



# TIMEOUT

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WITH REVISIONS BY NATHAN KNAACK

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Four ships registered as new red contacts on Maya Arikinnen's sensor overview, prompting her to uncloak her Buzzard-class covert ops ship and activate her cargo scanner on the closest target. All four frigates were manned by outlaws — her NeoCom promptly identified their call-signs as belonging to shady characters, each boasting track records rife with crimes and misdemeanors. Maya had already recognized their kind by their ships and style: They weren't killers, but smugglers. They were far from harmless, but they were less likely to start shooting in a moderately secure system. At least Maya hoped so.

Torrinos was on the outskirts of Caldari space, beyond which were increasingly less secure systems until one reached Amarr border zones some seven jumps distant. Although the route was not an official one between the two nations, it was still a popular path for smugglers or anyone else wanting to avoid prying eyes and uncomfortable questions. It was exactly the reason Maya had positioned herself there brandishing her newly acquired cargo scanner, courtesy of the customs license she'd obtained from the Caldari State. Many of her fellow employees agreed that Torrinos offered some of the best prospects. All she had to do was to sniff out some contraband and report her findings; she would receive a share of the fine imposed on the offender by the local authorities.

Once she achieved a lock, she activated the scanner on the nearest of the four frigates and started the sweep sequence. Before it could finish, it sputtered to a halt and reported that the scan had failed. At first Maya assumed she had done something incorrectly, but a brief diagnostic revealed that the smuggler had used some kind of cargo-concealing device or anti-scanning technology.

The four frigates suddenly veered off course and headed directly for her, a menacing advance that almost caused Maya to panic and flee. She managed to keep her emotions in check. The smugglers had not opened fire on her, which probably meant they were just trying to scare her off. The lead ship, a Jaguar-class assault frigate, initiated a communications link and immediately launched into a verbal assault.

“What do you think you're doing? Try that once more and we'll split your capsule in two.” Maya ran a deep background check on him with a single thought, almost instantly revealing him to be a member of a renowned criminal organization, some null-security alliance or other

— she didn't bother to note the name. They rose and fell so quickly these days. The pilot had surprisingly short record of smuggling citations, which suddenly made sense given his use of an anti-scanning device now. She still believed he and his cronies were just trying to scare her off, being sensible enough not lower their already feeble security standings, lose their expensive ships, or risk whatever cargo was precious enough to conceal.

She then turned her ship away and made as if she was leaving.

“There's a good girl,” the smuggler chided. He was trying to sound confident, but even over the static-laced communications channel Maya could tell he was relieved. She began wondering exactly what they were carrying and why they were so anxious to keep it a secret. It was tempting to provoke them again, but was sifting through the wreckage of all the ships involved, hers and theirs, worth it just to find out?

It was. With a thought, Maya switched ordnance and engaged her afterburner, sending her frigate in a wide arc as she began orbiting the first smuggler just within the substantial range of her Bloodclaw Fury missiles, reasoning that their close-range weapons would keep her safe. The smugglers quickly scattered into a disorganized combat formation, but didn't fire. Though Maya had originally only wanted her meager reward for helping the local police track down smugglers, somewhere along the way she had let her curiosity get the better of her. Whatever they were carrying, it was clear that the smugglers were willing to put up a fight to keep the identity of their cargo hidden.

She had just begun cycling her Kapteyn sensor array inhibitors when a new ship appeared, casting a lengthy shadow over the swarming frigates. It was a DED battleship, one of the deadliest combat platforms in New Eden. Maya sighed, thoughts still huddling somewhere between fear and curiosity.

Knowing that the DED officer could easily reduce every one of them to glittering cinders in a few heartbeats, any threat of combat quickly evaporated. The communications channel, however, remained alive and hostile.

“You show your face any deeper into lowsec and you'll be out more than just your ship, understand? You don't want to go to war with my employers.”

Ignoring the idle threat, for she had no intention of venturing past Torrinos into the more dangerous space beyond, Maya opened another channel to the DED officer. “Captain, I have reason to believe these individuals are smugglers. Would you mind staying here for just a mo-

ment while I—”

The response was terse and utterly impersonal. “Move along, capsuleer.”

Momentarily stymied, she persisted. “But I just need to scan their—”



The battleship’s engines came to life as it slowly maneuvered into a better position, but it was the sound of her sensors warning her that it had obtained a target lock on her ship that made Maya’s blood run cold. The officer’s voice thundered directly into her mind. “Do not activate your cargo scanner in this system again.”

A few seconds later, the smugglers had warped away in four different directions, scattering them around the solar system, and the DED battleship had laboriously aligned itself back to the stargate whence it came. She watched it slide into warp and disappear without another word. While her lips remained sealed, Maya’s mind raced with questions. Maybe she would risk an investigation, even if it offended a massive smuggling operation and the ubiquitous CONCORD.

She willed her ship’s cloak back online and disappeared from local scans.