



JITA 4-4

BY NICK BLOOD

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Part I

It's after 9 PM at the terminal when I arrive. Most shuttles are switching out 15-minute schedules for 30-minute ones now. People draw together and wait, struggling to distract themselves in the seemingly endless space between. Bars, vending machines, and VR booths fill every corner, offering up a quick, easy, overpriced escape from the intentionally gray concrete walls, illuminated only in the cold monotone of fluorescent lights. Pale and bloodless in this false glow, everyone looks like a vampire, something I would describe as convenient.

Now begin the dead hours, when things start to calm down, if you could describe anything here in those terms. Jita 4-4 may be one of the busiest hubs in the universe, particularly for the capsuleers, but the eternal dominance of the circadian rhythm makes itself known even here. Fewer shuttles leaving now? That's the station slowing her breath. Really it's us, our collective breath, but in everything now is the human imprint – for better or worse.

One rule is that you can't sleep here. For me, tired of traveling from a station out deep on the frontiers, this particular custom is unfortunate. You see, despite my much younger exterior, today marks a much older birthday, and without getting too technical about it, I haven't slept in over three days. I've kind of forgotten how to right now, and there's that moment in the lull, that seductive daydream that creeps up on me when I least want it.

Nevertheless, when in State space, I will do my best to behave. This is because the massive roster of station attendants, security officers, and "information advisers" will actually wake you and remind you, as they like to say.

"Ma'am, I would like to remind you that there is no sleeping allowed in Terminal 1."

As if you'd actually forgotten. As if you intended to lie there asleep and vulnerable, while anonymous passersby sidestepped your defenseless, inert body. As if you wanted to fall into that trap. As if you were, well...cattle.

They take a note, you see, and attach it to your Temporary Station ID. That's your first and only warning. The second time you drift off, they don't say anything, they just start the clock. If you wake up before ten minutes is over, that's two. Three is either ten minutes, or a third nod-off.

You think I'm kidding. You think there's no way they'd bother with this shit. You see, everything has its protocol, its hard parameters, its bottom line. Well, where are we again? Exactly.

Three times converts those little annotations into a vagrancy charge. Offenders are removed roughly, quickly, and without a word. Vagrants don't deserve to be read their rights, because by definition they effectively have none.

Now, I remember a few decades earlier, everyone would fall into this trap. There were the actual vagrant types: dreary-eyed Minmatar with the signature Sooth Sayer drool, clearly homeless and reeking of their own shit, and then there was the Caldari businessman, upper-management type — rules don't apply, they think. Usually their first time here from some outer-regional post, Lonetrek or something like that. Even those guys, dressed in suits worth more than the yearly salary of the three men unceremoniously hauling their waking, highly confused, designer-label-clad asses out of here: even the mighty can be treated like the lowest. Nobody, though, as far as I can see, has stumbled just yet.

I've come here to remind myself of the Caldari. And that's also why I take the stims.

There's the enjoyment factor, sure, but it has more to do with my aversion to cold cement streets and the types of people who roam them until dawn. There's vampires out there, too. Blame the circadian rhythm, or something.

As for what I'm doing here, well, let's just say for now that I don't want to fall asleep. In actuality, this has little to do with what might lurk out there, and more to do with my lack of Temporary Stati



We're all supposed to have one, you see. Otro Gariushi's was 19, the first civilian number available on the rotating register. Even he, Otro Gariushi, one of the most beloved CEOs the Caldari State ever knew.

My first stop is the food court. The primary one, that is. The one the size of four Mind Clash arenas that dominates the entrance to Terminal 1. You can't miss it, in that the place simply isn't designed that way. It's a four-by-nine-kilometer sprawl of gastronomical consumerism like you've never seen before. People come here just for this.

Everything you could ever want, from the fast and nasty (there is actually a vendor, or two, that go by this name) Minmatar bread soups to the most exquisite fine dining on the mezzanine.

There's nothing quite as fresh as Jita.

Jump drives brought about some amazing changes. They helped us reshape our world with dramatic speed and efficiency. Here in Jita at ground level, though, I'm reminded of the ways we've bent this technology toward more base means.

