

The Spirit of Crielere

An EVE Online Novella

Even from afar the partially built space complex showed all the signs of being a place of science. The circular shape representing eternity was a good omen to Ariko Cumin. The perfect symbol. Maybe the punishment her father had intended for her by sending her here would turn out to be a blessing in disguise. Ariko felt her spirit lift, for the first time in weeks. Maybe this wouldn't hurt her career as much as she'd feared.

The powerful cruiser she was traveling on made slight adjustments to its direction vectors as it entered the docking procedure, sliding majestically towards the station that already loomed large despite being only half finished. Other ships were cruising around the station, some waiting to dock, others outward bounds. Ariko noticed that many of the ships were Gallentean and despite herself she gave a shudder; like all Caldari children she had meticulously studied the war between her own people and the Gallenteans. The ninety years since the war ended had done little to ease the apprehension any Caldari felt in the presence of a Gallentean, even for those, like Ariko, that had never experienced the war personally. The war stories were all-too vivid in her mind to be at ease and she felt her small fists bunch. As the ship eased into its berth, groaning to a halt as the docking arms grabbed it and embraced, Ariko had to utter a few mind mantras under her breath to calm her nerves. She should be calm when entering her new place of work, duty dictated it.

The station had that unique smell that only new stations have before the ventilation filters start cluttering up and the lingering odor of humanity overrides everything else. Crielere, Ariko thought, smelled like freshly polished, brand new hover car. There was no one to greet her. She was just one of the many employees flocking to the station; engineers, technicians, scientists and common workmen, numbering in the thousands. The place was a total chaos and it took Ariko several hours to sort out the locations of her workplace and living quarters. By the time she entered the room assigned to her she was exhausted.

Lying down on the narrow bed to rest, she reflected on the events which brought her here. The total anarchy she'd met on the hallways didn't improve her view of the place and, as so often in the last few weeks, she got that nagging feeling that she'd made a mistake. As if that didn't bother her enough, it also meant that her father had been right and she wrong. She cringed at the thought. Only a few months earlier she had been the most promising physics student the School of Applied Knowledge had seen in ages, sure of a bright future at Wyrkomi, her foster corporation. And now here she was, stuck somewhere on the outskirts of civilized space, participating in some mad scheme hatched by two crazed scientist she knew next to nothing about.

She had been so sure she wanted to belong to something big, something grand. Something else than the dead-end job her father had. And yet her conscience troubled her now that she had

broken free of the silk-bonds that Caldari society bound. She knew she should be repaying her corporation, her family, for the sacrifices they'd made on her behalf. But she feared the lifelong commitment demanded once she'd become an employee of Wiyrkomi, her ambition pleaded for more. Thinking of her ambition she recalled the words of her father the day she stood up to him. 'A child is irresponsible in its desires, it learns responsibility through duty. Are you a child, Ariko?' Her mind cursing the desires of her heart, she drifted into a fitful slumber.

Ariko woke with a start. Somewhere in the distance a horn was sounding, its muted cries bearing on in dissonance. Rubbing her eyes it took her a few moments to gather her senses. The horn stopped for awhile, then started blasting again. It was 7 am , time for work.

Ariko's incredible academic success made her a privileged recruit for the Crielere project. Despite her young age and lack of work experience she had been assigned as a junior assistant to the two pioneers responsible for the whole project, Henric Touvolle and Taromi Umailen. The two held some administrative duties due to their status, yet they insisted upon working in a lab, allowing them to get their hands dirty with the common research worker. The lab was located in the only part of the station completely finished and Ariko was pleasantly surprised to discover that it was fully equipped with the latest gadgets and science equipment. The lab was actually divided into several rooms. The anteroom, which Ariko's workbench was located in, was the largest and served as the main research area. The wall leading back to the station's corridor had only the one entrance door, but the other three walls had several doors each, leading to conference rooms and offices as well as restrooms and a kitchen. There was even a small greenhouse at the back, breaching the hull of the station to reach some sunlight. It wasn't utilized to produce food or oxygen rich plants, though, the main greenhouse section several levels down took care of that. Instead it was used by the biochemists in their research. The chief scientists had their own spacious offices in the back, though Ariko soon found out they seldom used them, preferring to work in the main area with the rest of the staff. A slender Gallente boy met her as she entered the lab and shyly introduced himself as Gunaris the apprentice. He showed her the workstation she was assigned to and left her there. For some reason Ariko felt really self-conscious around him, but in a pleasant sort of way. She scolded herself for her feelings; they were totally inappropriate, after all, he was a Gallentean! She had long since laughed off the boogey stories she heard in her youth that Gallenteans had black hearts and poisonous fangs, yet she had always been uneasy fraternizing with them. But here she was going all gooey over a Gallentean boy!

Ariko caught herself staring at the boy from across the room. Furious at herself, she turned her back and set about familiarizing herself with the computer systems and equipment at her desk, some of which was of Gallentean design and thus unfamiliar to her. She was wrapped up in trying to get a simple tachyonphotometer to work when she noticed two men enter in a hurry, each carrying wads of paper and looking more than a little flustered. She recognized them as Touvolle and Umailen. She had seen holoreels of them in the news, but knew little about them personally. She knew that they had met during the war, Touvolle working as a researcher in a biological warfare unit and Umailen as a military engineer. But the details of their first meeting or why they became these great philanthropic scientists were unknown to her. She had been brought up not to jump to conclusions when there was insufficient data to support an educated opinion, but she couldn't help but feel some indignity towards the pair; wasting their brilliant minds on dreamy delusions.

While Ariko knew relations between the State and the Federation were improving she nevertheless felt a little resentful towards Umailen, befriending a Gallentean was so totally alien

to what she had been taught. But then she remembered her own feelings when meeting Gunaris and shook her head in confusion. 'My first day here at Crielere and already everything is so much more complicated than home,' she thought, for the briefest second pining for the comfortable routine and stability that State citizens enjoyed.

She was hoping to get the chance to chat a little bit with the two scientists, but when she approached them a plump, red-faced woman of Mannar ancestry intercepted her, blocking her path to the venerated pair.

"Get back to your workbench," the woman snapped. Taken aback, Ariko retreated to her workstation, quite bewildered. Out of the corner of her eye she watched the woman fawn around the scientists. Gunaris sidled up to her, also watching the woman.

"Don't take too much heed of Medila," he whispered, "she's the personal assistant to Touvolle and Umailen and she's, well, very protective of them, to say the least. I'd advice you to stay out of her way as much as possible. You don't want her badmouthing you to the bosses."

"Why do they let such an obnoxious person be their assistant? Don't they see her behavior can impend the work we're doing in all sorts of ways?" Ariko asked, still bristling from the way she had been treated.

"It wasn't their choice. The Federation Senate appointed her when they accepted the funding of the project. She's a Senate crony through and through. You'll soon discover that politics play just as large a role here on Crielere as real science. Everyone seems to be looking for an opportunity to stab each other in the back."

"Are you?" Ariko shot back before she could catch herself. Gunaris blushed, then smiled shyly.

"No, I was only talking about the Big Guns, that's what we call those that call the shots around here."

"You mean Umailen and Touvolle?"

"No, the money men. Men like Otro Gariushi, Pier Ancru and Jacus Roden. Umailen and Touvolle provide the vision, they provide the wealth."

"But isn't the Crielere project supposed to benefit everybody equally?" Ariko asked, somewhat confused.

"In theory yes," Gunaris replied, sounding a little sad. "It's a complicated matter, some discoveries will become public right away, other only after some time. I don't know the details all that well, it's not something I'm all that interested in."

By now, the over-protective Medila had herded the two scientists into an adjoining office, teaming them up with people Gunaris described as 'those on her good side'.

"You're not on her good side?" Ariko inquired. Gunaris shrugged.

"I don't think she even knows I exist," he said. Ariko could see that he was quite content with this arrangement.

“Well, I'm supposed to be a junior assistant to them, how can I do my job if I can't even talk to them?”

“You've been misinformed,” Gunaris replied, sounding apologetic. “That title doesn't mean anything else than you work in this lab. Getting access to them is quite another thing.” Ariko stood quiet for awhile pondering this. Gunaris found the silence awkward and soon excused himself so he could carry on his work.

Her mind still in turmoil, Ariko sat at her console and started to browse reports and documents concerning the research taking place in the lab. If she was in doubt about the wisdom of coming here before, she was doubly so now after her conversation with Gunaris. She had been quite exhilarated that morning to be a participant in something so grand, she now felt she was a mere sidekick. ‘If that's the case,’ she thought sourly, ‘I could have just as well have stayed home and behaved properly.’ For the briefest moments she wondered whether she could just return home, begging her father for forgiveness. But she banished such thoughts from her mind as soon as they surfaced; she was not a quitter.

Returning to the reports she was soon totally engrossed in them. As more and more of the Crielere project was revealed to her, the more excited she got. What dreams Umailen and Touvolle had! And yet, it all sounded so simple, so elegant and so plausible. These guys were way ahead of anything being done in the State, Ariko realized. In fact, she now pitied her fellow science students back home, toiling in darkness on trivial research projects. She might not be on the straight and narrow career-path needed to reach prominence within the State, but she now understood she was in a unique position to actually make a difference; to make her mark on the world.

But for her to do so she would have to get past that pesky Medila. She would just have to show that old sow! The grim-looking Mannar woman might be headstrong and vengeful like all her kind, but Ariko was resolved to show her what Deteis were truly made of. Feeling all fired up Ariko wanted to storm into the conference room and confront Medila then and there, but if her strict upbringing had taught her anything it was the merits of self-restraint. Patience was the keyword here; she would bide her time, learn more about the work schedule of the scientists and their daily routines. Then she'd make her move.

Soon, Ariko had settled into the routine of her work, which mainly consisted of double checking test results of others and filing them appropriately. It was a menial job that required little thought. As she suspected, Medila kept the two pioneers isolated from all but those she deemed favorable, i.e. those she could dominate and bring under her forceful will. The research progress was painfully slow. Medila was largely to blame, but there were other distractions. There seemed to be an endless stream of bureaucrats and officials visiting, all needing time and effort to deal with. And the station itself was only half built yet. Even though the lab was in perfect working order the same could not be said of most other facilities on the station. Routine things such as just getting something to eat could be an adventure in itself.

Ariko was one of dozen or so junior assistance working in the lab. It was a mixed crew. Every member race of the Federation seemed to have a representative, the stubborn Mannars, the elegant Intakis, the materialistic Jitai and of course numerous Gallenteans. The Caldari had representatives of their own, including one other Deteis. He was a middle-aged man named Wobanen with a carefully combed hair and distant demeanor. Ariko tried to strike up a conversation with him on several occasions, but never got more than grunts and curt retorts

from him, so she gave up trying to befriend him.

