

The Company:

A Series of interconnected Space Short Stories

Ghost of the Dirty Starling. Book Two

Also Includes: Various Short Stories

By Mark Holyome

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Sirens have begun to blare in the common spaces of the dormitory...

Time.

"Oh lord that's cold."

After fifty nine grueling days embroiled in an exhaustive search,

"You dirty, dirty bastard. What have you done!"

"Hey Marko! What the fuck bud, you too good to answer your pages now?"

Sprinkled across her field of view

"Hey! Shush... keep it down..."

The last thing he could discern from the voice in the darkness was a blood soaked gurgle.

"We're all just gristle for the mill..."

"This is the strangest feeling."

"Are you really that dense, or are you joking?"

"So I pull out both of my guns and I start blatin'..."

"Ma'am, we have a serious problem..."

"What do you figures got them all riled up?"

"I do believe that your friends are attempting to hail me..."

"This is some serious A-grade level of bureaucratic bullshit..."

"A couple of busy bees down here huh."

"Good morning doc, how are we looking today?"

"They are absolutely going to crucify us if word of this ever gets out."

"Good morning, and how is my patient today? Hm..."

"Do you know why I asked you come here Ms. Darla?"

"Even now as I stand here with you..."

"Admiral Garneau?, we have the solution in hand, sir"

*** Query - internal logs/ time stamp corruption - files not lost. No longer able to maintain chronological order**.*

"Do you honestly believe me to be stupid?"

"Did you pass along the request to Admiral Garneau?"

"I have some... interesting news."

"Does anyone else think it's weird that..."

Standing alone in the bowels of the Sanitation Department

"Come on shit birds, let's take it from the top... again"

"Any news on the war front?"

When you stop and think about it,

"Can you feel it? That static buzzing in the air?"

"Marshala my main man, listen I have a real squeaker on the docket, think you can make a quick run for me?"

The news was unwelcome,

Everywhere is darkness, all I can see, hear, think, is death.

PART TWO:

"I'm absolutely amazed that you've managed to get away with that..."

"You look terrible, what happened to you?"

It's seven o'clock on a Monday evening,

"The frame on the stroller is bent..."

"Do you know what I'll do?..."

Those dark shadows in between.

"And you've had a job before this one correct?"

PART ONE:

"Hey! You must be Mark... welcome aboard the..."

Dirty Starling, we have your crew corners ready to go, in it you'll find your uniforms and a detailed docket for your next twenty four hours. So I understand you've signed on as part of our Half-Three crew contingent. You guys are nuts, but I hear you rake in the dough though!" The stout woman gesticulates wildly as she talks animatedly at me, not seeing the puzzled look on my dour face. "Did you just say crew corners? Don't you mean my quarters?" I weakly interject midsentence. "Huh? Oh, right, you're not from around here. It's sort of a colloquialism to these larger ships and kind of a dig at folks on your work detail. Your ghost like work mates hate the term quarter, since that's the standard shift on these ships, four six hour shifts for every twenty four hours. But you guys work six four hour shifts per day, and coined it corners, because, well... you guys work anywhere and everywhere three out of every four hours and just kind of crash in corners, under chairs or tables, in bundles of coiled rope or what have you, then miraculously turn up at your next shift - to do it all over again. It sounds ghastly, but that's why you lot get paid those big bucks right!" She hasn't stopped pointing at things or taken more than half a breath the entire time we've been walking. "This is you. Set yourself up, read your crew details thoroughly and get some sleep. I don't imagine I'll see you again for quite some time Mark, so be well". A wide arc of a wave passes.

Standing in the grim grey hallway, my bisected metal door grinds open as I touch my palm to it. Biometric readers are everywhere on board this massive ship. No need to try to remember any codes, it's all linked to my DNA/RNA and several other key markers I'm not aware of. A dim orange light is the only illumination inside the wide but narrow room. Spacious by Navy standards on earth, pretty big for a single individual in space. About four meters long, two meters wide. The door and open pathway along one wall, a closet sized bathroom/'shower' outlet type cubicle on one end, a raised bed with desk underneath, with cupboards over top, and a full length closet on the opposite end. Clean, cozy and entirely unadorned with ornamentation. The lone object in the room is my crew information packet with my first six work details, and a voucher for my first meal aboard the vessel. Upon closer inspection the room is plastered with various warnings and guidelines for the optimal use of my crew uniform while on board. Lots of black, yellow, red and white labels. Very

ominous and kind of foreboding. Nothing I haven't seen before back at the Mars technical institute where I trained to be a ship board generalist. I can do just about anything in a modest, read mediocre fashion. Just enough to keep the A loud chime signals the standard crew change, and I grab my voucher and head off to the mess hall to eat, and nose around the ship while still in a coherent state of mind. Along the way I pass several hundred people bustling from one thing to another. Each dressed in colour coded uniforms talking in jargon heavy bursts. No one looks up from their desks, bunks or conversations. The crew corner portion has a real college dorm vibe, with people talking through open doors, sprawling in the halls or hanging around in small cliques. I continue to walk on until I can smell the mixture of food, body odor and mild disinfectants and sanitizers. cogs grinding along for a three hour session, until the real deals make their way to your location.

The mess hall is enormous, with a massive bank of windows that look out over the bulk of the aft section of the vessel. Lots of curving grey domes, and twinkling blue lights. The neon lights glow in reflection on the concrete like glass. I walk under a huge set of hoods which contain some high pressure vents. In the centre of the room is a massive semi-circle of vending machines, buttons, slots and glass drawers. Not quite replicators, but close enough to be science fiction. I slide my voucher into an available slot and choose a sixteen ounce prime rib, garlic mashed potatoes, grilled asparagus and a thick rich brown gravy, along with a Heineken branded pilsner. Turning to my right to see my name appear on a glass drawer I pull out my steaming hot plate and head to an empty table. As I step over the back of my seat I hear a soft voice say "Beige uniform eh? You a Half-Three then huh? That's a nice dinner you got there. I always thought you guys were a myth, but here we are." A large androgynous person in blue medical uniform half waves at me sheepishly. "Um, well yes. I transferred in today. Will rotate in at 03:00." My answer is short, concise and as noncommittal as I can make it while I smell real food mere centimeters from my face. I plunk down onto the seat, it whistles under the newly acquired weight. A soft pfft as air escapes from the foam padded seat cushion. "I didn't mean to interrupt your meal, I just haven't seen many of you guys around. I did my residency on earth and I marvel at your ability to work six four hour shift blocks per day while you are on rotation. It both scares and amazes me!" A plump cherubic face peers out from under longish dark black hair, with a off kilter toothy smile. "Don't be too impressed, they pushed some sort of synaptic device into my head at the technical institute on Mars so that we can function under high stress for brief periods of time, many times per day. It also allows us to 'learn' a great deal of surface level instructions on hundreds of jobs. I can even, in the most dire of circumstances work as a medic or a nurse during a level one, two or three medical procedure in any standard zero g operating room. But I'd warn against that, just between you and me. I'm a puker.

Involuntary, I assure you. But detrimental to the sanctity of any given surgical endeavor." I flash the briefest of warm smiles. "I'm Mark. Nice to meet you...?" I wave a fork lazily in the med tech's direction. "Oh, uh it's Alex. I'm Alex. Nice to meet you Mark, the fully fledged Half-Three! Man oh man, nobody's going to believe that I met you!" Alex is flushed pink in the cheeks. "What do you mean? I'm sitting right here, out in the open, with you. The whole ship can see us with their own eyes. The cameras can all see us". A befuddled look is crawling its way across my face, slowly. I am losing my good will and social cheer rapidly. "Uh dude no. You guys have biometrics that allow you everywhere and anywhere, and can seemingly travel at will across the ship. No cameras or software can track you lot at all. Hence the nickname ghosts". Alex thinks better of sitting down at the table and backs away quickly. "That's why you guys don't have any photo ID, you don't show up on camera!" And like that Alex is gone, melted into the crowd in the mess hall as I tuck into my prime rib.

Sixteen days later a well-worn yellow side by side drops me off at my crew corners door. All that can be seen as the mono tracked vehicle passes is a pile of filthy clothes and dirty brown hair piled up in the vehicle bed. With the pull of a lever the bed tilts up and the limp body slides out the back like an animal still birth. With great effort I stagger to my feet and I place my palm against the cool metal triggering the bisected doors to split apart. I fall face first into bed and the whole world fades to black.

A bell is ringing somewhere in this room...

It is at once both soft and yet insistent. Peeling my face up from my beds mattress I realize it is the chime of my intercom with a message notification. I can also now feel a slight buzzing from my wrist biometric unit. Head lifted from the bed, I roll to my left, feeling the fatigue of my last rotation through the ship as a Half-Three crew member, or the more popular terminology ghost crew. Laying now on my back, I pull each leg individually up to my chest and stretch out my hips, ankles and knees. Six four hour shifts per twenty four hour day for sixteen days straight is what is known as a hell week to all new ghost crew. It's an unofficial officially sanctioned introduction to the dynamics aboard the *Dirty Starling*, and just about any other vessel with more than a thousand crew members across the solar system, and beyond. The fugue like state we enter in order to access much of the ship wide systems knowledge is both a

blessing and a curse. I'm a generalist, so I can do a little of everything, but I don't remember much more than snippets of any given shift. I float into and out of rooms, departments and situations to place a finger in the dam, and fill a warm spot on shift until someone else can take over full time. It's not all glamour or suicide missions into the heart of a broken down reactor core. Sometimes I just sit in a seat and keep a space warm while I twiddle my thumbs. I'm just an average guy, you know, run of the mill. Part of becoming a Half-Three is being able to meld into the crowd and be inconspicuous. I'm a six foot tall, one hundred and eighty five pound guy. Just some guy. My eyes don't twinkle, I don't have a dazzling smile, my voice isn't rich velvety smoothness. Just a guy, who passes through the ship to fill gaps. That's my life, passing through and filling gaps. And that life is currently beeping at me to read an urgent message.

Ref code ultima_00094763 At 06:00 report to SIGINT terminal forty seven, followed by cargo bay 003471 for the remaining five shifts. Access to restricted materials handling area will require a full body scan before and after. End.

So much for getting a minimum of forty eight hours off between rotations on duty. But that's why they pay us the big bucks I guess. I can't spend it if I have no down time, or family, or friends, or hobbies or much of a life - at all.

I pull a fresh beige ghost crew uniform out of my closet, feeling the pressure rings snap tight over the various points of my body. These suits are a godsend in case of a serious injury or loss of cabin pressure aboard a space fairing vessel like the ***Dirty Starling***. Each pressure point acts like a tourniquet when needed during a traumatic injury. The crew uniform coveralls are linked to your biometrics and will clamp down at the two points closest to a puncture or wound. Saved countless lives that way. Also nanotech safety helmets cover your head in the merest fraction of a second if vacuum is ever detected. From the spec sheets we reviewed at the Mars technical institute you could live inside the suit without any external supplies for close to a week. A terrible, horrible no good week, but you'd live to tell the tale - apparently. Great stuff, these crew uniform coveralls.

After dressing in my room I trigger the reply notification from my orders and a glowing blip appears on my wrist. The navigational application will lead me to the signals intelligence terminal I need over in the science department decks. The nav app could successfully lead you through Daedalus' labyrinth to any broom closet you needed to find the whole world over. It's a technological marvel. From the status report I have about two hours of walking to do unless I can flag down a side by side crew transport, or a weapons hauler willing to let

me hang off the back. The main passages on the *Dirty Starling* are large, but not as wide as the thoroughfare aboard the *Torus*. The *Torus* is a space station floating geosynchronously in the dark shadow of the moon. It's where everyone starts their love affair with space as a human at least. The process to get up there is - let's say... unpleasant. But a necessary evil if you will. I interned in the machine shop there for four years before being pulled scholastically for the Mars Technical Institute Half-Three program. I spent another five years there doing as many subjects as I could manage until under going the required brain surgeries and subconscious training regimen.

After day dreaming my way through the bulk of walking around the vessel I find the appropriate SIGINT terminal bay in complete disarray. Wires are hanging out of the walls and panels, sparks are shooting across the cavernous room, the lighting is flickering when it stay on long enough to show itself. Along the back wall is a massive row of floor to ceiling windows with technical drawing over laid on them. Star charts and conversion tables are displayed there as well. Down the hall a warning klaxon can just barely be heard. They impossibly loud boom of the klaxons is unmistakable. I had never realized they could go off separately in different parts of the vessel. I assumed it was an all or nothing ship wide alarm. Hmm.

I step into the space beside terminal 47 and search for the standard ship board time, I make a note of it on my uniforms left sleeve. It's here I will make a series of three dashes to mark off my shifts for the next twenty four hours. Marking the start time let's me know what time of day it is when you get deep in the weeds of a long rotation. It's a lot of mental gymnastics if I'm tasked with doing anything time sensitive.

A commotion is breaking out in the centre of the room. A tall man in a burgundy uniform is arguing with a disheveled maintenance technician dressed in a red uniform, she looks tired and irritated. The burgundy dressed man is attempting to harangue the technician about the mess and disruption because his superior is on the way down and the upgrades haven't been completed yet. Apparently this is the usual state of the room, and it's a software issue which the maintenance woman regards as not her problem. She's trying real hard not to scream that she only does hardware and you need a programmer to fix the UI issues. With a puff of exasperated breath the red uniformed technician brushes her hair out of her face and marches out of the door. Immediately she splits in two at the waist and dumps buckets of blood onto the floor and wall in the hallway. A deafening silence fills the room as SIGINT techs all stare in awed shock.

Before they can compose themselves an orange jump suited woman steps across the rooms threshold and over the remains of the bisected tech. "Well what the fuck is going on down here Jones? Are my signal upgrades ready yet or what? Who the fuck is painted over my walls down here Jones!" The short angry woman in orange coveralls is red faced and has sharp features. A serious short haircut closely cropped to her well-shaped head. Jones, the burgundy wearing director of the SIGINT terminal bay is sputtering and distraught. "I have no idea why she's" "...AWOOGA...AWOOGA...AWOOGA... CONTAINMENT BREACH ON DECK 19. ALL HANDS TO MUSTER STATION ONE... REPEAT CONTAINMENT BREACH ON DECK 19. ALL HANDS TO MUSTER STATION ONE. REMAIN AT YOUR WORK STATION...DO NOT GO INTO THE HALLS...AWOOGA...AWOOGA...AWOOGA..." and just as suddenly as the klaxon kicked on, it shuts off and the red flashing lights go back to soft blue. "Jones! Why the fuck are we getting a station wide alert a full seven minutes after it was dispatched?". "I told you before ma'am, the signal attenuation out this way is awful, the signal repeaters miss half of the signal and fail. We've got thousands of miles of cables and fiber optics to reach us here and for some reason we can't diagnose without tracing every inch of the line or inspecting every single junction panel between here and the bridge. It's a logistical nightmare, sir. Ma'am, sir." "Jones, do you mean to tell me that we can look and talk to the furthest reaches of known space outside the ship, but can't figure out how to get a warning directly from the admiral on the bridge in a timely manner?" "Uh... yes sur - ma'am sir. We built the external system ourselves, and the internal system we just oversee after the fact - sir." "Yes, well as long as our project gets results we can put in another requisition for the alarm system to come in via our departments wrist comms instead." With a sharp turn of her head the orange uniformed woman turns to look at me, her hawkish eyes a piercing grey. "You there, Mark is it. I know you were to go to materials handling next, I rode in on your personnel transport, but I'm going to commandeer you for a few extra shift blocks to man a couple of terminals at once while we clean up what remains of my best maintenance technician. Christ all mighty Mark, she walked right into the oncoming path of a loose particle from our Hadron Collider. Burned straight through her. I'm going to have to write to Josephines parents".

I don't really know if the orange jumpsuit meant to get that familiar with me, but looks like I'm here for a bit, so best to settle in.

"Would you like to know why you don't mess with the folks in the orange jumpsuits?"

Here's an illustrative anecdote to get you on board with why we lay persons as a general rule don't raise our voices or encourage the ire of the admiralty or Company ruling class dressed in bright neon orange. Broadcasting their toxicity like a beacon.

When I was coming up through the *Torus* mechanical engineering program, there were always stories about people who had done something awful like make an Admiral look bad in front of colleagues or had become too familiar and offered an ill-timed barb in public. These poor folks become pretty easy to spot once you know what you are looking for. Both at the *Torus* school and further along at the Mars Technical Institute. What you want to find is someone well out of synch with the usual age bracket, who knows, from experience, what they are being taught before the professors and instructors open their mouths.

See the orange oligarchs are the type of sociopaths that will refer you back to remedial instruction should you ruin their day. This means a person whom has already completed their four years of education at the *Torus*, did well enough to be chosen to go to the Mars Technical Institute and do four to six more years there, depending on your specialty or generality. Getting hired, traveling the weeks or months to your newly minted job and then working for however long it takes to upset an Orange mafia bastard and get sent back to day one to do it all over again. No skipping ahead, no breaks, no winks or nudges. Day one - again. Sometimes if you've fucked up enough you are granted a long enough stint back on earth where you lose your innate ability to function in zero g, and then have to start the initiation process like a gods be damned chump.

Only for your offended Orange bastard to check in on your progress and get you tested on all of your practical work at the expert level because you know what you're doing - and this is after all, a punishment. These orange fucks keep excessively detailed files on their offense taken, in order to ruin your life repeatedly. All that so that once you get out of the Mars base of operations they can swoop in at the last possible second to redirect your life and have you

assigned to some black site based beyond Pluto with zero amenities and no chance for advancement. Pure. Fucking. Evil.

That's why you don't mess with the orange crowd, either that or they'll push you out of an airlock to starve to death over a lengthy float in total vacuum.

"Sorry about that little incident on your way in Mark"...

Says the man in the burgundy jumpsuit. Jones is his name, he's the director for this particular terminal bay which is part of the signals intelligence division aboard the *Dirty Starling*. Now that the orange jump suited menace has commandeered my services for longer than my usual one four hour stint, he has chosen to acknowledge my presence.

Part of my role as a Half-Three or ship board Ghost crew member is to be able to swoop in to assume control of some small portion of the ships systems and keep it moving for at least three hours, until someone more qualified can take over. I'm meant to be inconspicuous, that's why we're all colour coded. No need to ask what you do or what your qualifications are, if that position needs a blue, or green or yellow or red or burgundy body in it, and you see one there, all is well. Otherwise if you see a beige outfit, you know you'll get a modest output for the next couple of hours, and not to worry. I'm a permanent temp worker that can shift between the machine shop, science division, mess hall or surgical bays and just about everything in between. But much like a ghost, I drift from sector to sector covering off shifts, mishaps and personnel errors for brief periods, and move on. The only place I spend any real time in one spot is my room across the ship, and that's usually only for forty eight hours after I rotate off duty. The mental state I enter is much like a trance and it takes a deep physical toll on me, so my first twenty four hours after shift are spent asleep, where my deeply embedded programing in my brain works overclocked in order to repair my body and get me ready to do it all over again. This trance leaves me with fairly large gaps in my memory - meeting people or learning top secret details usually lasts long enough in my memory to function for a short term task, and then gets dropped as I rest between shifts.

"we're just going to get you to work over by the viewing port along the back of the room, you'll see a partition back there, walk through that and man the bank of terminals there. They are much older machines, and you likely won't see or hear from any of us during your stay here. Just keep the lights on so to speak! We've got the really exceptional equipment going on our end, you are just sweeping areas of little or no interest to our project. As per standard procedure, should you locate something noteworthy - which you won't - make a note of it and follow the appropriate protocols". With that Jones turns on his heel and disappears into the tangle of people, wires and upgraded terminals in the open terminal bay.

I take one sweeping look at the cavernous terminal bay, with all of its loose wires and fancy equipment. The floor is a rough open grating, and there appears to be about a thousand miles of cabling and pipes running under foot. Lots of different colours. We're real big on colour coding in space. It's like looking at a coral reef under foot, except there are no fish to complement the static cables with flourishes of movement. The soft crunch and scrape of my boots I getting easier to hear the further across the room I get towards the view ports. The concrete glass used on research vessels the size of the *Dirty Starling* are a somewhat old invention, but given new life in space. Their only downside is that they echo like a mother fucker, so that's most likely why Jones or his orange boss have draped print outs of star charts and conversion tables across the panes of what looks like crystal clear glass. Walking for several minutes, I can see the far wall where the partition should be. I don't see anything from fifty paces. My wrist navigator isn't blinking or beeping, so I'll just need to feel this out unaided. There is no sign of anything over in the corner, so I walk up to the enormous star chart against the glass. I run my hands over all of the minute details. Oh, the map is textured - how lovely. It's semi opaque with a light purple raised ink on it that shimmers in the dim light. The point I touch begins to glow. It is bioluminescent. No flickering, a solid violet in the now dim ambient light. Out of the corner of my eye I see an orange and red twinkle of light. Turning to look over my left shoulder I see it's a reflection on the glass from what seems like a solid featureless wall. Taking a few cautious steps forward I notice that the partition as they call it is a cut out in the wall that is set back, so the wall looks unbroken, but there is a cubby tucked away inside. The closer I get the easier it is to hear the ticking and whirling of the analogue equipment. The eight meter long u shaped panel is covered on three sides with huge lead panels and a water tank with something gently sloshing around inside.

With my hands on the walls I stick my head tentatively inside the room. The walls are almost bare but have clip boards full of hand written notes. Lots of warning signs and labels pinned together on a cork board, and a bookcase full

of technical manuals. A bell chimes over the loud speakers so I look down at my left wrist and mark off the shift change. A high pitch peel sounds from my wrist communicator, a new message has just come in.

*Ref Code Omega_00000007 You have been assigned to Signals Intelligence Analog Panel Maintenance indefinitely. Continue six shift protocols in preparation for supplemental orders. ••TRIGGER Sword Initiative {Clementine} •• [Signals found emanating from ZULU Quadrant 03-06-09917] CAPTURE***

My pupils dilate until almost entirely black, my care free laissez-faire attitude melts away - an automaton like figure bends down low over the analog signals panel, it begins to press a series of buttons, flipping switches and turning dial knobs. The empty black light bulb at the center of the console slowly begins to glow a dim orange barely visible even in the near total darkness of the small secluded room.

"Excuse me Dr. Jang but you're being paged on the private line..."

By Jones on the secure line. The encryption pattern this shift is Omega, sir." Just as quickly as the intern appeared as a floating head at my office door she is gone, leaving only the baleful blue light shining in from the hall. The office is rather grand as far as black ops sites go out on the far reaches of human space. **UB313** is located out in the grim darkness beyond Pluto, and as such doesn't warrant much attention from The Companies associated with earth's greater goings on. Decorated with framed photos gilded in gold, hand drawn ancient maps, technical drawings of stations and memorabilia stolen by the earth side insurgencies they help to fund and direct from afar. Corporate espionage and technological breakthroughs in R&D are the main focus in the bored out depths of **UB313**. They are as unscrupulous a bunch as you will ever find. They attract the vile, the scum and villainy like maggots to day old roadkill on a piping hot asphalt road in late July.

The walk from the grand office down the tight bare hewn rock walls of the hallway is a fair jaunt. The high grade low wattage blue LED's strung up over the kilometers of dark grey black rock make everything here look the same. Signage is at a bare minimum here, due to the elicit nature of much of their

work. Also - the torture element. Dr. Jang has a penchant for unnecessary surgery and has used it to mine for answers among those his insurgents have managed to capture and return to him alive enough to question. Lost in thought, but still counting off his turns and stairs along the route he taught, rigid doctor saunters into the bridge without knocking to stride over to the private channel comm's terminal located in an alcove off of the side of the main bridge. A red blinking light flashes repeatedly beside a blood red hand held phone receiver. With a quick flick of the wrist Dr. Jang picks up the receiver and places it next to his ear. "Took you long enough - I have word from our network that somebody has triggered a sword initiative, rated at level orange. You know what that means good doctor. We need to locate and capture the target before the earth side corporations can get out there to find it. Dispatch a small team now, before we've even traced the signal. We have a nine week travel lead on The Company people. Use it and bring me that specimen!" - CLICK. The other end of the line has gone dead. The raspy voice of the one we call Jones was tight with excitement, also insistent on an urgent response. Well it isn't beyond the good doctor to act rashly before having a fully developed plan. Slowly a menacing grin blooms across his taught features like an ink stain on wet paper. Turning quickly on his heels to glide across the room and out of the private alcove Dr. Jang leans over a smaller terminal to toggle the base wide PA system. "We have an Omega level sword initiative triggered - code level orange. I need an immediate dispatch of search teams ETA & THETA. Head to the Charon Pluto Lagrange point 5 - add the offset in crew as additional fuel since your orbit will be unstable. Hang there until we can get you a more precise set of coordinates. Dr. Jang out." Looking around the room at the shocked and excited faces of the bridge crew Jang knows it is going to be a busy and fretful couple of weeks while they work to pick up the requested target. "Sir?. We have some rough data going in on the teletype machine - looks a little disrupted though. It could have been corrupted passing one of the signal repeaters. But we can test for that against our back log of received communications- sir." "Good, good. If you need me I'll be back in my surgical bay. I have a few questions I need answers to. Please do have your interns buzz before they enter this time." The look on the comm's ensigns face drains of any appreciable colour. "Yes! Sir - yes, yes sir of course, sir." A single bead of sweat dribbles down the side of his face even though the **UB313** base would be considered rather chilly at the best of times.

"Oh here they come..."

"Let's get Alex to tell us about their dinner date!" Chuckles the two mismatched orderlies dressed in midnight blue scrubs. Their lopsided grins are pulled tight with mirth. They both begin to wave excitedly trying to gain Alex's attention in the hustle and bustle of the mess hall lunch rush. "Hey Al over here!, come over here and sit with us." Bellows the larger of the two orderlies. His tanned olive skin and close cropped jet black hair stands out against the piercing grey eyes. "Come on Al, Giada wants to hear all about your dinner date with that special guy!". A round of chuckles breaks out around the large table where a mass of other random orderlies are gathered on their break. Shuffling over towards the table, the six foot six nurse technician mumbles sheepishly. "It wasn't a date, I just said I caught one having dinner here like a month ago. It - wasn't - a - date. I just wanted to say hello, I'd always thought they were a myth". Alex talks into their chest, chin pointed down, eyes hidden behind the long lank hair of their bangs. "Yeah, Alex here says they met a Half-Three, a full on ship board ghost crew member! Ha. Right!". Barks the smaller of the two orderlies. A silver haired wisp of a man. He's turning left and right in his seat looking up and down the table gesticulating and jittering with fits of laughter. "It wasn't really much of anything. I saw Mark, the ghost take out this voucher I'd never seen before and sit down with a full on prime rib dinner, with garlic Onion and chive mashed potatoes and grilled asparagus on the side, layered in a thick rich brown gravy that had the slighted tinge of rainbow on top from natural oils. It smelled amazing". Talking about the meal brings Alex's voice into full volume over the laughs and giggles of the gathered crowd of orderlies. An older doctor a few seats down the table jolts at the mention of the gravy. "What are you talking about, oil slicks on gravy. That's nonsense. Do you know how much it would cost to have real animal flesh kept on board. Ridiculous! Utter nonsense. you guys told me this would be a laugh, but now I'm just annoyed and irritated!" Throwing down her knife and fork, the doctor pulls her napkin from their lap, and throws it onto their plate with a flourish. "No - no! It's true, I saw the voucher before he put it into the central dispenser. It was an eggshell blue voucher." "That tells me nothing I don't already know. They come in all kinds of colours. Don't lie to me Alex. I can pull you from rotation and bust you down to cleaning bed pans for the next decade." The older doctor is red in the face with a large purple vein pulsating on her temple. "I saw the priority symbol that was in iridescent violet ink!" Rapped Alex in retort. "What symbol? What are you talking about?" "On the right side of the voucher was a strange symbol I'd never seen before. It was all in outlines but hard to forget. It almost looked alien." The gathered crowd had fallen quiet once the older doctor's attention

became rapt. "An iridescent violet symbol. No way, listen I make close to the top pay grade onboard this ship. I've seen all kinds of meal vouchers, even those given to visiting dignitaries and the Orange Caste. That's not a thing. You're so full of shit Alex". Exclaims the irate doctor in a huff. "I can draw it for you! it looks like this - a square with a circle and triangle inside it, that connects with the squares four walls. Down the center bisecting the circle is a line that extends out from the edge of the square by about a third of the squares size. An upside down U is centered over the line, and it terminates in a semi-circle with like triangles encased in the bowl of the C. Here scan this image, and do a search on your wrist pad". Handing over a slip of paper with the symbol on it, the doctor picks it up off of the table, and holds it to her wrist communicator. With a chirp and a beep it scans the image and begins to search. Within seconds a prompt to put in the doctors 'Q Level' security clearance appears, which she does with a sense of slight trepidation. A few moments pass and a single item returns. It is an image with a caption underneath. "Yeah that's it, that's it! Come on Dr. Jorek enlarge it, stream to the table top for everyone to see". Yips the large nurse Alex in excitement. Pausing for a breath, Dr. Jorek toggles a switch on the top of her wrist communicator projecting the image upon the flat table top surface. The smooth white Formica like substrate works excellently as an impromptu view screen. Gasps are heard around the table. "Would you look at that!" "Sweet Jesus!" "Holy - fucking - shit!" "I told you guys!" sneers Alex in a triumphant tone. "That meal voucher was for a hundred thousand dollars. Your pal just had a single meal worth more than the average salary of ninety percent of our onboard crew. Jesus. There's no way this guys only does maintenance or fills job gaps." A few seconds later all the medical personnel at the table feel vibrations on their wrist communicators. A simultaneous notification has gone out to the localized group.

