'll place armed sentinels before we leave the sector. But I doubt Collins will hide for very long. The shuttle has no life support."

The navigator spoke up. "Captain! Cloud density is dropping quickly, we'll have full ship function in about thirty seconds."

Captain Ackilat nodded. "Good. Maintain course and put some distance between us and the cloud. If the lifter tries a suicide run at us, I want no more than ten percent strain on the deflectors when the nanoagent detonates."

Admiral Terenta watched the ship's sensors power up to full operation. The static faded, and stars emerged from the darkness. The tactical display finally cleared, showing a sector completely clear of vessels.

He permitted himself a grin. The ship was no longer constrained. Nothing could touch them.

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Kiranda rose to her feet too quickly, lost her balance and toppled into a heap against the wall. Questions raced through her mind, all competing for top priority.

*If this is virtual reality, how long have I been in it? What's the last thing that was real? How do I know what memories to trust? Am I even who I think I am?!*

Not being able to trust her senses was bad enough, but the thought that her memories could be fake truly frightened her. The reading from her internal chronometer might not be wrong too. For all she knew she'd never had one, and remembering that she did was another illusion.

She closed her eyes and took a few deep, steady breaths.

*If I second guess everything, there'll be no end to it. I'll start from the basics: Be practical and compassionate. I need both, neither should ever trump the other.*

She rolled onto her back.

Her most recent memory before waking was being attacked by Langley. The simplest explanation was he had caught her, and she'd been a prisoner ever since. So why was she being deceived?

Collins had told her to disable the self-destruct on the nanoagent, but that was after she woke so it probably wasn't him at all. That suggested the whole VR environment was a rush job, thrown together to get her to disarm the canisters.

That required interaction with the sabotaged nanoagent. How? Probably a remote-controlled android, with her actions in VR guiding the machine in the real world. The simulation monitored her progress, and provided the appropriate sensory feedback to convince her she actually was the android. It would do what she did, and disable the destruct. That was why the fiber in her fingernail hadn't worked, the android didn't have one.

*They must have drugged me so I wouldn't notice the limitations of the android. They even told me I was drugged! I'm so damned stupid, I just swallowed the whole story.*

She looked at her hand, and flexed her fingers. It certainly looked like her own hand, complete with dried blood. She formed a fist, aimed at the plastic tool box, and punched it with all the strength she could muster.

The cover bounced back into shape without so much as a crack.

*Well, that settles it. I should have broken that to pieces, the android must be a real lightweight. They must have scanned my physical appearance.*

She frowned. *Why didn't I get a muscle error or something to explain why it didn't break? That's... odd.* She rose into a sitting position against the wall and tried to think the whole situation through.

The setting they'd chosen made sense. The android was kept contained in a limited area, along with the nanoagent. Both were probably in an otherwise empty room in reality.

*No, wait... If they know about the sabotaged nanoagent, they wouldn't risk keeping it on board! Maybe it really is in the actual lifter.*

But she wouldn't be able to remotely control the android if she were on the Thorn and the lifter still in the cloud. No maybe she was on board the lifter as well? That would account for why her test had not produced an excuse. Her captors were too far away to properly monitor her.

*So... I'm alone. There are no Confed troops, no transport coming. My chronometer is probably accurate, and my sabotage efforts are only a threat to me. Again!*

Still sitting, she let her head drop to her knees.

*I have limited control of an android, and my body is somewhere close. Maybe I can find it and free myself?*

Kiranda climbed to her feet, and re-examined the lifter's interior. The cabin door with the green cross caught her gaze, and tried the handle.

It was locked.

She tried the other three cabin doors, and found them unlocked. Two were cabins, with no more than a small double-bunk in each. The third looked like it had once been a cabin, but the bunks had been removed to transform it into an empty storage space.

She returned to the flight deck, and sat down at the control. Android body or not, staying on her feet was exhausting.

There was no sign of any control system for the interior doors, but there was an internal sensor system. It was inactive, and when she attempted to turn it on, it stayed off.

She tried external sensors, which showed nothing but noise and darkness. Some alternative feeds were available, one of which was the supposedly inactive internal sensors. She selected 'Medbay' from the list.

An image appeared, showing a small room from the perspective of one corner of the ceiling.

The room held an operating table on one wall, and very little space alongside it. Lying on it was her own familiar figure, still clad in her black outfit. She was strapped down from head to foot, with bright 2D readouts glowing in the air above her. Her head was cradled by a white ceramic block which she recognized as one of the Ranboen's more expensive VR models. Her hair and face were filthy, and under the bright medbay lights, she looked so pale that for a moment she thought she might really be dead after all.

An autodoc was suspended from the ceiling over the table. The gleaming white machine was fully powered, and looked like it was ready to operate.

*Of course... Once I disable the nanoagent they won't need me anymore. I wonder what it'll do? Fatal injection? Maybe they'll slowly cut me up as revenge for Sach.*

Kiranda was used to seeing herself from the perspective of security cameras, but the image from medbay felt profoundly unsettling. The body on the table looked like a corpse.

She switched off the display.

*I have to get that door open. If the autodoc decides to kill me when I do, that's just tough.*

Kiranda retrieved a compact pickaxe from the cargo area, and returned to the medbay door. She tried the handle one more time, but it still refused to budge.

Bracing herself, she swung the pickaxe with all the power she could muster. It struck the handle, and the tool immediately tore itself out of her hands. She toppled backwards, hit the wall, and slipped to the floor.

Wincing in pain, she searched for the wayward axe. It had come to a halt next by the kitchenette, next to a new gouge in the flooring.

Unfortunately, the locked door had only a single shallow dent just above the handle.

“Bugger.”

She sat and thought.

*Okay, the android is too weak. It can't break in by force, and the lock looks like a good one. What else can I try?*

She broadcast an all-frequencies Network request, and received only a polite refusal. The response took about twice as long as it should have, which meant her implant's broadcasts were being intercepted and filtered. It was probably only pretending to allow it in case it proved necessary to

disable the nanoagent. She could probably get past the filters eventually, but it would take too long. The hovering autodoc and the nanoagent meant gave fresh meaning to deadline.

She rubbed her face. *Think, damn it! Can I cut power to the Medbay? No, both Medbay and main computer will have their own emergency power sources.* She hesitated. *The lifter's main computer must be running the VR session, nothing else is powerful enough. If I destroy it, the VR will end! What will the autodoc do without data from the main computer? Hell, let's find out!*

Kiranda stood, retrieved the pickaxe, and returned to the flight deck.

The panels on the walls were neatly labeled. It took only a moment to locate *Primary Processing* on one of the larger panels next to the door. She pulled it open, revealing a slightly dusty blue cylinder the width and length size of her upper arm. The side bore a variety of plugs, from which a range of colorful cables trailed in all directions.

