

Forsaken Ruins

An EVE Online Novella

E8-YS9 Solar System, EL8Z-M Constellation, Immensea Region

20.01.106 - 05:41 EVT

Failure always begets reflection, and Mattias found himself asking the same question over and over again:

How could it have come to this?

He stared in crushed disbelief at the rippling translucent inner membrane of the warp tunnel, watching the planets and moons of the E8-YS9 system shoot past his ship. The Blackbird-class cruiser at his command was hurtling through the tunnel at hundreds of times the speed of light. Mattias was amazed the battered vessel was still capable of sustaining this speed without breaking apart.

We were so close to killing him, he thought. So very, very close.

The tragedy would not be in his own death, but in the fact that his prey would continue to live out its wretched, despicable existence. For Mattias and the team of loyal bounty hunters that he had dedicated his life to, this was the ultimate failure. They had lost the bounty, were about to lose their lives, and worst of all, lost an opportunity to do some good in a galaxy controlled by greed and evil above all else.

“Do you believe in God, Mattias?” asked the voice of his enemy. Mattias cursed his own misfortune and refused to answer.

“And what of the Amarr and Minmatar comrades that you are leading to death?” the wicked voice sneered. “Are they believers in an afterlife?”

In an instant, Mattias thought of the entire history of the two outstanding bounty hunters – and great friends – whose lives were in as much peril as his own. Kirlana was an Amarr by birth, but had rebelled against her lavish upbringing and become ashamed of her cultural roots. She renounced her family name and turned her back on the fortune that would have been hers by birthright. The only “possession” she took with her was Matuno, the Brutor slave that had looked after her since childhood. She transformed him into an independent, Tempest-class battleship captain. Now, he answered to no one. But he would never forget those he was beholden to.

Forever grateful for being set free of Amarrian bondage, Matuno found himself unable to leave Kirlana's side, and together they sought greater purpose in life. After months of wandering Empire space, fate would introduce them to Mattias Kakkichi. Inspired by his passion for truth and justice, they readily joined his self-appointed mission: To become the arm of justice where the laws of Empire space could not reach. The money received from collected bounties was unimportant to them. The real reward was the righted wrong, accomplished through the kill itself. Watching evil succumb to the thunder of guns filled each of their souls with delicious satisfaction. No single feeling was more powerful than knowing that an injustice had been avenged. But on this day, the odds of lethal misfortune for pursuing such a risky profession finally caught up with them.

Mattias, Kirlana, and Matuno were fleeing from the scene of an assassination attempt on Trald Vukenda, the leader of the infamous Angel Cartel and the highest profile target they had ever hunted. The operation had gone horribly wrong. Within sight of their prey, the enemy surprised the bounty hunters with reinforcements, and they suddenly found themselves greatly outnumbered. Their ships were punished almost to the breaking point, and they were lucky to have escaped into warp. But there were only two jumpgates leading out of the system, and Trald already knew which one the bounty hunters were running towards. Both exits were already blockaded by Angel Cartel ships.

"I'm going to nail your self-righteous corpse to that jumpgate, Mattias," snarled Trald. "As a reminder to others about the perils in pursuing delusional moral obligations."

The hatred that Mattias felt swelling in his heart was powerful. He forced himself to suppress his anger and focus on trying to find a way to keep his good friends alive. They would be emerging from warp in just a few moments.

"Kirlana, Matuno...I'm sorry I got the both of you into this, but I'm not ready to say goodbye just yet." Mattias willed the camera drones orbiting his ship to zoom out so he could see all three ships traveling inside the warp tunnel. Kirlana's Omen-class cruiser was in the worst condition of them, venting plasma from a rupture in the hull plating alongside one of the ship's engines.

"Standing by," said Kirlana. Her voice was terse, and filled with fear.

"At your service," said the deep voice of Matuno, who had not known fear since the day Kirlana set him free. Their ships were already beginning to decelerate.

"We're only going to get one shot at this, so pay attention." Mattias was thinking quickly. "When the warp engines quit, Kirlana, point your bow at the nearest object you can warp towards and get out...Matuno, we have to give her enough time to get aligned, so fire up your sensor boosters as soon as you're able to and concentrate fire on anything that tries to cut her off. I'm going to target link with your ship to assist your artillery tracking and target jam anything that tries to close in..." The warp tunnel surrounding them had just about disappeared, and the jumpgate was coming into view. "Matuno, as soon as she's out, warp yourself out of there, anywhere you can..."

Both of them started to protest at the same time. "Mattias, what about you —"

"Go, damnit! Go! Go! Go!" The warp core disappeared, and the Blackbird's engines switched to impulse power. The ship's threat detectors registered danger immediately. Mattias counted at

least 4 ships, and saw the unmistakable profile of a deadly Arch Angel Warlord floating directly above the jumpgate. An icy lead ball formed in his stomach. He was well within range of the Warlord's most powerful cannons, and three Arch Angel Scout cruisers were speeding directly towards them. Mattias was certain that the Scouts were equipped with warp scramblers.

“Kirlana! Go!” Plasma trailed behind the Omen as it pitched upwards and turned away from the jumpgate. The first spread of Arch Angel heavy missiles began coursing towards them. The cruiser made painstakingly slow course adjustments to align itself perfectly with the warp tunnel projected in front of it. The ship accelerated and vanished just in time. Missile exhaust plumes crisscrossed each other at the exact spot in space where the Omen was just a fraction of a second earlier. One away. Right on queue, the Blackbird's sophisticated electronics systems established targeting locks on the three incoming Arch Angel Scout cruisers. Mattias linked with the weapons system onboard Matuno's Tempest, feeding it telemetry. The enormous 1400mm artillery turrets spread along the battleship's hull began tracking in unison. The Arch Angel Scouts unleashed a second spread of heavy missiles towards them.

“Matuno, go!” Mattias could see missile plumes from the Warlord extending towards them now as well. The Tempest's portside seemed to explode as the 1400mm artillery pieces unloaded. The shells slammed into the lead Arch Angel a split second later, nearly breaking the enemy cruiser's spine on the first salvo. Mattias willed his shield hardeners online and target jammed the second Scout. He simultaneously launched a missile volley of his own towards the crippled Arch Angel. “Warp now now now!” Mattias screamed in his mind at Matuno, inadvertently gulping down some of the ectoplasm inside of his pod.

Mattias could see the massive Tempest slowly swing its bow around in the same direction that Kirlana had warped towards. A half second before the detonation of the first incoming missile, a bluish-white aura engulfed the goliath battleship as Matuno activated his own shield hardeners. Mattias counted off eight devastating explosions as the Warlord's cruise missiles slammed into the Tempest, throwing it off course and ripping enormous gashes into the hull. The shockwaves expanding from the explosion sites crashed into the Blackbird, tearing through its shields and punching through the last of the ship's armor. The Tempest was violently spewing plasma and debris directly into space now, and a third Arch Angel missile spread was already on its way as Matuno desperately tried to coax his crippled battleship into warp.

The lead Arch Angel Scout exploded just as Trald's fleet arrived. Mattias activated one last blistering burst of signal-scrambling electronic noise towards the third Arch Angel Scout—now just 12 kilometers away—before randomly selecting a planet on his navigation list and activating the warp drive. Mattias thought he saw a flash erupt from the direction of the Warlord a half-second before the Blackbird's computer registered near-catastrophic hull breaches all over his ship. It was such a powerful impact that Mattias swore he could actually feel the shells slam into the hull from inside his pod.

That's it, thought Mattias. This is how it finally ends.

The Blackbird's thrusters were still trying to correct the ship's course from the devastating impact. The first spread of cruise missiles from Trald's ship began arcing towards it.

“My regards to hell's keeper, Mattias,” said Trald. “Good bye.”

Mattias rotated the camera drones around and focused them on the ship of his enemy. He

always told himself that when the time came, he would stare death in the eyes, and take the hatred for his enemy to eternity. Severing the communication link between himself and Trald, he allowed his mind to let go of the ship's controls, and waited for the inevitable to consume him.

But instead of greeting death, he saw the image of Trald's Seraphim-class battleship yanked away as the Blackbird miraculously accelerated into warp. Mattias nearly swallowed more of the pod's ectoplasm, and had to make a concerted effort to control his breathing through the nose tubes. For the time being, he had survived, and the subsiding adrenaline rush from his near-death experience nearly left him incapacitated with nausea. The ship's vital signs projected a grim image onto his mind's vision:

Shields: 8% and rising.

Armor: 0%

Structure: 4%

Capacitor: 2% and rising.