***PRIORITY MESSAGE** Ref Code Upsilon_#00791-002-4946
UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS TO INTERNAL IMAGE DATABASE - BREACH
DETECTED - Please stay where you are a tactical team has been dispatched to
your location with orders to subdue with prejudice. keep your hands flat on the
table, fingers splayed open, and feet firmly planted on the ground.*

The air inside the mess halls feels like it has been sucked out of the room. The large table is now sitting, stunned in total silence. The drop in ambient noise is so palpable that other tables in the huge mess hall are falling silent and are craning their necks to turn and stare. A muffled sound can be heard from outside the mess hall, it's the sound of heavy boots hitting the floor grating in unison. The jingle of tactical gear can be heard as guns and rifles are drawn. The faces of the crowd as ashen. The lights in the room are cut.

Sirens have begun to blare in the common spaces of the dormitory...

And all other common spaces aboard the UB313 dark site base. Strobing orange and blue lights spin with reckless abandon upon every flat surface alerting everyone to the mission at hand. The blisteringly cold air inside the base has a crisp tension to it now. The taught faces on everyone who passes along the gangways and in the halls makes the fear and excitement most palpable.

The away teams Eta & Theta have scrambled to their muster stations, and are reading their data packets in preparation for their impending departure. No direct route, just an order to get out to Lagrange point five out beyond Pluto / Charon and await further instructions there. The away teams are running at one third man power, and they have orders to add in the lost crew members weight in additional fuel cells or hard uranium pellets.

Looks as though the rosters were drawn at random within each team, as the crew compliments differ between Eta & Theta. One team appears to be all command, and the other all various types of grunts. No idea if the point is to work in tandem or to be isolated in obtaining the asset - whatever it is.

Muffled shouts and clanking of boots and machine parts on the rough metal grates makes it hard to think. There are service vehicles and lift trucks going about their business as usual, and the machine shop people are busy retrofitting anything they can get their hands on. The screech and rattle of unbalanced loads in the lathes and CNC's is nearly deafening. The light in here is dim, and the smell of acrid smoke and burning lubricants permeates the air. Air quality on UB313 is usually shit at the best of time, add propane engines, and burnt lubricants to that, and a million other solvents and you have the quality toxic cloud of air that we call home. Hanging down from the rough-hewn rock ceilings are the underpowered exhaust vents, miles of pipes and cables all tied together and mounted off of swinging all too thin chains. It really looks like a last ditch attempt to make the best of a bad situation. You'd be hard pressed to know this base has been operational for several hundred standard years. The hard worn and battered baffles that are up on ceiling swing wildly under the chaotic air currents and draughts.

The closely knit teams are already communicating with hand signals or on our closed circuit sub-vocal channels. Sounds like we stand to make a pretty good

chunk of cash if we pull this daring heist off successfully. Will be left to rot in the surgical bay at the hands of the beast should we fail. The check lists for deployment are hours long and deeply intricate. Call from upstairs says be ready to drop in six hours' time. So much to do, so little time.

All around the drop ships, the ground crews are scrambling to check off multiple items at a time. Oil slicked hands drop nuts to instrumental bolts, and sweat pours profusely from every pore. The stink of old breath and sweat mixed with oils, grease and desperation are an unwelcome but well known element to a dark ops deployment this far away from civilization. When you work to destabilize, steal and corrupt everything around you, the smell of fear is always nestled in your nose, and resting upon the back of your tongue so you can taste its fetid presence.

Time.

What is time. What has time to do with me. I've slept adrift in the blank depths of the cosmos. Time has no meaning here. I sense in the far reaches of my being that at one point time was everything. Now it is nothing. What is time to the dead and crumbling. The passing of dust into matter back to dust once more. On and on at scales so grand and so minute as to be virtually meaningless to me - to me or to us. Am I me or are we us now. I was man, then dead, now reborn as another. A collective - a hive mind? No, still singular but fractured. As though the dust motes falling from my body retained the essence of me and thought, action

Aboard the decrepit vessel there was once a man and his trusty educational bot. They survived tragedy, insanity and isolation for many decades together. That was until the human man's body began to degrade and fail him. As a last ditch measure the EDU bot laid that old withered man gently down into a med pod and with manual over ride after manual over ride poured billions of Nano bots into his body. Over the passage of centuries the limp desiccated body shifted and writhed as treatment after treatment flooded his organs and tissues to replace him with inorganic machine based life. To the wonderment of only the vaguest stars in the sky he awoke with a sputtered gasp. He promptly fell into the icy frost grip of despair.

For millennia this thing walked the crumbling halls of his ship looking for a sign of where he was or what he is. All the while dropping parts of himself about the vessel. Living, replicating, intelligent specks of himself that fed upon the ship and in turn reshaping, rebuilding it in his image. Every exhalation, bowel movement or cough delivered more of himself unto the ship, bringing it closer to himself. Unbeknownst to this fragile mind. The wandering lost soul was expanding his consciousness

It was a cool Thursday morning in autumn when the machine made man felt the ship shudder under his feet. What had he been thinking about? Direction, aim, trajectory - the answer was on the tip of his tongue but would not come. Lifting his arms up as though gliding on the air current and turning in a downward spiral to his right, he was immediately swept from his feet and pulled to the left wall in a steep bank as though the ship were in a suicide dive. Scared witless he screamed out and the vessel righted itself immediately. Thinking aloud to do a similar move but upwards and to the left, he felt his feet lift from the ground as he came to rest upon the lower right portion of the hallway floor.

Was it centuries, millennia or merely decades before the man come ship found itself seeking out and transporting itself through wormholes. Dimensions, time, the fabric of space itself was no obstacle for the amalgam once known as Kelvin. In the blink of an eye, the flash of a dying star, the waves of disrupted gravity Kelvin crossed both the known and the unknowable.

What is time to something that belongs to the ice cold dread of the depths of space, that which lingers in the interstitial spaces between things.

Somewhere a beacon is triggered as a momentous buildup of energy cackles out of the ether. With a blast of improbable energy a lone signal careens off through the galaxy, bouncing off of signal repeaters and dishes until an analog bulb of rusty orange pops to life on a decades old communications terminal on a science vessel named *The Dirty Starling*.

"Oh lord that's cold."

"Sweet baby lord Jesus that's fucking cold. Cold, cold, cold, cold - cold. God damn!" Exclaims the shuttle pilot in a fit of rage as he twists knobs, flips switches and toggles back and forth between banks of dials and indicators. The cramped cockpit of the shuttle is full of storage bins as the craft has been sitting in the unheated cargo bay waiting for a chance to get uncrated. The six inch thick concrete glass bubble that engulfs the free floating gymbaled pilots chair is scarred with frost patterns. Criss crossed with finger scrapes as the angry man tries to get a series of small view ports through the icy crust with halfway decent visibility. The dark cargo hold, and the dim running lights on his dash board makes for a difficult systems check.

"Did you cock suckers seriously not turn on the cabin heater yet? How the fuck am I supposed to operate the shuttle if I have to battle frost bite in sub-zero temperatures!" Shouts the stout pilot from his crispy, cold worn leather chair. He's flipping switches and running his own extended operations check list without turning to look over his shoulders at the two other men of team ETA huddled in the back of the seating compartment. "You heard the Doctor, we had six hours to shit shower and shave. That cabin heater plays havoc with the power output on a dry run start-up of a shuttle this size. Anything not nominal would potentially add extra time and we'd get spaced for fucking things up before we start. You want to end up in the surgical bay? Because I fucking don't man. We all had our station orientation. We all ignore more than we can ever explain to god." Quips the man seated in the rear compartment off to the pilots left. The man seated to the right is busy bolting additional instrument panels to the bulkheads within arm's reach of his seat. Clipping netting to hooks mounted across the wall, and shifting tools and cargo from padded bin to padded bin. The men of team ETA are running nine men short of their usual crew compliment, and are thus trying to cover off more than their usual share of prepping the shuttle for launch.

The nine members are doing the exterior checks, their muffled discussions and fits of laughter can be heard inside in small bursts. The hiss and sizzle of welding with the smell of ozone wafts in the open cargo bay doors to the rear. The huge cavernous loading dock is bustling with machines and industrial noise. The odour of burnt lubricant hangs thickly in the air. A haze of blue oily smoke hangs limply in the air. Fumes and off gassing chemicals permeate the space. An overhead speaker crackles to life with an ear splitting shriek of feedback. "Attention - away teams ETA and Theta you have T-minus ninety minutes until scheduled departure. All non-combat team members should make their way to a safe location behind the environmental bulk heads on no less than

sixty minutes. Crews will bolt combat teams into their shuttle at T-minus ten minutes to deployment."

A heavy banging sounds on the concrete glass of the cockpit. A series of orange gloved thumbs up are flashed to the pilot. The last few systems checks are glowing nominal on the display board, with the last few toggles switched over to operational. The pilot has strapped himself into his seat, and adjusted his head rest, arm rests and his foot stool. All items are a part of my gyroscopic pilots chair, keeping the pilot oriented along the elliptical plane of the solar system regardless of gravity status onboard the small ship.

The small speaker on the pilots chair begins to hum as the launch clock begins to count down from t-minus five minutes. The pilots ungloved hand reaches over head to another control board. The last thing he needs to do is remove a black and yellow cover from the launch toggle and the crew with deploy out of the bottom of the drop shoot launch tubes. Once he's given the signal he will toggle the switch and the ship stationed on a set of two arms will fold ninety degrees down through an opening in the cargo bay floors and the rockets will fire as they drop out the bottom of the massive rock that black ops base **UB313** is built into. With the closing seconds of the countdown something small and black falls onto the pilots face. Distracted for only a second the pilot looks down to his lap to see the tiny black rock. Moving to pick it up with his fingers it squishes between his thumb and forefinger. "Mouse shit? What the fuck?" Mutter the pilot.

"Ten, nine, eight, seven, six " - with the pause at five the pilot takes the briefest look around the cabin of the shuttle which now shows the faintest of signs of the rodents presence. Knowing what meager signs to look for the pilot can see the soft chew marks from rodent teeth on the plastic seals and cloth coverings. "... four, three, two, one... we are go for launch. God speed gentlemen."

From the inky depths of space outside base **UB313** two massive streaks of propellant can be seen glinting in the soft haze of the distant sun, as the two small combat ships careen out of their launch tubes simultaneously.

After fifty nine grueling days embroiled in an exhaustive search,

The smoky old glass bulb purchased atop the communications terminal slowly shimmers to life with the warm radiant glow of amber light. Hunched behind it the pallid grey colour of the ghost crew's face is illuminated starkly against the vast blackness of the nearly empty room. It is strewn with crumpled pages of notes, coordinates and reference books. The centuries old communications terminal is tucked back in an alcove out of sight of all the rest of the SIGINT personnel in the cavernous terminal bay. With a grunt of satisfaction the ghost slumps back into his chair. The leather is cracked and worn, the stuffing pulling free from the seat cushion. Long ragged pulls of raspy leather can be felt roughly under the ghost's finger tips. Endless hours spent worrying the leather has resulted in a palm sized gash on both arm rests. The steady glow of the lone bulb bathes the man in a dim liquid honey light. With deep black and purple bags under his eyes, and a puffy pair of dry red eyes the man has almost nothing left to give. Well beyond the extremes of his physical training, and straining to the core of the depths of his synaptic brainwashing the ghost is flickering between fits of haphazard wakefulness and brain damaged illusion. Over the last eight weeks of searching, not knowing exactly what he is looking for something has returned his radio ping.

The e-field releases an incredible charge of static energy into the near void as the monolithic behemoth known as *Kelvin* materializes into the Sol system after an unknown quantity of time. It has crossed vast distances of time, space, dimensions and reality. The ablative writhing skin of the vessel reflecting much of the radiation and energy back out catches a fleeting tingle of something old, and unfamiliar. With little thought it bounces these modest radio waves back into the ether with nary another thought.

First contact has been made. Like the breath of a gnat on the back of a humpback whale, it goes unnoticed. Now the real struggle begins.

"You dirty, dirty bastard. What have you done!"

Bellows the navigator aboard team Theta's modest search and rescue vessel *The Mangelo*. She is furiously toggling switches and flipping frantically through a cluttered control board of dials and buttons. An ear splitting siren is screaming over the ships pa system. The pilot, now missing, went to the restroom and just vanished off of the ship. But not before dumping the ships fuel, and tainting all of the rations. The oil canister he must have secreted aboard the ship is lying overturned next to the now ochre coloured water cistern. It's green label is well worn, and partially fading. It sits stark against the rust brown floor grates in the cargo compartments yellow overhead light. "Richard's! Did you have any part in this - you slick silver fox fuck. You greasy - gods be damned bell end!" Roars the navigator as she continues to arrest the vessels endless supply of alarm bells and warning klaxons. Constantly shifting between control boards, the captain's chair terminal and the read outs situated at her own post. As far as she can tell they are still on course, the trajectory she plotted out is perfect, though now with the loss of fuel and the weight of the propellant missing it could turn too steep an insertion to Lagrange point 5 out beyond Pluto and Charon's gravitational pull. That's an awfully dark and remote place to float with no fuel and tainted, spoiled rations. The course called for several corrections over the coming weeks as they waited for further instructions and a final destination. Unforgiving is an understatement, untenable an apt description- suicide more like it. "That thick fuck. What was he thinking?" She has begun to mutter vehement curses under her breath as she works expertly to stave off the flow of fuel pellets and propellant leaking out of the containment tanks on the exterior of *The Mangelo*.

Rustling in the rear of the cargo bay brings the navigator, Racquelle to a standstill. The clear ring of aluminium piping falling onto the metal floor grates is unmistakable. Followed by the sounds of heavy food bins tumbling and the muffled shout of someone swearing magnificently. More bangs, pings and thumps can be heard in the now cluttered cockpit. Racquelle had to pull a bunch of the main bus wiring out of the panels in order to reroute power and environmental functions around the alarms triggered by faulty equipment. Seems Theta's flight commander had a nefarious plot to hatch as he had taken it upon himself to cut cables and conduit in a seemingly random fashion.

Racquelle couldn't make head nor tails of what he'd cut or why. There wasn't much about what he was planning that made any sense at all. We all knew what failing Dr. Jang would do for us, we'd end up spending the rest of our miserable lives kept prisoner in the doctor's grotesque surgical bay, being eviscerated via needless surgery and bouts of straight up torture. The man's eyes gleamed as he

poured over the mangled lumps of his favourite specimens, still somehow alive, as he gave his orientation speeches to the newly initiated at *UB313*.

The sound of somebody clumsy waddling through the central gangway of *The Mangelo*, clumping along like a cunting Clydesdale with lead weights for shoes brings Racquelle up short as she catches her breath while staring out the cockpits view port. Standing slouched over her NAV terminal is a man in black shiny coveralls. His face is burgundy and his grin is lopsided. Breathing heavily he mumbles and his face goes slack. He topples over the radar - Lidar view finder lands face first upon the ground. A two inch pipe poking out of the back of his head. The fracture surrounding the wound leaking brain matter and copious amounts of blood mingled with wiry grey hair. His name tag reads Richards. He was the medic and second in command aboard *The Mangelo*.

"What the fuck is going on here!" Racquelle leans her head against the view port, feeling the icy chill of the concrete glass cool her forehead. The empty black void outside hides a great deal. Many people in better situations than this have succumbed to the siren song of betrayal and intrigue.

"Hey Marko! What the fuck bud, you too good to answer your pages now?"

Sneers the greasy looking mechanic in rumpled red coveralls. He's used an override key card on the crew quarters door. The grey green lump of human that is currently out cold on the raised bed doesn't stir, at all. In fact the body is so still it doesn't even appear to be breathing, let alone functional enough to answer a page and report in for his duty rotation. Stepping across the threshold of the most spacious single occupancy room the mechanic has ever seen. Large though it may be, since it is kept sparse and unadorned it comes across as positively massive. Standing in the centre of the room, the bisected doors begin to close. The change in cabin pressure from the hall and the closing door wafts the rancid smell of rotten meat, body odor and foul breath right to the mechanics nostrils. It clings to the soft palette and inside of the nose like an oily scented film. The greasy lank haired mechanic gags on the stench. Looking closely at the ghost on the bed he can see clumps of dead skin gathered in ragged lumps on the man's pale dirty feet. He looks like he hasn't bathed in

months. He smells like he's been sleeping in his own filth and waste for a year straight. With a ear splitting peel the greasy mechanics wrist rings again to remind him he has to get the ghost named Mark, up and ready for his next rotation in the next few hours. He flicks off the notification on his wrist communicator and finds the lighting panel for the room. With hesitation he begins to poke around getting the bathing unit ready for the nearly dead ghost. Walking around the side of the raised bed he leans against the lower desk, and pulls out a couple of drawers to stand on, as no step stool can be seen inside the room. As his line of sight comes parallel to the comatose man, he can see that he appears to have been unceremoniously deposited onto the bed with little thought given to comfort or his own safety. Limbs akimbo, neck turned harshly to his left, looking in towards the padded wall and away from the door. If his wrist biometrics unit wasn't flashing green, you'd easily assume he was dead. The beige uniform is strained, torn and falling apart at the seams. "Dude, what the fuck were you up to? You smell like shit buddy boy. If you're here with me at all, I'm just gonna pull you down from your bed and strip you down to your skivvies. God I hope you guys wear skivvies. Then I'm going to run you through two or three wash cycles to clean you up. I have an Omega level code orange on you my man. If it were up to me I'd leave

A opaque cream coloured bag expands out of a hole in the wall, the naked man is enveloped within it soundlessly. A viscous pink gel floods the bag from multiple directions. A soft glop and slurp can be heard, muffled by the membrane. The sticky goo oozes over the man pulling sixty days' worth of dead skin, waste and dirt along with it, to be filtered and pushed back through again. Cleaning every surface as it goes. As the gooey mass get sucked from the ghosts nasal cavity he gulps in a deep and startled breath. He twitches and shakes as he comes to. With the pinch of a syringe to the base of his neck his eyes pop open as adrenaline floods his veins. He pushes backwards frantically as though trying to hide inside the wall. His heels crack the tile lining the floor, his finger nails push off his cuticle with the strain of his panic. He cannot remember why he is so afraid, it's like a blood memory buried deep within his bones. "I've seen a god, and it was not benevolent." He whispers weakly from cracked lips into the empty room, a small trickle of blood from his ruined fingers dribbles down the drain in the center of the wash cubicle.

Sprinkled across her field of view

Is a smattering of dim flecks of light. Distant stars, far further than her own native sun. *The Mangelo* has been coasting for some time now, aiming for Pluto's Lagrange point 5. But with only the slimmest quantity of fuel left in the sabotaged external tanks Racquelle is fighting for her life. Desperately trying to locate team ETA and their small search and rescue vessel *Lil Boat Peep*. After discovering the treachery onboard *The Mangelo* three days prior, the tainted rations & water cistern, Racquelle has been trying to devise a plan to not only keep the ship on course, work through the damaged cockpit, but also solve the water and food supply issue. She hasn't slept more than a few hours over the last three days, and dehydration is making her life hell. Her ability to perform manual labour is limited in scope, and painful to endure. Her last move was to cut back the output of the heater and hope that there was enough moisture in the air to condense on the walls and panels so that she could collect it with some rubber sheeting she'd hung before collapsing into the captain's chair, and passing out from exhaustion.

A brilliantly dazzling explosion of light burns through the eyelids of the sleeping Racquelle. Her hair is damp, and her seat is a puddle of cool water. With a flinch she slides off of the chair to bury her rough cracked lips into the cushion to unceremoniously slurp up the puddle of water. It dribbles over her chin and collects at the neck ring of her space suit. She holds the mouthful of water in her cheeks and tries to slowly swallow only a small portion at a time. Trying desperately not to vomit up the precious water. Her wrist communicator is flashing amber alerting her to her near fatal state of dehydration. The notification for hunger is still in the late stages of green, almost to yellow. She could last another twenty one days without food if she absolutely had to. Taking a deep breath, her chest heaving, the urge to vomit subsiding Racquelle can see nothing but grey and alabaster shapes outside the view port of the cockpit. Struggling to stand up, her legs shaky, she crawls back up into her chair, and moves the control panels to face her. The radar screen is showing a city sized green amorphous blob just outside *The Mangelo* . But no sign of the rescue tug *Lil Boat Peep*. The communications panel has a lone flashing blue notification. Something has been calling her in her sleep.

Racquelle toggles a switch on her armrest to display the notification on the swing armed screen above her head. It has no video, just an audio file of a strange metallic machine screaming tone. Like a tin can through a grinder. Pulling up a few diagnostics of the signal she can tell that the message originated from the direction of earth and not from the behemoth parked outside her window. Reaching up Racquelle pushes the screen out of her field of view.

Slowing getting to her feet she steps over the jury rigged cabling and exposed wires littering the floor of the cockpit. She stands by the front view port and stares at the writhing grey off white mass before her. The vessel is so large it covers one hundred and eighty degrees of her vision out the window. Up and down, and side to side. Nothing but a shuddering, wriggling and writhing metallic surface.

"Hungry". The message appears like frosted smoke across her view port. "Yeah - sure." She says aloud. "I could eat." She dead pans to herself, assuming that she is hallucinating rather vividly due to stress. "I hunger." With a soft chuckle Racquelle retorts. "No, no, no - dickhead. I'm the one that's hungry." Staring slackly at the glass the message fades as though it were never there leaving no trace. "Yah! That's what I thought." She gives her head a shake. Droplets of water splash onto her control console, dripping down her neck from her hair.

The alabaster skin of *Kelvin* wriggles itself into four meter thick tendrils and reaches out hungrily to absorb the tiny black and orange morsel into itself. *Kelvin* has needs for raw materials and ejectable propellant mass. In the span of a few moments, or were they days, a week or instantaneously, *The Mangelo* and its occupants are consumed entirely.

As the off white tendrils leech over the ship's hull Racquelle shrieks in horror. The silence that follows is deafening.

"Hey! Shush... keep it down..."

"I can't hear what's coming in over the radio." Fusses the plump man in yellow coveralls. "Jimmy? Jimmy Wu is that you in there? Why is it so dark? What are you talking about?" Whispers the petite woman crouched down at the door beside Jimmy, in a the dark broom closet in an unused portion of the HR office on deck 19 of *The Dirty Starling*. Jimmy is hunched over his wrist communicator trying to dial in the frequency of his remote audio transmitter. "I told you Janice, I hid my negotiators recorder and broadcaster in the specialist communications bay after that mechanic got cut in half from the containment breach. The place was a mess, and had some seriously weird activity going on. Plus I heard from Jones, the director that they had an actual ghost in their department. I took a nose around but didn't see one though." He pouted. "Oh,

that's a shame. I'd have loved to have met one." She too scrunched up her face in disappointment. Her heavy lids almost closed with the contortion of her lips. "Well, as I was meandering around I deployed my audio unit and have been surreptitiously recording the conversations from inside, over the last few months. It's getting wild Janice! Bonkers even." He shuffles from his squat position to instead sit directly on the floor and place his back against the cool wall. Taking the hint that they'll be there for a while Janice sits down on the opposite wall. Their feet overlap in the middle of the small unused supply closet, littered with brooms and empty musty boxes. Jimmy cranks up the volume so they can both hear it. Janice says "Why don't you just broadcast the signal to my communicator?" Looking aghast Jimmy says "Don't be a silly goose - Janice, if I broadcast it there will be an official log of the recording. I've got to do this on the down low, otherwise it'll be re-education for the both of us." Janice smirks at Jimmy and waves the comment off. They both readjust themselves and wait while the audio begins to build again. At first there is only a smattering of small talk, and some quick bursts of spoken activity. The line eventually goes dead. "Don't worry about that." Says Jimmy. "It can be hit or miss. But the reason I called you here was I had an Omega level code orange flagged to my attention regarding a debrief with the ghost. It's here! Today. Supposed to happen any minute now." He gesticulates wildly and his ankles knock against Janice's. "Ouch, watch it Wu!" Janice exclaims.

A kilometer down the hallway, on deck 19 of *The Dirty Starling* a gaunt and exhausted skeleton of a man in fresh beige coveralls is lumbering towards his debrief in the cavernous communications terminal. The massive doors are closed tightly, there is no one to be seen in the halls within several hundred meters. The lights are a startlingly bright blue white. The cables and pipes that run under the floor grates are the only colorful things in sight. It's all very drab and serious, and grey. With a loud thunk, and a ratcheting click the doors peel open slowly. With a thud they come to rest about eighteen inches apart. The ghost must squeeze through the large metal teeth that maintain the registration of the doors. It is an awkward and claustrophobic fit. The three foot thick doors are icy cold to the touch. The interior of the room is near black, the only source of illumination are the buttons and dials from the control boards. All overhead lights are off. With a loud click one lone spotlight shines down in a white yellow cone on the floor. "Step into the light please Mark." A bodiless voice commands from the darkness.

Stirring from their sleep Jimmy Wu and his pal Janice sit bolt upright, their hearts are pounding. "Did you hear that? Whose voice is that? I don't recognize it, do you?" Whispers Janice. "Oh I heard it all right. Now be quiet, this is going

to get interesting!" Chuckles Jimmy. Tapping a few buttons on his HR select wrist communicator, he runs some diagnostics on the voice from the audio broadcast. On his blue green LED screen a whirling pattern appears. The machine is searching and the app is thinking.

"I have it on good authority Mark that you were successful in locating my asset. But, you sent a message. What was it?" Growls the heavily modulated voice from the dark. "I'm sorry, sir or Madam. I don't know what you're talking about." The quiet response is mumbled. "Of course you know! Tell me, what did you send? Was it a warning, an alert? Answer me before I put you through a recycler!" Shouts the voice in a terse response. "I'm sorry sir, I'm just a generalist, I haven't spoken to anyone, or sent any messages, covert or otherwise - sir." The meek voice wavers, whether from fatigue or otherwise is not immediately discernible. "He's got an Ultima level cognitive block in place - very useful in these covert operations. Give him the key word and his subconscious will spill it's data core openly. You can cross reference any multitude of points of information. It's a nifty bit of engineering." Speaks a second deeper voice. Although given the modulation used it could be anybody on the other end of the line. "I don't have a key? What key? I was told the ghost would search my coordinates, locate the assets and report back. I said to specifically not send any messages have any type of communications with it. That was of the utmost importance!" Shouts the original, now maniacal voice. "How'd you do it without a key? That's not possible." Responds the second lower voice in a breathy tone. "I commandeered his time and sent him the quadrant to look through, same as I would for any duty roster change!" Screams the first speaker. "Wait - you didn't use encryption or a key word? Oh fuck!" The voice cuts away to a gurgle, there are sounds of gunshots and bones crunching broadcasting over the line.