Her expert eyes studied the core. Judging by the coolant tubes, the machine was an older model but certainly capable of maintaining the world that kept her prisoner. She'd see no computers powerful enough in the Medbay, so the one before her was probably the culprit.

She touched the cylinder with a finger, marking a target on the dust that she figured would hold the interlinks between the primary and backup. Gripping the pickaxe, she stepped back and tried to prepare herself.

If she succeeded, just the destruction of the computer may kill her. Normally there were safeguards to prevent dangerous surges, but those safeguards also prevented the kind of subterfuge she was trapped in, so they must have been disabled.

She tried not to think about the autodoc.

Taking care to make the most of the android's limited strength, she drew back the pickaxe, then swung hard.

In the next moment, she felt as though she was drowning, freezing, burning, shrinking and expanding all at once. Rational thought was impossible.

She found herself screaming when her senses returned, writhing within the tight bands that held her in place. Her head felt like it had been smashed wide open.

It took a moment to recognize what she was looking at. The projected readouts above the operating table, and above them, the autodoc hung like a great metal spider. A motionless one, she was relieved to find.

“Network failure,” announced a calm, female voice that seemed to come from the table beneath her. “Power failure,” it added as the lights in the room dimmed. Kiranda felt her weight vanish as the artificial gravity shut down. “Emergency power active.”

Hoping the pain in her head was not serious, Kiranda tested the straps that bound her. They were tight. Forming fists with her hands, she put all her strength into trying to lift her arms off the table.

The straps gave a little. She maintained the pressure, clenching her jaw as her arms trembled with the strain. The strap gave a little bit further, and then her forearms burst free. She fought to catch her breath, and examined the end of the strap.

The restraint hadn’t broken; she had torn the metal clasp from the metal slot it had been fastened to. She grinned.

With the use of her hands, she quickly unclipped the remaining clasps, swung her legs behind her, and gently pushed herself toward the door.

Despite the zero gravity and the stable starting position, she missed and collided with the doorframe.

*Wow, what did they dose me with?*

Grabbing the door handle stopped her from bouncing away. Her legs seemed reluctant to do what she wanted, and it seemed to be their weight that had ruined her trajectory. Holding the door handle, she located the simple lock and flicked it open.

The door opened, and she pulled herself into the corridor.

She was definitely inside the lifter. To her left, she could see the canisters of nanoagent in the cargo room. To her right was the entrance to the flight deck, where a pair of angular white feet protruded from one side. Judging by the angle of the foot and the odor of burnt circuits, the android had taken a lot of damage.

The scent of coffee wafted into her nostrils.

The kitchenette was only a few paces away. The hopper was still open, and dry grounds were scattered around it. Kiranda launched herself toward it.

She collided into a wall and narrowly rebounding into the next by grabbing the edge of the bench. Tentatively, she scooped a handful of the grounds into her mouth.

It tasted even worse than earlier, but she swallowed and immediately convulsed in a fit coughing. Coffee floated through the air around her and despite the coughing fit, she grinned.

*Oh yeah, that’s the stuff!*

The hunger in her belly eased a little, and even her throbbing headache faded. She floated there for a few moments, flexing her legs as the caffeine circulated through her body. For whatever reason, she seemed to be recovering from the Alliance drugs. Pleased, she pulled herself to the flight deck.

The android floating just above the floor still held the pickaxe, which Kiranda was pleased to see had struck the cylinder so well the tip had gone through and out the other side. Moving the droid aside, she examined the communications console.

It was every bit as dead as the shipboard computer.

*Was it offline all along? I should have realized smashing the main computer might knock out lots of systems...* She glanced back down the passageway. The nanoagent canisters were there, still programmed to self-destruct.

The sight reminded her of the cure she had stolen from the Alliance, and she touched her outfit's chest pocket. The tiny cylinder was still there. Had the Alliance not noticed it? Maybe they left it intentionally. For all they knew she might have sabotaged it too.

“So. I’ve gone from being trapped with a time bomb, to being trapped with a time bomb. Yay me.” She winced.

*I have to disarm them. At least it’ll buy me some time.*

She set off toward the canisters. It seemed obvious the Alliance meant to pick up their weaponry once they knew it was safe. But that might be in minutes, or weeks.

She checked her internal chronometer, and stopped.

There was no longer enough time to deactivate all the canisters. She'd taken too long, an explosion was inevitable.

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Colonel Isamu Collins pulled the shuttle through one more tight turn. A thump reverberated through the hull as the drone pounded at the hull once more.

Astatoba had managed to strap himself into the ship's only other seat. His looked a little green, but he was doing an admirable job of monitoring the drone. “It's more maneuverable than we are. Every turn we make, it makes just as quickly.”

Collins scowled. “I can't lose it, This ship doesn't steer worth a damn.” He flew straight for a change and glanced at Astatoba. The strip of torn cloth tied around his head bore a red stain. “How are you coping?”

The man swallowed. “i feel better without the roller coaster ride.”

“I meant the cut on your head.”

“Oh, it's not serious.” The ship shuddered as the drone slammed into the hull yet again. “Won't it destroy itself if it keeps this up?”

Collins hesitated. “I think it's testing us for weaknesses, searching for entry points. How far have we moved from our starting marker?”

Astatoba looked at the blue display on his right. “Barely a kilometer, after all the turns. But that would be enough for us to miss the lifter, if it's on a straight course.”

The ship shuddered once more. Collins let out an exasperated grunt, and took them back toward the search area. If it weren't for the shuttle's gyro, he'd have lost all sense of direction long ago.

“Let's ignore the drone and try to find Schaefer. She may be able to assist.”

In the darkness ahead of them, a dim gray form of the drone appeared and hurtled toward them. Collins wrenched at the stick, but the heavy vessel was far too sluggish. It was going to hit the windscreen.

At the last moment, the machine's legs gathered together to form a single spike which struck the exact center of the windshield.

Jeremiah instinctively raised his hands to shield himself, but Collins barely flinched at the impact. He'd been anticipating an assault on the glass since the machine had first appeared.

The drone vanished, leaving a small circle of white on the otherwise undamaged screen.

Collins allowed himself to relax a little. The screen had held. With luck, the drone had taken more damage than the ship. It might even try to return to the *Thorn* for orders.

Astatoba lowered his hands, and stared at the mark on the screen. His gaze remained locked on the impression for several seconds before he finally closed his eyes. “Good lord, I wish this were all over.”

“Careful what you wish for, you may get it.”

Astatoba grinned. “A fair point.”

The machine hit the hull above them, more lightly than usual. The impact was immediately followed by a scratching sound. Collins sent the ship into a sharp spiral, but the noises continued until it became high-pitched buzz that reverberated on the hull.

Collins stopped trying to throw the machine off the hull, and gave Astatoba a grim look. “Well, it's given up looking for weaknesses and started cutting.”

Astatoba looked up at the ceiling. The noise sounded uncomfortably close. He turned back to the navigation display. "I think it best that we locate the young lady quickly."