Instead, she found herself drifting closer to Gunaris. The two were of similar age, whereas most of the others were older. They were also the only ones lacking work experience; Ariko having only just graduated and Gunaris still working on his final thesis. He was studying mathematics at Caille University, but was offered an internship at the lab after winning a mathematical competition sponsored by the Quafe Company. He was touted as a mathematical genius and though she was skeptical at first, considering herself to be a more than a competent mathematician on her own, she soon discovered that her talents paled next to Gunaris's. Moreover, while Ariko regarded mathematics simply as a necessity giving her choice of career, Gunaris was refreshingly enthusiastic about the field; it was almost like he revered or loved numbers the way he talked about them. Ariko couldn't help but share in his contagious enthusiasm and let herself be drawn into his world of numbers as he, with a dreamy stare, started talking. Theories and functions formerly so dense and boring sounded simplicity itself coming from Gunaris, and interesting too! As the days passed Ariko discovered that her little talks with Gunaris kept the tiresome monotony of work from making her go crazy. One time he tried to explain to her the work he was doing, but she had difficulty comprehending it. Apparently, there were places in space where earlier macroscopic phenomenon left microscopic residues resulting in dense clouds of plasma particles and charged microscopic dust which blocked electromagnetic radiation. Space ships inside these clouds could get no bearings from cosmic background radiation or known pulsars and were thus unable to warp out again. Gunaris was working on an algorithm, which, when coupled with a common sensor array, would filter out much of this interference. Along with complex multilateration based on nearby gravity wells, it would allow for an accurate location lockdown for ships inside such clouds, allowing them to warp out. She'd gotten a headache after listening to him for awhile, and he didn't broach the subject again.

Ariko was unable to completely shrug off feelings of discomfort when talking with Gallenteans, so she was glad her relationship with Gunaris never developed beyond the chit chat phase. But there were times when she cursed her inhibitions and wished for more.

Ariko used every opportunity to get familiar with the complex political situation on the station. As she had discovered on her first day at work the philanthropic vision of Umailen and Touvolle was only the tip of the iceberg. The Crielere project was the largest undertaking the Gallente Federation and the Caldari State had jointly embarked upon since the end of the war. The funding was divided between the Federation Senate, spurred on by president Souro Foiritan, independent Gallentean moneymen and the Caldari mega-corporations, notably Ishukone and Kalaakiota. The intense public interest in the project coupled with the expectations of what would be accomplished put immense pressure on everyone involved. The scale of it was also far beyond anything Ariko had imagined. The Crielere station would be a high-tech jewel the likes of which the world had never witnessed, but it was becoming ever more obvious that the construction process was not going well, delay upon delay already had the fund raisers squirming. But the whole management structure, faulty as it was, was strictly regulated and interference from the leaders of the corporations and federal agencies was forbidden. The clause had been inserted as one of the amendments demanded by the Senate before they agreed on funding the project; fearing undue influence by the Caldari mega-corporations.

But the main reason was something that Ariko could well identify with; the Gallenteans and the Caldari simply didn't get along all that well. Apart from daily confrontations between construction workers from either race that often escalated into fistcuffs or even worse, the two

aces had radically different views on work procedures and methods. It was obvious that the whole construction process was an administration nightmare, lacking all coherency due to lack of direction from above and many feared the station would never be finished, never being able to fulfill its promises. Failure loomed high on the horizon and morale was low. Ariko was hard put to keep her concentration while at work. A distressful call from her mother begging her to come home and plead for her father's forgiveness didn't help her state of mind. Maybe it was the ingrained xenophobia in her, but to Ariko it was obvious that the Federation Senate was largely to blame for this mess. And with Medila the top Senate official on the station Ariko felt it was only the patriotic thing to do to undermine her authority. That this would increase her chances for getting access to the scientists was only an added bonus.

A plan was needed, but Ariko was desperately short of options. Then aid came in the guise of a job offer. It wasn't a normal job offer in any normal sense of the word. She would even get to keep her current job in the lab; in fact, her presence in the lab was an essential requirement for this new job. In short, an agent working for the Wyrkomi corporation approached her one day during her lunch hour and said if she would indulge in a bit of industrial espionage for her parent corporation her sins for leaving would be forgiven and a golden career path ensured. Ariko was skeptical at first, but when the agent offered help in ousting the pesky Medila as an added incentive, she couldn't refuse. Getting rid of Medila was all well and good, but the vision of her returning triumphantly to the State, Wyrkomi singing her praises and her father browbeaten, was enough for her to accept the offer. She felt lightheaded all afternoon and it wasn't until she was alone in her small room that evening that it finally sank home; she was now a secret agent for the Wyrkomi corporation, engaged to spy on her paymasters.

For the next week Ariko got an impromptu crash course in covert ops, especially in communicating and exchanging information in the utmost secrecy. Though a part of her was still reeling from what she was doing she couldn't help but enjoy it all immensely. She met her contact, who called himself Mitsu, every night in some unfinished part of the station. One night, another man was with him. It was a very ordinary looking Caldari, clothed in unassuming workers cloths. Yet even if he was so nondescript that he almost blended into the gray background she could sense that his mind was something else entirely. Her contact introduced the man and said he owed Wyrkomi a small favor, which he would now repay by helping them to besmear Medila. The name Mitsu gave, Jirai Laitanen, didn't ring any bells with Ariko.

"I see you do not recognize me, even if I decline to employ some ridiculous pseudonym to hide my identity," the stranger said. "Maybe you know me better by my nickname, Fatal?" he asked mockingly. Ariko did. She felt a cold shiver run down her spine. Fatal, and his companion the Rabbit, were the leaders of the pirate group called Guristas. The pair, along with their fellow pirates, had harrowed the Caldari State for years, pulling stunts that seemed almost as much aimed to taunt the State as ruin it. Ariko was curious to know why Wyrkomi owed this enemy of the State favors, but didn't dare ask.

"So are you enjoying your little spying game?" Fatal asked, still using that mocking tone.

"It's interesting, but I'm still a bit uneasy, what with the whole moral issue and all that," she answered hesitantly.

"Yeah, I know what you mean. It's like when you're having sex and need to take a dump at the same time. While you're going in and out at the front you don't know if something will stay in or come out at the back."

Ariko blushed at his vulgar words, then blushed even fiercer when Fatal laughed scornfully at her obvious discomfort.

"Enough of this banter," Mitsu said brusquely. "Let's talk business. Medila is a Senate puppy and will remain so while the Senate sees her as the champion of their cause. We must drive a wedge between Medila and the Senate, it's the only way possible to get rid of her for good without rousing suspicion. Now, my thought was to try and besmear her in the eyes of the Senate by showing her cavorting with Caldari, but Fatal has a much better idea. Tell her about it, Fatal." Fatal produced a small crystal vial from inside his grubby coat, exaggerating his gestures as he showed it to Ariko, holding it between his thumb and forefinger.

"In this little vial here is a small gift I received from my very good friend Virge. It contains a little something his labcoats cooked up for him."

"Is it toxin?" Ariko asked. "Are you going to poison her?"

"No, nothing so crude. Killing her would rouse unwanted attention, which, Mitsu tells me, is a definite no-no." Fatal said this as if he lamented not being allowed to kill Medila. It sent another cold shiver down Ariko's spine.

"This stuff here makes you go funny in the head," Fatal explained.

"A drug?" Ariko asked, still unsure where Fatal was going with this.

"Sort of. Sort of a drug. But not quite. It makes you go funny as in crazy." A nasty laughter gushed from him. "Completely goo-goo." Realization dawned on Ariko.

"You're going to drive her mad?"

"Yes," Fatal answered, returning the vial to his coat pocket.

"For how long?"

"Oh, fifty, maybe sixty years. Depends on how long she'll live." Ariko was aghast. Pangs of conscience assaulted her. She had asked for help to get rid of Medila, but this? She knew there was no way for her to stop it, the ball was already rolling and she had no say in the matter now. That much was clear. The question now was, was she willing to take part in this scheme? Standing there, with the two intimidating men hovering over her, she wanted most of all to run away, to forget it all. But it wasn't an option. She'd gotten herself into this situation, foolishly letting silly romanticism about being a fancy spy cloud her judgment. The only way for her now was to go through with this.

Fatal procured the repulsive vial, but she had to administer it to Medila. She was the only one of the three in the position to do so. The only problem was for her to get the vial into the lab, as there was a tight security regarding everything entering or exiting the research zones. Fatal came up with the solution, using Ariko's personal code he could break into the security system and program it to disregard any survey checks made on Ariko. After discussing the task a little longer, Fatal finally gave her the vial. She hid it in her bra, praying it wouldn't break.

"Oh, one last thing," Fatal said as if it was an afterthought. "I may be paying my debt to the

Wiyrkomi corporation, but I expect a favor returned from you in the near future.” He indicated Ariko. She wasn't sure what he meant, so she just nodded her head. He seemed satisfied and bid his farewell. Ariko wasn't sorry to see the back of him.

The next morning a bleary eyed Ariko entered the lab, still dazed from her lack of sleep. Her conscience was nagging her constantly so she was actually glad when Medila confronted her later that morning and launched into one of her furious tirades about some perceived insubordination. Once the verbal assault was over Ariko was all poised and ready drive the tiresome woman mad, literally. That very evening Ariko snuck into the small lab kitchen, rummaging in the refrigerator until she found Medila's favorite food; it was some kind of a meat pâté native to the Mannars, but most others found revolting. Ariko carefully unscrewed the vial and stirred its contents into the foul-smelling pâté.

Only when she was falling asleep that night did she wonder just how insane Medila would become. Perhaps some precautions would have been wise. But it was too late to do anything about that now. The next day Ariko would almost come to regret it.

The morning turned out to be quite peaceful actually. Ariko managed to lose herself in cross-referencing data codes for a promising drone AI project, with no sign of Medila anywhere. After lunch, though, with Medila having eaten a generous portion of her loathsome pâté, things quickly escalated into the realms of the absurd.

It started innocently enough, with Medila being unusually domineering around Umailen and Touvolle. But as the hours passed she grew more and more possessive, while at the same time showing increasing megalomaniac tendencies. Late in the afternoon Medila had convinced herself that the fate of the project rested on her shoulders solely and that it was her genius and her genius only that would spark all the wonderful new discoveries. This didn't sound too bad until she got the notion that only by devouring the brains of the other scientists could she fulfill her own prophecy of becoming the Queen of Inspiration. She managed to lock herself, along with Touvolle and Umailen, inside one of the offices, barricading the door. Someone had called security, but the door wouldn't budge.

Ariko was in shock. It was bad enough being responsible for driving poor Medila insane, but now she had to contend with her possibly killing the two men that the whole project hinged upon. She watched the frustrated efforts of the security guards trying to force the door open. ‘This is absurd,’ she thought, ‘this is a lab. There must be something here that can help us open this damn door.’ She looked around, searching for something, equipment, chemical components, anything. Her eyes finally came to rest on a half-assembled infinite impulse processor, part of some linear audio phaser research she wasn't party to. But it gave her an idea.

Grabbing the equipment she made her way to her own workbench, where she located a small fusion array. She wasn't all that sure this would work, but it was worth the try. Working quickly, she fused the two items together. She then rushed to where the security guards were still trying to pry the door open, all the while shouting through the door for Medila to give herself up. There was no time to ask nicely.

“Get away,” she shouted, as she put her newly created audio blaster on the floor in front of the door. The security guards looked at her in confusion, but Wobanen was quick on the uptake and dragged them away. Ariko activated her newly created weapon, cursing for not having enough time to set up a timer. She could only hope the directional field in the processor was working

adequately, or she would blow the eardrums of everyone in the room. And possibly fry their brains in the process. She waited for the fusion array to charge completely, then she turned it to maximum output, released the holder key and scampered away.

The sonic boom shook the room like an earthquake. Ariko was sure it could be felt around the station. After all, it was circular. Raising herself, all she could hear at first was a high-pitch buzz in her ears. It faded quickly though. A few others were not so lucky, as she would later find out, the blast causing permanent damage to the sensitive auditory system.