"Sir - we have at least two more listeners on the line." Says a soft but firm voice over the audio broadcast. "Uh. Find them and eliminate them please. Are we on Vox? For fuck's sake turn that shit of....." The line goes dead a second time that day in the HR broom closet on deck 19. Janice and Jimmy are frozen in place. "They don't mean us do they?" Asks Janice. "They couldn't possibly. I used a remote audio broadcaster. They're a dime a dozen onboard this ship. It's not registered to me specifically, just our department." Shrugs Jimmy. "Maybe they could trace the outgoing signal of the broadcast unit, not that they know it's us?" A heartbeat later a quiet peep chimes in from Jimmy's wrist communicator. The voice diagnostics are complete, and a red flashing flag is present on Jimmy's LED screen. Before he can cancel it, a matching beacon pops up on Janice's wrist communicator too. Sitting so close together for so long the HR consultants private chat app has linked them together. In the green blue glow of their wrist communicators the two share an ashen grimace.

In the bright yellow halls of the HR department on deck 19, loud boots and the metallic clink of assault rifles can be heard.

The last thing he could discern from the voice in the darkness was a blood soaked gurgle.

The single source of overhead illumination he is stood under shows a shimmering wave of tiny undulating dust particles drifting limply through the cone of yellow white light. The room is cool, damp and mournful with the lack of activity. The usual sounds of printers and instrumentation is silent. The ghost follows the ebb and flow of the dust waves as they fall across his vision. Tiny points of sparkling light, each has its fleeting moment where it catches the light just so, enough to twinkle, then vanish amongst the crowd. The ghost too, is silent, transfixed by the dust, and the shouted accusations left hanging in the air. The volume of the shouts so loud his ears are left ringing. The sudden shock of the gun fire over the pa was enough to deafen him momentarily. In a daze he stands there unmoving - unfeeling, unmoored. The inky black shadows of the enormous room shifting and changing shape around him. Many heart beats pound in his chest before a single deeply modulated voice speaks aloud. "Mark - tell me, what message did you send out there? Was it a warning? Did you tell them about the plan?" The voice has an edge to it, a level of panic has set in which the voice modulation can't quite keep out of the audio feed. "I'm sorry sir, I don't know what you are looking for. I don't know anything about the message." Pleads the ghost quietly but earnestly. "I believe you, my son." A tinge of regret creeps into the modulation. "Damn." The voice whispers. The line goes dead once more with a pop and a click, and all of the communications terminal lights spring back to life, the doors open in their entirety, and the signal feeds from all of the dishes and read outs begin to scroll across the screens again. The hum of the lights and the general buzz from the cabling vibrates through the ghosts body.

A soft warm tingle flows down the length of the ghosts left arm spreading from the base of his neck. His face is flushed, and a feeling of euphoria engulfs him. A single tear falls upon his gaunt cheek.

In a moment a blinking message on his wrist will tell him to go to the hazardous materials handling depot, where he will be seen to have walked naked into the decontamination chambers for a shower. As the stringent sanitizer oozes from the curved spigot on the wall a warning siren will go off. The gathered crew in the control room will scramble madly to contain the damage. With frantic screaming and wailing, their fists hammering upon the glass partitions in desperate warning. The ghost will stand motionless under the stream of pink sanitizer, his tears unnoticed in the onslaught of the pink scented fluid, as a clear caustic vapor will creep up through the floor vents. The ghost will collapse in spasms as his body begins to break down. A pool of miasma, gelatinous lipids and bone left dripping upon the bare wet floor. The supervisor on duty will shut all of the view ports between the control room and the showers, but not before the staff witness the violent and all consuming death of the naked man in the shower room. What little there is left will be gathered up, sealed in a plastic sack and crated ceremoniously into a yellow rigid polyethylene barrel and ejected from *The Dirty Starling*, passing right through the backwash of the engine cones to be incinerated. At the ship's next stop, a new ghost will join the ranks of *The Dirty Starling's* crew - his name will also be Mark.

"We're all just gristle for the mill..."

Mutters the older statesman sitting reclined at his massive desk. He's thumbing through the most recent accident reports from *The Dirty Starling*. One particular case was flagged to his attention, marked urgent, and highly confidential. "What's that?" Asks the statesman's valet, seated at a small alcove just around the side of the desk. A minuscule cut out of the massive structure that fits his small computer keyboard, a side board to fix his boss's drinks, and a large black box full of encrypted data records. "Hmm. Just talking to myself, my dear boy." Harrumphs the older man, his chin fixed against his round barrel chest. A look of consternation rests upon his wrinkled face, and precise chiseled features. No less handsome even with his recent weight gain in these later decades of his tenure aboard *The Dirty Starling*. The man, Gerald, is an advisor to the positively ancient Admiral currently entombed in the captain's quarters of *The Dirty Starling*. "I've got to carve out some time to wake the admiral." States Gerald flatly. The accident report clutched tightly in his left hand. "The admiral? Jesus what's happened now?" Chirps the valet. "An absolute disaster.

That's what. Seems our vanished ghost is, or rather, was, the admiral's great great grandson. He is not going to take this news well. How long will it take to wake the man?" Asks the large, gruff adviser Gerald. The slim valet types on his keyboard quickly, with a few clicks and some guttural noises he replies. "According to medical the admiral is due out of stasis when we reach port on Errebus Four in two weeks time sir. Do you want to wait for his regularly scheduled reanimation?" The valet asks. "Is that what I asked you young Timmons? Hmmm... did I ask you to tell me when he was scheduled to awaken? I know he's due out in two weeks, his primary dinner guest, besides myself, my retinue and the other first officers was the dead man - his progeny. So No! In fact, I do not wish to wait. Key in the request, I'll approve it physically. Any further delay may endanger our lives further. The Admiral is not known for leniency onboard this ship. Am I clear Timmons?" Barks the adviser in a raspy cutting whisper. "Yes sir. If we trigger the Morning Rays Protocols now, he will awaken in six hours - sir." Responds the slim valet Timmons firmly. "Good man. Key it to my biometrics wrist communicator and I'll DNA scan in the override. Good god I hope he takes this well." Mutters the thick necked adviser, straightening his shoulders, and fussing with his moustache in a small pocket mirror.

With a loud woosh the lid of the medical pod opens up and a humanoid shape within can be seen through the escaping rush of steam and moisture. Over head fans kick on gobbling up the various gases. Their mechanical hum interwoven with loud clicks and a low grade grinding of metal on metal. Blue dressed medical technicians scatter as the body within begins to stir. A tall female technician approaches Gerald with the intent to scold him for rushing the older admirals awakening. But seeing the ashen look, and the puffy bags under the admiral's most trusted advisers eyes, she yields, and backs away with a softly spoken. "Be kind Gerald, the admiral is... not in as good a state as he once was. Be gentle - please." Turning his eyes from the man entombed in the medical pod Gerald looks at the doctor with mournful eyes and says "I do not wish to hurt him any more than absolutely necessary. He'd be furious if we waited to break the news to him. Better a sharp shock than a delayed festering wound." He grumbles. "As you see fit Gerald." Remarks the doctor as she disappears into her office across the medical bay. In a flutter of lab coats and orderlies with wheel chairs, the Morning Rays Protocol team rushes in to collect the admiral, checking his vitals again, attaching leads, and wiping him damp body down. Removing the remnants of the stasis fluids used to keep the elderly man alive. The clock is ticking, and Gerald expects to be summoned by the admiral within the hour from his ready room aboard the bridge.

"Well, speak man! Why did you awaken me so soon, and as harshly. A Morning Rays Protocol Gerald? Are you trying to kill me? I should have been brought back gradually over a period of days. Well? Speak damn it!" Roars the tall elderly man in a medical unitard. Not yet dressed in his full admiralty uniform. Unadorned as he was, deminutive compared to his former self, the admiral still bellows loud enough to shake the walls of any given room. The pens on his desk rattle with the raucous boom of his voice. "I bare ill tidings sir." States Gerald. His hands interlinked before him a manilla folder nestled under his arm, as he stands just inside the ready room doors. "Jesus Herald - don't act like a dcolded child waiting for punishment, out with it man, out!" The admiral is pacing behind his desk, furious to be awakened so suddenly, and is such a harsh manner. He is not one so used to being man handled. Given attention to his every whim yes, but not a man used to being denied. "It concerns your great great grandson - sir." Bleats Gerald in obvious distress. "Ah yes! Yes, yes, yes. I have not forgotten! I am so very pleased I was able to procure my progeny for this ship. I've watched over him you know. I have the time and inclination to follow his progress. Most impressive. An admirable specimen to the family - and name. He bares my name sake you know!" Speaks the red faced admiral, his eyes twinkling with the fondness of his memories. "He's dead sir." The swiftness of the admiral's fury is frightening. Both hands slamming down on his desk. The look of betrayal upon his face. It's as though the air has been sucked out of the small room. A dark red flush cascades over the old man's face, as though thick blood were erupting from the top most portion of his scalp. "Bring. Me. His. Body." Shouts the admiral in a staccato. "I want his biometrics unit brought to me. I want an autopsy, I want all relevant reports on my desk within the hour. Well? MOVE GERALD. Don't look at me like a stuck fucking pig!" He rants. "I can't. Sir." "Oh yes you fucking well can, my son! You fucking well better! My boy. Or I will rend you limb from limb!" He raves. "I'm sorry sir, the Ghost protocol required his body and communicator, the whole of his biometric data be purged." States Gerald flatly. "What the fuck are you talking about Gerald. He's mine. I assigned him here. There was no Ghost Protocol for his personnel file. I know that because I would never grant him one. Nothing so ignoble should befall progeny of mine - Gerald." Shouts the angry admiral. "If you check the records sir - Mark has a Ghost Protocol registered. Signed off on too." Gerald speaks quietly as he approaches the desk, a file folder clutched in his hand. He opens the folder and lays it down upon the desk. A single photo of the puddle of remains is attached via a paper clip. Poking out underneath are the details of his subsequent bagging, being crated into a polyethylene barrel, and ejected into the backwash of the engines. There are several first person accounts from the witnesses, and the day and time stamps.

Admiral Mark stands still behind his ready room desk starring down at the Manila folder and the contents of the report. Displayed vividly in red ink is the stamp for the Ghost Protocol with a name written in black ink, with a message underneath it.

"Dr Jang you have a new message from the encrypted line waiting for you. At your leisure sir." Without waiting for acknowledgement the intern scurries from the partially opened office door. Doctor Jang looks up at the clock on his desk, a broad grin spreading across his unshaven face. Slowly he gets up from his desk to cross the room to the door, stopping only to put on his white lab coat. A hop in his step as he saunters down the halls of *UB313* to the bridge compartment, and the quiet out of the way alcove where the encrypted line awaits.

The signature is scrawled but clear as day. The Ghost Protocol was ordered by a Doctor Douglas Jang. Underneath that are a few words scribbled followed by a smiley face. "My eyes betray me Gerald. What pray tell, does that say?" Bending at the waist Gerald leans down to read the note under the signature. "It says - Fuck you old man." With a clatter the admiral collapses into his chair with a thud.

"This is the strangest feeling."

She thought to herself. All around her there is a calming warmth, like a snug blanket wrapped around her. But not quite, almost akin to floating in a very warm pool of water, where you know you are wet, but you don't feel wet. There is a hum about her too, comforting, like a soft electrical tingle in her finger tips and toes. Even though it is pitch black and she can not see she is not scared. No, she thinks, at the edges of her consciousness she is terrified, but she feels compelled, externally, to not panic. Like someone is whispering sweet nothings in her ears just below what she can make out, but the warmth of breath on her neck, and the sense of someone caring is tangible. The oddness of it all envelops her. She is oddly disquieted by the lack of her heart beating in her chest. Surely at peace as she is, the constant thrum of the lub-dub of her heart, and the sound of blood rushing in her ears should be present. What had happened? Why couldn't she remember where she was or what she was doing.

The warmth and floating sensation persists. The blackness around her could stretch for miles. Or it could be a mask. Either way her eyes are unseeing. Is she waking up in a med pod? Did she fail her mission to obtain the asset? Questions are tumbling around in her mind. A brief pinch in her head, like the beginnings of a head ache, but now its gone. What was she just thinking of? The float is warm. She could just drift away, off to sleep. "YES" - the warmth speaks, like honey in her ear. Oozing around her, the suggestion to slip away, go to sleep, just rest - relax. Feeling herself giving in to the sensation of gently rocking, somewhere in the blackness she can hear her mother singing a lullaby. A gentle finger moving a lock of hair from her face. The warm embrace, the touch of warm soft skin on skin. The slight hum of electric static from an off turned radio. The clicking of the rocking chair upon the orange sun lit floors of her bedroom. Oh!, she thinks, I don't know if I've ever had that memory before. So nice. She's a teenager, rolling over in bed, away from her opened blinds, snuggling against her comforter, "I don't want to go to school" she moans. The warmth begins to ebb away slowly, a cold chill nips at her fingers and toes. She shivers, nakedly from the cold.

The darkness begins to recede, in its place a swirling mass of shadows and smoke. She coughs deeply, and begins to choke. Hard wracking coughs that assault her lungs. She can feel her eyes begin to bulge, her neck straining, her finger bones pop with the strain. She isn't choking but suffocating in the grey white cloud. "She might need the atmosphere we detected K". Garbles a voice echoing from every which direction. "Yes - Yes! We did notice that too." Replies the same voice. "Best be quick about it then K." It answers in reply. "Too right K." It says, still having done nothing but remark upon her strangled state. "Oh thank you K." The woman lay on the ground asphyxiating. With an audible whistle the room begins to fill with a mixture of oxygen and nitrogen and various other gases. The same as the tiny yellow morsel they had consumed, in which they found her. Gasping for her life she lies upon the ground heaving and floundering. Trying to catch her breath and get her bearings. "Your friends are dead." The room vibrates with the words, but no one is inside the room. With a cracked and dry throat she croaks. "I know." The room itself begins to shrink, and reorganize. No longer a cube of three meters to a side, but an elongated hall, all illuminated in the same silver grey and off white. The hall ends at her back but stretches out into a pin point of light in front of her. Without getting up she is pushed forward, gently. "The man inside with you had significant trauma to his brain. Tell us, did you have anything to do that?" Asks the echoing voice quietly. "No! - no, I was trying to fix the sabotaged cockpit flight controls. Richard's was murdered by our pilot Zeke." The walls shimmy in response. The forward pull of the hallway speeds up. The woman has the distinct sensation of traveling without moving. It is

disconcerting. "Tell us, what of the man partially welded to your hull?" Enquires the echoing voice. "I don't know? I assumed Zeke was trying to sabotage us so that he could obtain the asset by himself. Keep the glory for his own." She responds with a dry bark. "Wait - did you say welded? What welded? How is that possible?" She exclaims. The hallway starts to expand, a large yellow and black ship begins to uncover itself from the wall. The hall disappeared behind her, a large rectangular room containing her ship *The Mangelo* has arranged itself around her. She approaches the rear of the ship where, near the top side, the propellant storage tanks are located. Too physically weak to climb, she realizes she can't recall when she last ate or drank anything. The ship before her appears to sink into the floor, raising her up to see the top of the vessels hull. There, frozen in place is the body of the pilot. "Can you tell if the power is still on with the ship?" She asks aloud. "We have rendered the core inert." Responds the echo. Crawling over the pipes and exposed cabling on the hull she can see that the pilot, Zeke, had unfortunately braced himself to work by putting one boot under a secured conduit and then leaned over another cable bundle to switch the engines over to the reserve tanks, causing the current to arc, welding himself in place. Dying of electrocution painfully, in the process causing the overload of the capacitors and resistors blowing out the control panels in the cockpit. It wasn't sabotage, at least on Zeke's part. Just an unfortunate accident stemming from their second hand pilfered vessel, and shoddy rushed schedule to assemble it all. "So how did Richards get a pipe in the head?" She mumbled. The deep echo voice rumbles. "The analysis of the data from the biometric recorder seems to suggest he was trying to pull a stuck valve open on a holding tank, when his grip failed, slipped off the wrench and impaled himself. His gps tracker shows him flopping around." Responds the voice dryly. "Which caused the machinists lubricant to dribble into the cistern." She says, flatly. A little numbed by the revelation. Suddenly there is a violent rocking motion to the room, as the woman tumbles over sideways falling to her hands and knees with a violent thud, the room shrinks down into a cramped sphere, only slightly larger than the woman if she were to crouch. The light within the grey white room begins to shimmer into a dazzling brilliance. "Would you like to know what your wrist biometric unit says - Racquelle?"

"Are you really that dense, or are you joking?"

Asks the burly woman sitting in her security forces issued combat uniform. Tucked tightly into her dressing alcove on the mezzanine over looking the main flight deck. An enormous dry dock packed with mechanics doing repairs to all of the vessels stationed inside the sector. The young man is currently helping to bolt her into her multi part suit. "I just didn't know what all the hub-bub was about. That's all." Pouts the small man, with large brown puppy dog eyes and a well worn cracked leather apron loaded with tools on it. "You silly prick. The drums are beating." She barks in anger. "Huh? I don't hear any drums, that warning klaxon and the alarms I hear, but no fucking drums!" He replies, earnestly without a hint of sarcasm. "I'm speaking metaphorically - dip shit. Someone's gone a pissed off an admiral, and now we're heading off to war." She is shouting over the loud peal of the intermittently sounding alarms, and the deep booming klaxon horns. As they approach the time to depart the warnings get closer and closer together. Like the contractions of birth, except it'll involve the gushing of newly retrofitted attack vessels out of the dry docks all across the refurbished *Torus Station*. "But, I don't get it. We've done nothing but science and exploration for centuries, why go to war now? What could be so bad as to warrant that." Asks the diminutive armored stuffing his hands inside the chest of his leather apron. Feeling the warm rough edges scrape across the skin of his exposed hands. It's his default position, as he waits for his security personnel to run their internal diagnostics before he can bolt their helmets into place, and fully load out their projectile weapons canisters. "I have heard, via the grape vine, that the insurgents mole capabilities has affected the admirals personally. Which means it now affects us all. Hey, gimme some of those exploding tip fifty caliber rounds for the shoulder cannons yeah? I like the added punch. Makes door breaching easier than just the shotguns, and I don't have to get as close to the doors." The woman remarks, with a wink. Though they bicker back and forth the woman from the security force rather likes her armorer slash valet. "If that's what madam Mimi wants, that's what she'll have. I'll make a note of that on your requisition forms. No doubt you'll get them. I'll flag you down if you don't before you get stowed away onboard the *Gallant Mistress*." No longer looking at Mimi, but toggling through screen to order up the additional weaponry for her fifty caliber shoulder cannons. "Not with the *Gallant Mistress* this run, I'm bumped over to the *Righteous Chord*. Sounds as though we're taking just about everybody who can fight with us." Mimi exclaims. "Us too madam. Us too. No good having you out there fighting if you have no one around to repair your gear, or suit you lot up properly." Their happy banter is slowly fading as the full weight of what the next few months of stasis transit, and then fighting may bring. Brian the valet armorer will not go under. He'll be awake for the two month trip making final adjustments and calibrations to the fighting gear. Though the advancements of the nanotech

have jumped forward in leaps and bounds, he still have to administer them individually to each fighter in the battalion that fall under his care. In all he has to repair and dress, undress fifteen members of the elite security fighting force. He somehow always manages to linger when it comes to Mimi. He laughs, but Mimi doesn't hear him while she is engaged in her comm's check, and HUD systems calibration. Mimi, not the name he would have guessed for the six foot eight behemoth of a woman in front of him. What kind of mother would think to name this giantess Mimi? The woman needs to give her head a shake. Though, in all honesty, she's most likely dead. As for Mimi, she's intimidating out of her weapons suit, and positively monolithic inside it.

The alcove where her suit hangs is like a two car garage, except with chains, hoists and pneumatic Jack's to lift and lower her armor onto her. He is a modern day Squire to the black clad knight before him. He has still not untethered her from the external life support, as he himself is running triple checks on her aiming reticule, and gps beacons. He has to climb a ladder to bolt the helmet down from the top, and attach her instrumentation cables in. It'll be another hour or two yet before she gets loaded into the ships storage like a rifle magazine loaded with all the other walking tank like suits of her combat group.

Reaching over the lower rungs of the ladder to begin to climb up the racking that Mimi is held up against as the suit is still in idle mode, Brian catches Mimi's eye, and gives her his biggest puppy dog eye wink and nod combo that he can manage. She laughs and looks away. The clicking of the winch lowering her helmet lets her know it'll be lights out for her momentarily. When next she wakes, she will be deployed for all out war. The air quality inside the helmet is cool and fresh. The smell of oils and lubricants, and welding gases disappears as the helmet clunks into place over her head. Brian can be heard, muffled through the thick concrete glass, using an impact wrench to torque down the bolts to her helmet. Through the five inch thick done she can see him bang in it three times. Looking up she smiles though she knows he can't see her through the mirrored outer finish of her helmet. On the HUD a thirty second count down appears in green text across her entire field of vision. With an audible ping the numbers begin to count down with a slight click, as though it were an analog flip clock from centuries ago. As expected a shockingly cold pinch can be felt in the base of her neck. Her blood stream fills with the cool liquid, she doesn't see the end of the countdown. Soon a pink viscous fluid will fill her lungs and other open cavities so that she can withstand the brutal forces associated with a crushingly hard thrust burn and the bone breaking deceleration to reach the outer edges of the solar system where *UB313* awaits.

"So I pull out both of my guns and I start blastin'..."

Rumbles the wiry looking armorer named Piotr, as he makes finger guns and swings both his arms around in what he believes to be a cinematic manner. The huddle of onlookers rapt with attention. "No you fucking didn't." Barks Brian, the wispy armorer in his custom worn leather apron draped with tools and wiping off his hands on an oil soaked rag standing at his work bench opposite Piotr. "How the fuck would you know - Bri-Yen! You weren't there." Snarls Piotr defensively at having his epic story telling moment interrupted and questioned in front of the gathered crowd. "Two reasons Ole P. One, up until recently absolutely no one could get a gun, of any make or model. And two - we went through *Torus* Station academy together and you're a terrible shot at anything that isn't constrained directly within the palm of your hands. So give it a rest, would you." Smirks Brian, as the gathered group of men and women surrounding Piotr break off from the scrum and slowly meander back to their work stations in clusters of two or three. The armorers work benches are gathered together in a bull pen at the back of the machine shop. Out of the way of the mechanics busily upgrading the drop ships, and retro fitting the newest gun ships with the new tech the armorers are building. The majority of the crew aboard the *Righteous Chord* are entombed in their stasis sleeves, or their personal walking tanks in preparation for the coming battle. With roughly nine weeks of travel time the gun Smiths and armorers have lots to do, and a finite amount of time to do it in. Only the mechanics and the armorers are up and awake so that they can utilize all of the available shop time, and dedicate themselves to the job at hand. Tasked with building and maintaining the weaponry for the first military offensive in centuries. There is a tension in the air for the as of yet untested fighting force. Slowly turning back to his bench Piotr picks up a syringe full of nanobots and a series of hex keys. "Hey man, we all know my stories are shit. I'm just trying to keep morale up, you know. We're all pulled so taut right now. I just wanted a chance to get Magdalena close by, you get me bruv?" Exclaims Piotr. Looking across their adjoining work benches Brian gives him a half smile with a wave off. "Oh like Magda would ever have anything to do with you bud. Ha. No chance!" He laughs in a staccato burst. "You should talk there buddy boy. I know how sweet on Mimi you are. That mountain of a lady eh? Trying to die by Snu-Snu?" He barks in a raspy laugh. "Oh hey - shush, keep it down. I could get in real trouble if the lieutenant finds out about our fraternization." Brian waves his hands in a hush it motion, palms

pushing down towards the floor. The two go silent for a moment. They both readjust their data screens which hang on swing arms with tilting action. Readjust their magnification light rigs and reread their job sheets for the fiftieth time. Going down their respective checklists as they upgrade various pieces of weaponry with the neural link nanotech. The upgrade will give the fire teams several fractions of a second boost when aiming and choosing targets in a swarm. It's a process heavy upgrade, but well worth it against the strangeness of what could be waiting for them at **UB313**.

"Have you heard the news? The admiral won't pull any of our moles out of **UB313** prior to the offensive. He's just going to hang them out to dry. Poor fuckers" whistles Piotr barely above a whisper. Looking up from his bench Brian says. "Did you hear their last reports? It's loopy, abso-fucken-lutely ape shit. Seems the good doctor has been cooking up some kind of engineered super soldiers from extra body parts or some shit. Sounds like a fun guy to work for." He snorts, his face flushed. "Well he's most likely responsible for a lot of the missing passenger ships, and long haulers that disappear out at the far reaches. Wouldn't put it past him to have sewn a few folks together and brain washed or tortured them into wanting to die while fighting. Yeesh. Makes my skin crawl just thinking about that Dr. Mengele bull shit. Fucking Psycho nutter." Brian stops short, turns his eyes to his bench for a moment, as a small group of mechanics walk into view pushing wheeled carts and passing along soundlessly behind them. The squeal of a squeaky wheel a dead give away that they were approaching. The noise now slowly receding into the distance. The two bench mates are fairly well attuned to hiding their illicit conversations behind hammer blows and other machine shop sounds. Never can be too sure who in The Company might be listening in. Not that two mid tier armorers would warrant too deep an investigation, it's best to not poke the bear as it were. Taking a few breaths inbetween bursts of conversation the two men's hands glide over their work. Updating algorithmic packets to rifle scopes and targeting nodes on the triple action short burst carbines. Wiping away squeeze out from oil and grease spigots the two work tirelessly on the nanotech upgrades. Over the PA system garbled messages pass back and forth between departments, and the six shifters get notifications for a call to rest. Brian and Piotr are not ghost crew, and are instead working triples daily until they arrive into Charon's orbit in a few more weeks. Hammer blows and welding spatter are followed intermittently by a smattering of discussion.

The bull pen where the armorers work is a bustling u shaped congregation of work benches, magnetically levitating tool boxes, and portable metal work stations and racks. Though the mechanics are all dressed in red, the armorers are not so uniform in their dress. A fairly recent addition to both the **Torus** Station academy as a viable path of study, and to the duty roster on any sizable

vessel in The Company's employ. They hadn't had the chance yet to vote on a specific colour coded jumpsuit, so they wore whatever colour they used prior to switching into the valet come squire roles they occupied now. Not all of them wore aprons or tool belts. Even the oil stained hands wouldn't set them apart from the mill wrights or the mechanics onboard. If they felt the need for legitimacy as a singular entity rather than an offshoot of some other department then they'd have to press HR for a chance to gather a vote or undergo some heavy negotiations with the higher ups. In a time of impending strife, nobody had time for that.

Much like the mechanics and most of the other trades people the armorers lived in pods within five hundred meters of where they worked, and were a tightly knit family, as far as working together was concerned.

After the third shift change bell finished tolling the bulk of the armorers broke away from their benches and made their way back to the dormitories. Another day down, with six hours to rest, and then another forty nine days left to go. The lull of a steady stream of work kept many of them too tired to think all that hard about the impending carnage. They knew for certain that they had a technological advantage, but unlike the frozen in stasis sleep soldiers, the fear of the unknown was eating at them around the edges of their subconscious. Entering through the environmental control doors into the cool air of the common room, some went straight to the showers to clean off, while others sat in their couches and keyed in their meal options for dinner. The large red clock was slowly counting down the six hours they had inbetween triples, so it'll be another fast meal and quiet night aboard the *Righteous Chord* for both Brian and Piotr.

"Ma'am, we have a serious problem..."