Come to your senses, Mattias thought. Think. The capacitor was almost completely drained. Wherever it was that he set course for, his ship would come up well short of the target destination.

"Mattias, check in." Matuno had made it out! I need to be strong here, he thought.

"Roger that, Matuno, still alive. Are you with Kirlana?" The Blackbird was decelerating from warp. He was beginning to get his shaking under control.

"I'm here with him, Mattias," she answered. "We're in orbit around the 5th planet in the system. Hull and armor levels are negligible, diagnostics are red across the board."

"Must be that lousy Amarr engineering." It was a half-hearted attempt to relieve some of the tension with humor. Mattias sensed it didn't work, and the Blackbird was nearly out of the warp tunnel. "Make sure you keep moving, and warp to my location as soon as your capacitor will let you." Mattias checked his weapons inventory: no extra missiles other than what was already loaded in the launchers, and 34 total antimatter charges for the Blackbird's 250mm railguns. Mattias grimaced underneath the mask covering his eyes. "How are you two on ammo?"

"A dozen fourteen-hundred shells and a handful of six-fifty rounds, no missiles," replied Matuno.

"Radio crystals loaded, multi-frequencies in the hold, bingo missiles," answered Kirlana.

Great, thought Mattias. Here's where I come up with something brilliant to get us out of this. The situation could not possibly be any worse. His fleet would not survive another engagement with Angel Cartel forces, or any other adversaries for that matter. Some said that Trald Vukenda was the most powerful man in all of unregulated space. Whether or not that was true was debatable, depending on which pirate you asked. But they would all agree that Trald was definitely the most powerful man in this region of space. As the head of the most notorious pirate organization in existence, it was well within his means to seal off entire systems to prevent anything from coming in or leaving. This space, and everything in it, belonged to the Angel Cartel. Mattias knew that the longer they stayed here, the tighter the noose around their necks became.

In the bounty hunting profession, lofty ambitions bear enormous risks. Mattias was the one being hunted now, and he had placed the lives of the people he cared for most in great danger. Why was doing the right thing always so damn difficult, he asked himself. Why is it that so few of us find the courage to fight for the unpunished injustices of our time? Mattias focused the drone cameras on the Blackbird, inspecting the massive gashes in its hull. Judging from the metallic carnage, he estimated that sections of at least 6 decks were now exposed directly to space. Somewhere beneath where he was sitting, hundreds of crewmembers were sealing off compartments, fighting electrical fires and desperately struggling to keep his ship's vital systems functioning. How many of them died because of this, he wondered. As the captain of the ship, he was sealed inside a pod made of an ultra-strong, Jovian-manufactured alloy and neurologically connected to the Blackbird's systems. Inside of it, so long as the ship was intact, the captain was immune from harm. It was the Jovians who had introduced this remarkable innovation, and it had changed the face of naval warfare forever.

Mattias began contemplating the Jovians and their technology. As spectacular as the pod was, it was also emblematic of the traits that defined the entire Jovian race: hyper-intelligent, but utterly and completely numb to human emotion. Modern day starships are massive and incomprehensibly complex. Before the pod, there were so many points of failure between a captain's decision and the execution of his orders. The ability to create a direct neurological connection between a human mind and a ship's systems reduced those points of failure to zero. Commanding a starship was now a natural extension of the mind's will. All a captain needed was to just think about what he wanted his ship to do, and it was done.

To Mattias, it was all so impersonal. Because of the technology, a captain could skipper numerous ships over the course of a lifetime without ever meeting a single crewmember from any of them. Mattias was one of the few who made an effort to meet at least some. It seemed like the least he could do in exchange for their unquestioning faith in his abilities, and their trust in him to keep them alive.

As the Blackbird's warp drives shut down, Mattias expected to find himself surrounded with the vast expanse of nothingness that exists between celestial objects within solar systems. Instead, he saw that the ship had exited the warp tunnel just 40 kilometers from the surface of a colossal rock formation the size of a mountain range. It was surrounded by several small asteroid fields, and looked almost serene against the greenish-black nebula backdrop of the E8-YS9 solar system. Mattias was no geologist, and was at a complete loss to explain how such a bizarre formation could have formed. He willed the Blackbird to cruise towards it, contemplating the idea of using the range as a place to hide from the Arch Angels.

"Mattias, we are en route to your destination," said Matuno. "Be advised, Arch Angels warped to our location just as we got aligned."

"You guys aren't going to believe what I just found," Mattias answered. The formation was growing larger as his cruiser approached. The Blackbird's avionics registered the arrival the Omen and Tempest.

"Whoa..." breathed Kirlana. "Is this formation mapped?"

"Negative, but it does appear on scanner, which rules out using it as a place to hide," said Mattias.

"I'm not sure the Angels have ever been here," said Matuno. "No debris, no containers, no mining equipment...no signs of activity anywhere along the range."

Mattias rotated the view 180 degrees away from the rocks and watched as his two comrades pulled their battered vessels alongside of his own. The Omen was about the same size as his Blackbird, but the Tempest was much larger than the two of them combined, with more than twice the number of crew onboard. Amazing that the three of us are still in one piece, thought Mattias. The three ships were cruising above the rocks, still trailing long jets of fire and plasma behind them.

"No, something was definitely here," interrupted Kirlana. "Look closer at those pinnacles directly beneath us...can you see that flashing?"

Mattias swung the camera downwards and zoomed in closer. Yes, there it is. The sides of some rock pinnacles jutting outwards from the formation were being illuminated intermittently. He slowed down the Blackbird's speed almost to a stop and altered course just a few degrees to try and find the source of the light.

"There...it's a strobe or beacon of some kind. Actually...that looks like an escape pod or something," said Kirlana.

Mattias zoomed the cameras in even further and was finally able to focus on the image. It was about 5 meters in length, with a polished metallic black exterior. One end was lodged against the base of the pinnacle, and the other had the flashing strobe light. Mattias did not recognize the object, and it was still invisible to his ship's sensors.

"Matuno, do you still have salvage drones onboard?"

"Yes, deploying now." Mattias watched as a tiny drone began orbiting the Tempest. Salvage drones were not available anywhere within Empire space. Matuno had found this one among the wreckage of a pirate convoy that he had destroyed. For all of its risks, bounty hunting occasionally yielded some rare finds. Mega-corporations weren't the only organizations with talented engineers, and pirates were more than capable of generating their own prototype technology. "I can't lock the object, my sensors think that it's physically part of the formation's surface. The drone might be able to make the distinction, if I can get it close enough."

The drone descended from the Tempest to near the formation's surface. It started flying small racetrack circles around the pinnacle area. After several orbits, it abruptly stopped and changed direction, heading directly towards the mysterious object.

"The drone acquired it. Stand by for extraction," announced Matuno. The drone came to a stop and dropped its four, tentacle-like arms onto the surface, gently drawing them around the object. The arms appeared to struggle a little bit, and then it came free amidst a plume of dust and pebbles. Within a few moments, the drone and its mysterious cargo were onboard the Tempest.

For a few moments, there was silence.

"Hold...hold on..." Mattias could feel his eyebrows rise slightly. Not like him to get flustered at anything, he thought.

"This is no pod," Matuno started. "It's a casket of some sort. There are no neurolinks or traces of ectoplasm inside. The beacons were affixed to the external structure intentionally, and there is an engraving on the outside that reads 'FORMATOR IMMENSEA'."

"Immensea? The region we're in?" asked Mattias. He started a routine to perform deep-space scans covering every direction around them. As much as this find was interesting, they were all still in danger of being found.

"If it's a casket, then who's inside of it?" asked Kirlana.

Again, Matuno paused before answering. "A Gallente male dressed in some sort of ceremonial robes. He...looks like he was murdered."

"Murdered?" said Kirlana. "How can you —"

"There is a gold-plated dagger driven up to the hilt through the man's sternum, but his hands are resting on each other over his navel. He actually looks like he's at peace. The body appears that it was deliberately arranged in this exact fashion and laid to rest inside the casket."

Mattias thought about that for a moment. He had killed before. In fact, all of them had, but only by using their ship's weapons as an extension of their mind. To plunge a dagger through another man's heart...that was grotesquely barbaric, if not outright inhuman.

"One more thing," Matuno interrupted his thoughts. "There are coordinates engraved on the inner plating of the casket. They point to somewhere within this system."

Somewhere. Well, there were risks in trying to find out where that was, and risks for not trying as well. Staying on the move was an absolute necessity, but he was surprised at how his own curiosity exceeded his fear of being discovered by the Arch Angels. Whoever put him in there, he thought, wanted him to be found. The man inside the casket had been murdered, and Mattias found that to be a compelling enough reason to investigate.