Most importantly, the door was now open. The two halves of it were bent backward as if they were made of butter instead of a hardened steel alloy. Ariko rushed into the room, fearing the worst. The office was a mess, but the three people inside were thankfully unharmed. The security guards quickly took hold of Medila, even as she fought them with the inhuman strength of the deranged. She was no longer screaming for brains to feed her newfound queenhood. Instead, she was shouting abuses at the guards.

"I'm Medila!" she screeched hysterically. "I must contain the maniacs!" She nodded her head in the direction of Touvolle and Umailen. "I gave a sacred oath!" she continued. "To Mentas Blaque himself. He charged me with suppressing this whole idiotic project! I'm a smotherer! A smotherer!" she screamed as the security guards dragged her away.

'This is interesting,' Ariko thought. 'In her crazed state she has given up her secret mission.' During her research on the political structure behind the Crielere project she had often come across the name Mentas Blaque. He was the leader of the Federation Senate and a sworn enemy of president Souro Foiritan. She chuckled to herself. While she felt sorry for the sudden and tragic downfall of Medila she couldn't believe how things had played into her hands. Not only was the Senate crony now gone forever, but the Senate wouldn't dare replace her now that it had been revealed it had tried to impinge on the project in a most improper manner. Ariko also realized that her first impression of Medila being the main obstacle to the project really taking off was completely accurate.

Following the downfall of Medila, the Senate was quick to denounce any knowledge of any secret dealings with the mad woman and withdrew completely from meddling with the running of the station. Ariko could easily picture Mentas Blaque sulking in some extravagant luxury yacht somewhere, cursing the name of Medila and all her ancestors from here to eternity. The thought made her laugh.

In the quiet aftermath following the uproar few witnessed the arrival of the man destined to be responsible for the rise and then the ruin of the Crielere project. Otro Gariushi, CEO of the Ishukone Corporation, arrived silently at the half-built station in the early hours of the morning, slipping almost unnoticed into a docking bay on an unassuming shuttle. Branded an ugly brute by his enemies, of which there were many, he had never been quite able to shake off the dark rumors of a shady past that followed him wherever he went. Driven by some secret inner demons, his blind ambition lent him a powerful charisma that swept those around him into a maelstrom of obedience and compliance.

Gariushi, tipped off by his agents on the station, was quick to grasp the change in the power structure and his arrival was no mere happenstance. Like the other CEOs of the mega-corporation Gariushi had watched in worry the problems on Crielere escalate, but unlike the other CEOs he was more than willing to take an active part in rectifying the situation; a breach

of protocol was not something Otro Gariushi lost any sleep over.

A former adversary of Gariushi once remarked that 'Gariushi fills a power vacuum like an obese person a spandex suit' and before the day had turned to evening Otro had firmly asserted himself as the man in charge on the Crielere station.

Though Gariushi was not held in high esteem in the State due to his shady background Ariko was inwardly pleased that a Caldari was now calling the shots. The Gallenteans naturally grumbled a bit, but they had suffered from the lack of leadership just as acutely as the Caldari and most of them were simply glad that someone was taking charge, even if it was an obnoxious Caldari.

Ariko decided it was best for her to lay low for awhile until the situation had stabilized. She had no idea how Gariushi might react to what she had done or, more importantly, if he knew anything of her secret dealings with Mitsu or Fatal. Working the graveyard shift for a few weeks was much preferred than being booted out of the station. She had accomplished what she set out for; getting rid of Medila and gaining the favor of the scientists in the process. She wasn't about to jeopardize that now by sticking her neck out. Instead, she opted to observe activities from afar. There was another reason for her decision, the family name Cumin might ring some unwanted bells with Gariushi. She didn't know all the gritty details, but she knew that when she was a girl, her father, an important negotiator for Wiyrkomi at the time, had been sent to the headquarters of Ishukone to barter a deal. Gariushi had entangled her father in a conspiracy ploy and then threatened to reveal it to Wiyrkomi unless a very favorable deal would be settled on. Her father had no alternative but to accept, being branded an idiot was far better than that of a traitor. After his return her father's career slowly faded into obscurity and instead he pinned the hope of his family on Ariko's slender shoulders. Ariko was pretty sure that Gariushi had long since forgotten the name of Cumin, but she didn't want to take any chances on the matter. She would stay in the shadows for the time being.

Gariushi was quick to stamp his mark and in only a few days the construction process was as fast as it had ever been. In fact, construction materials were soon in short supply. At first Gariushi tried to increase shipments from the contracted shipping firms, Inner Zone Shipping and Ytiri, but they were slow to respond. Undaunted, his next move was to get freelance pilots, mainly from independent companies, to ship materials in. By appealing to the altruistic nature of the Crielere project, aimed to aid everyone, the response was overwhelming and gave a good indication what a shrewd nose Gariushi had when it came to political machinations.

The problem of an inadequate workforce remained. Much of the budget allocated to build the station had been spent, yet it was only half built. A week after his arrival, Gariushi ordered the construction zone to be sealed off, as well as the docking bay serving the zone. He justified this by stating that the workforce needed to shield itself from outside interruptions and attractions, so they could concentrate fully upon the task at hand. Ariko couldn't quite understand this need for seclusion, but dismissed the conspiracy theories about slaves being used to bolster the workforce as fabricated rumors spread by former cronies of Medila. The sudden appearance of burly Amarrians walking the station's halls was merely a coincidence, Ariko reasoned. Whatever methods Gariushi was employing he certainly seemed to be getting the results, as new sections of the station seemed to open up almost every day.

The impact these development had on the research effort was evident to everyone. Better facilities, coupled with optimism that the Crielere project was finally spreading its wings, meant

that new and fabulous discoveries were being made. Already blueprints were being churned out and the eye of the world again turned to Crielere for wondrous news. Ariko enjoyed being part of what was happening, particularly for her small but significant contribution in getting things on the right track. Vanity tickled her to shout her accomplishments to the world, but she had plenty of common sense to wrestle it to the ground. But when Gariushi declared that the first fully developed blueprints, for advanced mining equipment, would be made public to everyone, she felt that it was time to come out of the shadows again. She didn't know what Gariushi was up to, giving away discoveries like that. She doubted his stated reasons of philanthropy, but couldn't discredit them. But his actions meant that if she wanted to be of any value to her new secret employers then she'd better get closer to the two pioneers.

Gunaris was still working on his calculations, happily oblivious to the hectic goings on in other parts of the station. But he was on the inside track when it came to communicating with the two scientists. Through him, Ariko got to meet the scientists on a regular basis, even sometimes participating in brainstorm meetings or being asked to note down theories or ideas they seemed to be constantly throwing between themselves. The creative atmosphere surrounding the pair was so contagious that Ariko found herself easily caught up in the fever and enjoyed every second of it.

Umailen and Touvolle turned out to be quite the characters. Their relationship was almost a symbiotic one, they complemented each other so perfectly that after decades of working together they often finished each other's sentences or merely glanced at each other to see what the other was thinking. Far from being the stuffy old bores like many people imagined scientists to be they were almost like children in their irresponsible, playful behavior. Ariko could sense a darker side to them, something to do with their war experience all those years ago when they were both young men. It was as if those haunting memories they had drove them on, yet never surfacing in a negative manner. In fact, Ariko often felt like she was back in college, such was the atmosphere in the lab now that the stifling regime of Medila was at an end. She especially enjoyed the silly banter the scientists often engaged in. When they entered the lab in the morning they frequently made boastful proclamations about who would discover more wondrous things that day. She particularly enjoyed their 'science is' game, where they likened science to some thing or another, in a tongue-in-cheek manner. In time she became a participant herself in this game, where the trick was to out-do the others based in previous comments.

"Science is like a prostitute," Touvolle would perhaps say out of the blue. "You lust for a short-lived pleasure, but are left with something itchy and indescribable in the long-term."

"I beg to differ," Ariko would counter. "Science is like a callgirl. You know the number, but have no idea how to handle all the complexities."

"Ah, you're on the wrong track all together," Umailen would retort. "Science is like a marriage. It starts with an exiting affair and ends up eating all your time."

Thus it would go back and forth for awhile, before they all delved once more into serious work. Despite spending time playing silly games like 'science is' they were still even more productive than before and new blueprints saw daylight more or less every week. It was a fantastic achievement.

While Ariko was in a privileged position being part of the team surrounding the two scientists she was still just a junior assistant and as such still had some tedious assignments to complete.

Working late one evening she decided to make a routine check on the blueprints already filed. It wasn't the most fun job in the world, but it always filled her with a sense of accomplishment seeing a concrete proof that coming here hadn't been the disaster she initially thought it would be. Her father had sent her here when she refused to come work in his office after graduation. It was intended as a punishment and she had taken it as such initially. Now she knew differently. She thought it was ambition that had brought about her little rebellion, but now she knew it really was a longing to be part of something important; where she felt her contribution was not only appreciated, but also of value to more than just her family's prestige or her corporation's bottom line.

Ariko couldn't come near the blueprints themselves; their high value meant they were only accessible to a handful of people. Instead, she had to use a complicated robotic system to access and file the blueprints. Putting her mind into automatic, she filed the blueprints one by one while letting her mind wander about the impact these blueprints would have on the world. A soft beep on the console she was working on brought her back from her reverie. Blueprints were missing. Accidentally, Ariko had made a fateful discovery of the most innocuous nature, but which would unleash a series of events that would in the end shake the whole world.

At first Ariko thought it was an oversight on her part, due to tiredness, but she double-checked, then checked again, always with the same results. Missing were original blueprints of many of the most stunning and exciting discoveries made so far on the station. Ariko was at a loss what to do. Was it a theft or just an innocent mistake? She wanted to believe the latter, but her gut feeling told her otherwise. Her sense of duty told her she should report this to her superiors. But if this was a theft, who was responsible? Even the mere existence of the blueprints was top secret, making it almost impossible this was an outside job. Ariko didn't like the path her train of thoughts was taking her down, but there was only one inevitable conclusion; if this was theft it was done by an insider. Not only that, it was done by someone high up in the chain of command.

Ariko was in no position to investigate the matter herself. But she had no idea whom she could trust. The one thing she did know was that she had to report this to someone, otherwise the blame would fall on her. Gariushi she didn't trust. Besides, he was away on a visit to New Caldari. But she knew just the people to turn to.

The news spread like wildfire through the station. The next day when Ariko woke up the station was buzzing. She had told the scientists last night; after telling Mitsu first. Obviously the scientists had wasted no time in getting the story out, or at least not bothered much to conceal it. When Ariko entered the lab the tension was tangible. No one managed to do much work that day, suspicion and uncertainty the only thing on people's mind. Ariko hadn't slept much during the night. She was out in the open now, with all eyes on the station on her. She felt naked and defenseless, sure that everyone could see all her dirty little secrets. During the night she had half expected the police to come crashing through the door, dragging along Mitsu bound and gagged. At a time she even thought that the whole thing was a setup. After all, how stupid was it to steal these blueprints? It was bound to be found out eventually. How much better just to make copies or at least record the information, but leave the originals behind, then no one would have been any wiser that anything was amiss. In the darkness of her room Ariko was certain the only explanation was that someone wanted to pin this on her. Now, in the daylight, she laughed at her silly paranoia, though the uneasy feeling remained. There were other explanations: maybe the thieves didn't have time to make copies, or maybe they wanted to possess the blueprint technology all to themselves, or maybe they were simply cocky and didn't care if they were

found out.