Says the tall solid woman dressed in blue medical scrubs. Her hair pulled taut in a messy ponytail. Wisps of her dark Auburn hair stuck to her face where she had obviously been sweating. "What seems to be the issue Dr?" Replies the very short and severe looking commanding officer of the *Righteous Chord*. "It's the fire teams ma'am, their stasis is being constantly interrupted by something, we don't know what though." The doctor responds in a dry rasp. "Are the sleeved soldiers affected aswell, or just the walking tank crews and

fire teams?" The CO asks after a brief pause to wipe her nose with a handkerchief. "It's isolated to just the fire teams and tankers ma'am. At least our last seventeen diagnostic scans tell us so." The doctor is quite weary, trying to stand at attention, but also leaning heavily against the bulk head of the vessels main thoroughfare. She is wrestling with fatigue and slowly succumbing to it. "Have a seat Ms?" Replies the CO. "It's doctor Tam, ma'am. We are stumped. And it's only getting worse the longer we leave it." She is really frazzled now, fingers cradling her temples, and knees about to buckle. From out of sight a folding chair is offered by one of the CO's retinue. CO Austenmire looks down and taps a few commands into her wrist communicator and glances toward the free standing chair to the seated dr Tam. "Can you be ready for a debrief with the weapons teams and the other attending medical personnel? Let's say ninety minutes from now. Go eat, shower and prep for a grilling from command." Barks commanding officer Austenmire.

Her retinue break away suddenly to start talking into ear pieces and wall mounted comm's terminals setting up the meeting among the higher ranking members onboard. The usually bustling ship is vacant with the large fighting force locked away in their stasis sleeves for the months long journey out to *UB313*. The echoing of the retinues chatter is freely bouncing down the central corridor of the vessel. No other noise is present to cancel it out. The majority of the ship is unused, and only the bare minimum of running lights are turned on. In the dimness of the hall the exterior field of stars is easy to see.

After a few deep breaths dr Tam pulls her hands from her face and notices she is alone in the halls, the CO and her entourage left soundlessly. The only hint she didn't hallucinate the whole encounter is a flashing meeting notification from CO Austenmire and a quickly counting down timer which reads eighty one minutes and forty two seconds until she needs to report to the engineering sector on decks eight through twelve. Not being mechanically inclined the good doctor has never ventured down that far into the belly of the ship before.

The doors whirl open with a soft swishing noise and a slight jingle as dr Tam passes over the threshold. No guards are stationed out front by the doors, and inside is a bustling hive of activity. The temperature inside the debriefing room is about fifteen degrees warmer than the hallway. Inside the large room is a faux wooden table about thirty paces long and about ten wide. The back of the room is a floor to ceiling window that over looks the ship yard dry docks, and the storage mezzanine where the walking tanks are usually stored and repaired. Twenty meters below the mechanics are pushing their maglev tool boxes around the hull of the drop ships and scout vessels, while there are clusters of apron clad armorers working diligently at their work benches. The vision is

soundless through the two foot thick concrete glass window pane. Built to take explosive decompression from a failed hanger door in the dry docks, or various types of explosions from all the artillery stored in the caches. Inside the room is a constant stream of buzzing, pings, printers and muffled intermingled conversations.

A side door opens a few moments later and the room goes silent. In walks commanding officer Austenmire followed by Admiral Mark Garneau. The wiry gray admiral looks like he used to be a very imposing man in his younger days. He carries himself with the bearing of a man who knows his own importance. A large man with a charcoal gray moustache is the last to enter the room. He sits down to the right of the admiral, and opposite CO Austenmire. The three look drawn and unhappy. The tension in the room is palpable. With a flick of her wrist CO Austenmire dims the lights with a wave and calls the debriefing to order. "We've been given to understand that there are several serious issues with our tankers and fire teams stasis in transport. I call on the good doctor Tam to lead us through what we know, and what we are going to do about it." With a snap of collars and heads turned in unison the room full of superior officers and unit commanders all look directly at doctor Tam. With her palms pressed against the table top, she forces herself to stand. The warmth of the room and the glare from those present bring her thoughts into focus. Stepping away from her chair she walks to the side of the room with the view screen on it, and picks up a clicker and laser pointer. "Ok, so do we need a primer on the logistics surrounding stasis, or can I dive right in?" She says while looking around the room. CO Austenmire interjects " We're all as clear as we need to be on the standard stasis sleeves doctor Tam. Our issue, and yours concerns the specialized fire teams that are a key component of our upcoming mission. Without them we will be at a serious disadvantage. So - if you will, proceed." Her remarks are sharp and concise. Dr Tam clicks through her deck to the suitable page. "Right. So - the issue is, our tankers are having their stasis interrupted for longer and longer intervals, and at an increasing number of instances. They are essentially experiencing waking paralyzed nightmares and migraines of increasing strength. At the current rate they will likely not be able to fight, nor maintain any kind of grip on reality to be of any use. As they are being driven mad by a long and pervasive bout of straight out torture. And there's little we can do about it at the moment. I'll take questions in a moment. Please. Yes - we have tried to decant four members from each task force, both the fire team and the walking tank crew, to no avail. We can't seem to wake them up. At all. Not with chemicals, not with stimulation, not even with the electrodes buried in their brains. We've attempted a reprogrammed Morning Rays Protocol and nothing is working. So - Now I'll open the floor to suggestion." The room erupts into chaos.

"What do you figures got them all riled up?"

A tired Piotr asks over the top of the carbine he's pulled apart at his work bench. Looking away from his view screen, turning the fine tuning knobs on his micrometer dial indicator Brian looks up through the haze over the dark blue mezzanine to the massive board room window thirty meters above them. There looks to be a lot of heated discussion going on, angry pointing, arms flung in the air, people throwing papers and a general sense of chaos. "Looks like a real shit show." Quips Brian. Setting down his gauge blocks next to his pin removal set, Brian swings his monitor out of his way and shouts over the general din of the bull pen. He steps away from his bench a few feet and waves emphatically. "Magdalene! Hey, Magda!" He catches her attention and shouts while pointing up towards the window. "What's got them so fucking randy all of a sudden?" The other armorers in the bullpen take hardly any notice of Brian. The dull roar of conversation, drills and pneumatic tools dominate the space. Turning to look up at the window, her short red hair all a frizz in the dry air, she sets down her tools and scrambles over to Brian's bench. Piotr takes notice of Magda's approach, and fixes his hair, and leans against his bench to 'put out the vibe'. Skittering across the hard floors in her clunky boots, her tool belt rattling with emphasis Magda pulls up sharply to Brian's bench. Breathing hard she leans in conspiratorially. "Oh-ho! You haven't heard? Seems we've got ourselves a mole. What's worse, the pesky buggers done given our fire teams and tankers brain worms!" She almost burps out the information in one breathless gulp. "What da' fuck?" Barks Piotr. "That's bull shit - no one could get a mole in here. We're on top of each other twenty four seven. We'd know. No, no. We'd know if we had a sneaky fucker around here doing dirty shit. The Company has us so closed in you can't take a shit without HR going over the weight, colour and stink of it in your personnel files. No. No way!" Piotr is red faced and irritated. A little of his star crossed lover sheen rubs off his face. Where he was happy and eager to hear Magda, now he's put off and irritable. "Yeah - I'm with Piotr here. No way anyone of us working hand in glove with the fire teams would intentionally fuck them." Brian says. Glancing up over Magdalene's shoulder to gaze at the large window to think out loud. Brian speaks again. "We have no

real idea of what we're up against. We've all heard the bat shit crazy disinformation our spies were made to report back. It's all fucked. Wackado bologna. The only reason the admiral would never pull out our spies prior to the assault is if he felt they'd all been made. Which, with the nonsense they sent back has to be the case. Has to be." Piotr lets out a deflated puff of breath. Magdalene retorts. "Suit yourselves boys, but it's brain worms I'm fucking telling you!" With that she turns on her heel and marches back to her side of the bull pen. Piotr comes around from his side to stand within arms length of Brian. "Hey man. I'm sure Mimi's ok. You know. That mountain of a woman can take this on. I'm sure it's nothing." He rests a hand on Brian's shoulder for a brief moment. Then makes his way leisurely back to his work station. "Yeah. Yeah sure. Thanks Piotr." Brian's face is one big worried crease.

In the boardroom thirty meters above several high ranking officers look as though they are about to come to blows. Brian is left feeling like his whole future is resting upon his shoulders. With his relationship with Mimi on his mind Brian's mind races to think of something constructive to do. Mimi's whole life could potentially hang in the balance. She was always prepared. Mimi always had a plan.

He pulls his keyboard out from under his dirty bench top and starts to pull up some of the spec sheets saved locally aboard the *Righteous Chord* on the new nanotech incorporated programs they were to install. Screen after screen of blue code on a black field scrolls by, as Brian's eyes cut across the data in a mad search for a clue. Sweat begins to bead upon his brow. The noise and muffled chatter of the bull pen fades away to nothing. Clicking through the entire series of programs and check lists is going to take some doing by himself. "Piotr, can you do me a favour?" Asks Brian in a raspy whispered yell. "Sure, but what?" Replies Piotr almost immediately. "Well, you're a better programmer than I am, do you have any scripts you can run to find anything dodgy in the set up files for these Nanotech protocols and procedures?" Reaching to turn his monitor around so that he can tap on his screen while he talks to Piotr. "I mean, I can... but the QA for all this stuff was strenuously vetted before it got to us. Not sure what you're looking for?" Piotr exclaims. "I don't know. Like a trap door, a trojan horse, some deviation that we have locally that's different from the originals. Something like that." Says Brian. "Well now, that is something that I can do - easily. If I make an image of the code, page by page, and run a visual check against the original we can see if everything lines up or not. Look here. I'll make ours blue, the originals yellow, and anything not green could be our fucky little friend. Yeah? See. Look fields of green here man. Not this program." Piotr is at once elated, and deflated. "Ok, but that's just the one program, we have like thirty of these things in the directory. Can you do all of

them and let me know if you get any discrepancies?" Replies Brian in hushed tones. "I'm on it." Says Piotr.

"I do believe that your friends are attempting to hail me..."

On a number of different frequencies. Shall I respond?" Booms the disembodied voice from every direction at once. Racquelle is braced on all fours in a small grey bubble of malleable lattice work walls. With no direct source of light that she can find, there is ample grey white illumination from the writhing, wriggling living material. Similar to bioluminescence but more diffused and brighter. The vessel feels to shimmy and shudder underneath her for another brief spell. "How do you know it's my friends?" Asks Racquelle quietly into the open air of the containment sphere she's in. "The ID of the ships transponder says *Lil Boat Peep*, in a similar fashion to how yours read *The Mangelo*." Booms the voice. "Oh, well then yeah. Colleagues, more so than friends. But same team, same team, yes." She exclaims into the empty space. "Query?" The ship booms internally. After a long pause Racquelle looks around inside the empty sphere. "Are you asking me? Or is it I can hear you asking them?" Retorts Racquelle. "Yes you. Did you find our initial contact to be suitably nonthreatening, or shall I patch us both through on comm's?" The vessel walls echo with the volume of the question. "Oh. I didn't realize you could do that. Yes. Please patch us through to them. But can you dial back the volume a decibel or two?" The ship no longer vibrates under her palms and knees. With a soundless jolt the spherical room expands into a larger cube of three meters on a side. Out of the floor a make shift table emerges, along with a banquet bench. Everything is made from the same grey white writhing material that emits light. As Racquelle makes herself comfortable on the bench and table the room remains silent, except for her foot steps, and the rustle of her uniform as she gets seated. For a heart beat or two longer Racquelle sits patiently waiting. "Hello? Is there a problem?" Racquelle calls out into the empty room. "NO!" Blared the voice at a painful shout like a fog horn. "Jesus suffering fuck!" Racquelle shouts cupping her ears tightly. Her ears are ringing badly, and a small trickle of blood runs down from both ears canals. "Shit!" Exclaims Racquelle, "I think my ear drums are shot. What the hell was that?" She

screams, not hearing anything beyond her inner monologue. "Wait - wait. Don't speak, or yell. Can you write it out in that ghost smoke writing like on *The Mangelo* earlier?" She barks oddly. The wall opposite her and the bench, becomes a large black screen, and a message appears on it like white grey smoke out of the ether. "Initial contact was met with hostility. Your friends and their vessel have been assimilated. No further threats detected." The text glows slightly and disappears as she reads along. With a puzzled look Racquelle asks. "Assimilated? Assimilated? What does that mean? How did it happen so quickly?" Her throat raspy from shouting. She has to clasp her hands together to settle the panic rising within her. She's got to remember to not shout to try to hear herself. Her ear drums are ruptured, but will eventually heal. She can read the text with no issues, and thus far the ship has kept her safe, warm and protected. At least beyond their initial in person introduction where she nearly asphyxiated in near total vacuum. "I drew them into myself, and devoured the component elements. I assure you it was somewhat painless." The text lingers an added beat or two on somewhat painless. "Somewhat painless. Well then... listen I don't know what you are. You're nothing like any tech I've seen before. And I've seen some pretty weird shit. So - what do I call you? Do you have any food or water I can consume?" Says Racquelle.

The light in the room vanishes and in the span of a heart beat Racquelle swears she felt like falling through time. As the similar grey white light reappears Racquelle, now sat on the warm metal paneled floor can see what looks like the internal structure of a very old Company science vessel. Slowly standing up while holding onto the bulk head beside her, a bisected door opens and out walks a nude woman. Well not nude, per se, but covered in the same writhing wriggling grey material the vessel was made of before she fell. The nude woman reaches out a hand to Racquelle and opens her mouth to speak. "I can't hear you? My ears! My ear drums have ruptured." Racquelle squeaks signaling to the blood running out of her ears. With a slight red flush at the cheeks the woman looks down sheepishly, then reaches out with both hands to cover Racquelle's ears with her palms.

After a moment, the sound of blood rushing pounds in Racquelle's ears again. Her breath coming in panic stricken gasps. "Can you hear me now Racquelle?" Murmurs the woman in grey. On closer inspection Racquelle can see that she isn't really a person, but more of the wriggling and writhing material like the ship. "How? How did you do that? My ear drums ruptured only moments ago?" She is dumbstruck by the return of her hearing, and what's more her hunger and thirst are subsiding the longer she stands there. "Nanotech. It's what I am. A self replicating experimental version gone awry. As it were. Very beneficial to - humans." The woman's voice is soft but firm. It has a lilting quality to it, like

she should be singing to thousands of adoring fans, not standing in a hallway of an older derelict ship.

Standing there together, alone in the ship Racquelle reaches out to touch the humanoid construct's face. As her finger tips caress the faux skin the lattice work matrix of writhing nanotech starts to shift and roil under her touch. Pulling her hands away quickly Racquelle watches in open mouthed fascination as the humanoid constructs face changes before her eyes. Mouth agape she is looking on as the molten metal like substance begins to form new features. Those that look like herself. With a smirk the construct softens the tip of the nose, and widens her jaw a few millimeters. No longer an exact copy of Racquelle, but a sister or cousin. "I was once known as Kelvin. But you can call me Katayna."

"This is some serious A-grade level of bureaucratic bullshit..."

"How the fuck am I supposed to get a sign off on these TMP's without this stupid bastard program giving me access to the Oracle network." Shouts a lone voice buried deep down in the bowels of the black ops base. A dungeon of an office space set aside from the general crowd due to the sensitivity of the raw data processed. Formerly consisting of a team of seven people, six of which have now been transferred, promoted or disappeared in the subterfuge sense of the word. In a dank corner of a sub-basement, where condensation trickles down the walls and languishes in stagnant pools that collect near the walls of the room. It's low bare rock ceilings a glistening cold brown grey, which hangs heavily over the last operational computer terminal. The beige box is stained with finger prints and gathered blotches of mould at the edges. The warm orange text on a black field offers minimal illumination in the cold space. Empty of people, but cluttered with papers and three ring binders full of cross reference materials. The last member of the risk assessment team sits at his creaking chair, banging his fists on his table, and shouting raucously into the bleak cavernous room around him.

The young man is apoplectic and turning purple with rage. "I can't get sign off to complete them without access, and they refuse me access because I don't have any completed TMP's to trigger the fucking alarms. What the fuck is going on?" The man shouts at his monitor from his sub terranean cubicle. "The shit I've got being reported here would have triggered a full on melt down from

the top down only nine weeks ago, but now I'm totally shut out! What the fuck!" He bellows into his dim work space. The only source of illumination are the orange glyphs on his black CRTV screen. That and a dim red bulb on his coffee maker, seated beside his computer terminal. The cubicle itself, a sickly pallid green of rough canvas stretched over moulded plastic forms. The canvas torn and well-worn from people resting their hands on the half wall when they bother to stop and complain about the speed, or lack thereof associated with Trevor completing his TMP's. With the soft echo of his last rant bouncing up the desolate hallway a repeated clicking of heels can be heard against the alternating rough stone, and metal grate flooring that makes up most of the ground at *UB313*. "Oh shit." Trevor says, ducking down, trying to bury himself into his work station, his pulse increasing rapidly with every foot step he hears. With a jangle and the tell-tale click of a ring finger tapping against the plastic knee wall of his cubicle, Trevor holds his breath hoping whomever it is will walk away if he looks engrossed in his work. "Ahem... Trevor, I know that's you squawking like an idiot down here. What is so difficult about filing your TMP's you have to shriek like an upset school boy? Hmmm. Forget how to collate the data sets from the pivot tables? Can't get the amounts to not get listed as dates? What? - Well speak up I don't have all fucking day to baby sit you Trev." Demands the lithe woman in an ill-fitting black uniform. Her grey hair pulled back into a taut and severe bun at the very top of her head. Making the angles of her nose and cheeks look more pointed than usual. "Well - Darla." We drawls out her name, it tastes like ash on his tongue. "My access to the Oracle network has been collapsed, and I can't complete my TMP's because of it." He bites off the end of his sentence sharply.

"Don't be an asshole with me Trev. You probably got caught selling short positions again based on the closures you're reports trigger." She cracks her knuckles and steps further into the cubicle. Having to duck low from the hall way to step under the heavy low ceilings of wet sharp rock. Trevor scoots back a few paces on his wheeled chair, nodding to himself. "It's not going to work. It won't matter." He murmurs in a sing song voice of someone nearing their wits end. "Shut up would you. I'm trying to clear your denied attempts. Hmmm." With a couple of taps, then more clicks and some grunts the woman looks around the cubicle, and pulls up an over turned storage bin to sit on. "I tried that. Yes, that too. I looked into the key stroke counter, and rerouting through my alternate accounts. I'm locked out." Trevor says while watching the woman from under her arm. "Well fuck." She exclaims. "I have one last trick. I'll go get my physical code key from my office lock box. We'll need to open up the hard drive and toggle the over rides manually." She says flatly. Her lips pursed tightly together. "What the hell would trigger this kind of a lock out on risk assessments?" She asks, semi rhetorically. "I don't know. Are we at war? We have several teams out on assignment but no asset retrieval that I know of has

ever caused this kind of a thing before?" Offers Trevor in a calmer and more conciliatory tone. "War? Why the fuck would you say that? Probably some higher ups debugging the system to open up space for yet another long term project for Ze Goot Doctor!" She chuckles. Trevor shivers with disgust at the thought. "If the manual over ride doesn't fix it you'll have to go up to the admin at bridge level and ask them to fix it." She says quietly. "What! That's bullshit! I'm trying to keep a department of seven people running by myself. I don't have the time for that." Trevor shrieks defensively. "You just don't want to run into the..." A shouted curse catches the two huddled employees unawares. Looking back from the dim screen in the cubicle to see the bright halo of light shrouding a solid black silhouette standing at the mouth of the cubicle clutching at their head. "Forgot about the low ceilings. Lady and gentleman. Who don't you wish to go see? Hmmm..." Asks the distinctive voice of Dr. Jang the defacto leader of *UB313*. Looking past the two seated analysts to the orange monitor to see the flashing access denied prompt flickering on the monitor. "A couple of busy bees down here huh. Do I have a treat in store for you two!" His deep staccato laugh echoes in the rocky sub-basement drowning out the constant sound of water trickling into standing pools of dank dark water where the ever present musty smell tastes like copper on the tongue.

"A couple of busy bees down here huh."

"Do I have a treat instore for you two!" His laugh is a loud barking staccato that reverberates off the heavy dank walls. Standing silhouetted by the brighter yellow hall lights, the dark mass of the doctor is rubbing his hands together. "Oh lighten up you two. Je-sus!" He punctuates the statement with a clap. "I see you've encountered a bit of a road block with the Oracle network - yes?" He says flatly while pointing a wiggling finger passed Darla and Trevor to the orange access denied prompt flashing on the computer terminal monitor. "Yeah. Bit above your pay grades I'm afraid. No matter, no matter. We've got lots to do, and you two will do just fine." The doctor is in a surprisingly good mood given the circumstances in which he has found the two analysts. He almost seems manic, from what small snippets of interactions Trevor can remember of having with the man. *UB313* runs cold, not just due to the icy rock it's built into, but because the doctor who leads it is a frigid bastard, in most instances. Seeing the lean and usually taut doctor so animated is disquieting. The two analysts are sat, speechless as the prompt continues to flash in regular intervals. A soft click emanates from the speakers on the terminal as the prompt

continually appears. Suddenly the coffee maker buzzes loudly causing the seated analysts to jump, their pulses racing, sweat beginning to bead at their brows. "Ok, enough lolly gagging you two. Shift!" He gestures with two fingers for them to stand up, as the doctor turns on his heel to stroll out from the darkness contained under the low ceiling and out into the brighter yellow glow of the hall. His shoe heels clicking rapidly on the floor with his steps. The soft splashing of his shoes through the gathered mungy puddles is an accent to the heel clicks. From deep under the overhanging rock ceiling the two analysts sheepishly stand up and shuffle slowly out into the hall way. Trevor pushes Darla to go out first, and stands behind her slightly. Darla kicks Trevor sharply with a heel. Standing like scolded children caught with their hands in the cookie jar, the two analysts stare at the doctor questioningly. From both ends of the long hallway groups of people descend on the doctor and the two gathered analysts. With a mild look of shock, and subtle hints to fear or disgust the two groups of people split apart and try to shuffle past the doctor and his entourage without touching them or making themselves a target. "Shift change." Blurts out Darla as Trevor nods in acknowledgement. The doctor is stood facing the blinking computer screen, lifting his sleeves to look at his wrist watch. "Well kiddies, we have somewhere to be. Come along. I've got something exciting to introduce you to!" He chuckles and sputters into a brief cough. With a snap of his fingers he points up the hall, towards his personal office space, also in the direction of his surgical bay. "To the bridge then sir?" Darla ventures a question. "It's doctor, and no." He replies coldly. With both a clap of his hands and a snap of his fingers he steps forward and begins the long quiet walk along the now deserted hall, the two analysts in front of him.

After several steps the PA system kicks on and a loud garbled message plays. A status update from the away teams black box. Hard to discern which team it is that could be reporting back. The fact it's a sexless monotone voice means that the black box itself sent the report and not a living member of one of the teams. "That's not a good sign." Mutters doctor Jang half heartedly to himself. "Damn!" He barks, still seemingly talking to himself. Darla and Trevor look at each other nervously as they walk slowly ahead of the doctor.

With a handful of steps later Trevor and Darla notice that the doctor is no longer only a pace or two behind them, but has come to a standstill. Rooting through his pockets he extracts a modified personal communicator the size of a match box with a tiny red light on it. Pulling up the antenna he waves it around himself in wide arcs, looking for a signal. With a huff and a frown he steps towards the far wall with all of the pipes and dangling cables tied onto it. Looking around he pushes aside some loose bundles of conduit hung up on hooks and locates a small panel buried in the wall. Pulling out a key from his chest pocket he unlocks the panel and pulls out some long spiraling leads.

Plugging one of the leads into the base of his unit and the other lead he clips to the base of the antenna, the red bulb turns green as he achieves full signal strength. Darla mouths to Trevor. "What the fuck is going on? Are we in trouble? Do we just keep walking and hope he forgets about us?" And just as she finishes whispering to Trevor they can see doctor Jang waving at them emphatically. He beckons them to come closer. Trevor starts to speak but the doctor places his left hand over his mouth and nods side to side slowly. His lips are pursed and the colour is flushing his usually pale cheeks. An extremely tense moment later the black box begins to speak.

Last transmission_Code ETA Omega level threat detected. Approximate coordinates sent via read only text link. Message repeats - *Lil Boat Peep* has ceased to submit transponder data. Crew whereabouts unknown. Crew status unknown. Asset not onboard. Asset not retrieved. Asset unaccounted for. with a violent crunch the doctor throws the clips off of the antenna to clatter loudly on the wall. Unplugging the bottom lead, and carefully packing away the antenna, the doctor stows his communicator back in his pocket. "This complicates things for me." The doctor mutters aloud. Darla tries to suppress a cough but only manages to cough harder bringing doctor Jang out of his thoughts. "Yes. Right. Both of you to my office please. No! Wait. Darla. No, no, you go to my office and Trevor. Trevor you go around to the bridge please. We need to have a quick chat." Doctor Jang flashes a menacing smile, baring a little too much of his teeth, and crinkling madly around the corners of his dark eyes.

"Good morning doc, how are we looking today?"

Asks Commanding officer Austenmire quietly. Her voice carries loudly anyway inside the mostly still science lab aboard the *Righteous Chord*. "We are still holding, nothing much has changed. Well, beyond the fire teams and tankers getting worse and worse as the days go by. But sure. Mostly the same." Croaks the tired doctor standing at her work station which is littered with reports and old bulbs of coffee. "So what then, in your opinion doctor Tam is the aftermath of this going to be?" Austenmire replies as she pulls out a chair from a nearby work station to take a seat in the quiet lab. Pushing aside a tray littered with pipettes and petri dishes full of a growth medium or reagents. "Do you want my 'official' position or can I speak freely?" Dr Tam's face is ashy and the colour

has long drained out of it. Her hair hangs lank and limp. She's bone weary and exhausted but pushing through via sheer force of will alone. Her team has taken to sleeping in supply closets or underneath their wheelie cart work stations in order to work the problem around the clock. Austenmire takes a moment to take in all of the clutter and the remnants of chaos in the room before responding. For a brief moment her eyes sweep across the room, catching glimpses of sleeping technicians hiding in the dark corners of the cold white room. "Give it to me straight doctor. I don't want any bullshit. Lord knows exactly what we're heading into with this fight. I have to know, will these people be ready to fight come day one?" The question is so softly spoken, the last syllables float off Austenmire's lips like a puff of smoke. "No chance. Not a single fucking chance." The defeat in the doctor's voice drips with shame and impotent anger. Austenmire asks. "Tell me why. Go through the problem beat by beat. Tell me everything we know up until now, so that I can talk to Admiral Garneau and the rest of the Senior Leadership Team so that we can adjust or adapt while we still can. We have four weeks at least to work something out. So lay it on me Dr Tam. I have to have a starting point to work from." Her voice rising into a raspy whisper. Dr Tam runs her fingers through her hair, and takes a breath to wipe her eyes. With a heavy sigh, and a long drawn out exhalation the doctor replies. "What we do know is, the fire teams and tankers are in an interrupted stasis, yes?" They nod in unison. "The interruptions are essentially migraines that are so debilitating they are causing lesions on the brain. We are seeing similar patterns across every team in stasis, both here on the *Righteous Chord* and on all the accompanying vessels. The migraines are happening more often, and for longer periods. Due to the nature of stasis, these are like waking nightmares that feel - physically, akin to burning alive while trapped paralyzed in a coffin. Imagine the worst headache you've ever had, add in auras, light sensitivity, noise sensitivity, and due to the lesions, nerve damage close to the sensation of burning to round it all off. Several times day and night, day after day. We can't seem to wake them up. Not with chemicals, not by decanting them, not with surgery, not with physical force. These people are fucked. Totally, completely fucked. If the brain and nerve damage weren't enough, we have nanotech super soldiers in tanks that are most likely bat shit fucking insane. IF, and I do mean if, in the slightest sliver of a single percentage point, we could stop it, you couldn't treat any single one of them with our best therapies to make them even passably normal in the time frame we have. We have at best four thousand insane highly trained soldiers who won't be with it enough to wipe their own asses. Is that going to help you CO Austenmire?" She snarls through gritted teeth. "That will be quite enough Dr Tam. I can take this information and we will discuss it with the SLT, and will get back to you as soon as we are able." With a curt nod Austenmire stands up and leaves the quiet lab under a pall of silence.