"Matuno, transmit those coordinates to my navigation computer. I'm going to have a look."

"Roger." There were no protests from either of them this time, at least not spoken. For all they knew, Trald himself could have planned all this, and set the bait which would deliver them to a pack of bloodthirsty Arch Angels.

Mattias engaged the warp drive. Immediately, the computer indicated that the target destination was a mere 300 kilometers from the rock formation. A few seconds later, the view of an enormous space station rushed into view. He thought for certain this was a trap, and that sentry guns were moments away from cutting his ship to pieces. Mattias was about to panic when he realized that there were no guns or defenses of any kind at all. As the Blackbird approached the dark, foreboding structure, Mattias realized that the station was abandoned. And more importantly, according to the CONCORD maps, it didn't exist.

"Warp to my location," he ordered. "And tell yourself that what you're about to see isn't an illusion." Mattias steered the Blackbird alongside the station's greenish-metallic hull. Is the dead Gallente the owner of this place? Some of the exterior hull plating was missing along several decks. An ominous feeling descended over him. Something isn't right here, he thought. Every

station he ever visited was always bustling with activity, even the ones in deep space. There were no signs of life here at all, even though the station still had power. The contrasting images in his mind made him uneasy.

The Omen and Tempest suddenly appeared.

"Unbelievable," said Kirlana. "This isn't on the map!"

"No sentry guns, no defenses except for the shields." said Matuno. "And harbor control rejects all docking requests."

"So the big question is how the heck do we get onboard this thing," Mattias wondered out loud.

"And why haven't the Angel's claimed it for themselves, assuming they even know it's here," said Matuno.

"The shields," said Kirlana, sounding a little nervous. "Take them down, and you'll get in. It's an emergency failsafe mechanism built into most station's AI. If no active defenses are remaining and the shields are breached, the AI automatically shuts harbor control down, allowing anything from the outside to get in, and anything from the inside to get out. The thinking was that if something was powerful enough to take down a station's defenses – natural or man-made – then it assumes that hull failure and catastrophic loss of life are imminent. It makes zero sense to keep harbor control active at that point. The station is either already lost or about to be destroyed."

"How do you know all this?" asked Mattias.

"The Amarrs learned about it the hard way during the Rebellion," she answered. "The Minmatars tried it successfully during some pretty ballsy missions to rescue slaves just after the Jovians crushed the Amarr invasion fleet."

"Thank God for that," muttered Matuno.

"God had nothing to do with it," she answered. "Because there's no such thing."

Her words resonated in Mattias's mind. He wasn't a religious man – at least not in a traditional sense. But the comment still made him uncomfortable. Regardless of her rebellion against the religious paradigms of the culture that she was born into, to hear an Amarr say there was no God was extremely disturbing.

The plasma and fire escaping the gashes in her ship drew his attention for some reason. He decided to reclaim his team's focus.

"So what you're telling us is that we don't have the firepower to get inside."

"In so many words, yes. Even if we had unlimited ammunition, our three ships combined couldn't overtake the shield's rate of regeneration." Mattias's attention was diverted again, this time towards the station's hull, now more than 3 kilometers away from the Blackbird. The surface appeared to distort itself slightly, and a ripple began to move across it from left to right. Mattias's sixth sense screamed danger to him, and his heart stopped as he realized what was

happening.

“Both of you, put your shield hardeners on.” Mattias ordered.

“Say again? I don't see any —”

“Now! Quickly!” Whitish-blue auras enveloped all three ships as the bounty hunters followed Mattias's instructions, unsure of their purpose. One second later, the reason became perfectly clear, as a Jovian Wraith-class frigate uncloaked just 300 meters from Mattias's Blackbird. Although the Wraith was the smallest ship in the group, it was the most technically advanced, and had the enormous tactical advantage of being able to cloak itself. In numbers, the Wraith was among the deadliest ships in space. Mattias wondered if there were more of them nearby.

“I can't lock him up,” said Matuno. “And even if I could, he's too close, I doubt I could hit him with anything.”

“Stop trying,” answered Mattias. “Who knows how many others are out here. We'd be in pods or worse by now if he had bad intentions.” He brought his ship to a complete stop. The Wraith gracefully slid alongside, closing to within 100 meters. The Jovian opened a communications channel with him.

“A thousand apologies for my abrupt appearance, Captain Kakkichi” began then Jovian. “But the circumstances required this choice of tactics.”

“What can I do for you?” asked Mattias. He had never spoken to a Jovian before, let alone been this close to one of their ships. The camera drones were snapping pictures like crazy.

“My name is Veniel, and as you already know, I hail from the Jovian Empire.” His voice sounded almost hollow, like a drone. Mattias studied the portrait of the “man” speaking to him. He was human, but so...not human either. The Jovians were products of genetic engineering, literally harvested from cultures and grown in fetus test tubes until “maturity”, as they coldly referred to it. “Would you like me to invite your crew to participate in our conversation?” he asked.

“Allow me,” answered Mattias, patching in Kirlana and Matuno. “How long were you following us for?”

“It isn't often when the Angel Cartel actively hunts anyone specifically, let alone blockades the entrances to solar systems for the occasion. I had to find out for myself who the recipient of this honor was.” He paused for a moment. “I have to say Captain, that I am very impressed with your tenacity for survival.”

“I'm glad you find it entertaining,” Mattias shot back. “But as you can see from the condition of my fleet, I don't have time for games.”

“Of course not Captain, I understand completely. But before I leave you to your business, I have to ask...how, exactly, did you find this station?”

Mattias thought about his question carefully before answering. Odds were that the Jovian already knew the answer, if he was able to follow them to the rock formation. Veniel was fishing

for information, and Mattias decided to play along.

“We discovered an artifact in an asteroid field not too far from here, and it led us to this location.”

“And this ‘artifact’, did it contain the corpse of a Gallente?”

Aha. The man knew exactly what he was looking for. “Yes, it did.”

“Then I have a proposition for you and your crew, Captain. First, let me begin by saying that you will not survive another attempt to run the gauntlets in place at the gates in this system. Trald is focused on your destruction, and you will not escape from him again. Therefore, in exchange for the artifact in your possession, I offer you all three of the following: Access to this station, the explanation for its existence, and a way past the blockades in this system.”

Mattias had heard about the Jovians insatiable lust for knowledge, and that they were often willing to trade hyper-advanced technology in exchange for it. Veniel, on the other hand, was offering ways to spare their lives in exchange for, of all things, a corpse. Why he wanted it was both beyond explanation and irrelevant in this context. The upper hand in this agreement belonged to Veniel, and Mattias knew he'd be a fool to refuse. The Jovians were never known for cruelty or deceit, and although this one seemed atypical of the stereotype, he sensed no ill will on Veniel's part.

“Very well, Veniel. Deal.”

“Excellent, Captain. Now, the artifact, if you please.”

“I have your word that you'll fulfill your part of the bargain?”

“Most certainly, Captain.”

Mattias took a deep breath through the nose tubes. “Alright, then. Matuno, please jettison the casket.”

“Roger.” A tiny cargo container appeared just above the Tempest. Mattias was thankful that the errant plasma and fire jets still erupting from the damaged ship were pointing away from it. The Wraith slowly pulled away from the Blackbird and positioned itself above the floating cargo container, guiding it on board.

“Superb. Now, for my part of the bargain, if you'll excuse me for just a moment...” The Jovian broke the connection. Mattias focused his view on the Wraith hovering above the Tempest, already beginning to question his own judgment. It wasn't the first time he'd done that today.

06:45 EVT

The DED is the police force of CONCORD, and a Spartan affair even by military standards. Charged with the responsibility of maintaining law and order within the borders of Empire space, the men and women who make up its ranks are meticulous in their work, fervently devoted to their mission, and strict advocates of structured rank and their own respective place within it. Candidates wishing to join the DED are subjected to a near ruthless application process. If accepted, recruits are given a training regime whose intensity rivals or exceeds any military institution in mankind's history.

Their philosophy discourages autonomy insofar as its place within fighting units is concerned. DED ships are rarely seen alone. They patrol Empire shipping lanes and property in balanced fleets of varying military capacity, and are always within range of other patrols so that the response time to any crisis is almost instantaneous. The DED's prowess for coordinating strikes and rapid-response counterattacks within Empire space is staggering, thanks to the uniquely trained individuals that CONCORD enlists for the task.