Gariushi, back from New Caldari, and his people were also ominously silent. Some took this as a sign that the whole thing was a hoax and would be cleared up shortly. Others took it as a sign that Gariushi was trying to think of ways to cover this up. As day turned to evening the first orders from Gariushi's office filtered down; no one was allowed to leave the station, communications with the outside world were severely restricted and only employees of the station were allowed in.

At first Ariko thought these measures were to hinder the thief or thieves from getting their ill-gotten items out of the station, but then she realized that it was much too late for that – the thieves could have left long ago. The only explanation for this order was to hinder news of the theft from spreading outside the station. Ariko suspected it was also much too late for that. Of course, this also meant it was too dangerous for her to talk to her contact for the time being. But she had talked to him last night and there was no need to talk to him again quite yet.

The next day Ariko was finally called in for questioning. She had had butterflies in her stomach the previous day, fearing what her discovery the previous night might entail. A couple of officials showed up at her small apartment and escorted her to a secluded room in the upper levels of the station. There she met a soft-spoken man that simply interviewed her about her findings and her subsequent actions. It wasn't quite an interrogation, because Ariko was so cooperative, but she sensed that the soft-spoken man was quite ready to turn the screws on her if the need arose. He even seemed a bit disappointed for her not giving him an excuse for doing so. The interview only took a couple of hours, after which she was allowed to go. Ariko breathed a sigh of relief. It seemed that although Gariushi was unhappy with developments, having openly raved about her incompetence and disloyalty in informing the scientists first, he wasn't going to take it out against her. And more importantly, her cover was still intact.

The atmosphere was muted when she got back to the lab. Ariko was certain that Umailen and Touvolle would be crestfallen at the loss of such valuable blueprints, but they seemed as cheerful as ever. Touvolle summed up the feelings of the pair when he said:

“Ah, those blueprints may be of some value at the moment, but with the ideas me and Taromi have they'd be obsolete in a few months anyway.” Having said that he urged his coworkers to start working again, the best way to stick it to the thieves was by producing even better blueprints as soon as possible. Touvolle's short speech lifted the gloomy spirit in the lab and soon everyone were back at their workstations, toiling away happily. Ariko joined the others, glad that the research effort was still in full swing. ‘All the more for me to report,’ she thought grimly.

The next day the station was again buzzing. Not because of the stolen blueprints, but because Otro Gariushi had slipped away during the night, disappearing just as quietly as he had appeared a month earlier. While leaving behind a deputy to take care of business, it was obvious that Gariushi was washing his hands clean of the Crielere project. Ariko suspected he had already got what he wanted. She could only admire the man. He shrewdly manipulated the public opinion to remain in charge, while behind the scenes he carefully acquired what he was really after. ‘Then he slipped away like a thief into the night,’ Ariko mused. There was no doubt in her mind that Gariushi was responsible for the stolen blueprints. It was only a question of whether he would get away with it or not. She couldn't help but compare how differently Ishukone did business than her own Wyrkomi corporation. ‘With Gariushi at the helm

Ishukone simply comes in and takes what it wants. All Wiyrkomi could do was to recruit lowly me.'

The deputy left behind by Gariushi did his best to hush the blueprint theft. He launched an internal investigation, but gave no progress reports, or even an indication on when the investigation would be concluded. Days passed and still there were no official news. But there were subtle hints that behind the scenes a cleanup was taking place. Several high-ranking officials, including some Caldari scientists, had handed in their resignations, claiming they were too distraught by the theft to continue working on the project. All of them immediately got jobs elsewhere for empire corporations. The theft was becoming old news. Ariko was hoping the whole thing would blow over, allowing the research effort to resume. But she failed to take the righteousness of the Gallenteans into account. They wouldn't forget something like this and they would want to find the culprits. All they needed was someone to enforce their will. And that is just what they got. A week after Ariko first reported the stolen blueprints, Suro Foiritan, president of the Gallente Federation made an unannounced visit to the station.

Foiritan had been one of the staunch supporters of the project from the very beginning. It was well known that the man had a passionate interest in technology and new gadgets, and from what Ariko had heard from her coworkers Foiritan had to wrestle the Federal Senate tooth and nail to get it to fund the project. Thus, his arrival now when his pet project was in danger came as no surprise.

Of course, Foiritan had no official authority on the station, but with the current leadership being as tentative as it was he could steamroll over all barriers and protocols like a scorpion in a henhouse. Ariko would have thought Foiritan would storm right to the command center to take control, but she didn't count on his fascination for technology. He had to take a tour of the facilities first, starting with a visit to Umailen and Touvolle, whom Foiritan had come to love and respect. They showed him around the lab. Foiritan's face lit up each time a new invention was shown to him and by the time they came to Ariko's desk he was positively beaming.

"Here is the girl that discovered the missing blueprints," Touvolle said, introducing Ariko. She shyly shook Foiritan's hand. A shadow had past over his face at the mention of the stolen blueprints and now he looked grave and troubled.

"Ah, yes. The missing blueprints," he said softly, staring Ariko straight in the eyes as they shook hands. She could feel the charisma radiating off him and understood finally what the Gallenteans saw in this man that many considered a buffoon not fit for office. She remembered all the times she and her schoolmates had mocked this man after his latest folly. It made her blush and avert her eyes. Foiritan smiled knowingly and released her hand.

"Such a shame that some people are willing to sacrifice the future for such a short term gain," he continued softly, still looking intently at Ariko.

"Quite so," Touvolle concurred, a bit bewildered by the short exchange of words between president Foiritan and Ariko the junior assistant.

Ariko tried to breath calmly as Foiritan continued his tour of the lab. The sheer animalistic charisma of the man was enough to overwhelm anyone, but his words had hit her like a sledgehammer. Did he know about her being a spy? Or was it just innocent small talk? She couldn't tell.

She watched Foiritan as he talked privately with the two scientists for a few minutes, his bodyguards making sure no one could approach them. The scientists glanced furtively around the lab a few times, but never at her. She breathed a sigh of relief. If they were talking about her they surely would have looked in her direction at least once.

Later that day Ariko found out that Foiritan had ordered a thorough investigation into the theft, to be carried out by a team of independent investigators brought from outside. Foiritan made it quite clear that this team would have full access to the station and all relevant data, in order to speed up the investigation process as much as possible. Having come what he set out for, Foiritan and his entourage of PR people and the media, left the station on the large luxury yacht that had brought them here.

The next few days went by like in a dream. Ariko tried to keep her mind on the job, but her mind kept returning to the stolen blueprints. She knew that the future of the project hinged on the results of the ongoing investigation and so did the rest of the workers. Even Gunaris seemed too distant and preoccupied to talk to her. Only now, thinking about the future of the project, did she realize really how important it had become to her. She had been skeptical for a long time and the spying game had distracted her from seeing where her true priorities lay. Now she knew; with the project. With Umailen and Touvolle. She also feared that the investigation would turn up something unwanted, such as her being a secret agent. She hadn't heard anything from Mitsu in days, and though she hoped this merely meant he was being cautious she sometimes feared he had been arrested. She needed someone to talk to so she wouldn't go mad, turning these thoughts around in her head again and again. She finally managed to break Gunaris down and get him to talk to her. She stayed well away from discussing current affairs with him, as she feared this would shut him up, so she opted instead to talk about his youth. After a hesitating start, he soon got into gear and started telling her about his enthusiasm for numbers.

"I've always been fascinated by numbers, for as long as I can remember," he confessed. "My home planet, Ation VIII, has 21 moons and I remember I thought this was a magic number when I was a boy." He smiled his shy little smile that Ariko thought so endearing before continuing.

"To me mathematics was like magic and I loved number puzzles or strange sequences. Like this number," he said, picking up the light pen on his desk and drawing the number 142857 in the air. "It seems like just a random six-figure number, but try multiplying it by two." Ariko quickly did so in her head.

"285714," she said.

"Right, now multiply it by three, four, five and six." This was more difficult, and Ariko scrunched her face in an effort to do this quickly. Gunaris laughed merrily as he saw her struggle.

"Never mind," he said. "I'll give you the numbers." He wrote the numbers down below the first number, in a list. "Now, add the individual numbers of the first number together, what do you get?"

"27," Ariko replied promptly. This was easy.

"Correct, and the next and the next?" She looked at them, wonder spreading around her face.

"27, they're all twenty-seven."

"And if you add them vertically?" he prodded. Now she gasped and smiled in amazement.

"27 too, for all of them. That's amazing!" They both laughed.

"Yeah, well, this was the kind of stuff I found fascinating when I was a small boy, four or five probably. It sparked an interest in numbers that has never dwindled. Even though I've found no true magic in there."

"Are you still looking?" she asked. It was meant as a tease, but Gunaris became serious.

"I am," he finally said and Ariko saw he meant it. Then the investigators arrived in the lab and the conversation ended.

The investigators, most of them Gallenteans and Intakis, worked fast and efficiently. The thieves hadn't been all that careful in covering up their tracks, as they seemed confident that the powers that be would protect them. So the investigation was over swiftly and the results didn't particularly surprise anyone: men working under direct orders from Otro Gariushi had systematically plundered blueprints and even prototype equipment.

After the findings of the investigators had been announced it was like all the racial and political tension that Gariushi had held in check were now out in the open twice as forceful as before. With growing dismay, Ariko watched helplessly as confrontations between Gallenteans and Caldari escalated by the hour. Bar brawls became common, soon intensifying into full scale riots. The day after the investigative report was made public, a Senate delegation arrived to take stock of the situation.

With the arrival of a new Senate delegation, throwing the leadership on the station into confusion, things quickly escalated beyond control. The security personnel on the station, hitherto considered to have the easiest jobs around, suddenly found themselves in full riot gear, facing a mob that seemed ready to tear the just completed station apart with their bare hands. Conflicting orders filtered down from above, inflaming the volatile situation even further. Martial laws were declared, but with little effect. People started leaving in droves.

The Senate delegation left in a huff, furious about not being given sole command of the station. It came as no surprise to Ariko when she heard the next day that they had pulled the financial plug. The Caldari mega-corporations followed suit shortly after. The Crielere project was in a crisis, with most of the staff gone and now no budget. And yet, Ariko felt defiant. Not because she wanted further chances to conduct industrial espionage for Wyrkomi. In fact, she was fed up with the greedy corporations and their power politics. She didn't want the project to end.

The Crielere project was a like a dream you have when you're neither awake nor asleep, one you never want to end. Ariko realized what she wanted most of all was to keep the dream alive. It was too valuable for it to succumb to petty corporate rivalries and racial antagonism. She was reminded of one of her heated conversations with her father shortly before she left where he accused her of betraying her corporation. She could still feel the sting of tears of frustration in her eyes. To be branded a traitor and a spoiled brat by her father, whom she'd looked up to her entire life. She remembered how angry and humiliated she'd felt at being accused of betraying the corporation that had reared her, even if it wasn't true. She had intended to work for

Wiyrkomi. She only wanted to do it on her own terms. But now, his accusations were true. She didn't even try to convince herself that staying with the scientists gave her further opportunities to wring some valuable information out of them. She was too smart for that. She was staying because she wanted to use her talents the way they were supposed to; not stifled by the corporation, but allowed to flourish doing something that really mattered to all mankind.

Ariko had thought that coming to Crielere, bad as it sounded at first, would at least quench her thirst for adventure, but instead it opened her eyes to how narrow-minded her father was, or she had been, for that matter. How could she stay loyal to her corporation when it meant betraying humanity?