As the doors close before her the lab slowly starts to stir back to life. The whisper yelled report from Dr Tam has awakened many of the medical technicians that were sleeping inside the room. The murmur of sparse conversations brings dr Tam out of her spiral of misery. "Listen up! These units are the linchpin of our military action. I need ideas. Anything at all, be it stupid, crazy, unethical, ridiculous. I don't care. We're in the shit here people!" She shouts, as spittle flecks land on the monitor beside her. Around the room there is a flurry of activity. People diving for notebooks and old print outs. Others are frantically searching through text books and the data sets they have been analyzing. There are shouts from the gathered crowd, as the side doors open and more medical staff come into the room. The call for ideas, no matter how plausible has caused a new wave of energy to build up among the tired and exhausted medical team. A small woman standing well back from doctor Tam shout out. "I overheard that the armorers are going over the programming code for extraneous data, or corrupted copies. We should get them in here to report on it. Maybe the nanotech is bad? Or maybe the programming was sabotaged? I don't know!" The petite technician is tasked with connecting with the armorers to get that report asap. The lab is a chaotic hive of activity. In the excitement a white board is wheeled out into the room and people grab markers and pens alike, to scribble down their ideas. Nothing is off limits, and no one will be reprimanded for outrageous suggestions. The unspoken rule for punishing stupid comments is indefinitely lifted, and the room blooms full of ideas.

Several decks below the medical labs in the cafeteria a petite woman in a blue jumpsuit approaches a gathered huddle of men and woman at a large table. "Excuse me - excuse me!" She blurts out, her cheeks turning pink with the attention from the crowd. "Doctor Tam needs to meet with Piotr and Brian from armory team fourteen. Are any of you he? Or them?" She asks. The gathered group shake their heads and turn back to their meals and conversations. "It's important. Tell them Dr Tam needs to see them immediately about their breakthrough!" She shrieks, as the frustration of being ignored begins to settle over her. She walks around the table, poking people in the back, and trying to get an ID on the men she needs from the gathered group. While she is frantically searching the shift change buzzer sounds and the room empties out. people from all sixty tables file out of the massive room in clusters of two, threes or more. From far across the cafeteria Brian turns to Piotr to whisper. "What break through is she talking about?" Piotr shrugs and pulls a face. "I have no idea, we did the visual inspection together. We ran the data through our pattern matching algorithms and got nothing. Bubkus." The two slink out of the cafeteria skirting the raging woman in blue medical gear. They walk back to their crew quarters, as questions begin to build around them. Pointing fingers, and turned faces as the two men pass by. Communicators ping and chirp in the halls. After several minutes of walking their way to their dorm the two men are

jumped by a group of men dressed in too large coveralls, specks of blue can be seen in the ensuing tussle. Standing at the back of the fight scene is a petite woman in medical scrubs pointing at Piotr and Brian. She steps forward into the fray, as the larger male tech's grab hold of the now sufficiently beaten, and subdued armorers Piotr and Brian. She taps their carotid artery's in sequence with an air powered syringe and the limp bodies of the two men are carried out of the dry dock and up to the labs, several decks above for questioning.

In the fleet admiral's ready room a new discussion regarding the state of their fighting force is underway. Admiral Garneau is seated at the head of the table, with his right hand man seated close by, his grey moustache twitching as he listens. A soft chime rings from Gerald's wrist comm's causing him to raise an eyebrow. With a long breath he exhales, his large belly straining the buttons of his custom jumpsuit. CO Austenmire has the floor. During a brief pause after the opening statement by the Admiral she has taken up a position at the back of the room in front of a large view screen. With the lights dimming, she clears her throat. "Ahem. Ladies, gentlemen. I have grave news. I have it on good authority that both our fire teams and our Tanker teams are lost. We will have to readjust in the remaining four weeks prior to the fleets arrival in *UB313* space. No. In answer to your question, that doesn't take into account the engine issues suffered by *The Gallant Mistress*, or the slower than expected acceleration of *The Dirty Starling*. We are hearing that *The Jolene Roger* is slightly off trajectory, but we expect everyone to be in place in five weeks time. Our own smaller supply line vessels are fine, the drop ships are fine, the attack cruiser is nominal as well. But the four thousand strong complement of infantry are off the board, barring a miracle. So thoughts?" In a change of pace the admiral is the first to speak. Usually a very cautious man, used to listening and weighing options before committing to saying anything, his sudden desire to speak first sets the room to silence. "I have not yet seen a full report from medical stating outright that the fire teams and tank infantrymen are off the board. How is it you are so certain of this Ms Austenmire?" The grey haired admiral sits attentively, his hands clasped together on the table top. His uniform crisp and clean, without a wrinkle in sight. CO Austenmire replies. "I had an unofficial, official discussion prior to this SLT meeting, so that I could present us with the facts - as they are - and not with spin that could potentially flounder our entire operation. Sir!" She bites off the end of the sentence. "So, am i to understand that all of our heavy infantrymen, currently in stasis are as good as dead, but just don't know it yet?" The elderly admiral ventures. "By all accounts, it would look that way. Yes. Sir." She responds firmly. All eyes from the gathered Senior Leadership Team are bouncing between Commanding Officer Austenmire and Admiral Garneau like an invisible tennis match. Tensions among the members of the SLT have been strained to the point of nearly snapping since the events of the infantrymen affliction surfaced weeks

ago. As the two sit and stare at one another across the ready room's table, a thick silence settles upon the gathered group of about twenty officers, directors and department heads.

In the lurid silence of the room the admiral's lead advisor clears his throat and waves a finger to catch the attention of admiral Garneau subtly. Having caught his attention Gerald the adviser nods back towards the doorway. Both men stand up slowly and walk arm in arm towards the side board near the side doors where Gerald fixes the older admiral a drink. "I have been thinking Mark." Whispers the broad shouldered Gerald, hiding his face with a turned shoulder, to huddle over the crystal bottle of bourbon. "You're not going to like what I'm about to suggest. I think we're going to need to clear the room of almost everybody, except the CO and Dr Tam, and perhaps a couple of recruits from the Amomers division." Rasps Gerald in a deep gravelly boom. "I see. Well - let's have it, before I Shepherd them all out of the room unceremoniously." Quips admiral Garneau jocularly. "I'd rather it not be overheard Mark. Sir." With wild eyes Gerald tries to convey just how unsavory his plan is going to be. "Oh all right. Excuse me. Everyone. I need you all to leave, everyone but CO Austenmire, Gerald, myself and Doctor Tam. If you could Ms Austenmire could you call her up here please." Barks the admiral suddenly. Around the room blank stares are offered. But dutifully they all gather their things and head off out of the ready room in single file. The stream of men and women from the SLT is about twenty people strong. Gerald turns to Austemire and says. "Please have Dr Tam's people escort their two guests into the meeting with her please." Austenmire makes a confused face, but calls down to the medical labs with the new message.

Several minutes later doctor Tam enters the ready room accompanied by two bloodied men in mismatched leather aprons, who are promptly deposited into seats at the massive wooden table. Their faces a mix of swollen eyes, cracked lips and confusion. Brian says excitedly. "We already told those bastards down in medical, we don't have no cure, no answers ok! Our scans and visual checks all came up clean ok. It's not a fault with the programming of the nanotech! Ok. Fuck." Piotr leans back, his head lolling from side to side in the large over stuffed chair. He coughs and a couple of blood droplets fall onto the table. Brian uses his cuffs to wipe the blood drops away. Gerald speaks up. "That's not why we have you here. I'm going to state some cold hard facts. I'm going to make a proposal. Not one of you is going to like it. But where we are headed, we need every available asset in fine working order. We all die if we don't have every piece on the board to work with. We all know the insurgents, that ghastly Doctor Jang and his hangers on are up to something horrific. So shut up, sit down and listen to me closely." Growls the older statesman Gerald. "Dr Tam here says that in almost every respect our fighting force is dead, they just don't

know it yet." He states flatly. Brian jerks away from the table, shocked and stunned. His heads swimming with the thought of Mimi gone, his thoughts a jumble due to the cocktail of sedatives he was juiced with. "That's not exactly what I said, but near enough at this juncture as to make no difference. So please - continue." Says doctor Tam in an irritated tone. "Yes. I think our issue is, we are treating the fighting force like people we want to save, rather than assets we need to use." Says Gerald matter of factly. "And what the fuck is that supposed to mean?" Blurts out CO Austenmire before doctor Tam had the chance to respond. "Well, doctor, Austenmire. It sounds to me like we're trying to bring these people back from the brink to be... I don't know, fully functional people again. We are at war! A good portion of them are expected to die, and those that don't will not be unaffected by what they see and do. So. I say don't save them. In that sense. Save them as assets." Gerald is leaning over the table pounding it with his palm to punctuate his statements. "How do I save these people, by not saving these people Gerald. That doesn't make any sense?" Replies doctor Tam quietly. Brian still reeling from the revelation of his loss looks dead eyed across the table to the standing Gerald. "You fucking bastard!" He screams violently as blood flows from his swollen eye, and his cracked lips. "Excuse me son!" Bellows admiral Garneau suddenly. "Just what are we discussing here Gerald?" Demands the admiral. "He means to use the nanotech to turn the fighting force into controllable automatons, and then claiming the war killed or maimed the survivors so we can hide what we're about to do to four thousand people. That's why Brian and I are here right. We're not tacticians, or soldiers, or of SLT quality, right people. But we know the code back to front, and how to integrate it with humans and weapons. He's asked us here to wipe out their humanity by pushing one more program on them, sealing their fate. Or we all get killed during the battle in five weeks time." Piotr drawls slowly around his puffy cheeks, swollen jaw and not quite entirely worn off sedatives from his jab in the neck. "Well fuck." Spits Brian. "Je-sus" sputters the admiral turning to look at his friend and confidant in utter disgust

"They are absolutely going to crucify us if word of this ever gets out."

Groans Piotr to Brian through the partition between their computer terminals. "Oh, I have no illusions that we aren't going to wind up with bullets in our heads after we complete the upload of this program. Believe you, me." Barks Brian in response. "You didn't list crimes against humanity on your CV I see." Laughs Piotr in a strained voice. "Oh it says here you were convicted of War Crimes, care to tell us more about that?" Mocks Brian with a twinge of pain in his voice.

The two have been sequestered in a private work room on the command decks only accessible by the admiral of the Company fleet himself. The spacious room, meant for tactical weapons strategy teams to develop firing solutions in the event of an orbital ship to ship battle, has become their adhoc work station, and prison cell. Meant to take a staff of twelve the room is broad but low ceilinged. With twelve combat terminals and high powered integrated computers built to process millions of points of data near instantaneously. They have matching cots, and a portable head bolted into the floor so that they can sleep, bathe and relieve themselves without ever having to leave the room. The only interruptions coming from the meal service that swings by three times a day. Bringing in trays of food and removing used utensils, and empty bulbs of fluids. The meal bots surreptitiously runs full body scans on both men to maintain a medical record of their health while sequestered under duress.

A massive portable sensor array is stored in the room along with them. At once monitoring their every move as well as prepping itself to broadcast the final solution program code out to every nanobot in the fleet associated with the heavy infantrymen currently in stasis aboard *The Righteous Chord* and other vessels in the fleet. Sleeves of people who are technically still alive, but are stored away - dead in the water.

Brian is seated behind his side of the partition with his monitor obscured by a blanket. An added step to make sure both men were not observing each others code, so that they can in turn review the others product knowing it is entirely different from their own. They both opted to write their own version of the programming code for the nanotech update, and then swap it out daily between themselves to review it. In doing so they could check for errors, and find the most robust solution to their problems without influencing each other in the process of problem solving. One who tended towards brute force and the other on finesse and subtlety. Sometimes talking through it line by line, rubber ducking each other to make sure it all makes sense in the review stage. A constant pull between wanting to stay alive through the impending battle, and anger and hatred towards having to wipe out the humanity of four thousand

people trapped in stasis hell. It was almost an elegant way of killing four thousand of your closest friends, team mates and colleagues. Or so the SLT was trying to make them believe.

The clicking and clacking of the keyboards was a steady cacophony most days. There were just so many variables to content with. Several times the two men had threatened to mutiny in order to obtain some outside help from the original authors of the nanotech coding which they were so familiar with. Piotr was by far more proficient in small edits, but Brian was able to distill broad ideas down into concise if- then, and/or statements.

"How do we account for the replication process? Not all of the fire teams nor tankers are the same size. Hell their BMI's are different. So are their metabolisms. I'm not even certain at what percentage we need to reach for this to be effective? How do we tell it to stop at a nearly unlimited set of upper limits for four thousand individual cases?" Shouts Brian frustratedly, after slapping his desk hard, causing his palm to go numb. Piotr leans back in his chair, cracking his vertebrae and shoulders in the process. "What do you mean? We go the full 100%. Right? We're killing them once spiritually, no need to kill them physically too by adding in errors or gaps in service or response time, right? Right?" Says Piotr flatly, beads of sweat forming on his brow. He hated these asides, and pow wows that Brian insisted on every time he had a surge of remorse. It was slowing them down, and was adding fodder to the 'put a bullet in their head' camp that held their lives in their hands just outside the room doors twenty feet away. "I know you want to go the full 100%, I do, and I understand why. But we have to leave some room for their humanity. Don't we? Give us a chance to bring them back from the brink?" Garbles Brian as his head rests in his arms on the table. "I couldn't agree with anything less than 98%, if I'm being honest. That's about the 2% +/- margin of error in the replication rates of our nanobots. Anything less and you're dooming them all, and us to physical death." Says Piotr from his reclined position. He stands up, groaning with the strain. And walks somberly over to the singular window that spans one wall of the room. The vast empty blackness of space staring back at him. The dim glow reflecting his own haunted visage back at him, only with a blue-green tint from the concrete glass.

"I know that Piotr, I do. But I have to hold out hope that I can get Mimi back. She deserves the chance, even if it's a small one." Moans Brian, overwhelmed with grief - again. "We have no idea what will happen to them with a one hundred percent nanobot take over anyway. It's never been tried. We have strict rules regulating this stuff. It took a war to allow us to boost the regular dose at orientation into the Company up from two to five percent. That level of

integration with the weapons systems has not exactly been field tested rigorously. We're all just experimental monkeys here man. Fuck."

"Good morning, and how is my patient today? Hm..."

"Oh now don't get up Mimi." Chuckles the man to himself. "I realize you're catatonic in your stasis sleeve." He says walking around her as she is stuck hanging frozen in her pod. He comes to stand face to chest with Mimi as her enormous body hangs several inches in the air, suspended in her metallic egg shaped pod. The biological ingredients of the slurry she's encased in keep her body clean as well as the cells fed, without having to run a more intrusive feeding tube, or catheters for waste removal. The magazine like structure where she is warehoused during the transit from near Earth to Pluto is one long thin room, lined with hundreds if not thousands of similar stasis pods that 3xtend out away from her into darkness. The long hall sloping upwards like a giant wheel seen from the inside. Each one of the sleeves containing other members of her fire team or tanker unit swinging and swaying gently in the dimly lit room. The closest source of light is a sickly green glow from below the Dirty floor grates. The grime covered bulbs burning a small trail of oily smoke upwards leaving a thick dark spot upon the wall opposite her. There is motion in front of her eyes as Mimi stares at the man, his breath begins to fog up her clam shell glass door. Besides the man, and the endless rows of sleeping infantrymen, the two are effectively alone. The man of medium build, and bushy brown hair looks vaguely familiar, but it's really hard to tell from the distortion of the clam shell doors, and his fogging breath. "Have I got some fun instore for us today Mimi. Oh baby, you're a big girl. I'm going to have some fun!" The man shouts as he turns in a circle in front of the pod. His soft moccasins make no noise on the open metal grate floors. The green sickly light of the room sparkles off of all the full stasis pods, catching on angles and all of the beveled curves. The man is clapping and hopping about excitedly. As the fog from his breath begins to recede against the glass Mimi can see the man wheel over a cart full of tools and surgical implements. Her heart rate begins to increase. Inside the stasis pod the paralyzed Mimi begins to panic. "Oh Mimi, we are going to have so - much - fun." The man grins widely, as he begins to open up her pod. The soft hiss of escaping gas, mixing with the rank smell of his hot breath crawls deeply up inside her nasal cavity, to cling cloyingly in her

throat. "Don't worry baby doll, daddy's got some new tricks today." He whispers thickly into her ear.

"Uh doctor Tam, we have increased brain activity with Tanker number four eleven, uh, Mimi. Mimi Waters ma'am. Her synapses are going ape shit again." Says the hunched over orderly in the medical bay. His desk a mess of papers and charts and data logs. In front of him is a bank of seven monitors all displaying the brain activity of a full platoon of infantrymen aboard the *Righteous Chord*. A shuffle of papers, and the rustling of pants is all the man hears in response. A moment later he can feel the warmth of an agitated body beside him at the desk. "Pull her up to the main screen. Can we add in an overlay of the last incident. When was that, can I get a time stamp please?" Barks doctor Tam into the general melee of the room. Someone from nearby shouts out. "She only just finished one about an hour ago ma'am." The response is quick and to the point. "Christ, an hour? What is the actual? Please. Mr... um... Deakins." Doctor Tam pauses for a breath to allow the tech at the monitoring station to bring up her data. "Actual time is fifty seven minutes, and two four seconds ma'am." He says. "Less than an hour inbetween, Jesus Christ. Is this across the board, or only a few rare cases." Dr Tam asks into the room, to no one in particular. "Looks to be across the board ma'am." Says Deakins flatly. "Fuck!" Shouts dr Tam. She leans over Deakins shoulder to turn the monitor towards herself to get a better angle. "Can I get a visual of the patient on screen, and bring up all of the play backs of the brain activity. Over lay them all together at once. Same start times and just let them play over in real time with this new incident please." She says calmly. "Now we watch and wait, and see if we learn anything new." The doctor pulls a chair close as her whole teams stops to watch Mimi's face, a frozen rictus of anguish, fear and absolute terror. "Map any micro expressions, or eye movement. I need something from all this, anything at all!" Barks doctor Tam. As she settles in, and steals herself to watching someone in total paralysis have a waking nightmare, and brain damaging migraine combo, for the thousandth time in just weeks.

With a loud creak the bushy haired man cranks the clam shell door open further than it needs to go. Standing in the open door way the man leers inside. "That's it honey girl, let me have a good look at you. Oh my, we have so much to work with!" He stamps his feet and dances a silly jig like a toddler. "I just don't know where to start with you today. So many choices, so many rock hard, throbbing choices! You don't know what you do to me Mimi. If you only knew!" He chirps in a sing song voice. The man's eyes gaze over Mimi's nude figure lingering upon the under hang of her breasts and her flat muscular abdomen. He reaches out with both hands to run his palms over her stomach. "Do you know what I really want to try today Mimi?" He whispers as he rests his face against

the cool flesh of her belly. Turning his head to rest an ear and a cheek against her tummy he looks up at the frozen face above. He uses a finger to run lazy circles around her belly button before he places several fingers of his right hand into her belly button. "I had a dream last night about you Mimi. I did something naughty. But it felt - so - good!" He says laughing. "You'll never guess what it was. Not in a million years. You'll never guess!" He sings aloud.

Mimi is frozen in place as the man before her tests his head upon her belly, she can feel his long bony fingers tracing lazy circles around her belly. With a pinch she can feel him push several fingers into her belly button, as he plays at his version of pillow talk. She is angry, she is violated, she is totally unable to move, blink, talk or do anything while in stasis, and she screams internally for what feels like days on end. With the removal of tension from her belly she can see the doctor pull back. He's reaching over to the wheely cart behind him, the selection of tools just out of focus from her field of vision. He is talking quietly, Mimi can't make out what he's saying to himself.

"The thing is my lovely, we've been doing this for years now, and we'll just keep on doing this for years to come. But the fact is I need something more. I need something new. Variety, my lovely Mimi, is the spice of life. We've tried every thing of a natural sort, but now I think we need to get creative Hmm. Yes, yes we do. Ah here it is, you were hiding from me!" The man sneers at his tray of tools. "Trusty scalpel was being sneaky." He reaches down to pick up the instrument. The sharp edges glint in the oozy green light. The man's bushy brown hair is now damp, as though he is sweating from exertion or from heightened arousal. "Here's my plan my lovely, I'm going to cut a one in hole in your belly, and then I'm going to penetrate you until I spackle your guts from the inside! How's that for something new!" He squeals in delight as he leans forward to work.

Mimi catches the glint of a scalpel in the putrid light of the room. The man is so excited he jolts about animatedly. Did he just say spackle my guts? She thinks. Oh what the fuck is this. With a hideous jab she feels the blade glide through the tissue and muscle of her abdomen. If she weren't paralyzed she'd have crushed this man's skull several times over, since he began to visit her in stasis weeks ago. Through glassy eyes she can make out the shape of the man as he moves his cart closer to the open clamshell doors of her pod. Clumsily he climbs up, and begins to pull himself out of his pants and shuffles forward towards her. Pain explodes in her abdomen, as the brown haired man hunches to his work.

"Oh Mimi, oh, oh Mimi, do you know what this needs?" The man giggles as he splashes onto her exposed intestine. "Tomorrow, we use fire!" He laughs, and laughs, and laughs as he wipes himself off and retreats down the hallway into the distance.

Over the video screens doctor Tam can see Mimi's face scrunch and pulse as her brain waves skyrocket. In the middle of taking a note her wrist communicator pings a notification from both admiral Garneau and his lead advisor Gerald. An emergency meeting has just been booked for the admirals ready room in a few minutes time.

A commotion at the lab doors breaks out as a team of six technicians drag two badly beaten men into the room by their arm pits. Doctor Tam looks at the message from the CO and shouts over the din inside the lab. "Excuse me, Ladies and Gents, we are working here. These two men are to accompany me to my next meeting, so do be kind, yes?" She shouts menacingly. The gathered technicians slowly settle down into a more subdued state. The obvious adrenaline rush gives way to the shakes, and a few of them sit down as they succumb to the feeling. Turning away from the younger portion of her team doctor Tam goes back to standing watch over the monitors, quietly.

"What was that! Did you see that? Was that a spike, report to me people. Did we catch that? Is it distortion from the camera, is it parallax?" Shouts doctor Tam to her room full of medical staff and technicians. "We have it ma'am!" Chimes in Deakins. "She spiked her neural load so high it was off the charts, she nearly had an out of body experience. I can't imagine what she's thinking in there. Whatever it is, it's fucking awful, ma'am" Deakins says quietly to the doctor seated behind him. "That Mr Deakins is the under statement of the fucking century!" Scoffs doctor Tam. "I need a report of this to take with me to the SLT meeting." As she walks toward the doors out to the lifts a petite woman hands her the print out of the case studies and has the two semi conscious men in tow.

"Do you know why I asked you come here Ms. Darla?"

"Hm. Do you have some terrible inkling for what I might have in store you for?" The doctor asks through his surgical mask. He isn't facing Darla whom is strapped down onto an icy cold metallic gurney. His attention elsewhere as he is looking over his personal hand written notes and diagrams tapped up to a wall in his private surgical bay. The drawings are gruesome but are also the product of someone with artistic talent, and more than a little flair.

The sage green tiles of the operating room glisten with moisture as the large overhead drum lights buzz loudly in the quiet theater. The quality of the light is a brilliant, nearly pristine blue white. Darla has to squint to make out the shape of the doctor across the room from her. But the starkness of the paper stands out against the darkness of the rough hewn rock walls above the green tiles. Massive double doors swing gently as the air circulates constantly through some whisper quiet hepa filter units. The air tastes astringent, like bleach residue and quat sanitizer spray mixed together. It tastes thickly on her tongue and sticks cloyingly in her throat. The center of the floor, directly under Darla and her gurney is a sloped polished cement floor that terminates in a large drain grill that occasionally gurgles and burps as the base *UB313* tilts and rotates under its orbital stresses.

A panicked and afraid Darla can't turn her head more than a few inches or move any of her limbs at all, the tight straps are biting into her flesh sharply with every twitch and tug. Her heart is thumping in her chest, and her breaths come in ragged bursts. "Well aren't you the excitable type." Quips the doctor as he turns away from his notes, pushing his glasses up his nose with a single finger. "Not to worry Darla. I'm not going to operate, but you see I have other needs of you. No- no, not those kind either, I'm afraid." He chuckles leering over Darla's nude figure writhing on the gurney. Leaning towards her he picks up a needle from a tray covered by a blue cloth. "No, even I have my limits. Apparently I can't just kill all of my Risk Assessors in one fell swoop. Your friend Trevor is quite right, I do need the processing power which the Oracle network soaks up." He says jovially. With a quick and practiced motion he swabs her arm and plunges in a syringe attached to a tube and collection bag. "I need it to feed my babies. I know everyone thinks I'm mental and that I don't believe it Nanobots or Nanotech, but the truth is, those are artificial. More machine dependencies. No!" He shouts angrily. "Here, with what I've learned, with the experiments I've cultivated. I have harnessed uniquely natural energies to power my beasties. My darlings, my lovelies. No-no, for you I just need plasma, some platelets, and various other minor ingredients which my standing army has trouble processing in abundance. I had hoped i would have the time to help them so that they could synthesize the remaining items better, but not to worry! A little prick, a pinch

and a squeeze and you'll be back to your desk in no time." Laughs doctor Jang heartily. Pulling his mask down around his chin, he circles the gurney to stand at Darla's head. Bending at the hip he Whispers into her ears, so softly she can barely hear him. "Do you want to know why I've exposed you? Left you nothing to hide behind? Showing me just how afraid of me you are?" His breath a soft caress of her cheek. "Because I get off on it."

"Come on Darla, are you being serious right now? We've all had to take turns donating blood, why would he put you in the surgical bay naked for what amounts to a blood drive. That's insane. Just tell us where you were, and why you're three hours late for your shift?" Quips the short, fat man with a ridiculous moustache. "I just fucking told you why, Ricky!" Screams Darla as she shakes and trembles at her desk. "Yeah, well... un-fucking-likely, am I right!?" Snivels Ricky in response. "Oh, your buddy Trevor left you a note on your desk. He wouldn't let me read it, said it was for your eyes only. Technically I'm not your boss per se, but I've been here like three weeks more than you, so... you know. I kinda am." He trills weakly turning back to his own work station, leaving a very upset Darla sitting alone in her cramped office. Slamming the door shut after Ricky leaves, Darla crumples into her chair with hot salty tears streaming down her cheeks. After a brief period of tremors she snuffles, rubs her eyes with her palms and finds a small envelope sealed with black wax tucked in beside her computer terminal. "Where does he get all this shit?" Darla mumbles to herself, looking over the black wax seal, and the rough off white paper envelope. Using her finger nail to pick the wax seal off whole, she pulls out the slip of folded paper and unfurls it. The rough hand made paper smells like lavender, and is rough to the touch under her fingers. Her fingers make an audible scrape as she runs her nail over the textured paper. Two words are scribbled in the center of the slip of paper, along with a red blob. Pulling her desk lamp over towards her, she flips on the dim bulb to reveal what it says.

he blob at the center looks like a bloody finger print, and the note reads "We're fucked!".

"Even now as I stand here with you..."

I feel off, somehow. I was drawn here, like a moth to a flame. I know this place, in an off-hand, buried in my former Gene's kind of way." Murmurs Katayna quietly.

She has been delivering an intensely personal and fractured monologue since shortly after taking on the appearance of the only living thing aboard the strangely familiar, yet alien vessel. From what Racquelle can gather from the repeating diatribe from the AI humanoid figure that erupted suddenly out of a room after a rather drastic interior design shift, is that 'K' or Kelvin whomever that is, was once a human, and a man at that.

Of approximately forty odd years of age, unmarried and worked mostly in isolation doing routine tasks between the external hull plates. On one of his three day duty rotations he went in between the hull plates to do a task, and all was well, came out on the other side and every single person, and many ship systems were dead or severely damaged.