"I think so. The lifter might have a manipulator arm we could use as a weapon. But in this murk, we'll be lucky to find her."

Astatoba hesitated. "I thought we were going to locate the craft visually?"

"The lights on this tub are not up to the task."

"Might I make a suggestion?"

\*\*\*

Kiranda Schaefer examined the cargo bay's wide doors, running her fingers along the smooth edge as she floated. The inflated seal was visible. In theory, opening the doors would create enough decompression force to pull the nanoagent canisters out, and set them flying away from the lifter.

With the computer offline, the only way to open the doors seemed to be a covered pull-handle, locked in place with a tightly fitted pin. She worked the pin free and gripped the handle.

*Well, I survived it once. Sort of.*

As a precaution, she gripped one of the support rails that ran around the chamber. When she pulled the handle, a shrill alarm rang out and the lights turned red. Kiranda gripped the rail with both hands, and held on tight.

Concealed motors whined, and then stopped. The door was still closed. The handle flipped back into place, and the lights returned to dim white.

She let go of the beam. "Well, that figures."

From the sound of the motors, the doors must be welded shut from the outside. No doubt a precaution by her captors. It wasn't much of a disappointment, even if she'd managed to dump the canisters and repressurize the cabin, the impending explosion would likely still have been close enough to destroy the lifter and her with it. Only engines could get her to a safe distance.

*Maybe I can detach the whole module from the lifter? I don't think it's meant to be done outside of drydock, but it may be possible.*

She pushed away from the wall and searched for the point where module met lifter.

The seam was easy to locate. It was the flight deck hatchway, the frame of which was three times as thick as the others. Unfortunately, there

was no sign of a door. Maybe it was removed whenever the module was attached.

*Not necessarily... It might be a design that will close once the module is removed. It so, there will be some kind of emergency release for the module would be in the flight deck.* She drifted over the prone android, and began a methodical search.

She opened every panel, but found nothing. The only door release was the one on the ceiling hatch, and that was far too small to get even a single canister through.

Kiranda noticed her breath was creating fog. *That was quick. Well, at least I don't have to worry about freezing to death. I'll be blown up first.*

She tried the exterior floodlights, but they didn't respond. There probably wasn't enough power for them. A music player was still powered, and Kiranda selected play to see if it carried any hidden secrets. The rhythmic beat of electronic drums filled the cabin, accompanied by a pair of male singers with Alliance accents.

She switched it off. Her neighbor's dog did better during full moon. Drawing up her legs, she hugged them for warmth.

*Well, there's a few minutes left until the nanoagent goes boom, and I'm out of options. At least it'll be quick. At worst I'll get cooked for a second or two before the cascade goes critical. The heat might even be nice.*

She smirked. If nothing else, it would be interesting.

*...ply. C... ..ease... ..ly.*

Kiranda froze, not daring to move a muscle or even breathe. The fragmented signal had arrived through her implant, a transmission encrypted with the codes Collins had given her. But instead of reaching her through whatever remained of the lifter's Network, it was a direct broadcast.

She waited, but the signal didn't seem inclined to repeat. It might be her systems were starting to fail, or the drugs hadn't worn off as much as she thought.

*...ome in, Schaeff. Respond.*

She straightened so quickly she slammed the back of her head against the wall and set herself spinning in the air. Ignoring the pain, she immediately broadcast a reply. *Collins! It's Schaeff, I'm here! Come in.*

*Come in, Schaeff. Please respond.*

The message was weak, and seemed to come from multiple directions. Kiranda boosted the strength of her implant transmission to maximum.

*This is Schaeff. Your signal is weak, can you hear me?*

*Schaeff! I hear you. Keep transmitting, I need a fix on your position.*

*I'll start a beacon.* Kiranda started a signal, two pulses every second. *Collins, I have a bunch of Copycat on board rigged to blow. She added the countdown to her transmission. You may not want to come any closer.*

There was a pause, presumably while Collins calculated how much time he needed to get clear of the blast.

*That might prove useful. For one thing, we have a drone cutting through our hull. I have visual on your lifter... What's your condition?*

*The lifter is screwed, but I can move about inside it.*

Kiranda's headache began to return with a vengeance. The high-power transmission signal seemed to be aggravating the remnants of the drugs.

The transmission from Collins narrowed to somewhere roughly in front of the lifter, and she pushed past the seats to see. Eventually, she located a smudge of light that gradually grew brighter.

*Can I cut the beacon? My head is in labor.*

*Do it. If you have a suit, put it on quick. We're in a Plass ship, and our airlock can't dock with yours.*

"God damn it!" The words burst from her before she thought to keep it from the broadcast. Fortunately, her implant figured she didn't mean to send the remark. She moved away from the windscreen. *Colonel, I don't have a suit.*

There was a pause. *I'll get as close to your airlock as I can. Our hatch is a large target, but mind the hostile.*

She stood. *Okay. Go for the hatch on top of the flight deck. It's the only one that may work.*

*I see it. Get ready.*

The cloud outside brightened with the searchlights of the approaching shuttle. Kiranda pushed toward the ceiling, and hooked her feet behind the rungs of the ladder. Gripping the wheel, she started hyperventilating to oxygenate her blood. Her internal O2 had recharged enough for only a few seconds. She'd have to move very fast indeed.

The hatch was a simple enough design. She was confident it wouldn't give her any trouble, as long as it wasn't welded shut too.

*I'm good to go, just give the word.*

*Let me know when you're in our airlock. Opening outer hatch... Go!*

Still hyperventilating, Kiranda turned the wheel as fast as she could.

Four latches slowly retracted as the wheel turned. Three of them cleared their niches, the fourth proved to be longer and the wheel became

harder to turn. When the final latch squeaked clear the hatch tore itself from her fingers and swung open into the void. Some mechanism in the hinge prevented it from rebounding, but there was no impediment to the hurricane of air rushing out around her.

Her feet held her in place on the rungs as she peered at the crimson ship above. The side facing her was battered and scraped, the airlock gaping open. The distance between the two ship's hulls was barely three times her height. Her lungs emptied as the last of the air left the ship.

Her joints began to ache. The lack of a controlled depressurization meant the trace gases in her bloodstream and body tissue were expanding much too quickly.

Kiranda gripped the rim of the hatch and launched herself away from the lifter. Boiling vapor sprayed from her lungs into the vacuum, and her internal O2 kicked in.

For once, her care paid off and she floated straight into the airlock chamber. She felt the shuttle's gravity field grip her, and the airlock floor rushed up.

*I'm in!*

She hit the floor and rolled in the bizarre silence to absorb the impact.

*Roger, outer door closing.*

She felt a sudden jolt through the deck beneath her. Turning, she found the door was stuck halfway held open by the mass of a dark gray maintenance drone. It clawed at both floor and door with long ceramic arms, trying to pull itself further in. Each appendage boasted a vicious-looking tool which scratched and gouged the deck.