Entering the lab, Ariko mused that what was now left of the Crielere project was the essence of what it stood for. All the money grabbers and band wagoners were gone, leaving only those that truly wanted to make a difference, even if it meant sacrificing their careers. Gunaris was there and the sight of him made the cynical side of Ariko wonder how much the fact that he was staying behind had influenced her own decision unconsciously. Ariko knew the time was drawing near when she had to bare her feelings for him, as much as she dreaded it.

Touvolle and Umailen were seated in their favorite brainstorming chair, but for once they weren't discussing new science theories. The pair had earlier in the morning sent out a plea to the outside world asking for support, financial or otherwise. It had met with a bland response. There was an air of resignation around the lab. Ariko knew that if she didn't convince them to continue with their work, then all she had to look forward to was to return to the fold of Wiyrkomi and sign her life sentence of obedience with them. A few months earlier it would have truly honored her. Now it was abhorrent to her. Ariko had never considered herself to be of much a motivational speaker, but she had passion and hoped it lent her some powers of persuasion. She surveyed the motley crew assembled before her. There were maybe fifty of them left, a fraction of the thousands that had swarmed the station only few short weeks earlier. All had the look of gloom in their eyes, but she hoped the reason they hadn't left yet was because they still harbored some secret hope that the project could go on. She recalled a parable from back home, told to all aspiring young Caldari students.

"There once was a great rich merchant," she began hesitantly, suddenly all too aware that all eyes in the room were on her. But she plunged on regardless, steeling her nerves. "He lived to a grand old age and possessed every wealth a man could dream of. Many looked to him in awe or envy, coveting his treasures and desiring to imitate his great successes. Yet the old man was never happy and on his deathbed, a young clerk working for him asked: 'You must feel that your life has been one great success story, what with all the wealth you have accumulated.' But the old man replied. 'My life has been one of misery and sorrow. As a young man I chose wealth over family, discarding the love of my life. When I die all that I will leave behind in the world is money. But money is the same all over, mine is no different from anyone else's. Once my wealth has been scattered, all that I will be is dust and vague memories. My life is a failure young man, don't make the same mistakes I did.' The young clerk heeded the old man's advice, making sure he had the time to rear a family even if his focus was on his career path." Ariko took a deep breath, watching her attentive audience ponder her little anecdote. "Now, this story may not be all that relevant to our situation here, but to me, and I hope for the rest of you, I've become to realize that the Crielere project is the love of my life. If I abandon it now, no matter how successful I'll become later in life, I'll always regret having done so. This is an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make our mark on the world, to create something that will go down in history and not scatter in the wind like dust. I have no idea if we can pull this off on our own, but by

Fate, I'm willing to try my best until all avenues are spent." By this time Ariko was almost shouting, her passion and enthusiasm shining through. She didn't know what more she could say. She wanted to run to each and every one of those in the room, shake them by the shoulders and beg them to stay on.

No one spoke for a minute. Ariko was certain her words hadn't hit home, that she'd sounded too desperate, too manic. Then Touvolle stood up, a thoughtful expression on his face. He slowly walked over to where Ariko was standing and, in a sudden gesture, embraced her. "Thank you," he whispered in her ear. "Thank you."

It was done. They would stay and continue. Ariko was thrilled, but at the same time, her pesky cynical side couldn't help but wonder if all of them were living a dream they hoped never ended, but a dream nevertheless. No. This was no illusion. The Crielere project was real. Maybe more real than anything else she'd ever known.

Ariko had grown accustomed to the hustling and bustling of the station while the project was in full swing. Now the empty corridors echoed back her footsteps, hammering home the bleakness of the place. Everything seemed to be malfunctioning and the few dozen people she'd managed to convince to stay on had to spend most of their time keeping the station up and running. Closing down a few sections had alleviated the problem somewhat.

Touvolle had taken Ariko's speech to heart and was now carrying the torch for the rest of them. Ariko was happy to step back into the sidelines and let the energetic old man take on the role of a leader of this rag-tag team. Umailen was not far behind in spurring people on and together great progress was made everyday. But supplies were getting low and the crew was even forced to beg benevolent visitors for handouts. And Fatal would come soon and claim his reward, somehow Ariko was sure of that.

Mitsu was long gone, but he left her with a small communication device she could hide in her room. It was dangerous to use, even if they employed codes and encryptions. She used it only sporadically, just enough to keep Mitsu happy. But he was becoming impatient with the lack of hard data she was sending, demanding more and more. For a long while his threats of total ostracism from the State kept her in line. He even stooped so low as to threaten to make the life of her elderly parents difficult if she didn't comply. But as her admiration for Umailen and Touvolle grew she began to loath this secret side of her life ever more. It was beginning to affect her self-esteem; she began to loath herself for her treachery and low moral fiber. She was thankful to the State for rearing her for all those years, but since her arrival here at Crielere she had seen a darker, more sinister side of it. This was its true face, she realized. This is how the State behaved behind the pretty veil it cast on its citizens. It may shelter them, but it deceived them at the same time. What worth was the life's work of an honest man when it was made under deception and guile? She knew it was time to cut the umbilical cord for good. Maybe complying with Mitsu offered her a future with the State, but it wasn't a future she wanted anymore. She contemplated just throwing away the communication device; maybe Mitsu would think it had been damaged or she found out. But she wanted a clean break. It took her a few days to amass enough courage, but in the end there was nothing to it. Sure, Mitsu cursed her and all her ancestral line. He dragged her poor parents into it again. But she wouldn't budge. It was an ugly break, she shook all over for an hour after cutting the com-link for the last time, but it was over. She was now a persona nongrata. A person without a nation. She was remarkably relaxed about this, given that to most Caldari this was almost worse than being dead. The State had given her the time and the resources to grow and be educated, but she had given it all her

time in return. Yet it always demanded more, demanded all of her time all for itself. This she was not prepared to do. Her time was now here, on the Crielere station, with the scientists and the all-important Project.

'If only we had a little more time,' Ariko thought for the umpteenth time. 'Then we could complete some of the stuff we're developing and sell the blueprints. With a bit of luck we can become self-sufficient in a few weeks.' Ariko didn't consciously think the world worked in a predestined way, but if she did, then she would have cursed Fate for the blow it dealt next. The empires withdrew their police forces from the Crielere system. And then Fatal arrived. With his friends. Lots and lots of them.

The Guristas were quick to assert their authority in the system. Fatal had come to exert his due reward – full access to the station and every secret it held. This was an extortion of the highest magnitude and Ariko didn't blame the scientists to balk at Fatal's demands.

The empires turned a deaf ear when the scientists pleaded for their help in fending off the Guristas. It seemed as if they were on their own. But then help arrived from an unexpected source. The independent pilots, formerly so helpful in getting the station completed in time, arrived in droves. They had heard the pleas of the scientists and, unlike the callous empires, they had decided to respond.

Some came because they wanted to help fellow humans in need. Others because they believed in the project and wanted to help keep it intact. Still others came for glory, for the chance to hunt down pirates, hoping to get valuable loot or simply out of curiosity. But their strength and determination amazed Ariko and showed her how strong and vivacious the independent pilot community was becoming. She knew many discounted them as being immaterial, but Ariko now knew better. They were the future because they were organized yet flexible, tolerant yet principled; an ever growing organism whereas the empires were bound by their traditions and mistrust of each other.

The skeleton crew left on the station was already stretched thin working on the energy systems so the huge particle accelerators and other energy draining research equipment didn't overheat or destabilize. Now it also had to contend with bolstering what little defenses the station possessed. Power was re-routed to the shields and weapon platforms. It gave them all some sense of security, but Ariko knew enough about shields and weapons to deem the station defenses as pathetic; if it wasn't for the pilots out there sacrificing their ships or even lives then the Guristas could almost have waltzed right into the station. This was undoubtedly what Fatal had counted on, hence his decision to risk directing his pirate fleet so far from their traditional playing grounds.

The arrival of the freelance pilots was a surprise to the Guristas, but it wasn't a sufficient threat to make the pirates flee. A fierce battle ensued. Most of the Guristas engaged the freelance pilots, but several cruisers headed towards the station and started blasting it with everything they got. The Guristas obviously hoped to damage the station so severely it would be forced to surrender. Missile after missile slammed into the feeble shields, battering the hull in the process. The crew watched in mounting horror as the fission core used in their morphite plasma research became unstable to the point of threatening to explode. A team was hastily deployed to make emergency repairs, Ariko being one of them.

Laboring in the bowels of the station to stabilize the overheating core took Ariko out of the loop,

leaving in her complete darkness as to how the battle was going. Later she would often reflect if it would have mattered had she been in the command center when the greenhouse was breached. Would she have stopped Gunaris from going there for emergency repairs? Would she have argued with Umailen for his decision to close the section off? Would she have had time to say goodbye?

In the end it didn't really matter. The only thing that mattered was that Gunaris volunteered to enter the greenhouse, in an order to seal a breach that was letting essential oxygen escape. When subsequent explosions damaged the greenhouse section beyond repair, Umailen had ordered it to be sealed off before the whole station was extinguished. It hadn't been an easy decision, Ariko knew that when she looked into Umailen's haunted eyes. Yet she wished he hadn't had to make it.

They found his body the next day, lying peacefully between some tomato plants as if in deep slumber. It was impossible to tell whether he had suffered in his death or not, but Ariko didn't feel it mattered. She felt empty inside. Never having experienced true sorrow before in her life, she was unsure how to behave. Suddenly her time with Gunaris, their small talks and short walks, took on a whole new meaning. They were now cherished memories of someone she would never see again. Never talk to again. Never touch. In the first few hours after she returned to the lab and found out his fate emotions had raged through her. Anger, bitterness, loneliness, confusion, denial, grief.

The Guristas were beaten back finally, retreating into nearby systems to lick their wounds. This hardly registered with Ariko. Yet again she lost sleep that night, her mind in turmoil. For the first time in her life she prayed to her ancestors. She knew many Caldari did it; her mother for one. Until now she had scorned such practices as relics of the past, but now she found solace in it. It also allowed her to steel her mind against the grief that threatened to overwhelm her. All the emotions she had felt for Gunaris, but suppressed, now came flooding back, multiplying her sorrow. When morning came she had resolved to stay strong. She would find time later to grieve properly. Now the scientists needed her. And she needed to focus on the task at hand: successfully defending the station against the Guristas. They might have been driven back yesterday, but they were not beaten.

The lab had been turned into a makeshift command center. Nobody had wanted to take up residency in the old one, so they'd simply stripped the necessary equipment and set it up anew. Some had even started sleeping in the lab, not wanting to wander the empty corridors alone. Ariko couldn't blame them, thought she still stayed in her drab room. With half the station at her disposal she could have easily found something more grand, but she didn't bother.

Yesterday's events were being discussed as Ariko entered. The lab grew quiet. Everyone knew how Ariko and Gunaris had felt for each other. 'Everyone but me,' she lamented. She managed a smile and joined the discussion, brushing off all attempts at compassion. Soon, the conversation was back on track.

"That should show the empires how people feel about the Crielere project," Touvolle exclaimed when the independent pilots were being discussed. "These pilots can understand the value of our work."

After the initial rush of euphoria a battle council was called on the urging of Ariko to discuss how the station could be defended on a permanent basis.