But no large organization is without its informants. And the DED, despite the extensive background checks, personality evaluations, and constant surveillance of new and experienced employees, was not without their own. With so much power concentrated there, entities both malicious and neutral went to great lengths to infiltrate the law enforcement agency. The DED quietly dealt with the moles they were able to catch. But with espionage at this level, where the stakes are so high and the potential for damage so great, no one could ever be certain that every spy was purged.

Tantoseisen Kakkichi—the Chief of Internal Security at the DED—knew that other spies existed within the agency. He had been reviewing disinformation items designed to expose potential operatives when the Jovian contacted him. Midway through the conversation, Tantoseisen started believing that he was being set up for a disinformation play as well.

“How many stations did you say there were again?”

“Sixty-nine, to be exact,” Veniel repeated.

“In twenty three deep space regions surrounding Empire space?”

“Correct, Commander.”

Tantoseisen sat back in his chair, glancing towards Veniel's dossier on the other screen. Although they never formally met, this was one of the few Jovians that CONCORD had some record of. Ever since the legendary trade that brought pod technology to the forefront of naval warfare, contact with the elusive race had been rare. Veniel was the only Jovian who surfaced from time to time, and whenever he did, there were always significant repercussions. The consensus among DED intelligence analysts was that Veniel was the Jovian equivalent of a maverick, and they had serious doubts that his actions proceeded with the blessings of his own kind. That notion alone would make anyone wary of trusting him, let alone believe his claim

that dozens of stations existed in deep space which CONCORD knew nothing about.

“Veniel, with all due respect, you'll understand that I'm having a difficult time believing your claim.” And that's about as delicately as I'm capable of saying that, he thought.

“If you so desire, I can show you proof.”

“Very well then. Show me proof.”

Veniel's pale, vein-crossed, elongated face was replaced with the image of a Jovian frigate cruising slowly against the backdrop of a station. That could be anywhere, Tantoseisen thought. Something did seem different about it, but nothing so much out of the ordinary.

“Are you convinced yet, Commander?” asked Veniel.

“I'm afraid I haven't seen anything to make me change my mind.”

The image rotated so that the camera perspective was behind the frigate, still continuing its deliberate pace outside the station. Tantoseisen could see the outer hull of the base in more detail. Emergency lighting, he thought. But again, that could be any one of dozens of Gallente stations here in Empire space. Approaching the end of an enormous hull section, the ship began a slight bank to its left. When it finished rounded the corner, the camera panned back again.

The image of a critically damaged Tempest-class battleship came into view.

“Veniel, I thought you said that no one in Empire space knew about this.”

The Jovian did not answer. A second ship – an Omen-class cruiser, also badly damaged – was there, floating alongside the battleship. Both ships looked like they were on fire.

“If my word alone will not suffice,” said Veniel. “Then perhaps his will.” The view focused back to the Tempest, then panned to an angle above and behind it. A third ship – a Blackbird – was also there, on fire and...

The image suddenly registered as being very familiar to Tantoseisen: A Caldari, an Amarrian, and a Minmatar...

Mattias! How can that be? “Is that my brother?” he asked incredulously. His question was answered immediately, as the view was replaced with portraits of his older brother on one side, and the Jovian on the other. “Mattias, where are you? What happened to your ship?”

“Tantoseisen, it's good to see you”, said Mattias, who sounded angry. Veniel was silent. “I'm really sorry you got brought into this, but as long as we're all here, this is what happened...”

Mattias explained the entire course of events that brought them to the abandoned station. He talked about the tip they received about Trald Vukenda's whereabouts and movements, the operation that he and his team had planned to ambush him, and how it went terribly wrong. Tantoseisen was stunned.

“My God, Mattias...why Trald?” Tantoseisen didn't want to start an argument, but he just

couldn't help asking. You're completely out of your league is what he should have said. Mattias was always like that, pushing himself to pull off impossible feats and insisting on doing things his own way. It was reckless, and it endangered everyone in his care. The strict military officer of Tantoseisen's psyche hated it. But as a younger brother, he found it inspiring. Mattias was always a source of strength in his life growing up. Tantoseisen surprised himself to discover that he still admired his brother's courage. He knew exactly what motivated him, and what the reply to his question would be.

"Same reason as always, little brother," he answered. "Because it was the right thing to do."

Yes, the right thing to do. Tantoseisen nodded his head slightly, not saying anything. He often passed along information about criminals who escaped the punishment of CONCORD to Mattias, always in secret. The DED, as powerful as it was, lacked the resources to chase felons past Empire borders. Justice should have no bounds, the brothers always said. Mattias would be the instrument of CONCORD where the Tantoseisen and the DED could not tread.

"Commander, I can give you the exact locations of the other 68 stations," said Veniel. "But that is conditional on two terms. First, you and your fleet must come to our present location here in the Immensea region."

"Hey, wait just a minute—" Mattias started, but was cut off again by Veniel.

"The second term is that you do not, under any circumstances, tell any of your superior officers of your intentions."

"So that's how you plan on fulfilling your agreement with me? Goddamn you, Veniel," cursed Mattias. "You know he can't do that, he's a DED officer! He could be court-martialed and executed for doing something like that. Tantoseisen, don't listen to this snake, we'll be alright over here."

Veniel was unfazed. "It is true that the risks are great. But there is greater risk by not acting."

Remarkable, Tantoseisen thought, that he could put the both of us into positions that pit our mutual fates with each other's decisions. Was this man seriously prepared to let Mattias die at the hands of the Angel Cartel if I refused? Was he seriously capable of doing something that sinister? What was it that he really wanted, and why all this trouble for a corpse?

"Why the second term, Veniel. Why is it that my superiors are to be kept out of this?"

"There are certain elements within the DED which stand to benefit directly from this information, Commander. Some would almost certainly use it to advance their own personal incentives, rather than promote the cause of the greater good, as the DED mission statement specifies."

Tantoseisen was losing his patience. "'Certain elements'? Veniel, don't be cryptic with me, give me straight answers—"

"Elements who would take this information and attempt to conceal it from the other Assembly members. Tell me, what do you suppose the repercussions would be if it was revealed that a member government was hiding the existence of these stations?"

Veniel had a valid point there. Unbeknownst to the general public, the political situation within the Assembly had become very volatile, with disagreements between member governments on issues ranging from debt restructuring to deep-space territorial disputes. The internal strife wasn't serious enough – yet – to endanger the integrity of CONCORD, but this was precisely the kind of thing that could ignite the situation. If the right spies were to get hold of information this sensitive, the results could be drastic.

Sixty-nine stations, Tantoseisen thought. Trillions of isk worth of property and assets, up for grabs to whoever wants them...nations have gone to war for much lesser reasons than that.

Veniel continued his case. "Commander, time is running short. Trald's forces are actively hunting your brother, and they could appear here at any moment."

The comment infuriated Tantoseisen. "What's in this for you, Veniel." He spoke through clenched teeth.

"Knowledge, of course. And clarity of vision, for I consider myself a student of humanity."

This didn't surprise him. Jovians were known to covet the things that most other races took for granted. Judging from their grim, ghastly appearance, Tantoseisen could easily see how rediscovering humanity would be at the forefront of any Jovian's agenda.

"I suppose you need my fleet there as well to get inside?"

"That is part of the agreement, yes."

"And you'll share with us what you know of these stations?"

"Correct. We can begin during your journey here."

"No! Goddamnit, Tantoseisen, don't listen to this man!" Mattias protested.

"Mattias, I've already made up my mind. The Jovian is right; it's riskier not to do this. This is the right thing to do, even if the DED thinks the contrary." He began tapping commands on the screen console in front of him, readying his battleship and replacing the hybrid weapons with energy turrets. "I just hope I don't have a mutiny on my hands once I tell the crew where we're going."

"You are a courageous man, Commander. The crew will rally to you, not to a DED protocol." said Veniel.

"Veniel, I'm still not sure what kind of elaborate scheme it is you have going here, or if I even understand what your true intentions are. What I do know is that it is not your place to make assertions of any kind about me, and especially not about my crew. I want you to know that I am disgusted about the manner in which you decided to handle this situation, and that I would prefer it if you ceased making any more judgments about what you think my brother or I believe is right. Are we clear?"

"I intended no disrespect, Commander. I am deeply regretful for offending you."

“You're making a mistake, Tantoseisen”, said Mattias. “Your command, your career, your life, all of it is in jeopardy –”

“And I'm talking to someone who has done the exact same thing for years. For this one, I think I'll be the big brother for a change, Mattias.” He keyed in an order to have spare armor and hull repair modules loaded into his battleship's hold. God knows we'll probably need them also, assuming we actually make it there, he thought. “The order to recall my fleet from their patrol has already been issued. They will rendezvous with me here in Orien within 20 minutes, then we're going to set course for E8-YS9. That's 44 jumps...my ETA is 2 hours. I'm going to leave this channel and will contact you after we cross the line into unregulated space. Any questions?”