I say this because I can smell another human imprint, and it's something like the salty tang of

freshly caught fish. Maybe just a little over an hour old. Recently full of life, swimming upstream toward nothing under one of any number of alien skies. I follow the scent and pretend I can discern where: which planet, which continent, which settlement. Perhaps somewhere in Urlen, I consider, near one of the polar settlements, where the magnetic fields create these wondrously hypnotic purple skylines with clean, bright stars shining through the thin atmosphere. Perfect low-cost real estate for entrepreneurial fisheries. Must be even cheaper now, I realize, given the proximity of the planet to market hubs and the latest CONCORD madness, allowing capsuleers to drop extractors wherever they damn please. Forgetting for a moment what I am, in some ways, I'm back to imagining rivers of pure glacial water, artificially rich with the most economically favorable species of the month.

Then I imagine that fish, driven only by blind instinct as it slides inexorably down toward some dark fate. I imagine a murky and cold end — a net, perhaps, but it's not likely to be that romantic. These artificial rivers tend to be quite literally purpose-built to the end, with the flow of water eventually heading right for the abattoir. The Caldari have made it efficient to the point where you have to question their use of the word "fishing."

What's important, though, is that from this stream the fish finds its way to a warehouse, maybe 10 minutes or less, as these things tend to be built into the actual rivers as well (at least if we're sticking to the Urlen fisheries).

Another 20 minutes, and that fish is loaded onto the cargo bay of a freighter, where perhaps it swims around for a few hours inside giant plastic-lined tanks filled with life-sustaining fluids, waiting for the launch. Most likely our fish dies somewhere in orbit, if the acceleration out of the atmosphere is a bit rocky. A space elevator most likely makes it just as inevitable.

After at least another 10 minutes, it's at a station (and this can be pretty much anywhere in the known cluster if you have a long enough cyno net, as the best traders always do).

After all that... all those hours spent loading, launching, warping, docking, dying ... after all that, our fish is in something with a jump drive.

Within seconds, it's here and in the hands of some of the Federation's finest culinary experts, where those succulently smoked and sautéed and skewered atoms permeate the domed terraces, filtering out downward before they're slowly muted by the dull mix of cheaper breads and spices. I try to imagine just how many different atoms, from how many different planets, must be colliding around here right now. Cosmologically speaking, Jita must be a meeting ground for them like no other place ever before it, in all of human history. All because of isotopes, cynosural fields, and jump drives. Think about that the next time you're dropping off for a bite.

Because it's important to realize how some things come about.

I've come here to remind myself of the Gallente. If you ever doubted the capitalistic might of their corporate giants, you should visit here too sometime. The entire area is dominated by their cuisine, which in a way makes sense, since Gallente food accommodates everyone. It has to. If you ever thought politics or laws were the primary concern of an infinitely fractured populace, think again. Think about tonight's dinner. I know I am.

One of the great accomplishments of the Federation's food services industry was the way they managed to slowly absorb their competitors. They did this through subtle and well-applied use of the nation's media influence, which extends across all empires' borders. A predictable tactic, sure, but effective as anything. They don't quite play the Caldari corporate game either, and that actually gives them some advantages when operating in State space and abroad, even during the "Empyrean wars" when everything is supposedly turning to shit.

I suppose the most insidious thing about the Federation's commercial success isn't the level of trickery employed on their own consumer base, but rather the fundamentally repugnant facelessness of it all. To survive economically in your opponent's commercial nexus like this, you have to lose your face. You have to become about something entirely impersonal. You have to become about a system, about a way of doing things.

This is why people will talk about the diversity found in Gallente cuisine. That's one of the darker sides to it. To most people, this is perceived as something slightly simpler. They say that the Gallente have copied every other nation's cuisine, made fusions and called them their own, branded it as their own. This captures the essence of the issue, but doesn't identify the core.

These same people say that we've arrived at the point where it's no longer even clear who owned what anymore. (Hyperbole: Trademarks keep that perfectly clear, if only for the lawyers — most consumers don't even understand the most rudimentary networks of corporate ownership.) The favorite topic amongst economists is the strange way (particularly strange to the Caldari) the Gallente economic model worked on pushing everything into the public domain and then recycling it, again and again, making it just different enough to justify the trademark. This is part of what I mean when I say they don't play the Caldari game. But again, people overlook how it was accomplished.

That's not all they overlook, either.