"The Guristas will most likely attack us again," she explained. "And even if they don't then somebody else will pop up sooner or later. We can't depend on those independent pilots to keep defending us. Heck, from what I gather they've already started bickering amongst themselves over spoils of war following the retreat of the Guristas. They could even end up turning against us." This sobered the elated scientists somewhat. Umailen spoke up:

"We don't have the money to hire professional help and the empires have washed their hands clean of us. Maybe depending on those pilots is naïve, but they're our only hope as it stands. We just have to keep the wolves at bay for a few more days, some of what we're researching is nearing completion."

"If we can find the time to work on them," Ariko answered gloomily. "Listen, I don't particularly enjoy being the party-pooper, but somebody has to do it. Sure, we don't have money in the hand know, but we're rich in human resources. Surely we can sell that to somebody."

"You mean selling future discoveries?" Umailen said, sounding skeptical. "Then we'd lose our independence. We could just as well give up right away and start working for one of the large research firms. Being independent is essential so we can fulfill our promise of helping all mankind." The others nodded in agreement and Ariko saw it was a futile argument.

Touvolle had remained silent during much of the discussion, resting his chin in his hand. Now, seeing Ariko's discomfort, he spoke up.

"You have to understand, Ariko, where we are coming from. During the war, both me and Taromi worked for our respective governments. They used our creative energy to increase the suffering and the pain of the common man. Have you heard of Rutheren IV?" When she shook her head no, he continued. "That is understandable, few have. The name was stricken from the records, erased so completely that even those that were there have a hard time convincing themselves it was real. But it was. I bet you have heard of Nouvelle Rouvenor or Hueromont, but there were greater atrocities committed in the war than even those, bad as they were. Rutheren IV was the worst of them and it's there that I and Taromi met. On the ground. Face to face with those bleeding and dying. Until then I had been proud of my work for the Federation, convinced, nay, righteous in my belief that what I was doing was for the greater good of all. On Rutheren IV the reality, the enormity, of it all came crashing home. Through happenstance, which takes too long to describe, I met Taromi in a hospital tent, tending for those still clinging to life. And we made a pact. Good intentions count for little if the cause isn't right. I know your belief in Fate, Ariko, though you try to deny it. That day we decided to take our destiny into our own hands. That is only possible if we're our own masters. Getting funds from the Federation and the State to bring the Crielere project about was a necessary evil we had to endure. We hoped by having both sides onboard, then the common good of all would prevail. Maybe that was naivety on our part, I don't know and it doesn't really matter. What matters is that we can't now put our destiny in other hands than our own. We simply can't. I hope you can understand that." Ariko only nodded her head, she couldn't argue with that.

The meeting was soon called to an end. Pretty much the only thing that had been agreed upon was to urge the independent pilots to remain alert and prepare the defenses of the station as best as possible. Umailen had come up with a way to bolster the station's shields manifolds by re-routing the power generator through the heat sink system. Though it wouldn't hold a determined attacker at bay indefinitely it was nevertheless a great improvement.

The Guristas came at them again the next dawn. The vigilant freelance pilots engaged them as soon as they came in sight and soon had the assaulters pinned down. Umailen and Touvolle looked a bit comical sitting in front of the command desk with com-link devices covering their ears and eyes. Yet Ariko felt strangely affectionate as she looked upon them in their excitement. They monitored the battle from the lab, using the sophisticated sensor systems brought from the command center. The old men participated fully from afar, often shouting encouragements or warnings to the pilots who so valiantly defended the station.

The Guristas showed little in the way of devious battle tactics and seemed happy just to slug it out with the resilient defenders. This seemed very strange to Ariko, as the Guristas were not known to squander their ships in such a wasteful manner.

"The Guristas are retreating again!" Touvolle exclaimed. "They're withdrawing to the Thelan system. We can't allow them to rally now that they're in disarray! Follow them!" By now Touvolle was literally jumping up and down in his seat, sweat pouring off his face as he scanned the screens in front of him, tracking the pursuit. Suddenly, Umailen chimed in.

"I've spotted a second Guristas task force coming from the opposite direction. They're closing in on us." Ariko could feel cold sweat trickle down her spine. The retreat was a ruse. But the shields were up, stronger than ever, and Ariko was confident they could keep this small marauding fleet at bay until the defenders returned.

But then her personal console lightened up. It was Fatal. Ariko furtively glanced around, but thankfully no one was looking in her direction. She quickly disconnected the visuals in the com-link, blackening the screen once more.

"Hello there, pretty one," Fatal said, teasingly. "How's your parents?"

"What do you want?" Ariko said between clenched teeth. She wondered briefly how he knew about the threats Mitsu had made to her parents during their last talk.

"Now, now. Don't take that tone with me," Fatal continued, faking indignation. "You and me go a long way back, I thought we were friends." Even if Ariko could no longer see Fatal's face she could easily visualize the slimy smile licking his lips as he spoke. When Ariko didn't answer, Fatal continued.

"Well, enough fooling around. Me and my boys are keeping your vigilantes occupied, allowing my friend Rabbit to do what he does best; sneak around," Ariko shivered at his words. What was he up to? "I want you to open bay door number 3 for him. Open it up and you will have repaid your debt," he continued matter-of-factly. Ariko was incredulous.

"You bastard. You think you can make me sell the station into your hands just like that?" Ariko was fuming, she knew she had promised to repay the debt she owed Fatal, but this was too much.

"Ah, well," he sighed. "I was hoping your sense of duty was stronger. Obviously fraternizing with Federation puppies has tainted your sense of responsibility. But nevermind. I wanted to give you the opportunity to redeem yourself."

"Shut up!" Ariko screamed, turning a few heads around her. She had had enough of this

arrogant bastard. "You're never getting in here. You hear me? Never!"

"Listen to the girl," Fatal now sounded amused, infuriating Ariko even more. "I don't need your help. What do you think I was doing on the station the other day? Taking a vacation? Thanks to you, I have the access codes. You really shouldn't have let me rig the security system, it allowed me to plant this nice little Trojan. Oh! Will you look at that? Bay door number 3 opening up! Heh! I think Rabbit will accept your invitation. You'll be seeing him in a jiffy." The com-link went dead. Ariko sat paralyzed. What had she done? Thanks to her desire to get near the scientists she had inadvertently given the station's access codes to the leader of the Guristas!

The others had noticed the bay door opening. Ariko listened as if in a trance as they desperately tried to override the docking system, to no avail. Thankfully no one blamed her for what was happening. A small part of her almost wished she would be blamed, sacrificed. She deserved it. When Umailen declared in panic that the Guristas were inside the station, she blushed in shame. She couldn't let the station fall. It would mean Gunaris death had been in vain.

Ariko tried to call an emergency meeting on how to meet the onrushing threat. She knew confronting the Guristas face-to-face was out of the question. Though they had access to some weapons left by the security personnel, they would be no match to the trained ruffians that the Rabbit was leading. But chaos had engulfed the lab. The din made by those shouting to be heard meant that nothing could be heard. Some rushed out of the lab to engage the invaders without even bothering to check if anyone was following. Precious minutes were lost before Ariko managed to calm things down. Touvolle had aided her, Ariko felt it was remarkably that the impulsive researcher managed to keep cool head. But by then Umailen had already left along with a few others and Ariko had no idea where he was.

The only option available to them was to seal the lab and the surrounding living quarters from the rest of the complex. Unfortunately, the station had not been designed with combat purposes in mind, which meant that five corridors had to be closed, along with several bypasses and maintenance tunnels. Time was of the essence, the Rabbit was closing in and Ariko had no idea how long it would be for him to arrive. But she was sure he would take the most direct route, not foreseeing any trouble. So she rushed a team to close the main entrance way into the lab section, hoping this would stall the raiders.

Meanwhile, Touvolle, still watching the sensors, reported that Fatal and his task force had turned the table on the defenders and were closing in on the station again. Undoubtedly, his intentions were to continue harassing the independent pilots to give his comrades inside the station time to complete their mission. It meant that Ariko and the rest were on their own. This only made her more determined to succeed.

Ten agonizing minutes ticked by. More teams had been dispatched to seal off more corridors and entrance ways, but Ariko was waiting anxiously to hear from the first team. Were they quick enough? She had contemplated moving out herself to help out, but someone had to stay behind to coordinate the effort. So instead she tried to calm her frayed nerves by focusing on a large map of the complex, searching for some entrance way she'd missed. Finally, her headset chimed. The main entrance way was closed. There had been no sight of the Rabbit or his henchmen. Ariko allowed herself to breath easier. Now if only they could locate the foolish Umailen, rushing off without so much as taking a communication device with him. Then Ariko's headset chimed again. It was the team leader at the main entrance again. It seemed that the Rabbit had found Umailen first.

It was blackmail, plain and simple, and listening to the Rabbit Ariko was sure it wasn't the first time he'd done something like this. His demands were simple. Open up the lab and give up or Umailen would get it. Ariko told him they would think it over, but she knew there was nothing to think about. None of the crew wanted to be responsible for Taromi Umailen being executed. The death of Gunaris was still too fresh on their mind. Ariko, as the spokesperson for the crew, negotiated with the Rabbit, trying to set at least some conditions on their own. But the Rabbit knew he held all the aces and all he was willing to promise was not to kill anyone.

The Guristas wasted no time once inside the lab to raid it off the few blueprints still remaining. Ariko had imagined the Rabbit to be a haughty, cocky son-of-a-bitch following their curt negotiations, but he turned out to be quite the opposite, modest, quiet and well-behaved. But he had a mind of steel and when he declared that Umailen and Touvolle would come with them, Ariko knew that all pleas would fall on deaf ears.

It took the crew several minutes to register just what had happened once the Rabbit and his men had left. Taking Taromi Umailen and Henric Touvolle along with them. The lab was in shambles after the pirates' raid, which had resembled more of a tornado. Touvolle and Umailen had become almost like permanent fixtures in the rooms and with them now gone the lab seemed strangely deserted. Not knowing what else to do they fixed the communication equipment, restoring communication with those outside the station.

The Guristas were getting away, Fatal and his men shielding the Rabbit and his marauders with their valuable cargo. But the defense forces, bigger than ever, were giving the Guristas everything they got. The pirates fled towards the Olettiers system, with the defense forces snapping at their heels. Finally, one of the puppies managed to bite into Fatal. The pirate's ship slowly disintegrated as his comrades sped away, none willing to share their leader's fate. Fatal, in his pod, made a futile attempt to reach the stargate jumping him to Olettiers and safety, but Doc Brown was having none of it and promptly obliterated the pod. The rest of the Guristas got away, but they had paid a heavy price for their wild foray into the Crielere system.

Ariko rejoiced over the death of Fatal, hating the man for his betrayal. Yet his death paled in comparison to that of Gunaris. And the scientists, whose work Ariko had pinned her hopes and dreams on with Gunaris gone and all bridges to the past burnt; now they were gone too. Continuing their visionary work without them was impossible. Ariko felt lower than she had ever done in her entire life. And to top it all off, the station had finally had enough of the battering it had received over the last few days and was slowly disintegrating. The awe Ariko had initially felt for the majestic place had now been replaced by nothing but loathing. It now held too many bad memories; of Fatal and the Rabbit, the racial disputes destroying peace and harmony and last but not the least, the greenhouse where Gunaris had died. It was time to leave the crumbling Crielere station for good.