One of the arms lashed toward her, wielding a short cylinder she recognized as a short-range cutter. She had seen similar ones on construction sites, swiftly cutting sheet metal.

*Collins! Hostile in the airlock!*

The cutter flared into life.

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Admiral Terenta watched as the first long-range scanner sweep completed. Apart from the sentry buoys left by the cloud, the sector was clear. He noticed Captain Ackilat's shoulders relax as the man examined the same data.

It was pleasing to see the Captain had assumed nothing, despite the reassuring silence from the buoys. Expecting unpleasant surprises was a good sign in a commander.

An overlay displayed nearby short-range signals and their sources. It seemed that several brief signals had emanated from the cloud behind them. The signals looked were too weak to get a precise fix of their points of origin.

The communications officer gave a summary. "Sir, transmission fragments detected within the cloud are consistent with Confederation implant technology. Very short range."

Captain Ackilat nodded. "Launch a relay, let's hear what they're saying."

"Launching. Relay will enter cloud in sixteen seconds."

The signal fragments became clearer as the relay approached the vast yellow gas cloud. The possible sources locations were narrowed, and additional columns of data appeared as the ship's computer analyzed the signal.

Terenta studied the data with a frown. There seemed to be not one origin, but two. A conversation, highly encrypted.

The probe went deeper, but the signals stopped.

Ackilat turned toward him, and raised an eyebrow.

Terenta smiled. "No change, Captain. Keep us well away."

"Understood sir."

*Collins must be searching for his troublesome comrade. I rather hope he finds her. Either he'll help her disarm the nanoagent, or he'll be torn to atoms along with her.*

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Kiranda rolled across the airlock floor. The vivid white of the cutter sliced a glowing arc in the floor, narrowly missing her. A cluster of dented sensors on the front of the machine turned in their sockets, keeping her in sight.

With the machine wedged tight in the hatchway, the only place it could not see was beneath its own hull, between the powerful lower limbs.

Kiranda dived under the machine, placing herself out of the range of the bulky torch and into range of the machine's lower appendages, which immediately stabbed at her.

*Collins! The drone is jammed in the outer door; it can't close!*

Kiranda grappled with the machine's arms as the last of the moisture coating her eyes bubbled into vapor. More arms struggled to reach her, but the hatch limited their movement. She kicked at the drone's hull, trying to

push it out so the hatch could shut. Her efforts merely used up the last of her internal O2.

A compact buzz-saw entered her field of vision, the deadly blade spinning with eerie silence. She did her best to knock the blind thrust aside, and scrambled away from the machine. The move brought her back into range of the glowing cutter. She jumped over it, and felt the edge of the buzz-saw tug at her thigh as it nicked her suit.

*I'm in trouble here!*

*Stay clear of the outer door, I'll ram it.*

The shuttle lurched, and Kiranda flew helplessly toward the airlock's inner door. She managed to land on her shoulder as she struggled to remain conscious. She was out of time.

The lifter she's left behind grew to quickly fill the expanse beyond the hatch. Kiranda tried to brace, then the two ships collided and she was catapulted toward the machine.

She glimpsed the hatch door as it slammed shut, slicing the drone in half. Dark fluids erupted from the machine, then she collided with it and everything went black.

Her lungs struggled to breathe, but to her amazement, she felt them fill with warm air.

She gasped, blood thumping in her ears. Air rushed over her, bringing a range of confusing noises. She saw torn synthetic muscle, and felt a surge of panic before she realized it was from the drone. She stared at the twitching machine, her head and joints throbbing.

*Hah! Not so sleek and pretty inside, huh? Join the club.*

The airlock was moving, which seemed odd.

*Why can't I move my legs?*

She realized someone was hauling her away from the remains of the drone, and they were having difficulty doing it. As oxygen-rich blood returned to her brain, she recognized Doctor Jeremiah Astatoba. He wore a bloodied bandage around his head, a white surgical gown, and absolutely nothing else. He looked like an angel.

He smiled at her apologetically. "Sorry, I thought it best to get you away from the drone in case it's still active. You're a bit heavier than you look."

"My emotional baggage," she muttered, politely refusing Astatoba's silent offer of aid and gripping the airlock's narrow handrail instead. He looked to be in no condition to support anybody. The movement prompted a brief burst of dizziness, but that faded when she noticed the cause.

She and Astatoba were standing at an angle. The shuttle evidently had no inertial dampeners, and was accelerating. Collins was trying to escape the impending explosion by using ordinary thrusters.

Astatoba touched her arm. "Are you alright?"

She managed a grin. "I'm getting there. Thanks Doc." She moved along the rail toward the airlock's inner door. When she reached it, Astatoba again silently offered his shoulder. This time, she accepted it. It helped steady her, and it made him feel useful.

The airlock closed behind them as they skirted the dead Plass and head to the flight deck.

Colonel Collins sat in one of two seats at the controls, buckled in by a harness that seemed designed to hold a rhinoceros. Judging from the navigation display, they were flying out of the cloud to open space. Kiranda checked her internal chronometer, and found the nanotech canisters would detonate in a few seconds.

Collins spared only a brief glance away from the screens. She noticed his cheek twitch when he saw her. "Brace yourselves!"

Kiranda hurried to the only seat on offer, and slumped into it. Looping an arm around Astatoba's waist, she pulled him onto her lap. The harness was huge, and stretched around both of them before tightening. The straps pressed his bony back against her breasts.

She put her arms around his, locked her fingers together, and held him steady as the countdown on her implant reached zero.

It went into negative figures before the light burst from the cloud. Three separate shipboard alarms sounded, their combined cries waking the migraine she thought she'd beaten. Half the flight deck displays became solid rectangles of bright yellow, flashing radiation warnings. Some of the panels around the walls blew open, and began to release black smoke in impressive quantities.

The displays flickered, then most of them vanished.

The shockwave hit a few seconds later. The remaining displays and lights went out, and Kiranda was pulled and shoved in every imaginable direction. Metal screamed, and hunk of debris flew.

Kiranda kept her eyes shut. She was convinced the ship was being torn apart, and the prospect of facing the vacuum again was so awful she wished for one of the lumps of debris to find her first.

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## Chapter Thirteen: Surplus to Requirements

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Motionless in the void of space, a jet-black wedge of frictionless ceramic waited. It was a Confederation warship, though few would have recognized it as such. The Manta class was a stealth design, a technology relegated to surveillance vessels since the development of field technology and hyperdrives.

The *Dusk* was far from idle. With more sensors than a vessel ten times its size, it gazed beyond conventional space, scrutinizing the distant gas cloud with concentration only an intelligent machine could achieve. The machine evaluated, watched, and patiently waited for the signal from Collins.

There were several thousand intelligent machines in the Confederation, but few enjoyed long periods of solitude as much as the *Dusk*. Away from the interruptions of the Confed Network, it could relax in peace even while monitoring data streaming from sensors. It even had time to simulate a few universes.