Neither of them said a word.

“Good. I'll be seeing the both of you soon.” Tantoseisen terminated the connection and looked down at the DED 5-star patch insignia on the breast of his uniform. He was about to violate every principle that he held his own crew accountable for. The only way out of this, he thought, is by going right through it. Without hesitating any longer, he rose from his desk and made his way for the door.

*E8-YS9 Solar System, EL8Z-M Constellation, Immensea Region
Planet VI, Moon 4
Unknown Station*

08:58 EVT

Mattias was awestruck as the CONCORD-class battleships and their escorts unleashed a torrent of devastating firepower into the station. Tantoseisen had brought an entire task force with him – 18 ships in all. Minutes earlier they had decimated the same Angel Cartel blockade which, hours before, had nearly killed Mattias. Using his cloaked Wraith, Veniel told Tantoseisen exactly what to expect before his fleet jumped in. The Warlord battleship was destroyed so quickly that the remaining ships retreated, but Trald – the slippery snake that he was – warped out immediately after the CONCORD ships arrived. It was anyone's guess whether or not he would return with a bigger fleet. But oddly enough, no one seemed concerned.

The mood should have been more elated, given the brutal decisiveness of the battle that had just taken place. Instead, there was complete silence, even as the tachyons and heavy beam weapons drilled into the station's shields. Everyone was stunned by the story Veniel had told during Tantoseisen's journey to E8-YS9.

About 40 years ago, a movement of radical thinkers emerged from the swirling maelstrom of galactic politics that were unhappy with the institutions responsible for shaping the post-EVE era."

The group saw no purpose in borderlines or the imposition of cultural ideals into the populace through the use of government. They cited that this kind of thinking was counterproductive and ultimately to blame for the greater “fallacies and debacles of our time”, as Veniel had said, which included the continued imprisonment of Minmatar slaves by the Amarr Empire and the Caldari-Gallente War. They wanted to create a society that looked beyond bloodlines and focused more on the commonality between all the races; to embrace human diversity yet retain

the true “embodiment of mankind” that has “kept our species from disappearing from the universe forever.”

Every generation, Veniel had explained, has its prodigies. From time to time, people with extraordinary gifts surface in the gene pool, and the results are often unprecedented breakthroughs and contributions in a discipline commensurate with the individual's talent. The leader of the radical thinkers was a man named Sébastien Moreau, and his gift was charisma unlike anything the galaxy had ever seen. He was a powerful speaker and motivator, but could also make anyone feel at ease within minutes of meeting them for the first time. His charm – and soon, his mission – became irresistible to almost everyone who listened. Through the sheer power of Moreau's persuasion, “Immensea” was born.

Refusing to take his cause for racial unity to the floors of government halls out of pure spite for the “antiquated institutional paradigms” they represented, Moreau sought believers of his mission in private. He recognized that his dream society could not coexist with the Empires. To make real strides in pursuing his goal, he needed to attach the idea of racial unity with a physical objective that his followers could work towards. Therein, Veniel explained, the concept of “Immensea” was defined: The “immense sea” that separates the horrors of yesterday from the utopian bliss of tomorrow. Earth – like the notion of utopia – is out there, but a vast physical and spiritual distance must be traversed in order to reach it. “Paradise was always within”, Moreau had once said. “And so the journey home completes the circle: From one we were defined, and to one we shall return, unbound, and true to our own pure selves.”

Moreau's followers, now numbering in the thousands, became so passionate about this quest to “return home” that the task itself began to assume the form of a divine imperative. A massive research initiative was planned with a host of ambitious objectives, which included studies on how to stabilize the EVE gate in New Eden and a fast-track development of jump drives. All they needed was a base from which they could pursue these studies in earnest, far from the prying eyes of governments and “institutional bigots”. The cost to build even a single station was astronomical, but money, as it turned out, was hardly an obstacle.

Immensea was spreading, picking up momentum, members, and resources at a frenzied pace. Because of Sébastien Moreau's supernatural gift, the talent pool and economic resources of the Immensea were enormous. CEO's of mega-corporations, high ranking military officers, government officials, and brilliant scientists from each sovereignty were either secretly a part of it or contributing directly to its growth. Immensea had become a cult with the financial and intellectual capital to rival any organization in EVE, and because it had pervaded every level of society – military, government, corporate, and even criminal – people looked the other way as convoy after convoy disappeared into the deep of space.

True to the cult's directive to keep the institutions in the dark, no one said a word. People who tried to raise alarms about missing equipment or deleted journal entries were bribed to stay quiet. When that failed, they were silenced permanently. The first stations were built in the Immensea Region; they would eventually be constructed in a total of 23 regions, in some cases with the direct assistance of the local pirate cartels themselves. These “institutional outcasts” were especially vulnerable to Moreau's persuasion, who welcomed them as would a “foster parent to an abandoned child.”

Every station was completely isolated from the commerce of Empire space, but entirely self-sufficient. They were all equipped with refineries, factories, clone banks, research facilities, and

starship fitting hangars; everything that they needed to exist harmoniously with each other and pursue their mutually shared goals under the now prophetic vision of Moreau. Loners, families, and sometimes even entire colonies would vanish from Empire records as they traveled to deep space. They wandered into the open arms of the Immensea, which held no person accountable for any sins committed under the roof of the Institution and never, ever discriminated by bloodline. Caldari, Amarrs, Minmatar, Gallentes, and even the occasional Jovian found refuge in this hidden society. Utopia, so it seemed, had been achieved.

But it was not to last, said Veniel. Two things had happened which spelled the beginning of the end for the Immensea. One, its members began to think of Moreau as a god; and two, Moreau also began to think of himself as a god. It was all perfectly sensible to Moreau that the Immensea should worship the man who had created so much from so little. How else to explain his wondrous powers of persuasion and the results of his vision as anything other than divine? Sébastien Moreau cultivated the image of a god as much as he could, fabricating miracles with the use of technology and demanding worship from his followers. There was nothing that he would not take; no custom that he would respect; no law that he would honor; and no woman – married or not, young or old – that he would not ravish, for who could deny the seed of a god?

Moreau had descended into the darkest realm of the categorically psychotic, yet he retained his charismatic personage – a lethal combination that has manifested itself many times over in various rulers and tyrants throughout mankind's history.

The deification of Moreau began to resonate deeply within the souls of the Amarr among the Immensea. While some were born directly into the cult, every Amarr was still deeply rooted in his or her belief in One God, and that hell itself awaited anyone who blasphemed the Faith by creating false idols to worship. “For the Amarr,” said Veniel, “it is better to have never been born, should you be guilty of this sin.” As for Moreau, the only evil more sinister than worshiping an idol was to claiming to be one. In the end, the religious conscience of the Amarrs proved to be too much, and they tried – unsuccessfully – to assassinate Moreau.

The botched attempt on his life enraged Moreau and catapulted him even further into a deranged, diabolical mental abyss. He was now “fully capable of horrific atrocities and astounding cruelty.” He issued an edict declaring that all of the Amarr among them were to be exterminated for “interfering with the divine imperative that is the destiny of Immensea.” The result was effectively flat-out civil war and genocide. Suddenly bloodlines were drastically relevant again, and the Amarr were pitted against everyone else. In the end, all of the Amarr's – every man, women, and child among them – were mercilessly butchered by the other followers.

Moreau meditated on the event and decided that its cause was due to the stations being too autonomous, thereby detracting from his “divine” cornerstone philosophy of interdependence and unity for one, single race. To set matters straight, he ordered the destruction of all but one of the three “life essence” modules aboard each station, decreeing that only one of each shall be permitted to exist per region. If his people would not cooperate with each other in the exact way that he ordained, then he would force the issue upon them and mend their foolish ways. His remaining followers rendered station modules useless by sabotaging them in ways that would make them impossible to repair, and murdered anyone who tried to stop them.

In Veniel's opinion, the act merely accelerated the inevitable. Rumors of the slayings began to

spread, and contacts within Empire space quietly began distancing themselves from any association with the Immensea. The logistical nightmare of having to support three stations with one module each for every region they had settled in was unmanageable. One by one they fell into ruin and were abandoned. Almost overnight, the Immensea had all but disappeared, and some of its survivors – many of whom were the source of Veniel's information – took their own lives, overwhelmed by the heavy burden of guilt from their complicity in the greatest human atrocity of the post-EVE era.