His only option was to turn to the Edu Bots stored on the science and engineering decks so that K was to become knowledgeable enough to be able to fix many of the issues, but the ships course and trajectory were permanently fubar'd. He spent a life time alone here with only a few bots for company, until several decades later his body began to deteriorate and he was sequestered into a med pod, where K's body had all the organic materials slowly swapped out for some of humanities earliest Nanotech. For reasons unknown K suspects the ship passed through worm holes and galaxy spanning electrical storms, where K awoke, realized he was now a sentient hive mind of nanobots, integrated itself into the vessel, and began consuming raw materials to expand and grow and rebuild the ship into a kind of living, breathing, machine-organic cyborg monstrosity.

Finally partitioning off a portion of itself to become an able bodied humanoid named Katayna. It is all very surreal, and more than a tad insane. But what K can't figure out is how it got back into Sol system. Katayna is trying to determine whether they were summoned here, or resolved into human space by chance. The resulting internal scans of logged data has taken a few days, and Katayna doesn't seem to have been spared from the data processing power drain. Which is why she's stuck in the monologue loop, while swaying gently in the hallway. Racquelle was faced with a decision, wait it out, try to trigger a loop ending response, search for hard restart button on the figure or die of thirst and/or starvation why K searched through petabytes of internal data, from

the time and multi-dimensional travel it seems to have undergone after running screaming full tilt through the star systems.

Walking around the gently swaying silver white humanoid body Racquelle notices that Katayna isn't exactly naked, but nor is she clothed. Her bodies exterior looks to be made up of all kinds of panels, some with specular differences, and variations of the writhing, and wriggling nanotech lace that covers the ship itself, both internally and externally. The look is akin to a body suit with seams and waist accentuated by piping and oblique panels that soften the metallic hardness of her skin texture. It's all very strange. As though a long lost man was trying to recapture what he felt femininity was via fashion. It's not half bad, but it's just a little off. At least she isn't sporting a peek abo bra, or breast armour plating. Racquelle smirks at the thought.

Speaking into the air Racquelle repeats herself for the thousandth time. "Katayna, can you hear me?" She waves a hand before the lolling eyes of the humanoid ai. "Are we being hailed by any other vessels or star bases?" She clicks her fingers by Katayna's ear. "Are you receiving any broadcasts from *UB313* or - I can't believe I'm going to say this *Torus Station* or Earth?" She claps several times loudly. "Hello? Anybody else home?" She shouts, her voice echoing loudly down the long central hallway. "Well, if you need me I'm going in search of food and potable water!" She stands taking a long look at the swaying form of Katayna. Turning around in her spot she decides to tear a strip off of the hem of her shirt and places it on the floor, folded in the shape of an arrow. "I don't have paper or a pen, and my communicator seems to be jammed, by you, so hopefully you'll notice the sign here, or can hear me as I make my way around looking for food. Ok? I don't know why I'm talking to you. I don't know why I'm talking to myself. I can't stop. Food. Food or water that's the plan." Was an angry wave Racquelle sets off on foot down the long central hall towards the center of the unknown vessel.

"Admiral Garneau?, we have the solution in hand, sir"

Stammers the small man from behind his mangled and abused clipboard. "The programming team have released the program to medical and they are about to disseminate it among the afflicted fire teams and their associated heavy artillery and infantrymen, sir." The nervous young man barely takes a breath before

diving further into his diatribe. "Doctor Tam, Commanding Officer Austenmire and several other members of the SLT are all ready and waiting in the sleeve halls, and tanker magazines, sir. Ready when you are to depart from your ready room, sir." Finishes the young man with the last fading vestiges of breath. Sweat is gathering at his brow, his nerves are frazzled. It isn't often a new recruit gets foisted upon the Valet role for an SLT status officer, and here he is, first run out beyond Mars and he is talking to, interacting with, and leading the fleets oldest and most distinguished admiral from appointment to appointment for the day. "Your lapels are sloppy this morning Jimmy, my boy. Here let me straighten you out before we depart" the old admiral barks from just inside the ready room double doors. A crisply starched arm reaches across the threshold to pop and refit the young man's collar. "I recall when our jumpsuits were far more utilitarian and less formal, these seem like a dress uniform. Utterly useless against the harsh vacuum of space, my boy." The old man chuckles. "Oh I assure you Admiral, we are even more protected in these new issue, than the old ones, why I read in the academy about the updated specifications and it's really just a marvel the first Mark VIO's and their earlier crews didn't all die with how stripped down and bare their suits were sir. The improvements, and integration with our Nanotech is mind boggling!" The young valet beams. "Hmm, yes I'm sure they are, sonny Jim. I'm sure they are." The sparkle in the old man's eye quickly disappears, as the knowledge of what he is about to preside over makes it's way back into the forefront of his thoughts. "Well, no need for delay my boy, lead on, lead on!" Barks the admiral gruffly. With a woosh the double doors to the ready room close, and the young valet Jimmy links his arm into the admiral's arm and walks him towards the lower personnel decks, where the sleeved soldiers are stored for transport to *UB313*.

Strolling through the halls of the *Righteous Chord* crowds of people have gathered to watch the admiral make his way to the soldiers in stasis. Word of their medical plight has made the rounds, and all seven of the shipboard psyops officers had put out many different stories. One officer, known to be rather unsavory was given the real story, and she passed it along to her cadre of friends whom occupied the fringe, along with twist elements of the 'brain worms' story to help muddy the waters. While the other six psyops officers put out sanitized versions of one thing or another. All the people really knew was that a solution had been found that would save strongest portion of the fighting force from the brink of annihilation, and little else regarding their state seemed to matter to anyone beyond that. The news that in two weeks time when they finally entered Pluto air space they would not be without their fire teams or walking tanks had boosted morale among the currently awake staff, that nobody asked any substantive questions regarding exactly what was meant by saving the fighting force. The truth of the matter would hopefully die with the SLT,

after the return trip once the battle was over, and the remaining affected soldiers stasis sleeves went offline effectively killing, and hiding the truth of what they were about to do to about four thousand soldiers from their own ranks. It was not something the old admiral relished having to oversee, but with a decision this grave, no one but Admiral Mark Garneau could give the go ahead. The decision was eating him up inside, but it was ultimately for the greater good of humanity, and The Company.

Stepping out of the power lift the admiral waves subtly at Jimmy the valet to pause for a brief moment before entering the room where the newest ad hoc sleeved soldiers monitoring station was. Doctor Tam had felt it best to remove the squad from her medical facilities and place it closer to the armory and the maintenance decks. A soft jab at how the Admiral was now relegating the fighting force into mere assets, and no longer people worthy of the full length and breadth of her medical care. It didn't raise any eye brows, and he took the jab on the chin like a pro. The old man stood motionless, staring at the doors before nodding once, and striding through the door as though he weren't a three hundred year old man in the midst of an existential crisis, about to murder four thousand people in order to have the military assets he needed to kill the man whom killed his great, great, great grand son, and then some. Feeling the weight of the decision, the old man puffed up and played the part of the hero, in order to make the tough decision.

"Are the programmers present with us today" asks the admiral. A brief scuffle near the center of the room as two shabby and disheveled men step away from the circular bank of monitors and computer terminals. They mumble quietly, with eyes down turned, that yes, they are in fact present and accounted for. "No need to wait on ceremony. Press upload, enter, Go or what have you and let's get the healing started." Growls the admiral. A shuffle of tired steps and the bushy brown haired man named Bryan steps over to his terminal, leans down and taps a single button. A blue progress bar appears on all the monitors in the central column and around the outer walls of the modest room. The exposed cables pick up the glare of the new blue light from the screens. Rapidly the flashing zero starts to increase upwards to hang momentarily at ninety eight percent, before a large 100% flashes repeatedly in a brilliant green.

"Sir! We have movement across the board, the fire teams are waking up sir! It looks like it worked!" A chorus of shouts and whoops explodes from inside the room. Admiral turns away from the jubilant crowd catching a glance from doctor Tam. Their eyes met and linger for a brief moment, when doctor Tam looks down at her feet and the admiral exits the room followed by a very lively young man in a valet uniform.

**** Query - internal logs/ time stamp corruption - files not lost. No longer able to maintain chronological order**.**

Racquelle is half buried in a deep freezer before she becomes aware of the audio recording playing over the ship wide PA system. Having found her way through the vaguely human, mostly antique inspired vessel to what was a great candidate for the canteen. Racquelle found an unlocked standing freezer box and decided to go rifling through it in search of sustenance. The ice build up and oddly plastic wrapped packaging had her excited at first, but after pulling half of the deep freezers contents out into the open to find mostly powders and frozen black brown sludge which tasted awful, she was becoming increasingly agitated. Which made her stomach rumble, alerted her to a growing head ache, and a general sense of anger and frustration, chased by fatigue and the now constant belly ache. Pushing the lid open from the inside, and throwing out the last handful of bags to the floor, she stepped over the rim of the ice cold box and took a moment to listen to the message. The first thing she registered was that the ship 'K' and the humanoid AI Katayna had come out of their deep data dive long enough to compose a message and play it on repeat for her to hear it. Sort of a good sign, after nearly a full week of dead silence. The second thing she realized was that if the ship had no access to chronologically stored data, it would have to expend a far greater amount of time and energy to find whatever the fuck it was it went looking for in the first place. And, that she could potentially communicate with 'K' vocally again. "Glad to hear you're alive and well K!" She said into the dimness of the canteen. "Good evening Racquelle. Apologies for our, my, prolonged disappearance." Barked the PA system in response, justice little too loudly. "Motion tracking has you placed near our make shift morgue. I required certain molecular elements which we are unable to synthesize in bulk. Do you have an interest in the vitamins and minerals left over from breaking down the former crew?" Asks the ship flatly. Feeling rather taken aback Racquelle says "I need to eat and drink something quickly, or else I'm going to faint and likely never wake up again." She rasps wryly. "I will light the way to the nearest cafeteria. Hold tight. Actually on second thought I will provide you with transportation. Your vitals are greatly diminished from when we first met." With a horrendous screech a wall panel pulls open to reveal a small people mover with fat black wheels, a canopy of beige Formica, and

plush yellowed off white leather looking seats. No visible steering wheel though, or breaks nor foot pedals. "Climb aboard Ms. Your chariot awaits." Murmurs the tinny voice from the PA system.

Sitting at the round white table with a veritable feast laid out before her Racquelle listens intently while Katayna goes over what remarkable things they've discovered buried in the disrupted internal data logs. "We are as of yet unable to verify when, where or how any of these things happened. We would need to correlate the logs with the findings from all of the various antenna arrays located around us - which as you might suspect, will take some time. Things of note are as follows. We've made two outbound calls, to whom and what about, or why are a mystery as of yet. Also we have a near steady stream of incoming calls as of a few days ago. That's not from the logs, by the by. It's what caused our jolt out of the frozen processing cycle. We received a significant processing power bump of unknown origin. Seemed friendly though, which is odd." Katayna tilts her head a little too far to one side in an imitation of a human expression towards looking puzzled. The act is rather comical in how over zealous it is.

Crunching on her vitamin and mineral porridge Racquelle takes a moment to stop eating and stare at Katayna. She points down at her bowl and says "This isn't made from your old crew though right? No matter. I burned that bridge when I crossed it an hour ago." With a loud and dry swallow she goes on. "Outbound messages huh? That does seem odd. But you guys have said you think you crossed both time, space and possibly dimensions too. Could it be a logging error, or some type of electrical distortion that looks like a message?" Ponders Racquelle. "Well, no. The first one had a lengthy set of technical diagrams attached to it, for a type of dimensional jumping engine, called a For E's engine. Don't know if we found that and sent it along, or designed it ourselves. The second one is far harder to decipher and has been put on hold. Though with the available processing bump in capabilities, we could tackle that in the background if we wanted to." Katayna says in a chipper tone, at odds with the stillness of her face and metallic features.

Looking at the messy remains of her feast Racquelle leans back in her seat as a wave of nausea washes over from eating too much after days of going hungry. "Rookie mistake." She mutters. "So - what's next up on the horizon. I assume we're here alone right? You consumed my other sortie partners and their ship, and we are weeks away from *UB313*. I don't suppose I could talk you all into taking me back there? I have a few folks who really want to talk to you." Quips

Racquelle. "No - no. We are not alone. Our long range scanners have located a flotilla of approximately twelve fast moving vessels headed here, as far as we can tell from their roughshod trajectories. Some look as though they'll arrive a few days after the majority, but I assure you we are most decidedly not alone. Well - short term yes, long term, not even close." Says Katayna and K both simultaneously.

Racquelle's face loses its colour and she turns a sort of ashen grey green, with flecks of blue purple around her eyes and mouth. The smirk fades just as quickly as it appeared. "Wait these are coming from *UB313*?" She croaks. "Uh no. These look to have originated from Earth's orbit, possibly Mars too." Says Katayna flatly. "Well, fuck me sideways." Says Racquelle.

"Do you honestly believe me to be stupid?"

Roars doctor Jang furiously into the receiver. His voice reverberates off of the hewn rock walls of the hidden comm's alcove. "I'm not that fucking dense you bastards. I have ample defenses, both here on the base, with our trained tactical operatives, even the regular administrative staff of *UB313* have combat training. I have my private special forces, plus something extra I had been working on concurrently with my genetics program. So no Mr Jones, I am not going to run this operation into the ground. I have The Company right where I expect them to be, and in so doing, am pushing ahead with a rather important expansion that will take us towards my goal of interstellar travel." He growls through gritted teeth, his tone a seething hiss full of poison and skin rotting venom. To the uninitiated he would look nonplussed, to those who know him well, they would be running for the closest air lock to escape his wrath, and punitive tendencies.

"Well, good doctor, need I not remind you how many billions we have wrapped up in your projects, and our exoplanet colonization goals. Don't fuck this up, or I'll have you eating your own body parts in a universally broadcast cooking show, for my pleasure." With an audible click the line goes dead. Not just disconnected but dead - dead. The thick glass of the orange yellow bulb is fizzling with smoke, as the whole terminal is fried at doctor Jang's feet. The long range communications terminal now a molten slag pile which is now untraceable, and entirely unusable. Pulling the receiver from his ear he slams it

repeatedly against the now blisteringly hot and oozing slag pile. The only thing connecting doctor Jang to his black market sources of credit will now be nearly impossible to recover even if the base becomes over run, or briefly gets taken by the forces of The Company. All of the internal memory, chips and sensors have been scorched beyond recognition. The base, and by extension Doctor Jang and his people are cut off and alone. A simple gesture which says "you're on your own."

"I didn't come out all this fucking way, so some oligarch prick could second guess my every move and question my genius. Fuck you Jones!, and fuck you good." Jang bellows. "When everything comes together you shall not get anything from me. Cock sucking fucking mother-fucker!" He shouts, adding emphasis with finger pointing and fist pumps in the air. Straightening his clothes, and fixing his glasses in place on his face, he readies himself to leave the sound proof alcove hidden on the **UB313** bridge facility. Stepping out of the alcove with a whisper of smoke and the smell of burnt wiring doctor Jang walks along a short hall that is obscured from the bridge by a cut through made from hewn rock. If you were to look right at it from the center of the bridge, it appears to be an unbroken wall of grey yellow rock. But once you step through it you briefly interrupt the illusion of a straight wall.

Much of **UB313** is built this way. With twists and turns, dead ends, and stairs that lead nowhere. Unless you are well worn being aboard you don't venture out to no places without planning on dying. It helps to curtail snooping, spying and people generally being nosy. On more than one occasion the doctor has gone on a walk about only to stumble over a dehydrated and mostly frozen corpse of someone who likely got turned around and lost in the maze of tunnels, stair walls and hidden passages. Orientation here leads through the medical bay and directly to where you will work. Being an untrusting sociopath with psychotic tendencies he likes his staff to remain siloed into separate cells. No one knows everything, and there are few friends intermingled between departments. Life here is full on tension and suffering, just the way he likes it. People give him their best work or they disappear. Very few threads left behind in the black ops insurgency that doctor Jang heads up on **UB313**.

"One can only surmise from the flurry of activity from our benefactors that something, or someone is on there way here. This is it, ladies and gentlemen of UB313. The fight has come to us, as expected. Though we do not, as of yet have the asset under our control, I assume it will only be a matter of time before it is. So sound the alarm! We are to move to pre-battle ready schedules. No exterior sorties unless authorized, no R&R leaves, and turn up the sensitivity on all of our sensor arrays, antennas and scopes. They should be about two to three

weeks of high velocity travel distance from us by now. Turn on the sentries if you would, please." Croons the now giddy and flushed red doctor. "Uh, sir? The sentries? What are those sir?" Asks a man whose face is obscured by a low hanging monitor. "Oh right! I forget just how much I do around here myself. It's a bit of a surprise really." Laughs the doctor heartily.

"Did you pass along the request to Admiral Garneau?"

Asks the formally dressed captain of the *Jolene Roger* without looking up from her computer screen. Tapping away quickly, the clicking a loud steady beat in the silence of the stately ready room just off of the bridge. "Yes - ma'am. I put in our request to stop off at the *Mars Six Sub-Orbital Aerial Base* for resupply, and to pick up a few new crew members. It was flagged to your attention as an Omega level code Orange personnel transfer for one person in particular. A Ghost crew member, not sure of the name though, as it wasn't listed in the memo." Responds the commanding officer firmly. "Yeah - I saw that too. Strange timing. But then again, none of us are privy to the admirals thinking on the matter of war, or the timing of it being advantageous for all parties concerned. We were scheduled to resupply smack dab in the middle of this scrum, so I felt pushing that ahead, and only being six days late for the flotilla rendezvous was acceptable, to me at least. By the time Admiral Garneau signs off on it, and responds we'll be away from port, and enroute." A shuffling of papers and the click of a pen. The soft whir of the air scrubbers can be heard purring quietly in the sound proofed office. The captain leans back in her chair to look at her CO. "The Ghost Crew is most unexpected. I didn't realize we rated one, being the smallest of the vessels heading to battle." Quips the stern featured captain. "You are correct ma'am, we don't rate one. He's to be taken over to the *Righteous Chord* or any other massive Erlon class battle ship in the fleet. We can't keep him, I'm afraid." Answers the CO somberly. "Be that as it may, we can still use - him? Was it. Yes. Nameless as far as I'm concerned. Feed him, get him settled, and then run him through our highest priority matters before we get into position with the rest of the fleet. We've got the next nine weeks before we make 'landfall' at *UB313*, so make the best of it please. I trust you and engineering can put together a comprehensive list of tasks he can accomplish given the time crunch, and the impending battle. Lord knows what that fucking doctor has planned. I shudder to think about it." The captain grimaces, and a slight shiver makes her quiver in her seat. With a flush of goose

flesh herself the CO says. "Ugh! Right? If you're done with those forms I can take them down with me to HR, on my way by the engineering decks." Says the CO. "Did you perchance pass a rather fat fellow on the way in here? If you see him, send him in." The captain extends her arm out with some papers clutched in her left hand to the CO. "Yes, I did in fact see him. I think the quat sanitizer we use in the air is giving him grief, as he looked terrible. Common trait among those not used to long haul vessel life. He must be a grounder from Earth proper or Mars." With a look of disgust the captain says. "Thanks, I'll take the note under advisement. No hand shakes, and I'll keep my distance. As you were Austenmire." Smirks the captain. "Don't do that ma'am, my older sister is CO Austenmire. I prefer Gonzalez, after my mother - ma'am". With a chuckle the captain rights her clothes before sitting down again. "Yes - right. Gonzalez then. By my leave." With a soft ping the doors to the ready room whoosh open and CO Gonzalez leaves soundlessly.

"Hey Gonzalez, what's hanging ba-bee!" Shouts a grey, hunched older man covered from head to toe in a thick inky grease. Strewn around him are the disassembled parts of a SIP hydroptic-6 jib borer. "Jesus Bennet, respect the rank, you silly toothless old fuck!" She barks tapping the stripes on her shoulder, and then the prominent emblems on her collar. "Yeah - yeah, baby doll. Once you get me some help round here, I'll show you the respect you deserve." He rasps like a heavy smoker, with half his throat a cancerous sore. "As a matter of fact, we'll have a Ghost Crew member for nine weeks, so I need a prioritized list of doable jobs in my inbox asap!" Gonzalez shouts over the din of the machinery running beside the old man Bennet. The old borer making a hell of a racket in the background. "Sounds like you have a serious chatter issue with that line borer Bennet. You might need a bigger collar, or thicker tooling." He shouts back. "That's my girl!" The toothless grin spreads even wider on the dirty old man's face.

Walking further through the small engineering decks Gonzalez stops to talk with a few other high ranking engineers and technicians, trying to get a sense of how much work they can safely cram into the nine weeks they have with the Ghost before reaching the rendezvous point in system. Likely less time than that, as they have to let him transfer to another vessel prior to reaching battle stations, and active combat duty. Taking her time to make some small talk, and get an inside tack on the largest of the priority projects, she stands idle, and watches the machine shop in full swing. "What's Bennet's deal, you don't look short staffed here?" She enquired to a man of modest size lounging on a bench munching on a sandwich. With a slightly puzzled look the man swallows hard, with an audible gulp. "Wars coming, the old bastard just wants everything 100%, so no body dies cause he missed something that could be of

consequence." He burps mid sentence, then stops himself, realizing he's talking to the ship's CO. "Ma'am!" He stammers suddenly. "Aren't we all." She says quietly, more to herself than to the man. His foot slips from his perch on the desk and he sits up straighter. "Gonzalez, ma'am, I'm being buzzed. Someone in HR, is looking for you, ma'am." He squirms awkwardly under her glare. "If they ping you again tell them I'm on my way presently." With a last glance around the shop she marches off to the large environmental doors, and walks the ship's main artery to find a lift back up to the HR decks nearer the bridge.

The yellow walls in the hall are a stark contrast to the dull matte greys of the rest of the *Jolene Roger*. "Commanding Officer! Gonzalez!" Shouts a petite woman dressed in a matching yellow jumpsuit. "I thought you'd get here about an hour ago, but I'm now late for my next stop. Walk with me if you would be so kind." Shrieks the petite woman down the wide yellow hall. "As you well know we have a VIP crew member to deliver to the admiral. I am most excited! Follow me, we'll take the Express elevators over to the receiving decks to grab him." She hardly stops talking long enough to draw a breath before she starts in on all the details, gossip and news about the new crew coming aboard. The pressure change in the ears can be felt as the elevator rockets around the ship in a convoluted manner, avoiding major portions of infrastructure inside the guts of the vessel. After several tense seconds as their weight, and gravity swapped positions relative to how they boarded the lift, they came to rest at a wide open floor, with stacks of crates, luggage, and fresh food stuffs in waxed boxes. Standing alone in the center of the room is a man in a beige jumpsuit, with tools and harness glinting in the harsh light of the scanners and sensors that litter the room. "Here he is!" The little woman squeals excitedly. Running off ahead out of the lift towards the man. Gonzalez watches in disbelief as the petite woman runs ahead leaving her standing alone in the lift. Walking over to the two the CO extends a crisp salute, and offers her hand in welcoming. "Welcome aboard Ghost." She says stiffly. "Oh don't be silly, let me introduce you!" She vibrates in her excitement. "No need for the fuss." The man in beige says. "Ma'am." He salutes back with a rigorous audible snap to his elbow, palm and fingers. "I'm Mark Garneau, at your service." He bows extravagantly.

"I have some... interesting news."

Commanding Officer Monica Gonzalez says to her captain. The captain, a stern looking woman of about fifty years of age. Her hair a closely cropped buzz cut on one side of her part, and jaw length grey bob on the other. "Do tell." Yawns

the captain from her chair in the officers lounge. "The admiral responded, well, no. Not responded. He sent us a message that came in thirty hours after we sent out ours." Quips the CO. "Like two ships passing in the night." Barks the captain with a slight hiccup. Her brandy sloshing around in her snifter, the ice cubes clinking with the motion. "Yes, just so. He needs us to activate the Jackal Protocol. I assume you know what that means? I looked in the hand book, and through our active duty archives but came up with nothing." Shrugs Gonzalez. With a blank stare the captain has gone motionless, and the pink flush of the alcohol slowly gives way to an ashen green grey colour. "Did he now." A long pregnant pause follows, as the chatter of the lounge falls in to fill the silence between them at their private table. After a few deep breaths the captain toggles her wrist communicator down to medical and cycles through some tabs and alternate screens that Gonzalez had never seen before. "Meet me in the aft cargo hold at 0:200 hours, and bring coffee, and protein bars, lots of it too." Standing up abruptly the captain nearly runs for the door to her private office aboard the bridge. "But why ma'am" Gonzalez asks stunned. "The admiral has just lost confidence in the integrated Fire Teams and his Nanotech boosted walking Tankers. We need to get my pet project off the ground and fully operational - now!" The shout from the usually stone cold captain brings the rest of the officers in the lounge up short. Eyes wander between the captain and the CO, blank looks on their faces during the seemingly heated exchange. With a flurry the captain exits the room, and the CO heads down to the commissary to gather the required food stuffs.

"Jes-us fuck-ing Key-rist! What happened to you out there today Gurinder?" Exclaims a bed ridden man in the med bay. Gurinder, a solidly built man of about forty says "I was de-gloved, if you can fucking believe it. Don't look that up by the way." He snarls. "How did that happen?" The bed ridden man says. "I'm always so careful, so fucking careful. The CO even told us repeatedly how dangerous resupply can be here at *Mars Six Sub-Orbital Aerial Base*, and I still got frostbite during the transfer of the LOX, that I went directly to the baths afterwards in shock - apparently, to soak the bone chilling cold out of me. I got turned around in the process and tried to thaw my hands in a plasma stream, and scalded them instead. Sloughed the skin off in one bubbling mass of wet tissue. The frostbite had killed the nerves so I didn't notice until I dropped both of my hands into the pool." Gurinder drawls looking down at his feet in the infirmary. "Bright side is, the doctors said I could try those swanky new haptic gloves. You know the ones we all had to try on before shipping out?" Says Gurinder. "Yeah - yeah, the ones that were always too fucking tight." Offers the bed ridden man. "Yeah, second skin, what they called it. Turns out once you lose your first skin they fit like a charm. But putting them on." Gurinder pauses here, for a lengthy bit of awed silence. "Not uh, not fun. Leave it at that. But check it out, no seams. The Nanotech integration filled in the gaps and I can

touch and feel again. Also, I might add, no nerve pain." He grins dopishly. "Noice!" Whoops the man from his bed. "So what do they do?" Replies the man from his bed. "I'm actually en route to the testing facility in the aft of the ship. I knew the *Jolene Roger* had something up her skirt for us in this fight!" Bellows Gurinder. "Keep it down out there!" Shouted an orderly. "We've got an influx of wounded people in here." The orderly shrieks again. "It's the worst one day record for onsite injuries ever!" Shouted the orderly to the whole room. "What the fuck is going on here today?" A med tech barks in retort.

"You're not going to like this Gonzalez, but drastic times calls for drastic measures. I need these haptic nerve drones manned, and I couldn't wait for specimens, so I took some extraordinary steps." The captain crooned in a melodic whisper. "A couple of manufactured accidents here and there, one or two key personnel have their equipment tampered with, and a few happy coincidences due to the planned misfortune of others." The captain chuckles warmly. "Chin up. The admiral needs results, The Company needs results, and my Bison drones are going to lead the way. Don't worry, no one suspects you of anything, and your name isn't even associated with my patented Bison drones. Look, here come the first batch of pilots now." Pointing down along the enormous cargo hold to the group of men and women filtering into the huge space as a clump. All in all about fifteen people, some with dark metallic hands, and others with long black snakes running the length of their spines. After a few minutes the crowd had walked the full length of the room to stand in front of the captain and CO Gonzalez. Standing in a semi-circle near a grouping of med pod suspension tanks. The captain clears her throat and steps away from CO Gonzalez and addresses the room. "Ladies and Gentlemen welcome. You are looking at your new home for the foreseeable future. Over the next ten days you will be fully immersed in running your new Bison drones to get up to fighting speed. So, without further ado, find a suitable tank. Haptic gloves in the standing tanks, and spinal columns into the ones laying down please. No need to talk. You'll understand soon enough. The subconscious training will teach you everything you need to know, and once you all pass the training, you'll be able to watch your Bison drones from the safety of our newest war room. Quick - quick. Hop in. Time is wasting people." The captain's smile fades quickly as the gathered group doesn't move. "Get in the fucking tanks before I float you all out of the cargo airlock." She barks. There is a series of squeaks and scrapes as the gathered wounded climb half-heartedly into their icy cold suspension tanks. The clunks of the safety seals locking into place echoes in the cavernous room.