It had five active ones at the time, all based on the same mathematical model. So far, only one had produced planets. Another had formed a vast swirl of matter that seemed in danger of becoming so huge it would tax the limits of known physics. Strangely, the only difference between the two artificial realities was the angle of one of the anti-strings during the instant of the big bang.

It set aside a portion of long-term storage to record the comparison. Hopefully, one of the other who shared its interests would be able to provide some insight. Sasha Ulrik in particular might make sense of the variances from previous models.

Sasha was an unaugmented thirteen year-old girl on New Tania, and a good friend. Some of her theories had forced *Dusk* to re-think some long-favored simulation techniques.

She didn't know it was a ship, which made it feel a little guilty. *Dusk* did not officially exist, so it had told her it was a weather prediction machine in the Core Systems. The deception contained a grain of truth, and her enthusiasm had been quite unaffected. She was a very promising human.

On the subject of promising, the latest long-range readings showed activity within the gas field... Several of the displacement scanners had detected a significant release of energy.

*Dusk* boosted the gain on the relevant sensors, increasing the resolution twenty times at the cost of temporarily overheating the sensors.

It suspended the simulation of two universes, and allocated the extra resources to studying the readings as they came in, millisecond by ponderous millisecond.

It calculated a 99.92% percent probability the readings were a series of explosions within the cloud. The detonations were nearly simultaneous, and clustered so near each other even *Dusk* had trouble determining how many there were. The shockwave starting to spread through subspace confirmed a degree of atomic breakdown.

It certainly wasn't Wellspring 21. If such a large mass had come that close to the edge of the cloud, it would have sent the scanners off the chart.

The explosion reached maximum intensity, and *Dusk* found a 94.23% probability the destruction was caused by between four to eight containers of programmable nanotech self-destructing by use of the code provided to Collins and his team.

It considered the possible implications.

The signal from Colonel Collins was overdue, and it the explosion was outside of the designated mission area. But it was close, and it seemed clear the team was involved.

The subspace shockwaves began to dissipate, leaving no sign of hyperdrive usage. Perhaps it was a signal from Collins... But if so, did he want *Dusk* to approach or to flee?

The scanners were running hot, but it kept them going and noticed an anomaly. Barely detectable by the cloud, was a pair of extremely shallow grooves on the subspace fabric. It was very recent, and already starting to fade.

*Dusk* was impressed.

There was a starship out there, moving at sublight speed. The distance between the grooves suggested a warship. A heavy destroyer at least, possibly even a light cruiser. With such little disturbance, it had to be a near-new vessel. The angle and position indicated the ship was moving out, away from the explosion and the cloud. A ship that could carry nanoagent ordinance, and outgunned it by an order of magnitude.

*Dusk* ramped reactors up to full power.

All engines gulped down every joule they were given, and the ship leaped forward. *Dusk* compiled a report of what it had seen, explained its intentions, and transmitted all it had to Headquarters in an encrypted burst. If things were to go badly, at least its superiors would have an idea what had happened to it.

The starscape behind it rippled as the drive plates shoved against spacetime. While the hyperdrive began to charge up, Dusk inspected the wake behind it, and noted with satisfaction that the subspace signature was significantly weaker than the one it had noticed near the cloud.

With speed building, Dusk calculated a range of options for jumping to hyperspace and selected the most direct. When the hyperdrive generators had soaked up every terajoule they could, the ship jumped.

As a machine, it could see the starscape before it twist and open, making way for the jet-black circle forced into existence.

Dusk's angular nose hit the portal five nanoseconds after it opened.

The hyperdrive poured all the power it had into keeping the rip open. Field coils superheated and generators strained, but the Dusk pressed on until, barely an instant after opening, the generators vented and the portal slammed shut barely a yard behind the drive plates.

Jump completed, the Dusk continued to accelerate through hyperspace. The rippling planes of energy above and below shuddered like great seas, marking the point where mathematics broke down and matter ceased to hold.

But Dusk knew it was safe. Even the tallest anomalies were well over a hundred kilometers below or above... They only *looked* terrifyingly close.

Dusk busied itself monitoring the fast-cool cycle, and prepared to return to normal space. Jumps so short were not dangerous as such, but they did strain the hardware. Over a third of the coolant reserve had become superheated gas, which vented in great plumes from both sides of the hull.

Without a reference point, knowing when to return to real space relied entirely on extremely careful timing. Dusk intended to re-enter space a mere five thousand kilometers from the braking trail it had seen. Such proximity increased the chance of collision, but it also meant it would get a good look at the area of the explosion and surprise any hostiles.

Dusk armed the weapons it had, including a salvo of medium-range antimatter missiles. Hopefully, it wouldn't need to fight. It wasn't built for it.

It pressed on between the boiling seas. When the hyperdrive finished crash-cooling and began to recharge, the warship shelved the last few simulated universes and freed all the resources it could.

The decisions it made on arrival would likely determine survival or destruction.

\*\*\*

The violence had subsided. Kiranda Schaefer was floating in zero gravity, but to her surprise she could still breathe.

A bruise was developing on her forehead, right between her eyes. During the chaos, the back of Astatoba's head had likely struck her.

She opened her eyes and found the scientist was unconscious. A bruise was visible through his light brown hair, but her reinforced skull didn't seem to have done him any significant damage.

She looked past his slumped figure at the main console, and found only three displays still working. Astatoba's limp form made it difficult to see which systems had power. Collins seemed a little dazed. He winced a few times as if trying to clear his head, or his vision.

She turned her attention to Astatoba and lightly clapped the side of his face. "Wake up, Doc. Your turn to put the garbage out."

He didn't stir. She started timing his pulse, and then realized stars were visible outside. The heavens slid across the windshield as the shuttle slowly tumbled through space. The thrusters should have steadied them, so they had to be casualties of the blast.

"Collins, we're out of the cloud!"

Isamu Collins shot one look at the screen, and turned his attention to the surviving displays. He didn't look pleased with what he found. "See if the self-diagnostics work. Yellow panel, on the wall over there."

Kiranda released her harness and slid out from behind Astatoba. He remained slumbering in the loose harness as she pushed toward the panel.

Her implant had difficulty translating some of the Plass markings, but the self-diagnostic was identified easily enough. She jabbed at the manual interface, but no displays appeared. She pored over the lines of instructions inside the panel, and found it was designed to activate the moment the panel was opened.

A brief examination located the slot hosting the mechanism, which sported a dark patina still reeking of burnt circuitry.

"It's cooked, well and truly." A warning beep made her turn to see more displays coming to life.

The Thorn was still visible in the distance, slowly sliding across the screen as an orange star. She only identified it thanks to the yellow box highlighting it, with a line of Plass text that her implant translated as *Colonial Alliance Light Cruiser, Threat Extreme*. One display provided a magnified view, revealing that her various sabotage efforts had not even scratched the paint.