Veniel said that there are remnants of the Immensea among us. Most of the Empire-based intelligentsia who supported the cult, but did not actively participate in the Amarr massacre, continued the grim task of keeping their identities and roles within the Immensea a closely guarded secret. Veniel said that he was once close to obtaining clear evidence that “the government officials of several sovereignties” were secretly hunting down Immensea survivors, but suddenly lost all contact with his source. Many intelligentsias still remain in positions of considerable power including, very much to Tantoseisen's concern, positions within CONCORD. Veniel refused to name anyone he personally suspected until he had irrefutable evidence, which as always, he would trade – for a price.

Until this day, the fate of Sébastien Moreau had been unknown. By blind luck, Mattias had unwittingly stumbled across the final piece of the puzzle, and Veniel would have paid handsomely for it had the bounty hunter's situation been any less dire. He explained that Moreau's corpse held enormous scientific value to the Jovians, who were extremely interested in determining the biological components of Moreau's legendary charismatic qualities. The Jovians had been actively monitoring the Immensea stations for some time, searching for clues on the whereabouts of the cult figurehead. But to everyone's amazement, the Jovian's never ventured inside any of the stations to look, believing that it was not their place to disturb what was left before the Immensea's existence became known publicly.

According to Veniel, the Angel Cartel knew the exact locations of every Immensea station in space. In fact, all of the major pirate organizations did, including the Serpentis, the Guristas, and the Blood Raiders. And most importantly, so did Trald Vukenda, who by now had to know where Mattias and the CONCORD fleet were, and that the dark secret of the Immensea was about to be revealed.

As the tachyon laser turrets from the CONCORD battleships continued to spit focused white beams of searing energy into the station, Mattias focused on the last thing that Veniel said before concluding his story. He said that the pirate cartels wouldn't go near the Immensea stations. Far away from Empire borders, legends and stories can grow unchecked by rationality. The isolated life that pirates lead in the remote systems of deep space lends itself to being highly vulnerable to superstition. Out here, said Veniel, the word “Immensea” was a curse. The pirate's tale was that if you listened closely enough, you could still hear the screams of dying Amarrs as the demonic Moreau and his minions struck them down by the thousands. For the more practical minds among the scoundrels such as Trald, the reason to stay away from the stations was apparent in their condition. The Immensea made certain that the damage they inflicted to their own outposts was permanent. The pirate cartels were well financed and smart with their money. It was far more economical to build a station from scratch than to even attempt to make use of stations in such bad shape.

There was one more part of the story that Veniel had intentionally omitted, saying that he would continue it once he was onboard, and in doing so complete the three terms of their agreement.

Mattias panned the camera away from the CONCORD ships and back towards Kirlana's battered Omen. Neither she nor Matuno had uttered a word since the Jovian stopped speaking. He was deeply concerned about her.

"Mattias..." said Tantoseisen. "It is done."

He panned the camera back around and saw that the CONCORD fleet had ceased firing, and were slowly aligning themselves behind the Wraith. One by one, the ships began a procession into one of the station's massive hangar bays. Matuno's Tempest swung around behind Tantoseisen, with Kirlana's Omen trailing in its wake. The ominous feeling that Mattias had when he first saw this station was much worse now.

E8-YS9 Solar System

Immensea Uncharted Base One – Main Hangar Concourse – Deck 22

09:23 EVT

My God, you just lose perspective when you're looking at all this from a camera drone, thought Mattias. He was standing inside of the Mobile Gantry Unit (MGU) that had just extracted his pod from the Blackbird. The size and scope of the damage to his ship made him shake his head as the MGU flew downwards past one of the cruiser's massive engines. As big as his ship was, it was nothing compared to the immense size of the hangar it was floating inside of. They built so many of these stations, he thought. How could they have done all this so quickly? The darkness made him uncomfortable. Usually there was lighting from the windows of hundreds of offices, labs, and living quarters built into the walls of the hangar. In here, all of them were darkened. The entire cavern had a hazy, bluish glow from the emergency lighting system, and he could see debris drifting throughout as the MGU continued its descent towards the concourse.

A click hiss sound marked the end of the trip as the MGU docked with the deck hub. Mattias oriented himself as the door in front of him opened. The hangar was a zero-G vacuum environment, but all sections that were accessible by habitants were surrounded by gravity wells and pressurized with breathable air. His knees buckled a little as he stepped through and adjusted to his own weight again. Matuno was waiting for him inside.

"Mattias, Kirlana is not herself", he said. "She has not been the same since the Jovian told his story." Matuno was speaking quietly. "She will not tell me what troubles her."

"I'm worried about her too," said Mattias. "I don't think she's ever been that close to death before in combat, and as if that wasn't enough for her, to hear about what happened to the Amarrs who used to live here..." Mattias kept trying not to think about the comment she made earlier, about there being "no such thing as God". He took a deep breath. "I know I don't have to tell you this, but...just keep an eye on her."

"There is something else," added Matuno, leaning even closer. "The Jovian and your brother started looking through station's logs as soon as they arrived. Veniel pointed to something on the screen and said very audibly, 'Without question, that is Admiral Sulei Manatir. Now, look at the hooded female surrounded by the Amarr bodyguards.' Your brother looked very surprised, almost shocked, and then said 'Veniel, are you sure that's her?' The Jovian answered that he was 'certain of it'. Then your brother re-entered the hub and went back to his ship."

Mattias blinked. "Back to his ship?"

"Yes. Veniel is still here, just outside in the concourse, still pouring through the logs. Tell me, Mattias...do you know who this hooded female is that they were referring to?"

Mattias said he honestly had no idea, and shrugged. Matuno took one step closer to him. The Minmatar Brutor towered over Mattias, and was almost twice his weight.

"I certainly hope you'll tell me if you know." Mattias was slightly unnerved, and stepped to the side.

"Of course, Matuno. I'll...see what I can find out." As he took a step forward, Matuno lowered a giant hand onto his shoulder, preventing him from exiting the hub.

"Mattias...if it is her, then you know how personal it is with me."

Mattias looked up at him. "I know it is, Matuno. It's probably personal for a lot of other Minmatar's as well. But now is not the time, even if it's who you think it is. So, if you'll please excuse me, I need to get back to the business of trying to keep us alive."

Matuno removed his hand and allowed Mattias to pass into the concourse. The only light came from the hangar itself, through the transparent side of the concourse. The arched doorways to offices, freight warehouses, and even hovertram stations on the other side were barely visible. The Blackbird was high overhead, and its blinking navigation lights sent soft pulses of light throughout the darkened hall. Kirlana was sitting on floor with her back against the glass, staring blankly at a locket she held in her hand that was still hanging from her neck.

Veniel was standing in front of a console built into the hub that Mattias had just exited from. The greenish hue from the console gave him a ghastly appearance. Without saying a word, he extended his hand towards Mattias. A disc was between his thumb and index finger.

"What's this?" Mattias asked, taking the disc.

"The last part of our agreement," Veniel answered. "A way for you to get past the Arch Angel blockades on either side of this system."

"You mean having a CONCORD fleet blast through them for us wasn't your plan all along?"

Veniel dismissed the remark. "Your brother has also been given a copy of that."

"What's on it?" Mattias asked. Matuno stepped out from the hub.

"The Immensea had some help when they built these stations, Captain", Veniel said. "What you are holding in your hand are the exact locations of not only these bases, but of a jumpgate network that you will not find on any CONCORD maps."

"What are you talking about?" Mattias asked. Kirlana looked up from her fixation on the locket.

"This jumpgate network rings Empire space, but does not traverse it. Thus, every region in deep space is interconnected and completely independent of Empire influence."

Mattias was stunned. "The Immensea built them?"

"Not the first ones, but once Immensea began establishing a presence in the outer regions, the gate builders realized they shared common ground with Moreau, especially where it concerned hiding their existence from certain Empire influence." Veniel emphasized that word.

"So, the Amarr built them?" asked Mattias.

"Quite the opposite," answered Veniel, who was now looking directly at Matuno. "The rise of Minmatar power was always puzzling to us, considering the extent to which the Amarr Empire went to suppress their ambitions. Amarr ships used to patrol all of the gates leading to and from Minmatar systems; nothing could travel in or out without being checked. We wondered how an enslaved nation was able to amass armies and construct warships right before the watchful eye of their alleged masters."