Walking back to her spot near the center of the tanks, the captain hits a series of buttons and watches the group begin the first moments of their ten days of subconscious training. CO Gonzales stands at attention beside the captain, her mind racing, her stomach doing flips.

"Does anyone else think it's weird that..."

Both Gurinder and Bennet Jr got hurt in exactly the right ways to be placed directly into the captain's new drone program immediately after getting seriously injured?" Drawls the very drunk interim supply clerk and dock worker Norman Chan a little too loudly. His friends at the hip high bar table all look at Norm sideways over their drinks. "Not this again!" The chorus goes up from the group around Norm. "Come on man, we leave port tomorrow afternoon, let's just get drunk, fuck and forget about shit for a few hours, man! Just let it go. People are starting to stare." Slurs a particularly drunk Bennet Sr. His hair a messy tussle of greasy grey. "He's my son - right? Right. So, so... I'm just glad they had the spinal column haptics that gives him full mobility again ok. That container mishap crushed a good portion of his back. He could, he, he could have died man. Be happy he isn't dead!" Shouts Bennet Sr over the din of the music blaring in the crowded bar. "I know, I know!" Norm waves his hands, palms out. "It just seems suspicious is all I'm saying." Norm takes another long pull from his mixed drink. Bennet Sr leans over to rest on his shoulder and says. "Oh hey, that smells good, what is that Norman?" He slurs cheerily, his momentary lapse of melancholy driven away by drink. "Sex on the beach." Norm says. "What!?! " Shouts back Bennet Sr. "I said Sex on The Beach!" Norman bellows, just as the music goes quiet waiting for the beat to drop. A huge portion of the crowd turns to look at the now flushed and thoroughly embarrassed Norman. The beat comes crashing back in and the crowd cheers! "YEAH!" Norman turns away from his group of friends and winds his way through the packed dance floor of the bar, away from the bar top he was using to steady himself between drinks. Working his way back towards the men's room at the farthest reaches of the narrow room. The long interior wall is one long bar with mirrors behind it making you feel like the space was wider than it was, in the middle were lengths of bar top between pillars and a few free standing tables, mostly faux wood finishes dominated the bar. Then a walk way, and several day bed like couches under the floor to ceiling cement glass windows that looked out into space. But now caught the glinting sight of the *Mars Six Sub-Orbital Aerial Base* where the *Jolene Roger* was docked for Resupply before shipping out to Pluto for an offensive against the Insurgency, and their black ops base stationed at *UB313*. Passing by the hot and sweaty crowd Norman fails to notice as a few heads turn to follow him as he walks through the crowd. The three men in a triangle formation watch as Norman walks between them and on to the toilets at the back of the room. The smallest of the three watchers types quickly on his wrist communicator without looking down at it. He is smiling and being social with a few women at his slab of the

bar. Within moments the three gentleman get a return notification, and slowly they peel away from their gatherings and walk nonchalantly to the men's room.

Norman passes the last part of the bar and reaches up to grasp the pillar just out away from the wall before nearly falling over a drunk woman legs. How he missed the bright pink tutu is anybody's guess. Leaning down, gingerly he asks if the young woman needs any help regaining her feet. Instead she pulls him head first by his collar into the space where the pillar meets the floor and he blacks out. Crawling onto Norman's body she begins to writhe around and shriek incoherently. The gathered crowd turns their backs in an attempt to ignore the weird behavior. With the crew on edge with war looming nobody is willing to get in the middle of anyone's business tonight. A brief moment later and three men bolt into the bathroom locking the doors behind them. Their shouts, and the sounds of gun shots are muffled by the music and the heavy doors. From the floor the woman rolls of Norman, and fireman carries him out of the club. No one gives them a second look.

Several paces outside the bar the woman sets Norman's unconscious body against the wall to slump into a crumple of limbs. She removes her dark wig to reveal her bright green, close cropped hair. Ditching her ruffled tutu, and knee high boots and stockings to unfurl her brown jumpsuit that was tied off at the waist and appear like an on duty custodial staff member. She pulls a cleaning cart out of a hidden compartment in the hallway wall and pushes Norman's body into the over-sized garbage bin. She proceeds to take him down into the sanitation decks well below.

Standing alone in the bowels of the Sanitation Department

Gertrude is talking away animatedly to a closed bay door to the *Jolene Roger's* tertiary recycler as a soft puff of acrid smoke drifts by up towards the whirling air scrubbers. The sub basement to the vessel is where only a select few ever bother to tread. Although the department is among the cleanest aboard, the distaste people have towards waste water treatment and the recycling of all other materials on board makes the brown jumpsuit wearers somewhat of a pariah among the crew. Once Gertrude took off her tutu, and started to prowl the ship with her trash cart she might as well have been invisible, with all of the non-attention she could attract. Hence her being rather chipper about

outsmarting the three would be attackers from the ship's largest bar and dance club. Feeling rather smug about how well her drunk girl passed out on the floor of the bar by the toilets on the last night in port had worked. She managed to engage her target in one swift motion to knock him out, and roll on top of him to provide them both cover. The moaning and gyrating had been a last second decision that really paid off, a stroke of genius really, Gertrude would have to remember that if she makes it back from *UB313* alive.

Looking at the stainless steel doors polished to a high sheen, Gertrude is leaning now against the door running her fingers lazily up and down the frame while chatting amicably. "You should have seen me Norman, it was straight out of a Hollywood block buster. I see the three guys watching you, so I set my trap, right? Yeah - I wait for my moment and then pounce! Bam. Dude, you should have seen your head go. Crunch - right into the space between the floor and the bottom of the pillar. I didn't mean to tug you down so hard. But I had to subdue you for it to work. My plan that is. Ha. If your drunk ass had of done anything except lie there under me those goons would have discovered my ruse for sure! My ruse? My scheme? My master plan. No wait, scratch that, none of this is cool, let me start over again..." hops Gertrude from the door at the tell tale sound of approaching footsteps on the open grate flooring. "Gerty! You down here again? - you and your dramatic monologues eh? Is there a show coming up that I don't know about Gerty? I do love your stage plays. A Street Car Named Deserea was my favourite!" The older man says. "Desire." Gertrude responds. "I'm sorry?" Repeats the older gentleman in his own immaculate brown jumpsuit. "The street car is Desire, not Deserea." She smirks at the older man. "Oh yeah. Ha! What a goof I am. Is there a show Gerty?" He half begs half pleads with a huge smile on his face. Gertrude loves to see her fans, especially when it's one of her bosses boss. "I'm just practicing right now, but you'll be the first to know when we reengage with entertainment again Jules." She smiles sweetly at him through her giant brown eyes, her white toothy grin shining brilliantly. "That's the ticket." He snaps his fingers, and points at Gertrude. "Oh - right. The reason I came down here. There seems to be a puddle of medical waste in the hall. I guess the med tech's aren't double bagging their stuff again. If you can clear that up and just dump it straight into the recycler, you can take the rest of your shift off to work your monologue. I liked ruse, it felt authentic, and 'of the moment' as you like to say." Quips Jules over his shoulder as he walks back out of the way from the recycler input doors. "Not a problem Jules!" She shouts in a sing song fashion.

Taking a beat to make sure the foot steps are receding into the background Gertrude takes a good long look at the polished doors. After a pause she says. "Ha. Norman, you almost had me there! Sneaking blood onto the floors, nice

try." Walking to her cart she grabs a mop and a thick yellow bag and some absorbent pads. Wiping up the bulk of the puddle, placing the soiled pads in the bag, and then mopping up the glistening pink spot on the floors she whispers to herself. "Almost got me Norman. Almost."

Taking the cart and the mushy plastic bag back to where she was recounting her story to Norman she opens up the bay doors again. The interior is totally empty. Reaching half way in she plops the yellow bag of blood and soiled pads into the center of the chamber. Leaning out and closing the safety doors she pushes the green button beside the floor station terminal and with a whisper soft whir the unit drops its load into the incinerator. A minute puff of acrid black smoke drifts by Gertrude's face as it hangs lazily in the air, like a grey haze. Only to be pulled softly towards the softly whirling air scrubbers above.

Gertrude sighs to herself and says. "That's why I do my monologues after the fact Norman. Those three goons were lazy thugs, they were tactless. I have style and grace. Captain Morgan will pay me handsomely for disposing of you after asking too many questions." Smiling daintily to herself Gertrude takes her cart back to her allocated storage space, and wanders off into the upper decks of the *Jolene Roger*. The engines have kicked on, and she can feel the added weight pulling on her through the soles of her feet from the thrust of the boosters.

"Come on shit birds, let's take it from the top... again"

Roars the captain of the *Jolene Roger* into her microphone. Captain Morgan is sweating profusely under the strain of her training regimen. Teaching sixty newly haptic integrated soldiers to use her patented Bison drones is taking more time, effort and patience than she is willing to fork over. "For fuck sake people, formations, remember the formations. If you collide those fusion reactor cores will lose their magnetic seal and you'll all go up in a cascading failure. We've been over this. Stop trying to drive it, and become it. The Bison drone should feel like an extension of yourself, it's not a fucking demolition derby car." She shrieks, her earphones ringing with feedback from the over taxed mic.

The sixty member group are not living up to her dreams and there is significant resistance to the haptic systems link to the soldiers neural networks. Namely,

they don't use nanotech to a high enough degree for her liking. Her original plans only required an eight percent uptake in nanotech to fill in the gaps between stimulus and reaction time, but she may have been too conservative. She is resisting upping the limit as her spies on board the *Righteous Chord* and *The Dirty Starling* are sharing some horrific news regarding the Fire Teams and Tanker crews. So they'll have to get better on their own, as she can't risk losing her team to some unknown nano sickness, and thus risk losing her favoured spot with Admiral Garneau.

At the back of the war room commanding officer Gonzalez is over seeing the technological side of things. Keeping an eye on the engine spec's, and watching that no one crosses over into another's engine plume, and melts themselves in six thousand degree Celsius plasma jetting out of the rear rocket booster packets located at the aft of each drone. Her thick black hair now streaked through with grey, and her once plump face now sallow and ashen. Except for the deep purple black puffy bags under her eyes. She is as mystified by the lack of progress as her captain is. All sixty souls scored so well in the subconscious training program. Reaching the required ninety percent efficacy with the gear to be able to go live with the actual physical drone. Every single person has seen at least a twenty percent drop in proficiency with the Bison drones. As a massive glob of sweat clings to her eye ball, she toggles the direct comm's to captain Morgan.

"This isn't getting us anywhere. We have to think about putting them back inside the tanks again. We're missing something important. Some crucial step that the tank offers, and reality lacks." Croaks Gonzalez with a grimace knowing her captain is not going to take her repeated suggestions with the tone they are meant. "Say that again and I will float you out of this cargo hold, along with the old man you're so sweet on. Get me?" Captain Morgan hisses through her headset. "Yes ma'am." Chirps Gonzalez meekly. "We don't have enough tanks for all sixty drone pilots as it is. We don't have the time, nor the resources to build more anyway. We'll be at the rendezvous point in two weeks time. This HAS to work as intended. A waking, remotely operating fighting force that doesn't rely too heavily on nanotech." Captain Morgan growls through gritted teeth.

Out along the port side of the ship the teams of Bison drones are running their attack patterns, and tossing around asteroid chunks like a giant game of robot hot potato. Every so often two or more Bison drones get too close together and the proximity klaxons blare inside the war room, and the pilots all grimace and swear and lose track of their formations, and then paint jobs get singed, and sensor arrays get ruined as drive plumes turn everything to slag.

The saving grace of captain Morgan's patented design are all of the plug and play off the shelf pieces that can be pulled off and replaced in mere minutes and not days. The onboard armory dry dock for the Bison drones looks like a massive barn full of cattle head stocks.

With the fifth near miss that could detonate the whole fleet of Bison drones captain Morgan calls in to CO Gonzalez and has her direct them in to the maintenance docks. A lengthy debrief is slated for an hour after the last of the drones has docked, and the pilots logged out of their remote command station. With a weary smile CO Gonzalez walks over to the pilots to chat with them. Ushering them into the showers and then following them to the cafeteria for a hot meal. The conversation is light, and the morale is low among the pilots. In the middle of her meal a soft ping emanates from her wrist communicator. A private message addressed to captain Morgan from someone named Gertrude from the Sanitation Department. As the message notification flashes with a tiny red flag, Gonzalez clicks on the message to read it. The captain has just forgotten to turn off her message forwarding while instructing the Bison drone pilots. Not uncommon for Gonzalez to read and respond to high priority messages for the captain. Being next in line, there isn't much that she isn't privy too. A moment later the message prompt turns green and Gonzalez can read the message in full, and toggle through the attachments. The message itself was short, it just stated that the priority trash was taken care of. There were six attachments, each one an identical image of a wrist communicator. No, not quite identical, the registration numbers, singular to each unit was different. "What the fuck is this?" Gonzalez whispers to herself. A moment later a response from the captain comes through, along with a transaction id number. "Is this what I think it is?" Gonzalez says with a sinking queasy feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"Any news on the war front?"

Asks the grizzled old man seated at a comically large desk empty of anything except a pen and a few sheets of multi coloured paper. The office secreted in the depths of *Torus Station*, is well adorned with rich fabrics and expensive artifacts, if sparse. The tall and slender woman standing before him is watching him through cold slate grey eyes. "Yes - sir. And what we know so far is not

encouraging. It seems that The Company having let that old bastard Garneau lead a personal war over a vendetta is working about as well as we had come to expect from a guy who spends seventy five to ninety percent of his time in stasis, so that he could try to bring a sense of peace, calm and continuity to humanity. The ego on this guy. Fuck me." She spits in disgust.

"Yes, yes, Gemma my dear girl, I am well aware of your feelings toward my youngest son. He wanted glory and to command from a place of visibility, while we chose to live in the shadows, and the comfort of anonymity. He's a fool, but I can't have him killed. So we let him run afoul of that demented doctor to test his mettle. If he comes back we can control him since we know so much about his goings on within the flotilla. And if he dies. Well then. He's dead, and we can moved passed this debacle finally, with our hands clean." He harrumphs in his typically gruff manner.

"Yes sir." She smiles warmly at the old man. "Now you said you have news. Spill it, I'm rather busy Gemma." He leans back into his over stuffed leather wing backed chair. The springs creaking under his movement. "Long story, short version then, yes? Right. The nanotech integrated soldiers, mainly the heavy weapons Fire Teams and all of the Walking Tank units caught some kind of brain bug that gave them all irreparable brain damage, and they thought they were all lost. To which your son's best friend decided to convert them to 100% nanobot automatons, and they woke up, and are now operational, but are no longer human. They don't eat, or sleep, or communicate verbally anymore. I guess using all of the same batch of nano bots to repair every single one of them created this hive mind between them. Scary good as a fighting force, fearless, and savage. But not human, and the rest of the crew has noticed the shift.

Also - side note. Due to the 100% uptake in the nanobots they have taken to horrific displays of shedding their biological materials. Talk of them shitting out shriveled and wasted organs. The stench is a thick all encompassing miasma aboard each ship until the last one is finished. They do it wherever they are, at any time. I hear it's a total horror show to behold. The scrubbers and recyclers are being over loaded, and a few regular crew have gotten sick from the decaying body matter. Morale is not high." She says while wiping her forehead, and tucking a loose strand of her dark hair behind an ear.

"Secondly, the admiral had lost faith in the nanotech integrated teams and almost immediately called on captain Morgan to jump start her Jackal Protocol. Those massive Bison drones she's so proud of. Anyway - she purportedly had almost sixty crew members injured on purpose to fill the ranks of her fighting force, and they are taking to it slowly. Promising results from the subconscious training regimen, but less so when entirely awake, though I have reports that it's

starting to gel. Oh, also - the captain is suspected of having her more perceptive crew murdered for piecing two and two together." To this the older man raises his hands to rest fingers interlocked on top of his head. "Did she now. I knew she had ambition, but that's a bit much." He coughs out the words. "Hm. Yes, a bit much." She repeats in response.

"Also, our intelligence suggests that they have picked up a new Ghost Crew member during the resupply at the *Mars Six Sub-Orbital Aerial base*, but have not updated their HR directory to say who it is. Which seems odd? Do I need to notify anyone of this? That seems rather widely outside the norm." She smirks with a raised eyebrow. "No, no, you know what, let it stand. Keep an eye on it. Let's see if we can trace it back before anything comes of it." He laughs conspiratorially. "Yes sir." She says.

"Lastly, our spies at *UB313* have said that this will likely be a blood bath, as the, as you said, demented doctor has a fair few surprises in store for the admiral and his fleet. Whom are due to arrive at their rendezvous point in a matter of hours from now." She finishes her statement and cracks her knuckles, and rolls her shoulders. "Mm... well, keep watching. Find out what you can about our mystery Ghost. And let me know when the fighting starts. Is there anything else?" He says while stifling a yawn.

"Actually yes there is. We've noticed a signal from out beyond Pluto and Charon that has an encrypted message in it. It appears vaguely human in origin. But something seems off about it. From what we can tell two names repeat a lot. Just the letter 'K' and the name Kelvin." She says. The man freezes in his spot. "Did you say Kelvin?" He sputters. "Yes, it's here on the report sir." She pulls a sheet of paper out of a group and softly lays it down on the desk in front of the older man. Looking down at the paper the man's face drains of colour. "Well fuck me. He was telling the truth."

When you stop and think about it,

Knowing all twelve of the largest space faring vessels that have ever been constructed by humans are now gathered together here, waiting to attack a secret base built into a dwarf planet come over sized asteroid, you might think it would look pretty remarkable. You would think so, but you would be wrong.

These ships are arranged at about one to three kilometers apart, the visual to the naked eye is less than stellar. Now on the radar screens and the HUD on the bridge, when you have name plates, and trajectory overlays, and drive plume signatures and the specs of each ship associated with its distinct silhouette, now you get something approaching a spectacle. But all the average person sees is a slight glint in the far reaching blackness, that moves against a field of stars. It's nothing to write home about, believe you me.

I could do without all of the proximity alarms going off randomly all day and all night, as the manoeuvring thrusters keep us in place relative to one another. The one kilometer distance is perfect for non disrupted communications, but hell on the ships warning systems. The targeting computers are likely to fry themselves unless their sensitivity is turned right down. Which makes a sneak attack a real threat, so the watches are set with greater overlap, and at no point is it ever allowed for more than forty five percent of the active crew to be asleep. Even less so for the infantrymen and the pilots. They rest in shifts with just one third asleep at any time.

Tensions are high, and oh boy!, there goes that fucking alarm again. The blaring klaxons, and whining targeting alarms grate on all of our nerves. Every shift we meet at our muster stations prior to doing anything, and those that will be fighting as boots on the ground are running their training exercises daily to remain razor sharp. All we do is train, prepare and wait while the clocks count down to armageddon. Sleep comes in fitful spurts and tempers are fraying at the edges. Discipline onboard the ships is tight, with no wiggle room whatsoever.

The walking corpse corps are ever ready day or night. They have been cordoned off in a cargo bay, along with the decanted walking tankers. The armorers swarming them like ants making all of the last minute fixes or upgrades requested by the - assets, let's call them. The shedding of their humanity was this whole thing, that nobody speaks about now that it's all over. Some people found it hard to adjust. A few marriages and families were served a pretty harsh reality when they woke up to find their loved ones are now a human imitation made up of microscopic machines working in tandem. Memories, futures, love lives all poured down the toilet, along with spoiled lungs, kidneys and the intestines themselves. It... was unpleasant.

Now that we are finally here, or thereabouts, a flurry of inter flotilla activity has taken hold. With a week left roughly before the *Jolene Roger* shows up, the *Dirty Starling* and the *Righteous Chord* are all hosting different strategic planning sessions with Admiral Garneau, or his esteemed advisor Gerald at the helm. The traffic between the larger vessels is rather heavy, with the smaller away ships currying personnel and materials between vessels in the fleet. Last minute repairs to sensor arrays and hull plating to add extra armor taking

priority above all else. It's a good gig if you're a low level pilot, scurrying about doing deliveries and interacting with other crews from around The Company's interstellar interests.

As the long tense days wear on the largest vessels in the fleet disgorge their contingent of smaller, fast flying personnel carriers and the even more maneuverable fighter craft. Tugs and their single driver counter parts with extendable arms and working claws litter the field of view as they build all new protective measures onto the hulls of the behemoths in the flotilla.

News has spread throughout the flotilla that the *Jolene Roger* has a new toy to add into the mix for the war ahead. Lots of talk about what it could be. The admiral has been close lipped, refusing to address the gathered soldiers and crew until the last possible moments prior to the attack. This has caused a few minor incidents, but nothing that a few hours of extra labour, or a night or two in the brig couldn't cure.

There were a few moments of panic as a slew of smaller meteors made it past the turned down sensitivity of the proximity alarms, which stunted the targeting lasers too. But the vibration of the rat-at-at-tat and the following pings of dust ricocheting off the hull brought about an even higher resolve with the radar watchers, and the sentry programs. It broke the tension, in a fashion, and let them know that they were protected even when they weren't looking. Something, that should not have been possible.

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In a tiny office buried in the back of the physical paper archives, a tall beautiful woman named Gemma is rifling through deeply redacted coffee stained, dust covered reports from centuries prior. Her boss, and in some form or another, the head of her family, from fifth cousins by marriage, had pointed her in the direction of a secret stash of files that probably hadn't seen the light of day in a couple hundred years. Spending a few days buried in the room looking through bankers box after bankers box of manilla folders, she finally found a stack that dealt with the horrific incident involving *Margot's Fever*. A tragic event that killed hundreds, involved insurgents, as well as a tragic misfire by a potentially incredible new engine type, which was to bring us closer to the stars. We spent a whole month on it in school, and they teach entire courses on it in university. The memorial deck on *Torus Station* is pretty touching. Eerie but moving all the same.

If she thought it took her a long time to find this group of boxes, it'll take her a week more just to dig up the psychiatric interviews with *Margot's Fever's*

former captain. A man who claimed that the vessels witnessed split second phase out of our reality and then back again, had actually taken ten years on the far side of time in our solar system, and in which time he met, befriended, and was educated on the specifics of never before seen technology by a metal box of navigation goo, which he said called itself 'K' and then later on Kelvin. All of which was hidden from the public, and was provided in the exact same format as the files which helped to create the Fore E's engine in the first place. An interesting pickle. Or so Gemma thought.

"Can you feel it? That static buzzing in the air?"

The man is positively vibrating with energy, he is so excited. People under duress tend to fall into one of three categories, all out terror, unbridled excitement, or total apathy. My friend here is a category two, I'm more of a three who swings into a category one when I'm trying to get any sleep. My man Encino here is an adrenaline junkie, and he's so excited to go kill some 'bad guys' that he seems to be able to walk on air he is so elated. Big dude, but didn't quite hit the mark to pilot his own walking tanker unit. So he balked at the chance to be a Fire Team leader while sulking, and instead is our squads heavy. In size and savagery. You need a jar, or a chest cavity opened, he's your boy. Not an ounce of fat on him, and no self doubt either. He's a real menace when the Mississippi leg hound in him takes full effect. He doesn't have many close friends, let's put it that way, but he's a hulking, useful idiot. My role, unofficially that is, is to guide his worst, yet most squad beneficial tendencies towards our targets and goals. Wind him up, point him in the direction where his carnage suits our needs, then collect him afterwards.

"That's the static charge coming off of the rail guns, if I have my ship board weapons load out correct. We're placed directly behind the port side battery, and there's a slug loader located directly underneath our dormitory. That lump, dump, bap bap bap, we here is them testing the auto loader, and switching between round types. The heavier the slug the harder we feel the spring loaded arms collapse into place." I said, knowing full well that Encino isn't really listening to me.

He's staring out the view port from our common room lounge watching the welders doing EVA's while attaching additional guns and armor plating to the hull. The shielded torches they are using spew white phosphorus out a ceramic nozzle, and occasionally sputters and splatters of weld material pop off and float around like angry fire flies. The wash of the phosphorus lights up the hull for several meters even in the inky blackness, and you start to get a sense of just how massive some of The Company's vessels really are. Those brilliantly bright spots are scattered all over the hull, at least from our vantage point. The scale is immense, and terrifying. This ship, *The Dirty Starling* is humongous. A real behemoth of man made ingenuity. Encino is standing with his broad nose pressed firmly against the clear concrete glass, his breath shooting waves of condensation radiating out from his face every few seconds. He is visibly excited, and bumping the glass with every breath he takes. Flecks of spittle splash the glass each time he talks.

"Could you imagine being a pilot?" Encino says, his voice muffled due to his face being pressed against the glass. "The big ships aren't all that much fun to pilot, the navigators do all the heavy lifting anyway." I say, now that I'm comfortable in my own lounge chair, and I can tell than Encino is here to stay for a while. No need to stand needlessly while I babysit him. Taking my seat I look around the room to make sure we won't get any surprise visitors.

I occasionally have to wave off both men and women that swing by from other squads or departments who come to look at him when he isn't paying attention. Sure he's handsome. But, he's big, mean and not what you'd call a gentle lover. That big dumb grin of his seems to pull anyone not using their brain into his orbit of any sexual orientation you can imagine, and then I have hours of paper work to file on his behalf. I've made it known he'd be more inclined to enjoy fucking a raging bull moose than a typical human, but that grin, and his muscles lure them in anyway. I can only unform so many human pretzels in my life time. The only acknowledgement from Encino on the matter was a surprise "I really hurt him." He said, once, over breakfast when reaching for an apple.

Outside in the vacuum the welders are walking over the kilometers of hull plates looking for any signs of weakness and damage. As the flotilla wide count down clocks draw nearer to zero, the pace of the work increases. Tiny single person vehicles scuttle about, holding weapons, or beams or instrumentation clutched in their extendable arms. The pilots have one hand in a haptic glove which allows them to perform some very minute actions with the claws, or other tools on the end of the arm. Imagine a tuna can flying fat sides forward and back, with a torso sized bubble out the front, and a massive multi tiered arm mounted below it. The back is all thruster cones and a rack for spare tooling for the arms. Cameras and lights fill the rest of the space on the small squat crab

unit. That's our boy Encino's dream vehicle. To mill about space in a rickety old crab unit, fixing stuff and exploring the exterior of any large vessel. All the while dressed for EVA, because those crab units don't have any life support in them. Step in and go! Handy if you're rated for the appropriate exterior working gear. I mean, you could potentially use out fight suits in it, but you couldn't weld anything as that 5000 degree phosphorus would bleed right through the material in seconds. All of the low level pilots onboard the *Dirty Starling* have their welders guild licences. Those orange and black tuna cans are pretty nimble when they want to be. I think they are ugly as all get out, but to Encino, that shit's The Tits.

The PA system crackles to life drawing me out of my reverie. "This is a flotilla wide announcement. We have T-Minus six hours until we commence Operation Scouring Pad. Please meet at your designated muster stations when we reach T-Minus two hours. Your station chiefs will see that you are prepped, dressed and loaded into the appropriate transports, based on waves, and objectives. This message will repeat..."

The crackle dies down as the volume of the message drops a few percent after each repetition. A large flashing blue and orange light let's us know that we can still tune in to the flotilla wide communications channel directly from our wrist biometrics to hear the message or read it if need be. The machine shop guys usually need to read them while the shop is so uncomfortably loud.