You see, for most people at Jita 4-4 and abroad in State space, it's enough that the logo on the restaurant they're eating at is a Caldari one, and for the Gallente business owners and entrepreneurs, it's enough that a little playing pretend is all it takes to keep dishing out foods of every type as they corner (or, most commonly, invent) another niche in this already hypersaturated market. Everybody knows the game, but people's apathy for such things is deeply ingrained.

Take the salted Amarrian rockjaw.

Now this thing is a beast of a creature, quite familiar with the interiors of Amarr torture chambers, too. It has a rather sweet taste, with a fresh salty aroma to the flesh. You can have that at

Dieurelli with a side of Achura Songbird wings in a sweet nut-and-berry sauce. This meal, to anyone there who eats it, is unquestionably Amarr. It is a tasteful, politically correct marriage of Empire-State cuisine. Perfect for high-profile business lunches you want to keep hiccup-free (depending on your clients, of course).

A little further down, off the high-rollers' mezzanine and into one of the many corridors spinning a nebulous web below, you can get more adventurous with the rockjaw at every corner. At Pmokka Caravan Delights, you can have it seared over a traditional Brutor khari oven, then watch as it's slowly de-skewered and served alongside tender pieces of traditional Pator steak, bloody and still rich with life beside their impaled counterparts.

Some meals speak for themselves, and many do in fact have something to say. This one says, "I am unquestionably Minmatar."

But in every one of these restaurants, all you will ever see is pretty Civire girls waiting tables, with the silvery circular logo of the State out front. Meanwhile, in the engine room, it is most often Gallente chefs who will be driving things forward. Not just at Pmokka, but at Diurelli, and almost anywhere else you care to look behind the curtain. The Caldari think they're exploiting the labor of the Gallente, and the Gallente think they're influencing Caldari culture, one mouthful at a time. The Amarr and Minmatar? Shit, they aren't even really here. They're just ghosts, puppet apparitions dancing to the tune of friends and foes up north.

And this... this hasn't ever really changed.

I'm opting for a low-profile bite-and-run here, though (keeping my mind off the steaks...), so I stop off at QuafeSnacks. The food here is, I suppose you could say, the very bottom line. It's not like Quafe hides it either. They have QuafeSnacks Premium and QuafeSnacks Premium Ultra vendor stands, and Quafe Deluxe, Quafe Deluxe Premium, and Quafe Elite restaurants plastered all over the courtyards as well. If you're at this particular franchise, you don't really have any illusions as to why.

Personally, I find a sort of perverse, gimmicky joy in watching the families order and endure. Most of the food here comes exceptionally cheap, you see, but there are no tables and no seats. The consuming crowds have to disperse and eat amongst the milling populace, at tables and ledges near elevators, escalators, walkways, and – best of all – in waiting rooms packed with people killing time on empty stomachs.

All designed, you see.

The bags that carry their food project subtle holograms above: a small news ticker, the current air temperature, arrivals and departures, station announcements. All to the side, all but consumed by the cool neon green of a Quafe logo. Then there's the perfectly manufactured scent of it all, the look of satisfaction and enjoyment.

It's the best way for me to blend in, you see, become just another billboard.

Yep, you can do pretty much anything here. Except sleep.

It's a non-starter for me anyway. If I fall asleep, then they'll see soon enough. They'll notice the sockets at the base of the neck, telltale signs of trouble.

While pleasantly dreaming, I'd be giving them an excuse, a reason, a motivation to look closely enough, and they'd realize quickly what I am. In these situations where we are uncovered, alone and incognito, lurking amongst the masses, they find it easier to just shoot us.

When capsuleers are involved, it's the only path with a predictable end.

If they woke me, and let me know that they know, well, who knows what might happen next? I could be loaded with nanite viruses, armed with invisible spy drones, laced with biological contaminants. Who knows?

...Maybe I'm here to take a hit contract on some civilian in the crosshairs of a person with too much money and some serious grudges. Just walk up to them as they amble tiredly towards a shuttle and then boom, spray, bang, zap...who knows, but it's lights out either way and I'm laughing all the way to the nearest clone bank.

I could be here to solve all kinds of problems. Or, I suppose, cause them.

Whatever it is, it's assumed by default that whenever a capsuleer is trying to blend with the baseliners (b-lining, they say – rather repugnant if you consider it), it's not because they're here to mingle.

Besides, the mechanics of it all are for them the same as for me. They have the authority to act with lethal force at a moment's notice. Against us, that is. Hidden, uncovered, that is. Beyond that, they have impunity.