Collins had left his chair and was working on a section of the console, elbow-deep in the wiring.

Kiranda pushed herself back toward Astatoba. “I suppose making a jump to hyperspace is out of the question?”

Collins gave a firm shake of his head. “No engines.”

One of the displays flickered and vanished. The few that were left had an impressive number of fault notifications and warnings. The shuttle was a write-off, even she could see that. So what was Collins so busy with?

She watched him at work, and realized he was trying to get power to the ship’s short-range communications system.

Strangely, the Thorn wasn't firing on them. It didn't even seem to be moving.

*They're watching us... Why? Do they think we still have nanoagent on board?*

Kiranda eased the unconscious Doctor properly into his seat, and tried to rouse him again. “Come on, Jeremiah. You’re missing the show.”

His eyes flicked wide open, and he seemed to look straight through her. “Abigail?” His eyes focused, and she could see the sense of loss fall over him.

She forced a smile. “Sorry, wrong guess. Nobody here but us loonies.”

To her amazement he returned her smile with genuine warmth. “Of course. Sorry, I was... Very far away.”

*How does he do it? He has even more regrets than I do, yet he has pleasant dreams.*

Astatoba looked past the displays. “It seems we’ve left the cloud.” He nodded at the magnified cruiser. “It will take them a decade to build a new manufacturing facility on that scale. You did well Ms Schaef.”

“Yes!” Collins cried, finally pushing back from the mess of wiring.

She looked at the display in front of him, and found short-range comms was online.

*He managed to get the radio going! I wager it won't stay that way for long, this tub has practically no power left.*

She touched her feet to the floor, and used her grip on the back of Astatoba’s chair kept her in something like a standing position.

Collins started entering data for a burst transmission. “Doctor. Did you manage to activate the sample?”

Astatoba nodded firmly. “Yes. I was present as the transport unloaded it at Wellspring. It was inside packing foam, but I'm sure it must have heard me say the keyphrase.”

“Good. Any idea if they took it aboard the Thorn?”

“None I’m afraid.”

Kiranda felt the chair shudder, and the cabin reverberated with a groan. "Am I supposed to know what the hell you two are talking about?"

Collins paused, his finger hovering over the send button. He seemed to be waiting for something. "It's not very complicated. You remember the Confederation K6 sample Doctor Astatoba gave to the Alliance?"

"Sure. You tracked it to find the station."

The magnified image of the cruiser suddenly moved to one side, and a man's head and shoulders appeared next to it. He wore a uniform with shoulders so richly adorned they could barely hold it all. His bald head shone from a light somewhere above him, but his gaze was what caught Kiranda's attention. His eyes were every bit as cold and piercing as any predator. She had no doubt this was the Admiral Astatoba had mentioned.

The man grinned at them. "All three of you are still alive? I'm impressed, a very sturdy vessel indeed. We hadn't finished examining it."

*He can see us!*

Kiranda's mind raced. If the Alliance could open a two-way channel, they might have been listening from the moment they left the cloud. Worse yet, anything Collins tried they could stop in an instant. "Cut the link!"

The Colonel raised an eyebrow at her. "I wouldn't dream of being so rude to the Admiral!" He smirked. "After all, he may have called to surrender."

Terenta's grin remained unchanged. "Quite the reverse. I might be willing to let you live if you surrender."

"Screw you!"

It took Kiranda a moment to realize it was her who has said that. Her hands grip on the headrest in front of her tightened. The sensation of seeing her own body lying on the lifter's operating table refused to leave her in peace.

Collins shook his head. "I'm afraid we are not in a position to surrender at this stage, Admiral."

Terenta nodded. "I see. After losing good ordnance in that explosion, I'd hoped to salvage something from the loss. No matter." He looked toward someone on his right. "Fire a mark five torpedo at the target."

Collins' gaze hardened. "Not taking any chances, I see. A vaporized ship leaves no identifiable remains."

Terenta didn't reply, but the image of the Thorn boasted a new marker. A neat box curving gracefully around from the ship's hidden bow toward them.

Kiranda stared in surprise. The missile was so large, the shuttle's crippled systems had misidentified it as another shuttle.

Collins leaned forward. “Admiral. You have exhibited a clear intent to commit aggression against Confederation citizens, using a consignment of nanoagent on board your vessel. This constitutes an act of war.”

Kiranda’s gaze left the approaching missile and peered quizzically at Collins. At first she thought he was losing his marbles, but then she noticed the drop of sweat rolling down the back of his neck. He was desperate.

Admiral Terenta curled his lip in contempt. “Oh, please! Even if you could contact your precious Black Division lackeys, you have nothing to suggest the actions of myself or this vessel represent the will of the Alliance.” He waved dismissively. “I have allowed you to delay us long enough.”

The image vanished, leaving only the approaching missile and the distant cruiser. Despite the considerable distance, it was clear the missile was fast. Kiranda estimated they had fifty seconds.

Collins shook his head. “He’s a sly old bastard, I’ll give him that. That whole call was just to confirm what his sensors told him. Checking his facts before closing the matter. Very thorough.”

Kiranda drew a deep breath. “So we’re screwed then.”

Collins didn’t answer.

A flash of blue light burst from the wall behind them, and the main display winked out. He didn’t even flinch. Communications and the short range scanner were the only systems still operating, and Kiranda began to suspect he’d wired the shuttle to burn through everything it had to keep those two systems going.

*The burst transmission... Maybe he's going to try to fry the missile? But then what?*

She shook her head and grinned. “Collins, You are an incurable optimist.”

The corner of his mouth crept up a little, but he kept his gaze on the scanner and his hand over the send button.

The Thorn began to pull away. The disruption caused by the engine plates behind the ship obscured the vessel with ripples of spacetime.

Kiranda watched the image quality drop as the ship accelerated away.

Astatoba studied the grainy display with a thoughtful expression. “At the rate it’s moving, I believe they’ll jump before the missile reaches us.”

Kiranda checked the displays, and realized he was right. The Thorn would be gone by the time the missile hit them.

She winced. “That’s insulting. Are they afraid we have this thing packed with antimatter or something?”

The Thorn began to visibly blur around the edges.

Collins leaned forward. "They're bringing their hyperdrive online."

Kiranda looked first at Collins, and then Astatoba. Both men were ignoring the approaching missile, and watching the Alliance ship intensely. She was about to ask what they were looking for when Astatoba suddenly pointed.

"There! On the lower right, a point of light!"

Kiranda looked up and caught a glimpse of fading light on the underside of the ship. Her view was fouled by her hair drifting past her eyes. She angrily brushed it aside.

The blur around the ship had stopped, and the drive plate was clearly visible again. The ship's belly erupted with spouts of flame and the cruiser began to roll, hiding the glow from view. It was clearly in serious trouble. There was even a trail of debris flowing behind the ship.