"The answer was hidden jumpgates, unknown even to us until very recently. With the help of Gallente engineers, Minmatar tribes began construction on the gates in complete secrecy and without Republic knowledge. The pirate cartels operating in the vicinity were sympathetic to the Minmatar's plight, but also saw an opportunity to advance their own agenda by assisting them. The gates provided the Minmatar with a 'back door' through which rescued slaves, construction materials, supplies, troops, and warships could travel unhindered by Amarr checkpoints."

"Years after the Rebellion, the cartels continued work on extending the network to include more systems. When the Immensea constructed their first bases here in the Immensea Region, Moreau convinced the cartels of the mutual gains that could be realized by sharing resources. Moreau offered them access to his stations in exchange for access to their jumpgates. The resulting partnership quickly accelerated both projects, since they complimented each other's practical needs and counter-institutional ideals. In the end, 96 gates were constructed over the course of more than 140 years, with more than half built in the last 30 or so, after Immensea was founded."

"One of those gates is in this system, Captain, and Trald Vukenda believes that you are unaware of its existence. Most of the smuggler gates are used primarily to ferry supplies, the majority of which are illegal within Empire space. The pirates have never felt a compelling need to guard them, except when traveling near the borders of rival or competing clans. The only ships you will see near there will be Cartel industrials, although I imagine all that will change once knowledge of this network comes to public light."

The sound of the click hiss from another MGU startled Mattias. Tantoseisen emerged from the hub.

"Well, it's official, I'm to be court-martialed as soon as I return," he said. "But so long as I'm here anyway, I'm going to have a look around. If there is any evidence here about any intelligentsia still in power within Empire space, I need to find out."

"How did CONCORD take the news?" asked Matuno. Tantoseisen shook his head.

"They're completely shocked. I'm still not sure they even believe it, and knowing them, there's going to be an expedition – this time, an authorized one – to confirm everything."

"I hope you exercised caution in choosing whom to share that information with, Commander"

said Veniel.

"It's been taken care of," he answered. "No matter what, they won't be able to keep this discovery quiet."

"Court martial," Mattias breathed. "Tantoseisen, I'm sorry," said Mattias. He knew how hard his little brother had worked to build such a remarkable career in law enforcement, and that if not for his own bad luck and poor decisions, this would have never happened.

Tantoseisen took a deep breath. "We were spotted near the Edbinger crossing by a convoy that was on their way out to deep space, and they reported it to the press. Now it's public knowledge that we're out somewhere we shouldn't be, and the spin on things is that I'm 'defecting', or some other nonsense. Anyway, it's against the rules to take a CONCORD task force on a joyride through unregulated space without authorization, and I'm going to be punished accordingly for it."

"Where should we be looking for clues?" asked Matuno. "And how do we know for certain we're really alone here?"

"I cannot say I agree with this idea," said Veniel. "But if that is what you feel you must do, this is where I would look."

Matuno, Tantoseisen, and Mattias gathered behind Veniel, who stepped aside so everyone could see the screen. Displayed on it were schematics detailing the deck level they were currently on. Mattias could recognize the floor plan of the concourse and the hub they were standing in front of. Five blue dots were clustered around it.

"In this program, the blue represents detectable heartbeats. These sensors and others like it are embedded in hull structures throughout the station," Veniel explained. Then the image zoomed out slightly so that more of the area was visible, but a section covering the entire right half was blacked out.

"The dark areas denote zero data. The sensors in this area were either intentionally disabled or destroyed. This section is also where the clone facility would be, prior to its destruction as per Moreau's orders. I can tell you for certain that nothing lives outside of this area." Veniel tapped on the darkened section. "But in there, I cannot say. There is no way to find out if any clones are intact unless someone goes inside. However, the station's computer is indicating that the area is a 'breach zone', which means there is no air, and no gravity."

"I have to do this," said Tantoseisen. "And I know I don't have a lot of time to get it done. The troops outside are understandably restless, and I can't ask them to do too much more for me."

"I'll go with you," said Kirlana. Everyone turned towards her. It was the first time she had spoken since coming aboard.

"Kirlana, are you sure? You haven't—" Matuno started.

"I'm fine, really." She picked herself up off the floor. She appeared alert, and the distant look she had up until now was gone. "But we're going to need survival suits and weapons, and mine are on my ship."

"Weapons?" asked Mattias. "Who do you think is going to be shooting at you in there?"

"You've always been a cautious fellow," she answered, almost sarcastically. "And I've always been a cautious gal. If I don't know what I'm getting into, then I say bring a weapon."

That sounded like the Kirlana of old, but for some reason the confidence in her voice still wasn't as reassuring as it used to be. It sounded so feigned. "Well, if you're going, then I'm going," said Mattias. "And that means Matuno is also."

Veniel had a strange look on his face, almost as if he was worried. "There is a former security outpost alongside the bulkhead which separates the corridor from the clone facility. You will find weapons and survival suits there."

"Are you coming with us?" asked Tantoseisen.

"With all due respect Commander, no. But I will remain in contact with you from here, and provide whatever assistance I can. But again, I highly suggest you act quickly, and not overextend yourself for the task."

"Noted, Veniel. And thank you for your support," said Tantoseisen. "We'll be aboard our ships in 60 minutes time at most."

"All of you, be careful," Veniel said. He spoke without emotion, but it was sincere.

Deck 22 Security Outpost – Main Concourse

09:53 EVT

Mattias watched Kirlana recheck the ammunition clip on her rifle. She was acting as though nothing was wrong, even as the rest of the group acted cautiously around her. His brother was testing the camera feed and a portable radar-imaging device (PRID) with Veniel over the radio. Matuno was lucky to find a suit big enough to fit him, no doubt a product of the multiethnic culture that this place once fostered.

None of this feels right, thought Mattias. It had felt that way for so long now that he wondered if anything would ever feel right again. He could understand his brother's reasons for doing this. It was a last ditch effort to save his career, and Mattias felt he had no right to complain since they'd all be dead without his brother's help. But he had put Kirlana and Matuno in enough danger already, and this was by far the riskiest proposition of the day. You could make a mistake in a starship and maybe your crew and your shields would get you out of trouble. But in a pitch-black, zero-G chamber with god-only-knows what floating around in there, the margin for error was a lot narrower, and most of this bunch hadn't seen zero-G training since flight school.

The bad feeling he had about Kirlana just wouldn't go away. And since he failed to understand exactly what was causing it, he couldn't justify putting a stop to her coming along. He'd seen her and Matuno argue about missions he had objected to her participating in a hundred times. That was just the kind of person she was. In fact, they were all stubborn that way, the three of them. Tell any of us that there's something we can't do, and you may as well consider it done. Until today, their collective stubbornness had paid off well.

But now even Matuno wasn't sure how to read her, and he couldn't remember the last time he ever expressed concern over how she was acting. It was the combination of her past and the events of today which kept coming to mind; her rejection of God and the entire Amarr culture, this crazy Sébastien Moreau person and the cult he created, and who could forget what happened to all those Amarr people...

And then it dawned on him: She's questioning all of it, Mattias thought. Everything that's happened today is making her question the choices she's made in her life. That must be what it is. Who could blame her? We were all probably doing the same thing.

"Alright team, helmets on," said Tantoseisen. "We're just going to check a few of the clone banks, then we're out of here. Veniel, we're ready when you are."

Mattias could hear Veniel on the radio via the earpiece inside his helmet. "Have your team enter the airlock, Commander."

"Roger that. Everyone inside," said Tantoseisen. The "airlock" in this instance was actually the antechamber allowing access from the security post to the clone facility. Stations were built like ships; every compartment was separated by one or more antechambers that could be sealed off in the event of an emergency. The corridor between the two doorways was barely large enough for the four of them to fit inside. "Everyone inside and clear of the hatch?" Tantoseisen asked. All answered affirmatively.

"Clear," said Tantoseisen.

"Sealing the hatch, standby," said Veniel. The door behind Mattias hissed shut.

"Disabling gravity well." Suddenly Mattias felt himself rise off the floor grating slightly. "Mag boots," said Tantoseisen. There were eight thumps as the magnetic fields generated by the survival suit boots were all switched on.

"Standby for depressurization." A loud whoosh sound filled everyone's ears as the air inside the chamber was removed. Mattias immediately felt claustrophobic. He was standing behind Tantoseisen, who was facing the door leading to the clone center. Or whatever the hell else is on the other side.

"Opening the clone center door," said Veniel. The helmet's breathing apparatus made each exhale much more audible than usual, and he could hear himself start to breathe faster. The door slid open slowly, and there was nothing beyond it but pure blackness. It was suddenly very cold, and Mattias could feel the survival suit generating more heat to compensate. He watched his brother step through the doorway.