Several old shuttles nestled in the docking bays, leftovers from the hurried exodus of the last few weeks. Ariko entered the passenger cabin of one along with a few other Caldari heading home. 'Home,' she thought. 'This was my home, do I still have one at Wiyrkomi?' She knew that even if they let her back in, she'd be reduced in rank, probably forced forever to toil away her entire life as a lowly clerk, serving as a warning to others. The thought didn't please her at all. Fidgeting in her seat, she pondered her destination. The Crielere system was directly on the borders of Federation and State space. The shuttle was heading for the Kubinen system, on the Caldari side of the border. Once inside there might be no turning back. The thought frightened her. She realized it was not because of the fate that awaited her. She feared it would be the final nail in

the coffin of the late Crielere project.

Ariko hadn't let her thoughts linger too much on the fate of Umailen and Touvolle, but it was undoubtedly much worse than what awaited her. But now that the hectic departure from the station was over and she had time to reflect upon the situation, she felt ashamed for abandoning the scientists in their terrible predicament, and to abandon the vision of the Crielere project. She realized that the spirit of the project could only be kept alive if the scientists were free to continue their work, for the good of all mankind. Yet there was nothing she could do. The scientists were gone with the Guristas deep into the outer region. Retrieving them would be impossible. Still, Ariko had a nagging feeling she should wait.

Just as the pilot was about to activate the shuttle's warp drive to make the short jump to the gate leading to Kubinen, Ariko made up her mind; she would stay and see how things panned out. The shuttle changed course at Ariko's insistence, much to the chagrin of her fellow passengers. But she was only taking a short detour; her destination was the Artisine system close by. The Scope had a development studio there and a reporter Ariko had met some weeks earlier was working there. The reporter, Jinette Pandour, was an experienced investigative reporter that had covered the Crielere project from the start. Ariko considered her to be little more than an acquaintance, but Pandour had interviewed her and had struck Ariko as a sensible person passionate about her work. Not knowing anyone else in the region, it was the only place Ariko could think of while waiting to hear of the fate of her two scientist friends.

The Scope station was a low profile station that didn't see many visitors outside those that had some business with the huge media conglomerate. Nevertheless, Ariko received a warm welcome there. Pandour was eager to hear all about the events of recent days, as news from the faltering Crielere station had been little more than rumors since the empires pulled out. The energetic reporter felt the events warranted more coverage and managed to convince her editors to get an exclusive on the goings-on in the Crielere complex in its last few days of operation. The daring Guristas raid and brave resistance of the independent pilots would surely merit the attention of the Scope.

So Ariko found herself having agreed to provide Pandour with all the nitty-gritty details of everything that had transpired in the station since her arrival. Naturally, Ariko left out the covert ops parts, but otherwise remained cooperative. After all, being on an all-expense account paid by the Scope was nothing to sneeze at.

Ariko was certain she had a long, anxious wait ahead of her before hearing anything from the scientists. But less than a week after her arrival in Artisine, Pandour burst into her room one morning shouting:

"They're being sold! The Guristas have put them up for ransom!" Pandour was pacing the room in her excitement, her mind racing at the possibilities these news opened up. Ariko finally managed to get the whole story out of her. The Guristas, now led by the Rabbit after the fall of Fatal, were in disarray and wanted to offload Umailen and Touvolle to the highest bidder to get some heat off themselves. Ariko was glad to hear that Fatal, in his typically arrogant manner, had refrained from buying a quality clone of himself and thus found himself with severe memory loss and reduced motor functions, once he was revived after being podded. In his weakened state he had been ousted out of the Guristas and gone into hiding. 'What goes around, comes around,' Ariko thought.

Ariko found the idea of her friends and mentors being sold like cattle to be totally repugnant, but at least it would mean they'd escape from the clutches of the Guristas. Once more she wished she had the opportunity to talk to them, instead of being forced to fret in total darkness. Pandour was kept busy over the next few days keeping track of those in secret or not so secret negotiations with the Guristas. Ariko routed with an effort launched by the same independent pilots that had helped defend the station during the last few dark days of the project. But though they managed to collect an impressive sum, their financial strength was still too weak for them to compete effectively. Still, Ariko was confident that she would soon be able to see her friends again, free at last.

Then Fate dealt her another blow, as if to scorn the visionary efforts she was part of along with Umailen and Touvolle. Ariko Kor-Azor was the highest bidder, by a large margin from what Ariko gathered from Pandour. It seemed the man had no qualm about plundering the estates that his father, the current emperor of the Amarr Empire, had so carefully cultivated over the decades. The royal heir intended for the two scientists to head a new research lab he was constructing. Ariko didn't know what they were supposed to research but was certain it had nothing to do with their previous work. Ariko Kor-Azor was not known for his benevolent nature.

Now that Ariko knew Umailen and Touvolle were to be released by the Guristas in mere hours she grew even more restless than before. She couldn't wait to speak to them again. She got just that opportunity later in the day, thanks to Pandour using her media links as leverage. When Ariko finally saw the haggard face of Touvolle on the screen, she felt she would cry from joy. The two chit-chatted for a few minutes, Ariko was so overwhelmed she hardly noticed what she said. She barely registered what Touvolle said. He and Umailen were being held in an Amarrian station at the outskirts of empire space, he didn't know the name of it. The Guristas had released him and Umailen at dawn, seemingly glad to be rid of the pair.

"We will be transported later today to the research lab," Touvolle said wearily.

"Do you know what it is you will be working on?" Ariko inquired.

"No, we've been told nothing. I'm just hoping that getting back into a lab will at least allow us to keep our pet projects alive, even if we can't work on them except periodically." Touvolle replied and sounded a little more upbeat when the discussion turned to the work they'd been engaged in on Crielere. "The little I've been told," he continued, "is that this new research facility is only just completed and it hasn't even been properly staffed yet. In fact, the only thing the Amarr officials said to me after we were taken into their custody was to order us to recruit other scientists to join the lab. They're obviously putting much stock in our reputation, hoping to use it to attract others."

"Oh?" Ariko hadn't considered that. Now it made her wonder. The possibility of working again with Umailen and Touvolle, even if it was on some nefarious research for the loathsome Articio Kor-Azor, excited her no end. "I'd love to have the opportunity to work with you again," she'd blurted out without really thinking about it, but she didn't regret it.

"That's fabulous news, Ariko," Touvolle replied, the relief visible in his eyes. "I was afraid to ask, after all we may have to work on something despicable for this man, but I'm really happy to have you aboard. It makes all this so much easier to bear."

The two chatted for a little while longer, Touvolle much more upbeat than he was at first. Finally, the Amarrians grew impatient and terminated the communication link, hardly giving them time to bid farewell.

Afterwards, Ariko was in really high spirits. Even the thought of traveling into Amarr space and working in some potentially hostile place didn't put her off. This was what she had been waiting for all those long days here at Artisine. She had no home in the State, she would not be welcome there. It was a remarkable easy decision to make.

She had allowed Pandour to listen in on her conversation with Touvolle, as part of their arrangement. Now, with Ariko leaving soon, Pandour had to decide whether to wrap up her story or follow it through all the way. It was also an easy decision for her. She would accompany Ariko into the Amarr Empire and witness the happy reunion.

Ariko finally felt at ease. The last few days she had been in a limbo, with no clear future ahead of her. Now she had a plan, something to aim for. She would travel into the Amarr Empire and become a full fledged researcher, working alongside Umailen and Touvolle. It was like a dream come true for her.

For the first time in awhile she allowed herself to think about Gunaris. Every time she'd thought of him, she felt sorrow threatening to wash over her, engulfing her. She thought of him when she saw something beautiful or remarkable. It always made her think how unfair, how tragic, it was that he couldn't be here to see or experience the same. That he would never get the chance to experience beauty or awe ever again. Now she wondered whether he would have approved of her decision.

Early the next morning Ariko and Pandour left the station on a Vexor cruiser owned and operated by the Scope. Their destination was a system in the Kor-Azor region, named Nebian in the Jatari constellation. There they would rendezvous with another Scope reporter, a veteran of the intricate political structure of the Empire. As Ariko was not yet officially an employee of the Kor-Azor's new research lab, she had not been told the whereabouts of this highly secret place. But she saw no reason to lope around in Artisine waiting for her employment status to come through. Pandour also wanted to cover this new twist in the story of Umailen and Touvolle from early on, so she had arranged for the transportation. They expected a dull and uneventful voyage, but while they were still in Federation space they received the news that president Foiritan was working behind the scenes to get the scientists released.

In light of the new information they decided to halt on the border of Federation space, before heading into the Genesis region. Ariko was unsure what to make of the news, so many unexpected twists and turns had happened in the last few days that she was becoming quite confused. Pandour, who was no great fan of Foiritan, was certain that there was something fishy about the whole thing. Was Foiritan's reasons purely humanitarian in nature, did he want to thwart Kor-Azor's research scheme or did the scientists possess some secret knowledge that Foiritan didn't want to fall into the wrong hands? All these speculations came up as the hours ticked by. Ariko was pretty sure that the last conspiracy theory was untrue, but then she remembered the private talk between Foiritan and the scientists the day he visited Crielere and wondered. The Senate was livid that Foiritan was negotiating with Articio, which it considered to be immoral and dangerous to the interests of the Federation.

As evening drew near it became evident that the matter would not be settled any time soon, so

they decided to camp out at the border. Ariko was confident that matter would be settled overnight, but she had to wait three whole days before a settlement was finally reached. Articio would give up the scientists, but what he was getting in exchange was kept secret. Ariko didn't care, she hadn't really hoped this would happen and now that it had she was overcome with joy. She even began making plans on how the scientists could continue their work once they were back in Federation space.

Pandour was clamoring to be present when the scientists were handed over, but everywhere she turned she hit a dead end. It seemed no one wanted a reporter anywhere near the place where Articio was giving the scientists into Federal custody. Pandour was quite agitated by this, and claimed Foiritan was holding a grudge against her after she had released a story last year that didn't paint him in a favorable light. Ariko only half-heartedly listened to her prattle; her mind was already with her impending rendezvous with Touvolle and Umailen.

Again, Ariko was forced to stew in her own anxiety for several days before the paperwork for the release of the scientists could be cleared up. She had no opportunity to speak with the scientists, as they were already on the secret research lab and outside communication was not allowed. Finally the word arrived: Federal officials had arrived to take the pair into their custody. But once they did, they immediately saw that something was amiss. The two persons the Amarrians handed them were Minmatars.

Ariko was in shock. Fortunately, Pandour was at hand to gather information on what had happened. It was almost beyond belief. Articio Kor-Azor, in his arrogance, had shipped the two famed scientists on a common slave transporter to the research lab. Somehow, two of the slaves managed to steal their ID chips and pose themselves as the scientists. As the research station was only occupied by construction workers and security personnel, who had no idea whom to expect, the ruse only came into light when Federal officials arrived at the station.

Pandour was investigating what had happened to the scientists and her findings were disturbing. They had been shipped, along with the rest of the slaves on the transporter, to a slave colony in the Inis-Ilix system. Presumably, they were then dumped there with the other slaves. Ariko was sure she was going to faint when she realized that for several days the two old men, accustomed to life in a peace and quiet in a lab, had been working in a hard labor camp. A hard labor camp where ground condition where terrible, to boot. Inis-Ilix IV was little more than a blasted rock with a barely breathable atmosphere. Ariko shuddered at the thought what it would do to the two old men.