One of the long, yellow engine modules erupted in a bright flash. By the time the sensors managed to re-adjust, only a deep scar was visible where the engine had been.

In the next instant the ship exploded in a flash that overpowered the scanner completely. The failing system managed to outline an expanding cloud of debris. Only two chunks of any size remained, and neither were recognizable. A Fire still burned within the larger one, the last of the oxygen burning away.

Kiranda gaped in disbelief.

Doctor Astatoba merely sighed. "Thank goodness."

Collins nodded. "A little antimatter at the right time."

Kiranda looked back at the approaching missile. "Do you have a second miracle for that missile? Because we've got eighteen seconds to live. Fifteen."

Collins shook his head. "Sorry, Schaef, I think I'm out of miracles."

Kiranda looked at the stars. *What a frustrating way to die. So many questions I want to ask!* She drew a deep breath, and sighed.

*Well, we did it. I can finally say I've done more good things than bad. So why don't I feel at peace?*

A third image appeared on the display. Another ship, detected only by the wake it's sheer speed was leaving as it sped along the edge of the cloud. It seemed in a hell of a hurry, and it was closing.

*Alliance reinforcements?*

The image showed a hull so dark it was difficult to make out the shape, but shark-like fins protruded from both sides. She had never seen a ship like it.

Collins reacted to the vessel's appearance by hitting *Send* so hard nearly launched himself out of his chair. The burst transmission was on so many frequencies her implant misinterpreted it as an attack.

Time ran out. The missile reached them, and Kiranda instinctively shut her eyes.

An entire second passed without jagged death. Then another, and another.

She reluctantly opened her eyes to slits.

The missile was gone. Only tiny fragments remained, spinning slowly away as though they had hit the deflector field of a capital ship.

*That's impossible! No ship can project a field across that distance!* The hull groaned, and Kiranda had to hook a foot around the base of the chair to keep herself from drifting toward the wall. *It's pulling us toward it.*

The shuttle finally stopped tumbling, and turned to find the black ship already alongside. It was so close it filled the entire view.

Kiranda turned to Collins, and found he was grinning like an idiot.

"I was wrong Schaefer. Turns out there was one more card up the sleeve after all." he smiled at her. "Even though I was certain I'd lost it."

The hull groaned as gravity returned, slowly enough for her to set both feet on the deck and stand. A hissing sound grew loud, and was already easing away by the time Kiranda realized it was entering the hull from outside.

Collins climbed to his feet. "People, welcome to the CSC Dusk, a Manta Class destroyer."

As if on cue, the black windscreen flooded with light. Kiranda stepped toward it, and squinted into the glare.

The shuttle was neatly parked in a white hangar. Several maintenance drones were fussing around their crippled vessel, but there was no sign of any people. As she watched, a machine resembling a football with legs clambered over the shuttle's crimson nose and peered at her through the dented screen. Collins gave the drone a thumbs-up. The machine jumped in what she could have sworn was joy, then it scuttled up and onto the roof of the craft.

Astatoba closed his eyes, and held his hand to his bandaged head. "I never managed to activate the beacon, Ms Schaefer. Did you?"

"No, it was destroyed."

Collins scratched his chin. "The CSC Dusk is fully autonomous. It probably detected the nanoagent detonation, and concluded we needed help. Good thing too, though it was damn near too late."

Kiranda shot a look at Collins. “You never mentioned your ride was a full-blown warship.”

The Colonel raised his hands in mock surrender. “A stealth vessel, yes. It's primary purpose is surveillance, and it's quite friendly.”

*Maybe, but I swear I saw missiles on some of those fins.*

Collins crossed to the airlock and hit the switch, to no effect. The frame seemed a little warped. “You'll have to make us a new door, Dusk.”

Kiranda heard a high-pitched whine as rescue cutters went to work outside. The three of them moved clear of the airlock as the drones carved their way in. They must have been designed for the job, because they made swift progress.

Kiranda shook her head. “You two might be busy patting yourselves on the back, but the hired help is still very confused. What happened to the Thorn? You said something about antimatter.”

Collins nodded. “Yes, there was a small antimatter bomb on board.”

She waited, but he didn't elaborate. “How in the hell did you manage *that*? Didn't they search you both?”

“We didn't bring it aboard, they did. It was in the K7 sample Jeremiah brought to them. There was certainly nanotech in there too, a basic medical nanopaste used to treat nerve damage. Beneath it was a small antimatter charge.”

Kiranda winced. “In something so small? But the fields and shielding need... It can't...”

“It's a fortune to manufacture, but the technology has been around for decades. The fields can be detected by active scans, but active scans damage concentrated nanoagent so we knew it would be undetected for a time. Fortunately, we arrived on Wellspring before they could commence proper tests.”

She glanced at Astatoba. “You mentioned a keyphrase... That was to prime it?”

Astatoba nodded. “The charge was armed when it heard me speak a specific sentence.”

“...which was?”

*“I believe Abigail would be pleased with me.”*

Kiranda had no reply for that. Fortunately, Collins continued on her behalf.

“After it was armed, all that prevented detonation was a barrier that fails in the presence of high-strength hyperdrive fields. It was our insurance policy, in case the sample and Astatoba were moved beyond our reach.”

Kiranda shook her head. “But that was a big ship! How can such a tiny bomb destroy it?”

“If it were a warhead, the deflectors would have brushed it aside. But it was already inside the hull. The armor funneled the EM burst into the drive, and the ship's own engines tore it apart. By the time the nanoagent went, the ship was already finished.”

The airlock's inner door fell open and hit the floor. Fresh, warm air flowed in. Kiranda had become so used to the stink of blown circuitry the clean air came as a real surprise.

Collins helped Astatoba through the airlock. Kiranda felt a little unsteady, but she followed them without mishap. She wanted to sleep for a month.

A small platform lowered them gracefully to the bright hangar deck. After the interior of the shuttle, so much white was uncomfortable to look at.

A small, open-top transport was waiting.

Kiranda started toward it when her implant warned she was being scanned by one of several drones fussing over them. It was a medical model, so she let it be.

A waist-high drone offered her a moist towel, making her feel she was checking into a spa. She accepted it, and sat on the transport to wipe some of the blood and dirt from her face and hands. A drone tended to Doctor Astatoba, and another busied itself with Collin's upper arm.

Kiranda's towel soon had practically no white left on it. She remembered the damage to her hair and looked to see if there was a mirror, then stopped and laughed.

*I'm injured, narrowly escaped death, and I'm worried about my hair!* She experimentally probed the cut in her mouth, and tasted fresh blood. Annoyed, she spat it into the dirty towel, and handed it to a waiting drone.

She looking around the hangar for the spacedoors, and eventually located them beneath the shuttle.

They weren't very noticeable with the markings turned off. The lack of a crane meant the hangar was dangerously reliant on gravity control. In all likelihood, the designer had done it simply to reduce weight.