Beams of light from Tantoseisen's helmet cut through the darkness. "Okay, Mattias, I'm on solid ground where I am. Move forward and hold next to me."

The magnetic boots made a hiss ker-chunk sound that was audible only to Mattias as he took several steps forward and stopped alongside his brother. He kept the light beam pointed downward at the floor grating until he saw his brother's right boot. Looking up, the light beam caught reflections of some small debris floating not too far in front of them. There was a considerable amount of dust in the room, and the beams weren't powerful enough to reach

through to any walls or structure in front of him.

"Mattias, fire up the PRID," said Tantoseien.

"Roger," he answered. Mattias set the tripod in front of him, kneeling to make sure it was anchored to the floor. Satisfied that the device was secure, he turned a dial and the tiny parabolic dish began tracking slowly back and forth.

"No one move," Veniel said suddenly. Mattias froze. The dish was sending its return images to Veniel, giving him a fuzzy picture of what was inside. "You are standing on a catwalk about 125 meters in length, but there is a gap in the scaffolding about 5 meters in front of you. There is a 60-meter drop on either side, at the bottom of which there appears to be significant quantities of wreckage. The ceiling is approximately 50 meters overhead, and you should be able to see breaches in the hull which are directly exposed to space." Mattias looked up and to his left, hoping to see something that would help him get his bearings. He only saw more dust and haze in his beam, and blackness everywhere else.

"The entire facility is filled with a large debris field," Veniel continued. "And there are several large fragments floating directly above the both of you."

Kirlana was still waiting in the doorway, eyes wide as saucers. She took one step forward.

"Don't come in here," warned Tantoseisen.

Kirlana was training the beam from her rifle upwards of Mattias and Tantoseisen, holding the weapon out in front of her as she took another step, clear of the doorway.

"Kirlana! Wait!" said Matuno. Mindful of Veniel's warning, Mattias rose slowly to a crouched stance. For some reason, he felt like he was going to lose his balance even though the boots fastened him securely to the floor. He turned around to face Kirlana, watching the light beam from her rifle slice through the dusty blackness above them.

Veniel's voice came through the radio, directed only at the brothers and Matuno. "Her heartbeat is racing, and her breathing is fast and shallow," he warned. "You should disarm her and get her back inside."

Mattias was about to speak, when the length of the beam from Kirlana's rifle suddenly shrunk as it illuminated debris just 2 meters over her head. Her eyes opened wider and she started to scream, just as Matuno's hand came from behind her and swatted the weapon away. The rifle tumbled end over end, its beam cutting 360-degree arcs through the blackness, changing directions several times as it collided with invisible objects. Matuno wrapped his massive arms around Kirlana and pulled her back inside the doorway.

"What the hell happened?" shouted Tantoseisen. Mattias could see her anguished, horrified face through her helmet, screaming as though in extreme pain and agony. Suddenly, the inside of Kirlana's facemask was splattered as she retched violently and began coughing spasms.

Matuno was banging on the hatch leading back inside the security outpost with one hand, and holding Kirlana around him with the other. She didn't look like she was moving anymore.

“Veniel! I have to get her back inside!” Matuno screamed.

“Mattias, Tantoseisen, get clear of the door,” said Veniel, whose voice was completely devoid of panic, urgency, or emotion.

The doorway closed and sealed, leaving the brothers standing in a sea of darkness. The only light came from their helmets and Kirlana's rifle, far off in the distance. Mattias's head was spinning, and he was trying not to panic. He wasn't used to this at all. But his brother was well trained for zero-G operations, just like all enlisted men and women in the DED were.

“What did she see that made her react like that?” Tantoseisen asked.

Mattias dropped to a knee again, just wanting to be close to catwalk grating. It was the only thing he could use to keep his bearings. “It was right above the door,” he breathed, trying to stay under control. He was just staring at the floor grating. “I should have never allowed her to come, I don't think she's ever had this kind of training before.”

“Oh my God...” gasped Tantoseisen.

Mattias looked up, and saw the beam from Tantoseisen's helmet focused on something almost directly above him. His heart stopped from the reaction that something invisible had been so close to him all this time. But then his eyes widened in terror as recognition of what was floating there settled in.

The ghastly visage of a corpse was staring right at him, illuminated by Tantoseisen's beam. The skin was a grayish-drab color, preserved from the lack of oxygen and extreme cold. Its eyes were still open, mouth agape, neck split across the Adam's apple. Mattias stopped breathing for a moment, and then started shallow breaths as his own heartbeat started to race in panic.

“Stay under control, brother...” breathed Tantoseisen, panning the beam to his right and catching the suspended arm of a second corpse floating over the door. The dead appeared to be wearing the same expressions as the instant they perished.

Veniel's voice came through. “Kirlana is in shock, and is being rushed to a CONCORD ship for treatment. She has suffered some kind of traumatic emotional breakdown, and will be unable to pilot the Omen.”

“Veniel,” breathed Mattias, trying to get his breathing under control. He felt extremely dizzy now, almost as if in a nightmare, for he could not think of anything except darkness and the face of the corpse. “Find a way to light this place...flares, emergency lights, anything...”

Mattias was on all fours now, resting his helmet on the grating. Veniel did not reply. He felt a hand on his back. “Mattias, easy,” his brother said. “We're going to get out of here, right now.”

“Veniel...Veniel, do you copy?” said Tantoseisen. “Veniel, come in, we need to get back inside. Veniel!”

There was no answer, and Mattias started to lose his composure as the panic began to overwhelm him. He could hear his brother shouting something, cursing, but none of it registered. He just focused on the floor grating now resting directly against his face shield,

getting lost in the details of its nothingness, wishing he could escape from the corpse who was trying to speak to him and the blackness that existed everywhere else.

Mattias lost consciousness while listening to the words of the dead, who spoke to him of righteousness and avenging injustices.

Epilogue

Using the smuggler jumpgates, Tantoseisen Kakkichi's CONCORD task force returned safely to Empire space. Veniel provided forward scouting for the fleet, breaking contact after they had safely crossed the border. Tantoseisen immediately turned himself in to DED authorities and was arrested. All charges, save for one, were eventually dropped after the full account of the Immensea became known.

Before starting the long journey back to Empire space, the remaining crewmembers of the Blackbird and Omen cruisers were transferred to CONCORD ships. The vessels were then scuttled outside of the Immensea station in E8-YS9.

Mattias Kakkichi would make a complete recovery from the temporary delirium that was induced when he succumbed to spatial disorientation inside of the clone facility. Shortly after he lost consciousness, Veniel appeared at the security outpost, manually pressurizing and then opening the door from there. He claimed that the station's AI would no longer allow him to operate the door remotely after Matuno and Kirlana were back inside.

Kirlana would not fare as well. She vowed to never pilot a starship again, and that her days as a bounty hunter were over. She never disclosed to anyone, not even Matuno, exactly why the story of Immensea was so personal to her.

Before breaking formation with the CONCORD fleet near the Empire border, Matuno asked Tantoseisen to pass his brother a message for him. Tantoseisen agreed; Matuno transmitted the encrypted message and then disappeared. When asked some time later what that message was, Mattias would only say that Matuno was chasing after his "life's ambition", and that when the time was right, he would contact him again.

The press demanded an explanation as to why a CONCORD task force would leave Empire space. Dantennen Fisk, the legal counsel and longtime friend of Tantoseisen Kakkichi, answered before the DED could. He publicly stated that his client's actions were "justified" and that the reason for his excursion to deep space was not rebellious or the result of any falling out with DED high command. Because of the publicity surrounding the issue, CONCORD had no choice but to associate the discovery of the abandoned stations with Kakkichi's actions, which they did in a press release of their own. But before they would reveal the station's locations, they wanted answers about the Immensea, and to recover as many of the dead as they could.

Through a deal brokered in secrecy by Veniel between the DED and the Jovians, CONCORD was able to recover thousands of bodies and compile a detailed history of the Immensea. DED scouting vessels carrying investigators met Jovian warships at all 69 stations, exchanging information for the firepower required to get inside. With the exception of a single leaked photograph from the inside of one of the E8-YS9 disabled modules, the DED has clamped down on the release of any investigation details.

Veniel disappeared after brokering the deal. No one has reported seeing him since.

The regional government's public reaction to the Immensea was one of apathy, but in reality sent their respective intelligence agencies into upheaval. Furious officials scrambled for an explanation as to how, exactly, news of this scope and size could have eluded them all this time. No government would ever publicly admit to an intelligence failure so pronounced.

Mattias Kakkichi found other bounty hunters who shared his ideals, and continues to patrol deep space in search of injustices to avenge.