Me, us, we always had it – so they get to catch up. A dangerous game I don't want to play. Some of you would just not believe the rumors I've heard. The stories of opportunistic savagery unleashed upon our kind when nobody who gives a damn is looking.

I hope a kind-yet-firm bluff will be all it takes. I know exactly what they fear, even better than they do. This counts for a great deal. I understand their countermeasures, and when you know their paths back to safety, you command attention. They, sadly, only have one go at this. For me, this is practice. Something to keep my senses sharp after a long while doing nothing much, just mixing it up. Blame the circadian rhythm.

As for what I'm doing here, now, deep inside a sub-basement level following two Brutors who smell like alcohol (made of fermented wheat from Amarr, I establish, but keep to myself)... well, I'm following the scent. I'm here to remind myself of the Matari. (I always preferred that name over Minmatar.)

But more specifically, I'm making a purchase. More particularly, drugs. And to be explicit,

we're talking some quite rare ones that have, curiously, become far cheaper in recent times... recent meaning, here, in the weeks, months, and years following the wormhole openings.

Strange, right? Well, see anybody complaining, making a public scene out of the fact? Exactly.

C3-FTM (C3-fullero-tris-methanodicarboxylic acid, in case you wondered) – I used to have to go to the mezzanine for this, and I remember how awkward it would be to order such tiny quantities in hushed tones, surrounded by an opulence that outstripped the value of my purchase by an order of magnitude. Obviously, the situation of demand and supply was complicated back then.

Now all I have to do is hook up with the local Minmatar smugglers, follow these two Brutor, and soon enough I'll have a whole fucking crate for the price of the meals I used to have to order as a disguise.

Maybe you understand now that I am no cynic to be asking, "what's the catch?"

Following along this dimly lit artery toward some unknown destination, I'm listening to a crisp, momentary tone as it's played out through invisible loudspeakers embedded into the walls, perfectly audible even down here in the bowels of the station. The two Brutor look over their shoulders at me for an explanation; they understand the game, but they don't get the language. I shrug a "nothing you need to worry about" and keep the pace down the darkened corridor.

It's interesting that they grasp this much. Perhaps the operation here isn't so reckless as I initially thought. My immediate suspicion is that I'm about to run into one of my own kind. Or, at least, another capsuleer.

Close enough.

That's one of the games, you see. Or one of the ways they divide us, classify us, speak to us... look at it how you want. I see a game. In these momentary audio blips there is a secondary message, a heavily compressed metastream lying obfuscated beneath expertly crafted static and white noise – all of it neatly engineered into a fleeting, innocuous bleep. Inside each one there's often quite a hoard of information. Here, in this one: a neurovisual map marking VIP elevator access points; secure comms lines; security posts; and of course, advertisements for restaurants, accommodation and other venues that are all kilometers above where we are now, and with price tags to match.

It's one part Survival Guide to B-Lining and one part Here's What You're Missing Down There.

Maybe now you understand, too, why I wasn't about to explain this one to my Brutor guides.

"That? Oh, it was an advertisement for 4.6 million-ISK shoes, and a map showing twenty-five of the quickest routes out of here."



In any case, they just stare ahead and continue briskly along a hard right into a sharply twisting staircase that drops rapidly below what I just thought had to be the bottom of the station. I'm beginning to wonder how close we are to the surface, to the vacuum outside. Everything is quiet save for the low hum of ventilation ducts, occasionally rattling a new breath of hot air through these dimly lit catacombs. I imagine it all coming apart for a moment, and imagine surviving. There is comfort in the thought.

After some time we arrive at a door. The two men stand beside it as it opens inward. I move to step inside, and just from the way they both turn toward me, I know that this is as far as I come.

Staring in from the outside, I'm met by what appears to be a plainly dressed Vherokior seated behind a desk with antiquated wooden drawers that sound like they're run on ball bearings. She's writing something out on paper, actual paper. Surrounding her are rows after rows of bookshelves, each filled with crates of drugs – and, from what I can see, the odd weapon too.

I reel instinctively, before I can even restrain the impulse.

She notices this and smiles, lowering the archaic pencil. She's dressed like a commoner, it seems, but the way she carries herself and commands this strange scene screams both money and influence, and comfort in deception.