“Hey Collins, isn't there any crew on this ship?”

He shook his head “Just us. The CSC Dusk is a full Captain, and commands this vessel. Speaking of which Dusk, you cut that very close! Thanks for the rescue.”

From the solid floor a few metres away from them arose the a pale blue fish, several feet in length. It swam through the air toward them,

slowing to a halt at a comfortable speaking distance. Kiranda studied the image the Dusk had chosen, searching for hints about the machine's personality. The eyes were expressively large. Instead of scales, the creature had a pattern of circuitry that constantly shifted. Kiranda searched her internal catalog of Confederation sentient machines, and found no matches for either the image or the name.

She grunted in surprise. The catalog had been compiled from a range of rather unique sources, and she'd thought it complete. It certainly showed no machine with a military rank above corporal.

The avatar smiled with reassuringly square teeth. "I'm glad to be here, Colonel. Good evening to you Doctor Astatoba, Ms Schaefer."

Kiranda smiled. There was something pleasing in the Dusk's smile lines. "Hello Dusk. Tell me, do you have coffee on board?" She felt her chest pocket, and found the sample of the Copycat cure was still there. "I've got an Alliance nanotech sample here that I'll trade for a good cappuccino."

Collins stared at her.

*Well I'll be damned. It is possible to surprise him after all.*

"You have the Copycat cure?"

Kiranda unzipped her chest pocket, pulled out the metal cylinder, and handed it to him. "It's what you asked for, just make sure the Alliance didn't put one of those antimatter things inside."

Dusk's eyes widened in an expression of delight. "Well done Ms Schaefer! I have a top notch cappuccino preparing already, you'll have it in a minute."

She smiled. "Call me Kiranda. Dusk, you're my new best friend."

The machine laughed. "Why thank you, Kiranda!"

Collins placed the cylinder in a rather heavy-looking container presented by a drone. The machine hurried out of the chamber with it. Dusk seemed to be taking her warning very seriously.

"After the coffee, I'll need some time in your Medbay."

Dusk nodded, and its expression sobered a little. "It is already prepared. Some of your injuries require surgery and replacement tissue, but none are pressing. A short time relaxing will be beneficial."

Collins finally tore his gaze away from the doorway where the droid had vanished with the cure. "Schaefer, that Alliance sample means the border will be safe for the next decade, or more. It... Excellent work, Schaefer. I'm impressed."

"So will you tell me how you did that thing with the sofa?"

He grinned. "Not a chance."

“It was inflatable, wasn't it?”

“I'll never say.”

The vehicle moved out of the hangar with a drone on board to help steady Astatoba's head. Dusk's avatar swam enthusiastically ahead of it. All the doors they passed were closed.

*Probably hiding more secrets, she thought. I've had enough of them.* She shut her eyes.

*I did a lot of good... But those I've killed wouldn't see it that way. Their families...*

She felt a tear forming in the corner of her eye, and wiped the moisture away with her fingers. *I felt sorry for them even as I did it. That has to be what matters.*

She opened her eyes to find Collins gazing at her.

“Schaefer, you and Jeremiah should be proud.”

*Isn't pride is one of the seven deadly sins?*

She was too tired to argue, and merely nodded. “Let's say I feel grateful. I think... somehow, I expected a sense of redemption.” She turned to look at Astatoba.

Astatoba seemed rather better and listened to her intently. “Nothing can change the past. We can only change the future.”

“Thank god for that,” Collins concluded. “This was one mission I would not care to repeat.” The transport slowed to a halt outside a small lounge, from which the smell of coffee beckoned.

She could tell it was a perfect brew. But she stayed where she was, with Collins's flippant words on her mind.

*If our choices are all we have, I can't leave mine to an imaginary little girl. Not any more.*

She stood and followed Collins and Astatoba toward a table of food and drinks, which included the best cappuccino she'd ever tasted in her life.

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The NuAndean night was cool, and the dirt trail still moist so her bike's tires kicked up very little dust. She steered into a grassy clearing, then slowed to a halt and cut the engine. Without the headlight the shrubs and trees were darker implants. Still, the moon was full and she could see well enough without resorting to her implants. The light from the city beyond the reserve flooded the sky, and the moon seemed larger than usual so low on the horizon.

She left her helmet with the bike, and walked through the scrub toward the gentle sound of the sea. The trees and shrubs gave way to a field of soft grasses, which finally ended as the lip of a sandstone cliff.

The city was a glimmering band of light stretching from each side of the reserve, curving away in both directions. Only a handful of stars were visible in the bright sky... The brightest points of light were the many stations and craft in orbit.

She smiled. The man-made stars had a beauty of their own that seemed curiously fitting for the city.

The distant horizon was visible, the water a slightly darker black than the sky above it. The moon sported a fresh smudge of black where the body's massive volcano had been active again during her absence.

Her new augmentations still felt a little strange. Collins had seemed pleased when she offered to give up her more dubious systems. Looking back on it, it occurred to her the replacements were provided suspiciously quickly. They were good ones too, the best money could buy.

In all, the man had treated her very well. He'd volunteered amnesty for her past trespass and hacking activities, which was helpful. He'd also suggested he could offer more work at Black Division, but she still felt dubious about that. Perhaps she would consider something on a case-by-case basis.

*I'm trespassing again already. What would he think of me being here, I wonder? Technically, this land is off limits. A fine of a few hundred credits.*

There were many sites like it, thanks to the Coastal Preservation Act. Land slowly being detoxified into parkland. The one she was in was nearly finished, due to open in another five years.

A shiny softdrink can in the grass indicated she was not the only one who sometimes slipped past the fencing.

She zipped her leather jacket down halfway to expose her blue necklace. Carefully, she pulled the string of beads over her head, one hand automatically trying to push aside a mane that was no longer there. She still hadn't gotten used to the shorter cut.

The loop of blue beads coiled neatly into her palm.

*This saved my life, that day years ago. It helped me find the kindness I had lost.*

The breeze strengthened, and she automatically gripped the necklace to keep it safe. The round beads felt warm and reassuring.

*I won't allow compassion to leave my heart again.*

She opened her eyes. The breeze was cool in her face, but she easily blinked away the threat of tears.

She lowered her arm and felt the weight of the necklace in her fingers. “Thank you, little Kira Schaef. You scamp!”

Swinging, she threw the necklace as hard as she could.

The string of beads rode the wind, flying far from the cliff before dropping into the sea below. It vanished into the dark waves without a sound.

Kiranda smiled. For good or ill, she would make her own decisions and take responsibility for them.

A lone petrel drifted in over the waves, heading toward the land. As the gray and white bird reached the cliffs, it caught the updraft and rose effortlessly into the sky before turning and heading back out to sea. Kiranda watched it soar out over the ocean. Smiling, she took one more breath of the salt-laden air, then turned and walked back toward her bike.

She felt better than she had for a very long time.

**THE END**