Ariko was certain that an immediate rescue effort would be launched by all parties involved, but she was sorely disappointed when all that happened over the next day or so was silly bickering between Articio Kor-Azor and president Foiritan regarding the fate of the two Minmatar imposters. Articio wanted the two executed, while Foiritan claimed that Kor-Azor had handed the pair over to the Federation, thus it was up to the Federation to decide their fate. Finally, Articio grew tired of the whole matter, not wanting to further his embarrassment by engaging in an international dispute over some inconsequential Minmatars. Ariko for her part couldn't care less about their fate. She wanted the scientists found. She couldn't sleep, every time she closed her eyes all she could see in her mind's eye was an image of Umailen and Touvolle toiling away in some filthy sulfur-mine, sweat pouring of their frail bodies as the brutal ultra-violent sunrays blistered their skin. She had to find them.

Fortunately, Foiritan's involvement had Pandour all fired up and she was more than willing to

go the extra mile to get to the bottom of the story. She was just as keen as Ariko in finding the two scientists, though for different reasons. She wanted to interview them to see how deep Foiritan's involvement really was. The Vexor was still parked in the docking bay ready to go and since their permission from Amarr authorities to land on planets within the Empire was still valid, Ariko and Pandour simply decided to assemble a rescue team of their own. Again Pandour managed to get the Scope to foot the bill. The company's money made it easy for Pandour to attract people to their cause and in less than a day they were ready.

The team Pandour had assembled in record time wasn't professional by any stretch of the word, but to Ariko they seemed up to the task. Or at least she hoped so, as she was pinning her future hopes on them. Only in the recent few days, which had given her ample time to contemplate, had Ariko finally come to grips with her decisions. Her path was that of Umailen and Touvolle, aiding them along the way to human enlightenment in science. Only her fear of cutting all ties with her past had held her back in realizing this sooner. It was a big mental step for her to wrench her foot from the doorway leading to the State, but she had to do it. Now all she had to do was to find Umailen and Touvolle and she could begin building her life anew. When they finally departed and headed into Amarr space, it wasn't a moment to soon for her.

The journey, as usual, was uneventful. On the way they learnt that Articio Kor-Azor had finally handed the two Minmatar impostors over the Federation, grudgingly. Foiritan had also acted quickly and had assembled a rescue team of his own, which was also heading to the Inis-Ilix system. In his typically blunt manner he had simply put a huge bounty on the heads of the two scientists, thus sparking the interest of every bounty hunter in the area. Of course, the bounty would only be paid out if the scientists were brought back alive and well. Ariko silently thanked the energetic president for his efforts; the more people searching for the scientists, the sooner they would be found. But she didn't voice her feelings to Pandour, who sarcastically called this a mere 'token gestures' to make up for his earlier blunders. Ariko didn't ask what these supposed blunders were. It was irrelevant.

They arrived at Inis-Ilix IV at dusk, docking at an Amarr Construction foundry station orbiting the planet's only moon. The bounty hunters hired by Foiritan were already there, unloading their gear in the docking area and preparing to descend to the planet. A handful of Amarr officials hovered nearby bewildered by this sudden invasion of dozens of tough-looking bounty hunters, most of them of Caldari or Gallentean origin. Ariko herself quickly became floundered in the chaos, but fortunately Pandour was used to such hectic rush and not before long Ariko, Pandour and the rest of the team were onboard a shuttle heading for the surface.

It was nighttime when they arrived. The night air was chilly, but Ariko could feel the heat rising from the ground, indicating how hot it had been during the day. The air was thin and had a rank sulfuric taste that clung to the tongue. The team set out erecting a base camp; the search would begin at dawn. Despite the terrible condition, Ariko was feeling very optimistic that she would be reunited with Umailen and Touvolle sooner rather than later. She was already planning in her head what she would say to them and how they could get back on track with their work. Lying there in the make-shift tent, she played these fantasy conversations again and again through her mind.

But she had to wait four days before getting a chance to act these conversations out for real, and by then she had all but forgotten them in her fatigue and frustration. Dealing with the Amarr authorities on the planet was an exercise in futility. They seemed to have no understanding of the notion of individuality of slaves. Slaves were labeled for inter-stellar transportation, but once

on a slave colony they lost all identity. There was no need for the slave masters to know their name; to think of them as unique or special in any way was totally alien to them. Time and again Ariko and her team spent hours trying to make stubborn, narrow-minded officials understand, often to no avail.

Then on the fourth day they received the news that the bounty hunters sent by president Foiritan had found the scientists, in a cave outside one of the slave camps. The news was vague and failed to mention the condition of the pair. Pandour rushed them to the hover cars she'd rented for the team, herself taking control of one. Sitting next to her, Ariko noticed the strange gleam in her eye as she commanded her media crew to get their equipment ready. This was her big break.

It took two hours for them to reach the cave, even if they traveled the whole way at breakneck speeds. There was already considerable activity around the cave, kicking up dust clouds that triggered coughs and watery eyes, but at least shielded them from the worst of the sun. Yet despite all the people already on the scene when she arrived, she was surprised at the lack of urgency or even some token show of joy. Instead, the burly bounty hunters looked sour while scrawny Amarrian officials wandered aimlessly around. Then she saw the stretchers being carried out of the cave, white cloth covering what lay beneath. Even without actually seeing their faces, she knew they were dead. Somehow she had always known since she heard where they were, she had just embraced the soothing illusion of denial, convincing herself otherwise. She was on her knees now as she watched the stretch-bearers entering a tent a short distance from where she was; she didn't remember falling on her knees.

"No!" she wanted to shout to the world, but it only came out as a croak, barely audible. Tears cleared shiny paths down her dirty cheeks and soon she was raked with sobs.

She felt she cried for hours, but it was only a couple of minutes. She had to see them. One last time. With a renewed resolution she stood up and set out for the tent. She was vaguely aware that Pandour was following her every footstep, making sure the holo-cameras hovering around were aligned correctly. Two grim-faced bounty hunters stood either side of the entrance to the tent, but they barely registered with Ariko. Only when one of them grabbed her as she was about to enter did she come out of her daze. An Intaki man appeared from inside the tent. He was clad immaculately and seemed the only one around not affected by the dust that permeated everything. Ariko found him familiar and when he looked her in the eye she remembered him as one of Foiritan's entourage when he visited the Crielere station. She saw recognition in his eyes too and when he smiled it was the first comfort she felt since she saw the stretchers.

"She can come in," he said softly, indicating Ariko. "But keep the others out." Pandour protested loudly, then when this didn't have any visible effect pleaded with Ariko to speak on their behalf. But Ariko didn't have any patience for the prattling Scope woman now.

The tent was dimly lit and it took her eyes some time to adjust. The bodies of Henric Touvolle and Taromi Umailen were lying on narrow tables in the middle of the tent. The white cloth still covered them from the waist down, revealing their thin, shrunken chests. A doctor and a nurse were setting up field gear to conduct an autopsy. Ariko felt oddly relieved they hadn't started the gruesome operation. The Intaki man, introducing himself as Endt Strovare, escorted her to the tables. The doctor, taking Ariko for someone important, started yammering something about respiratory problems and malnutrition, but he quickly shut up when he noticed that nobody was listening.

Apart from Gunaris, this was the first time Ariko saw bodies close up, though whether she should blame or thank her sheltered upbringing she was uncertain about at the moment. With Gunaris her grief had been too overwhelming for her to notice the small details and she was too distraught to partake in preparing him for his funeral. She had heard all the stories about how serene someone looked that had just died peacefully, and to an extent she saw they were true. But she also saw red-rimmed eyes that stared into oblivion and bluish lips that no breath passed between. She saw their destroyed bodies and smelled the foul stench of their feces disposed from their loosened bowels. Death might be peaceful, but it certainly wasn't pretty.

Ariko had seen enough here. But she also wanted to see the cave where they were found. Strovare, who seemed to be the man in charge, approved quickly, but for her alone. He escorted her from the tent and followed her to the cave, keeping a respectful distance. Ariko had heard that the Intakis had great empathy for the feelings of others and this certainly seemed true of Strovare. Thinking about the Intaki she couldn't help but wonder what one of the top aides of president Foiritan was doing here. And why he was in charge, and not the Amarrians. But then they were at the cave and she let it go.

It was not a big cave, perhaps 15 meters deep and 4 meters wide. The floor was sandy, the rock wall was brown with a yellowish tint. A few items indicating human inhabitation littered the floor, but they didn't interest Ariko. The walls did. They were covered with scribblings, painted on the wall with anything the scientists had laid their hands on, juice from berries, soot, even dung if her nose wasn't deceiving her. Everywhere her head turned she could see intricate formulas and advanced theories, written by men on the brink of death possessed with ideas they had to get out, lest they died with them.

A few workmen entered the cave, clad in body-covering suits with breathing masks. Strovare indicated to her that they had to leave, gently taking her by the arm. Ariko didn't resist at first, but then she realized what these men were doing here. They were going to wash the walls clean, eradicate the last message Umailen and Touvolle had for the world. She tried to wrestle out of Strovare's grip, but he had anticipated her reaction and held fast. He had to drag her from the cave, as the workmen fired up their powerful hoses and started hosing the walls.

It was the next day. Ariko, Pandour and the team were back on the space station orbiting Inis-Ilix IV's lonely moon. They had been told gently, but firmly, that they were no longer welcome on the planet now that the scientists were found. Pandour was still seething at the treatment she had received, but her nose for news was also as strong as ever and she could easily smell the story here. Some sort of a cover up was taking place, but she had no idea what. President Foiritan might be involved, or maybe it was just the stubborn Amarrians. She had been intrigued by Ariko's account of events in the cave. The scribblings themselves didn't interest her that much, but the hint of conspiracy did.

It was the opposite for Ariko. She didn't care for conspiracy theories or corrupt politicians or imperialists. The ideas of Umailen and Touvolle did. With them gone, these ideas of theirs were all that was left. It was their legacy, and she was the only one that could appreciate it. But already Ariko could feel her memories of the cave scribblings fading. She had only had a chance to look at them for a few seconds before being ushered out. Although she had scanned all the walls, it was only for the briefest of moments, much too short for her to get a clear picture of what was being written.

But this knowledge couldn't be lost. She couldn't let it happen. She had burned all the bridges

linking her to the past, pinning all her hopes and dreams on the two scientists and their wild but wonderful schemes. She had jumped aboard and taking a ride to the heavens and now there was no way back. In a sense, she was the only thing that remained of the great pioneering spirit that had roamed the halls of Crielere for few short weeks and shifted the world. But she wasn't a pioneer herself. The most she could hope for was to be a spectator.

Or a courier. This new thought flashed in her mind and physically jolted her. Of course. She could never hope to revive the spirit all by herself. But she could be the vessel for which to bring the message to the world. What she saw in the cave was still in her mind. She couldn't recall it herself. But she knew somebody that could. The Jovians.

It was a wild idea. It wasn't even a longshot. It was borderline lunacy. But in a way it made sense. The Jovians were wonderfully advanced, they possessed the technology to extract the cave memory from her mind. And they would most surely agree to do it once they knew what was in her head. She didn't know much about Jovians, but she knew they craved new knowledge above everything else. So she would bring it to them. And enlighten the world.

A week later a Caldari Navy frigate on a patrol on the border of Caldari space noticed a small shuttle cruising to a stargate that would take it deep into the outer regions. It wasn't really his business, but the captain felt obliged to warn the occupant of the shuttle of the dangers it was heading into. The only reply he got before the shuttle disappeared into deep space:

“Fate won't kill the Messenger.”