“Yes, we're a bit old-school here,” she says, looking through the licks of her perfectly straight

hair, arranged traditional Vherokior style. No jewelry (unless you count rubber bands).

“So much for not leaving a paper trail.” With the copycat pretense of it all, I can’t help screwing with her a little bit. Tension is adrenaline and adrenaline is good; it keeps you awake.

“C3-FTM?” she inquires, ignoring the jab. I nod.

“Of course, glad to help.”

“The cost?” She can tell I’m not really asking, that I don’t need to ask. She can see the subtext.

She nods in turn. “Not much, these days.” I hold her gaze. “You seem curious about why, hmm?”

“I suppose you could say I am,” I tell her.

She waves me inside. “Then we can probably help each other. Come.”

I step inside as she opens another door at the rear of the room and follow her into a narrow hallway lit by cold blue beams, all of them reflected in meticulously designed angles across the cavernous metal spaces above us, perfectly placed as though everything is ricocheting along the straight, rigid lines of Caldari steel (perhaps I should say Caldari Steel, since it’s their product here). Something that looks like a turret is trained on me as I follow her, swiveling from its mount in the ceiling as it slowly spreads a web of red light over me.

Not sure what that just was.

“Is this still about C3?” I’m asking, raising my hands out of antiquated instinct. The Vherokior is looking over her shoulder at me as she slides out of the dirty robes around her, revealing a head-to-toe capsuleer’s pod suit beneath, black with white linings. Must be about YC-111 style.

“Of course,” she replies. “We can speak in confidence here, you do realize?”

I don’t.

We reach the end of the hallway and stop at another door. She looks at me strangely. I can see a sense of revelation slowly growing in her expression. I’m supposed to be realizing something here too, but, well, that could be any number of things just yet.

“You’re home, amongst company,” she says quietly, sensing the reasons for my hesitation as she stares about this strange room before us, but there’s something practiced about the way she does it, and something definitely wrong about the way her eyes follow me wherever she looks. I think she recognizes me.

“No,” I say. “I think you’re mistaken.”

“I’m not here because I’m...” she begins, leaving the rest for me to fill in as the door before

us slides away. Then, “I’m here because I know a Sabik when I see one,” I hear her say, just barely.

The room ahead of me is supposed to be a lounge of some kind, but I recognize its double use as someone’s bedroom (not hers, a man’s). She stops at the edge of a few small steps leading down to a sunken central area, furnished only by a large, circular couch, overflowing with blue and purple cushions. I think she is motioning for me to sit, perhaps, but she is leading me away down one side of the room toward a ledge. Something else I recognize, silver panels stretched across the top, adorned with tiny glowing buttons of various colors.

Understated. I like it, but I keep this to myself. (She probably noticed anyhow.) Each color is clustered in groups of four (that’s Synth, Standard, Improved, and Strong variants) and arrayed in pleasantly cascading rows.

I want to keep the bloodstream legal as possible, so if she offers—

“Synth?” she asks, already at least one step ahead of me. She spins around to face me, her left hand now resting on one of the panels. Pastel sky colors gradating to a dark, inky ocean-blue. That would be Blue Pill.

“Tried the NOH variant yet?” she asks. I shake my head. “On me,” she motions. Her fingers lift away from the blues and float towards a panel of warm, orange lights. I’m reminded again of the first room I entered. That would be Mindflood, and all four of her fingers now rested on the smooth bumps in the otherwise impeccably smooth surface. I suppose that’s her way of saying I won’t be the only one about to let my guard down. I stare as she presses down, and hear the pressurized shots of chemicals escaping from the tiny nodes.

“Slightly stronger, still legal,” she says, inhaling gently as she rubs her wrist and turns toward the couch. For a moment I regard the panel that houses the release button. Sky blue like the other, but with a tiny little NOH logo on top to differentiate. “Interesting,” I say as I indulge.

She glides effortlessly over the edge of the couch and takes a seat at what appears to be the head of it. I hadn’t noticed this in the design until now. I feel slightly dizzy as I climb over and seat myself at an acceptably middle distance, not too close, not too far. There’s a stupid amount of cushions here. I feel like I’m in a playpen. I kick a few away from my feet.

“Make yourself comfortable,” she says.

“Strange setup you have here,” I’m saying before really considering it. “Kind of hard to…”

In truth, I am starting to sink a little into this thing and relax, but that’s more down to NOH’s latest pharmacological sleight-of-hand than this overcrowded cushiontopia. Cushionocracy. Yes, definitely thanks to NOH.

“I’m curious about C3,” the Vherokior says, almost absentmindedly.

I'm curious about that Sabik remark earlier, but I suppose we can get to that. I turn to her. She doesn't seem interested in staring games anymore. "What, in particular?" I ask.

"I just handle goods," she says. "I don't need to understand much beyond the basics. C3 is interesting though."

Is it? I don't even bother saying it. I can feel my expressions betraying me enough to make the point.

She looks at me like it's some big secret. Some vast conspiracy. I'm not quite sure what to say.

I ask her how long she's been a capsuleer. Three years. That's a good amount of time. Longer than I guessed.

I explain to her that C3 isn't really a drug. You don't get high from it. It's a performance enhancer of sorts. You have to be able to know how to use it, though, and what it offers isn't all that remarkable, in fact – only useful in certain situations.

She asks, naturally, what situations.

Imagine, I tell her, that you are outside of your capsule, and what you need to do there isn't all that complex. Maybe you need to meet someone, or you want to get something to eat at a real restaurant, maybe sleep in a real bed.

Of course, this isn't hard to imagine, really. We're both unplugged right now. She nods, a slight sense of impatience about her. I give her a "bear with me" expression and shift up in my seat, kicking another cushion away. I can tell she's getting progressively more high too, just by the way she watches the pillow sail away over the edge.

For a situation like this, or at least some of them, I tell her, you don't really need your childhood memories, or your knowledge of how to pilot jump freighters. And the more situational your needs are, the more you can narrow it down, the less you need to bring along.

She's asking if I'm talking about selective memory, compartmentalizing different parts of ourselves into different areas (her word, not mine). I'm nodding.

C3 helps with this, I explain.

She seems genuinely interested in the idea. Whether because of its potential or historical application, I can't tell.

This outcome is altogether quite surprising, although not at all unanticipated. First, I'm still not convinced that these capsuleers (there are more people here, and five exits, two of them unguarded) aren't just posers, and this overextension, this trying-too-hard veneer isn't just the surface-deep summation of who and what they really are.

I don't pick them for it. But she said Sabik, which is an interesting differentiation to be mak-

ing, even if I do have the unfortunate tendency of reading far too much into these often thoughtless remarks. I'm following the beams of blue light on their path around the room, wondering if she's even meaning to screw with me.

Because part of this must be ego — my ego, that is — feeding into it, making this more significant than it is. Of course. Part of it. Part.

Then, of course, there was that half-decade stint a few decades ago with the Blood Raiders, and then Sahtogas, and Mabnen, and all that. An irrelevant association in the grander scheme of things, but with our actions come various labels and categories, families and friendships, little tones on the loudspeakers that you either hear or you don't. I didn't drink blood, if that's what you're thinking. I'm not a freaking Literal, and Omir won't ever have the pleasure of seeing my ass, let alone kissing it.

"Sabik, you said earlier," I note with a stressed hesitation. "Meaning?"

Part of the reason it escapes my lips so perfectly neutral is because I don't even have a clue anymore myself.

She's folding her arms again and pushing off the seat slightly, taking an artificially long time to consider the answer. She can tell I'm after something important. She leans over and reaches out. A man I hadn't noticed until now (another egger) is handing her a small metal crate, the vials within which I recognize, even though they're slightly updated and... well, enlarged.

The tubes used to be millimeters thick at their very largest, usually much, much smaller. Microns, typically (in the early days, first contact). She is holding what appears to be over 7 liters. She eyes me all the way over, smiling in a predatory way as she offers the canisters, her emaciated arm trembling slightly with the weight.

This is a whole lot of shit, no matter what way you look at it.

"Meaning, happy birthday."

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Perhaps I've been moving too fast. Perhaps I've not explained enough for you yet. You don't really understand where we are, what made it possible, or even what a capsuleer is. You certainly won't appreciate what happens next until you grasp a few basics, and you're far from that.

Well, that would be my intention, yes. But this is how I started out, you see. I'm not about to give you any advantages. Take it from someone who actually became a capsuleer, from some-

one who knows more than enough, that we all begin here – drowning in the deep end, trying to make sense of these things. Jita 4-4 is a good place to start. It's designed to disorient you. If you can start to make sense of it, though, you will start to understand a great deal.

But try to understand, also, that I won't make this easy on you, for the simple reason that it wasn't easy on me.

Part II

I'll take us back a little now, before Jita 4-4 even really existed, to the dawn of the capsuleer era. Some associates of mine at the time discovered that I wasn't just good with their cloning technology, I was capsule-compatible too. New arrangements were made. I was second cohort. Joining in the first rush would have drawn a little too much attention, you see, so I waited a year and joined in YC 106.

The first few hours of being a true, proper egger you don't really remember. Not years later, not when everything you've accomplished leaves those early days as embarrassing reminders of your own primitive imprint on this most advanced piece of technology. Certainly for me, this was true.

Of course, not everyone feels that way about it. Some can recite their graduation days with a clarity that borders on eerie and pathetic, most often as part of some well-rehearsed yet banal anecdote about their "early days." These are the sorts of people you see in the navy.

My point is, you don't really remember because you don't really appreciate what the hell it is that you're doing in that egg, what you're capable of. Not yet. You might remember getting pats on the head from some instructor agents, and the rush of your first few warps and fights, but that shit is all peripheral to this larger picture. That needs time to grow in your mind, and if you've got the right type of head for it, you'll start to realize important things sooner or later.

The First Thing to understand is that capsuleers can have the wealth of nations, the influence of nations, and most importantly of all, the sovereignty of nations.

Many of us get to this first point. There are countless numbers of us now, colonizing the outer worlds, building corporations and alliances that exist and operate outside the purview of the empires. Of course, the four nations are not exactly underrepresented up here. They have their own massive fleets, and there are many of our own kind who have taken their loyalties with them to the stars, whose patriotism has not been diminished by the drastic changes that fate has afforded us. Some are just scared of that endless dark out there, where not even CONCORD can protect capsuleers from their own kind. They have little to be afraid of and yet, so often, people — my people — claim that there is absolutely nothing to fear.

This is nonsense.

Which brings us to the Second Thing that eventually dawns, but on a diminishing scale now, down to the thousands. The second realization is that capsuleers can die. They are not immortal.

Many of my kind refuse to acknowledge this, but it is quite obvious. Standard capsuleer re-cloning relies on the use of mind-state transfer technology, which transfers consciousness from one highly controlled environment to another, Body A inside a capsule (an “egg”) and Body B (as in Plan B) in a cloning facility.

The important phrase here is highly controlled environment. You can’t say it is anything else. Just as you die, a scanner pores over your brain, capturing every last thought, every memory, every personality defect, and it does this why? Because your capsule was breached.

Because someone just proved how fragile that egg really is.

And that cloning facility you wake up in?

That cloning facility is surrounded by some of the most high-clearance people in the field — these invisible caretakers who oversee the rebirth of the universe’s elite. They have a job with an importance like none other in our world, and with it, surveillance and monitoring you won’t see anywhere else either. They are the real bodyguards. If a corporate CEO is waking up in one of these facilities, his contingent on the ground has already failed, and this, the most sacred of contingency plans, now depends on the people in the white suits. Obviously, not everyone is comfortable with this reality, least of all we capsuleers who won’t often admit how tenuous our grip on everything really is.

Why? Because these people in white suits could make things go horribly wrong for you and me.

I think the reason we’ve started installing cloning vats on our largest, most powerful ships has little to do with logistics and more to do with trust issues.

Regardless, there are contingencies for such obvious threats, if you have the resources to implement them. The point to take away from this idea is that if your plan for immortality relies on your never having to ask questions like what happens when these become not-so-highly controlled environments, then chances are your plan really isn’t worth shit. Most of us still trust in the system, eating the crap served to us without ever really wondering who cooked it up, if you catch my meaning.

As for the Third Thing, we need to return to that moment of capsule breach, when your brain is scanned and transmitted via your capsule back to that facility.

The third thing to realize is that, in this moment, the capsuleer has become data. Maybe only for a second, half a second, even less in reality, but for that moment we are nothing but 0s and

1s as we fly across light years of space in between heartbeats. It's so short that almost nobody recognizes the importance of this moment, and it's something only a few of us even want to appreciate.

The idea of the informorph.

The question: What if we just stayed out there and never returned to another clone?

What if we could live out there, and build a bright and better world in that space between?