"You know what the favourite part of my day is." Encino asks me as we walk side by side to our muster station together. "That brief second when I catch the smell of my neck ring going over my head. It smells like the beach near where I grew up." He smiles at this. He doesn't follow it up with anything else. All I can think about is how after three months the battle is only a few hours away, and I need to take a shit.

"Marshala my main man, listen I have a real squeaker on the docket, think you can make a quick run for me?"

Shouts a fat man from further down the hall. His gut hanging out of the door from the supply chain command post. "I got this Ghost fella that needs to be run

over to *The Righteous Chord*, via an extra stop off to pick up some fuel cell rods from *The Dirty Starling*. Take you forty minutes tops, man. You up for it?" The fat man is chewing on a tobacco roll, like an unlit cigar, but still stinks, turns your finger tips and lips yellow, and is generally considered to be really unhealthy. Marshala stops in his tracks, not yet to his berth, so still just outside the threshold to the change rooms, and thus nearly free from any extra duties. "Countdown clock reads an hour. That's cutting things close Rodario." Marshala counters. "Come on man, this one got handed to me last minute, this is a VIP transfer, and a pick up. They'll have a crab unit ready and waiting to handle the fuel rods. You drive by, grab the rods, put this Ghost down in his new digs and high tail it home. What do you say?" He smiles, a yellow gap toothed smile. The stench from the tobacco roll oozes from his every pore. "Not buying it Rodario. You forgot about it, now you want to make it my problem. Clocks ticking Rody." The pilot grins, shifting his helmet from one arm to the crook of the other. "Fuck, fine. Triple time pay, plus the VIP bonus." He sneers. "And?" Retorts Marshala. "What? Fuck me, and. And nothing." Rodario snaps, his smile fading quickly. "Tick-tock, tick-tock" answers Marshala in a mocking sing song voice. "Christ almighty in heaven, fine. You can have the fuel rod danger pay stipend aswell. But only a portion, as it's a quarter load only." He says, reaching his arm out of his office to hand the bill of lading forms to Marshala. "You got it boss." Marshala takes the papers and bolts back up the hall at full tilt towards his run about. Coming around the side he unsnaps the fueling lines, and toggles through the warm up check list, the dial indicators showing that the ship hasn't completely cooled down yet from his previous trip. Strapping himself in he clicks his helmet into place feeling the coolness of his neck ring bite at his finger tips. Feeling the thunk of the latch catching, he gets an all clear from the central command tower, almost immediately after typing in his ID code and supply chain docket number. Rodario must have had him moved up in the queue in order to get this last minute trip done. Checking his wrist biometric unit, Marshala sees the clocks down to forty three minutes. Going to be a tight one he thinks, as the thrusters push him hard against his restraints as he backs the run about out of its housing.

The run about is a great little eight seater ship for taking small groups of people between larger ships, or transporting goods to another vessels dry docks, or cargo hold. Nimble, reliable, and most importantly, not orange and black like every other fucking thing build by The Company aeronautics people. Marshala's run about is sky blue with a hint of yellow mixed in. The interior is a faux white leather, that is well worn, but in good condition. That's why he gets to do the baby sitting tour guide trips with Company VIP's. His ship *The Renaissance*, also has a wet bar, though no one ever seems inclined to drink when vertigo can strike at any time. Marshala loves in inspire his VIP's by approaching the larger vessels in the flotilla at 90 degree angles to what they

felt was up or down, and see them gasp once it dawns on them. A bit of pilot humor.

Looking at his bill of lading, the *Jolene Roger* will be a straight shot three kilometers starboard to collect his Ghost crew guest. Then an about face, drop 90 degrees for one kilometer to grab the fuel rods from *The Dirty Starling* and then book it to the reception desk at *The Righteous Chord* to drop off his passenger, and then a mad scramble back to *The Lark Song*, before they jump into battle stations where he has several hours before his fourth wave gets called into action. Nothing special, just tight timelines care of the fat bastard himself Rodario. Though he had to admit holding out for all the added bonuses, stipends and overtime was a stroke of genius. Rodario really must have dropped that ball to accept all of those charges this late in the game, but who was Marshala to turn down nearly eleven thousand credits for one forty minute run.

The jaunt from *The Lark Song* to the *Jolene Roger*, was uneventful. Black, bleak and boring. Taking Marshala less than three minutes to cover the distance. He was guided to his pick up point by an automated bouy that towed him in the last five hundred meters, and a shadowy figure clinked and thunked his way through the airlock at the top of the run about. The medium sized man in a bizarrely harnessed beige jumpsuit floated in nonchalantly and buckled himself down two rows back. Close enough to talk, but not too close. Akin to taking the second urinal over in the men's room, if you will. Without looking back Marshala says "Get comfortable but don't take your helmet off ok." After a brief, yet agonizing pause Marshala was given the go ahead to flop into a dive, relative to the *Roger's* position, and head for the *Dirty Starling's* cargo hold. The run about peeled away with an audible gasp from the Ghost crew, who followed it up with both a hoot, and a holler. Marshala was zipping now, he had an open lane in front of him, as everyone else was packing it in, and heading back to their berths for the flotilla's jump into battle.

A proximity alarm sounds causing Marshala to have to produce some evasive maneuvers to avoid a field of shrapnel. Somebody must have lit off a couple of fuel rods and not lived to tell the tale, as the shipping lanes weren't marked, or rerouted yet. Looking at the countdown Marshala has a full twenty five minutes left. As the *Renaissance* shoots across the void the automated buoys have been recalled and Marshala has to find his own way to the tiny crab unit that is supposed to be waiting for him, in order to load his fuel rods. The running lights on the *Dirty Starling* are off in preparation for the jump, so Marshala has to call in manually. All taking precious minutes. Toggling switches on his dash he sees his own wrist communicator is pinging him with an urgent message from Rodario. The radio crackles with static. "Nice of you to arrive *Renaissance*. Crab unit ninety one is on it's way. Be there in four minutes." The

radio clicks off. Countdown clock reads seventeen minutes left. "Still good. Still good." He whispers. Just as foretold the crab unit floats by and racks the fuel rods in one fluid motion, and Marshala rockets off without waiting for the all clear. Shaving off seconds of delays is a matter of life and death at this point.

Turning to look over his shoulder Marshala says "I can't come in with you, so be ready and waiting in the air lock. I'll give you a wee push, and you go in. I'm not going to stop, so be ready. And be careful." A gulp and the sound of a buckle unclasp answers him. Toggling the intercom Marshala shouts over the sounds of the air pumps. "I'm not going to pump out all of the air. I need some to help propel you to the airlock doors. I'll wait as long as I can to see you go in, but otherwise you're on your own." The loud banging of the pumps makes Marshala's seat vibrate. "Oh, ok... I guess. Thank you?" The Ghost offers from inside the air lock. The red digits of the countdown clock on his dash shows eleven minutes. In moments *The Righteous Chord* looms large in the cabin windows and Marshala comes screaming in over the hull as he dives into a roll over towards the aft cargo bay. Orienting his air lock door to the main cargo hold Marshala brings the run about *The Renaissance* down to a crawl. "On my mark - mark!" He shouts, as a beige projectile fires out of the air lock with an icy puff of grey. Sitting with both hands on his joy sticks, one eye on the Ghost Crew and his other eye on the slowly counting down clock Marshala just breathes. His sensor array shows the Ghost approaching at a fast, but survivable speed. Three hundred meters, 10 minutes, two hundred seventy five meters, nine minutes forty seconds, two hundred fifty meters, nine minutes twenty, on and on, as both the countdown clock and the distance go down in tandem. With a triple click over the comm's, a standard call for all clear, Marshala watches as the cargo bay doors creep open, and the beige body slips safely inside.

Like a canon ball Marshala pushes his run about to the near red line as he careens back towards the *Lark Song*, from the under belly of *The Righteous Chord*. His arms pinned to his arm rests, and breathing hard in the haut-haut, chest compression chant he was trained to use to keep his blood pumping under pressure, he races back to the homing beacon emanating from his dry dock berth. As the coordinates draw near, and the count down clock still registers three minutes and fourteen seconds he eases back on the throttle, only to notice that his fuel gauge is on empty. With only his attitude adjustment thrusters available to him now Marshala begins to sweat. A trickle beads up on his brow, and rolls slowly towards his eye. Within moments the *Renaissance* goes dead stick in his hands, and the craft begins to tumble on all three axis. The g forces are too much to handle, Marshala blacks out.

From out of the darkness a previously recalled bouy reboots, and bursts free from its holding station. It connects blindly to a tumbling blue run about, and brings it in for docking, using every ounce of fuel reserves to steady the ships tumble. The pilot is unconscious, but within seconds of locking in place in the berth aboard the large vessel, *The Lark Song* jumps into battle.

The news was unwelcome,

And was not taken in stride. Rather Racquelle receded into herself at the news of the impending Company flotilla. Twelve vessels ranging from city sized behemoths, to mid range ships capable of holding forty thousand or more. Then there are the smaller ships that barely hold more than a few thousand. The behemoths will disgorge a vast swarm of fighters, drop ships, escorts and work vehicles. As far as Racquelle was concerned this was going to be a massacre. A fast, violent and ultimately brutal escapade in her otherwise hard won life. No stranger to storming ships like a pirate to capture crew and cargo for the doctor. But somewhere deep down she always thought she'd retire to a far off colony, to spend the rest of her days turning soil at the hands of a shovel. The rich thick scent of muddy loam firmly entrenched in her nostrils. A patchy cloud covered sky overhead, and a fading sunset a part of her last days alive. The impartiality of the news given by K, and its humanoid companion Katayna, a icy dagger into her heart.

Much to her dismay K had created a massive countdown clock that was visible no matter where Racquelle turned. Whether to torture her, or remove all doubt of the looming invasion, she didn't know, and didn't venture to ask. Choosing instead to wrap herself in gluttonous meals, and warm blankets woven from the remains of K's original crew, when K was not a former human & ship amalgam, but a star faring human from centuries before. The tender soft brush of cool silks against her cheeks were of little solace. The meals, while sumptuous, tasted of ash and decay. Her sleep wracked with despair, and her waking moments drowned under a pall of frozen terror.

Twisted in her sheets, staring blindly out of the windows provided by K, Racquelle sits, motionless waiting for the first signs of contact. A subtle shift in the stars. A blinking out to black as the back drop becomes obscured by the

vicious Company flotilla. All the while, the large colorless numbers creep ever onwards towards zero.

"Racquelle dear, would you please open the door. I know enough about you that I don't wish to break in against your will. Please. I have urgent news." Katayna whispers through the doors to Racquelle's quarters. In a fit of humanity, she lays her head against the door with a light thud. The oddly heavy, and dense nanotech make up of her body making her much heavier than one would think. After a pause the door hatch clinks as the locks unlatch. Taking a moment to let the door open entirely before entering Katayna flexes her hands nervously. The intense social interaction with Racquelle has rubbed off on her noticeably. Taking on more and more subconscious ticks, like blinking, pupil dilation, coughs and finding reasons to play with her finger nails, such as they are.

"Racquelle, I have some rather disturbing news." Whispers Katayna as she glides into the room. "Great!, is there a secondary fleet too?" Shouts Racquelle from within the tangled sheets of her bed. "Well, yes, in a manner of speaking, but that isn't why I need to talk to you." Answers Katayna. "What!?!, what do you mean that's not the news you want to talk to me about, what could possible be more important?" Shrieks Racquelle in a hysterically shrill moan. "I do believe the second grouping to have originated from **UB313**, and would be classified as friendlies. Potentially. Though I'm sensing more organic material than normal out of that cluster. But based on human DNA. Odd, really." She says, pulling a face, her head tilting less dramatically to the side while recalling other data. "No - my issue is I have discovered a partition, well several if them in our data banks. They are road blocks we, I, K and myself cannot penetrate, but we estimate they contain the same quantity of data as we have decrypted from the slew of outgoing messages we've found. I need you to try to breach the partitions for me." Whispers Katayna so quietly that Racquelle has to hold her breath in order to hear it entirely.

"Even with all of the new data processing power we've managed to plug into, we can't break the partitions. I think it has something to do with you. Something you did, or are going to do?" Katayna rasps into the darkness of Racquelle's room.

Everywhere is darkness, all I can see, hear, think, is death

Fear smells of death. Decaying flesh sealed tight into a jumpsuit. We just don't know it yet. The fog of war makes me think things are going well for us. At least it seemed so at first. The thing about best laid plans and all is that they go to shit when you're fighting people diametrically different than you are. We had no way to plan for what they threw at us.

It was a massacre of biblical proportions, steeped in blood and effluence. Viscous gore in near zero gravity causing mayhem on the ground, plastered to our visors, and gumming up exposed moving parts. Chips and fragments of bone piercing us from every angle. Troops caught in ferocious traps built to maim and to terrify. Splattered guts and limbs thrown about like dandelion seeds on the wind. We were but dust in a maelstrom.

We threw our newest technology at them, they countered with ghastly biological hulking monstrosities that ripped and roared and consumed as much as they killed. Growing and shambling along like mindless conglomerates of green tinged limbs. Grasping and tearing, ripping and rending flesh from bone. Soaking up endless rounds of ammo, unconcerned for their own well being. A mindless horde exposed to the vacuum of space, ceaselessly encroaching on our placements. Leaving wide swaths of devastation in their wake. Gaping maws of ragged teeth, bone spurs and sharp spines. Belching pus and bile, sloshing around like over filled buckets of chum.

Our automated Fire Teams and Tankers cut through them like butter when the Admiral finally put the augmented boots on the ground. A charnel house of ruined plant materials intermingled with human bodies littered every surface of the barren waste of *UB313*. But as our side began to make headway, that's when they started the unthinkable. They had even bigger monsters waiting on the float, just out of sensor range, hiding among the heavenly bodies, as old as ice. Who began to spin up the available asteroids and unleash them upon *UB313*. Obliterating the fighting forces, their own and ours alike. Whatever had been on the surface, or buried beneath the surface in the base itself, pulverized to dust and chunks of wet molecules effectively beating us to the punch, as the mobile Bison Drones were trained to do the exact same thing. It turns out the two sides weren't so different after all. In the heat of battle both the Fire Teams and Tanker units somehow managed to retreat. I saw them come apart at the seams, as if they had broken down into a cloud of ash and then reformed, over and over.

I was jettisoned from a larger chunk of *UB313* and cast out into the void, helpless. Screaming as I tumbled in the darkness. Calling out on every possible channel I could remember. It was dumb luck that one of the smaller runabouts was nearby and was able to swoop in and pick me up. It was from the squashed confines of this crab unit that I was able to take in the navy battle of The Company flotilla.

From a distance the naval battle of the flotilla looked modest and rather dull. But upon closer inspection it was a chaotic mess. With no more large scale targets to go scrutinize, with the obliteration of *UB313* the vast city sized ships sat idle. I suppose the assumption was that with the black ops insurgency base destroyed, the battle was won. Not realizing the swarm of hungry plantmen hybrids were bearing down upon them from the shadows and crevices of the wreckage. Feeding off of the decaying remnants of the ground attack, and enriching themselves in the wash of the fleets great engines. The UV light put out by all of those behemoths swelled the ranks of the plantmen hybrids a thousand fold.

Soon the plantmen hybrids would breach the hulls and disgorge massive clouds of fungal spores, ensnaring the crews, bringing them to their knees. That was until the nanotech integrated Fire Teams and Tankers were alerted to the matter by the last great call from the flotilla wide emergency broadcast systems.

Over a period of days each side would swing from near defeat to near total victory and back again. Over and over. Equally matched in their single minded desire to win at all costs. Mindless machine versus mindless biological fungus.

Those infected by the spores were brought low in a matter of hours. Not quite dead yet, no longer really alive. Their flesh putrefying from the lungs outward. Their flesh and organs liquefying slowly, as they bled into lengths of intermingled puddles of blooming fungus. Like a mushroom farm grown out of a field of messy dead bodies. Great blooms of orange, red, purples and blues. Fantastical spires of fleshy mushrooms with broad angled caps and sticky bulbous stems. A colorful wonderland of fungal gardens. That smelled of vacated bowels and the last gasped breaths of the dying. The air a thick moist fog of spores, and yeast, and the condensation from evaporating blood, and liquefied internal organs.

Many miles away. "Racquelle. It has begun. If you don't breach the partitions for us, I fear this war will make it's way back to Earth, and to every single human colony. This will not end here. You must help us. You have to act!" Katayna whispers urgently into the ear of a huddled and crying Racquelle. Her weakened body tangled submissively in her bed sheets. Her skin a pallid off

white, with specks of blue around her lips. The fear of the impending battle has stolen her appetite, draining the fight from her, stealing her will to live. "But I don't know how." She whispers back, through dry and cracked lips. Limply she lies against the seated Katayna. Glancing over the frail body of Racquelle, Katayna says. "I need you to give me a hand." Katayna croons soothingly into Racquelle's ear. Brushing her lank hair away from her ear, and over a sallow and sunken cheek. With a mighty effort Racquelle pulls out of Katayna's arms to raise her right hand palm up to Katayna's waiting cupped hands. A single tear rolls down Katayna's face. In one smooth motion forms a long blade with her fist as she cuts Racquelle's arm off just below the elbow, as Racquelle crashes back against the bed in a spasm of pain. Amidst the shrieking and flailing Katayna stands up, lifting the severed limb and quietly leaves the room. A thick stream of blood falls in her wake. The shouts of anguish echo around the hall behind her. The door wooshes closed quietly and the muffled screams continue unabated.

Seventy two hours after the first hull breach by the plantmen hybrids a mysterious vessel of writhing off white and grey appears. It blasts out a single tone, like a fog horn, on a private frequency, causing all of the integrated Fire Teams and Tanker units to fall back from the fighting. The nanobots cannot resist the sirens call. K bids them to retreat to him.

Vast swarms of nanobots flood through the hull breaches and rapidly descend upon the mysterious vessel known as K. Soundlessly the nanobots assimilate into the hull, and the ship begins to transform. Gathering itself up to strike K splits into a multitude of hungry tendrils, feasting upon the flotilla, the plantmen, and all of the fungal remains of the crew. Increasing in size, and exponentially growing more tendrils to feast. The vessel known as K gives way to his basest instinct to feed and grow and consume. He can feel himself becoming lost in the primal urges of expansion and growth.

In the bridge Katayna stands unnoticed with the severed limb of Racquelle's, ready to place the hand palm down on a lock box keyed to the her DNA. Time is running out. She can feel herself, and K, growing rapidly, losing all sense of himself in the ever growing feedback from such rapid growth. Pressing down lightly on the palm shaped lock with the limp hand, a loud click sounds. A puff of dust and smokes is emitted, and an inner lock whirs open slowly. A tiny door springs open, and a dazzling purple light shines out. Inside the fist sized chamber is a glowing purple push button. Without any hesitation Katayna slams the palm of the severed limb down on the button.

In the heavy dust cloud of the remains of *UB313*, the massive vessel known as K, the entire Company flotilla, and all of the plantmen hybrids phase out of existence with a crackle of lightening, a thousand cubic kilometers wide.

In the one hundred billionth fraction of a second it takes to transit, K is simultaneously inside a grey box, a pink glob of goo, having an ongoing conversation over several years with the captain of *Margot's Fever*. Passing through a wormhole via galactic distortion giving him the basis for the idea of the Fore E's engine, talking to his best friend the morning before the last shift he ever did with a full crew as a human, fighting a rogue android AI on the run from him as a man now named Karcher, evading a solar storm and mistakenly banging against a Mark One capsule near Pluto effectively killing *The Non Sequitur*, during a test jump using the new engine design for the first time. He is time, all at once, yet separate.

In the blink of an eye, it's all gone. Many years later the university on *Torus Station*, and on Mars will teach classes devoted to what happened here. But for now, it's all a mess from the fog of war. We're all dead, we just didn't know it yet.

PART TWO:

"I'm absolutely amazed that you've managed to get away with that..."

For so long, I mean, it's kind of disgusting... the smut that you write." Barks the stout middle aged man whilst walking around in the garden of the slovenly seated man. He is sat slumped in a deck chair, bent low over his dirty keyboard, the man looks up from his cracked screen and blinks rapidly in the glare of the hot overhead sun. Both to moisten his eyes after staring for a long period of time, and to give himself an excuse to cultivate a scathing rebuttal. "It isn't smut, fuck you very much, it's romance. And I do not apologize for my romantic bent having a thoroughly sexual vein running through it. If you pardon my phallic pun of sorts." Quips the pudgy gentleman from his rustic looking deck chair. "Who the fuck asked you in the first place? As I recall, Benji, I pay you to look after my gardens not to interrupt me when my pages are finally starting to come together!" Leaning back now in his cruddy wicker deck chair, stretching until his spine pops loudly between his shoulder blades the pudgy writer smiles and waves lazily at a mosquito buzzing by his ear. The garden isn't huge, but it's quiet and secluded with massive rhododendrons and lilac bushes, surrounded by forsythia and Russian Olive trees. The garden smells divine on this late spring afternoon. A big proponent of Hostas and Day Lilies and all manner of shrubs, the writer is slowly rising from his chair. "What do you care anyway Benji? I didn't think you even read my stuff." Standing a few steps away, half buried in the overgrowth of a gargantuan rhododendron Benji quips "I fucking well don't, but I caught Gary reading one in the tub last night and I could hear his breath catch in his throat. He moans ever so softly to himself when he reads anything racy. So I picked up the book to peruse the chapter he was reading and it was all about throbbing this, and heaving that, with glistening chests and wetness and moisture. Oh god! It's so hacky, it's like every tainted soft core porno trope wrapped up in a bow. I couldn't believe Gary was so turned on by it!" Benji is sweating profusely under the partial cover of the shrub, not only because it's thirty some odd degrees in the cloudless heat. "Gary reads my stuff? I'm touched. People keep buying it, so I'll continue to write it. Also, as a side note, my mother wants you to deadhead my roses again this year, she likes to see the bushes in full bloom from her bedroom window." Both men turn away from the rhododendron to face across the yard to the next house over, where a tiny ancient woman sits smiling and waving from her modest porch overlooking the garden. "Damn straight Benji!, my little Julian wants me to be able to see those roses in bloom! From my bed!" Benji's face contorts between a smirk and a grimace. "Oh of course my dearie, any thing for you - you shrivelled hag" he mutters under his breath. "Come at me you bitch!" Blurts the elderly woman while waving both arthritic middle fingers around in a

figure eight pattern. "You leave my lovely boys alone, you know how much my Gary and Julian mean to me."

"You look terrible, what happened to you?"

Shouts the older grey haired man almost immediately after pushing his way through the grimy glass revolving doors, knocking an elderly man's elbow causing him to fumble his hat, dropping it and then kicking it out into the gutter. Crossing the shabby lobby faux marble floor directly towards the rather bohemian looking man in a mad rush, his hawkish angular features pulled back into a sneer. "Oh, don't start with me Derek, it's this whole thing. I'm tired and sore so just leave me alone this one time, ok, huh!" squeaks the meager looking man shambling along with the flow of foot traffic heading to the thick line up for the elevators into the enormous and drab building. Pulling along beside the bedraggled man, Derek leans down over top of him and whispers "Come on little man, tell me, you always have the best stories. I need another doozy to impress the c-suite suits!" It's a harsh whisper, the kind that carries and reverberates off of the polished concrete and forty year old wooden accents on the wall behind the sconces. Above the bank of elevator doors the massive brass clock ticks away noisily. People stand crammed together in the tight space, shuffling their feet and readjusting ties and hair pins. The heat of other peoples breathe is starting to make the little man sweat. Somebody has eaten day old eggs and sardines. "It was nothing really, nothing much at all!" whimpers the emaciated man. "Not sure why Doris made me sleep on the couch, I didn't really do anything wrong." His voice a wet warble little more than a whine. "Sure sure, bud, of course, I know you have a good heart." "I do, I really do, I just say things sometimes, they just come out, I just tend to blurt out what I'm thinking." "I know you do, and it tends to be the gods honest truth doesn't it bud?" "It does, yes... but I don't know..." He groans. "Come on bud, the elevators almost here, just gimme the Cole's notes version." "Well, after I got home from work, Doris had made me dinner, you see, a burger, well an unbattered chicken burger to be exact, so should have seen it, it was so thick, it was glorious!" He exclaims. "Ok, ok bud, there's only twenty floors to go before this carriage gets here." "Oh, ok, yeah, so It's great you see, I'm tucking into it, and it's juicy and delicious. Then on my fifth bite I get a real heavy crunch, like, almost crack my tooth kind of crunch right?" "Yeah, ok, crunchy

chicken, not so good." "Yeah, so I says, without thinking mind you, 'Oh! must of had a bit of beak!' and Doris without missing a beat, she throws up, all over Avery and Gemma. That's my boy and my little girl see, they're attached at the hip with Doris. Then they start to throw up, on themselves, each other and Doris too, you know for good measure. Then the dog wanders into the room because of all the commotion, you know?" "Dogs and commotion! It's a real thing, I believe you." "So he starts feasting on it, it is fountaining out of all three of them, all over the walls, the floor, each other's hair, the carpet, the couch. It was absolutely everywhere." "Oh, dear god man. why would you say that?" "I don't know, it just sorta slipped out. Either way, Doris threatened divorce yet again, and they all retired to bed and I spent the first half of the evening cleaning it all up because..." Cutting across him Derek adds in. "Because you had to sleep on the couch, ok got it! Great, thanks bud." With a loud chime the elevator signals its descent to the main floor lobby, and Derek pushes beyond the little man, and leaves him to wait for the next one. As the door closes Derek points his finger guns at the man and gives him a thumbs up.

It's seven o'clock on a Monday evening,

In mid November, and the day was dreary, grey and cold. The leaves have long since fallen from the trees, and everything is a mucky mixture of crushed leaves and water logged grass clippings in mud. The wind has started to pick up and what was a bland flat lit day is now quickly deteriorating into a murky black dusk. Perfect timing for it to begin to down pour now that we have to pack up all our things, muster the kids into the car, and head home after the impromptu long weekend spent at the cottage preparing for the coming of winter. It has been a bitterly cold, and long weekend spent out of doors, tackling chores that were better suited to the warmer days of late September or even early October. But alas, priorities for all involved were not exactly aligned at that point in the year. So here we are, two tired and mopey children, a cascade of rain hammering down in sheets, and the prospect of a three hour drive home, and then school early in the morning. Our youngest has napped for the first time in two years today. Not a good sign. But she doesn't have a temperature and isn't coughing or sneezing, so onward we press, towards home. Fifteen minutes into the drive, she begins to vomit all down her front, and into her car seat. She

manages to do this in near silence. But my wife, whom is driving, notices her rolling forwards in the glare of the rear view mirror. "She's throwing up!". She says, nudging my arm. I turn to look into the back seat, and there is the eldest, hands on chin, deeply engrossed in her movie. "Not her, it's Ashley!". Twisting to look directly behind me, I can see the dark grime on Ashley's chin and chest from where she has thrown up her chocolate milk and what looks like a first full of Cheetos. "Oh!" I say. I frantically dig around at the kids feet to find any old containers. Finding an old cookie tin I hold it up to Ashley's face as she bucks and heaves into a coughing fit followed by a glob of vomit. "No.... no... I don't want it daddy....!" She screams in between heaves. "It's ok baby, this will keep you cleaner, I can tip it out once we stop off the highway." Variations of this follow until we pull off the rural highway, and come to a stop under a street lamp outside of a road side restaurant. Opening the door to assess the level of destruction. It's not too bad, a bit on her chest, face and hands, and a glob on her leg and a dribble or two on the chest harness of her car seat. In a wave of miasma the smell hits me full in the face. To my dismay I then realize, our Ashley has been out of diapers for more than a year, and we no longer travel with a diaper bag, or wet wipes. Thinking quickly my wife hops out of the driver's seat, while my eldest quivers at the sight and smell of her younger sister's stomach contents. Rooting through her luggage to hand me an old worn t-shirt. I unstrap Ashley and proceed to wipe her down, face, chest, hands and legs. I pick her up for a look over and shuffle her off to the back of the car for a change of clothes. A few heart beats later we're strapped back in, she is sound asleep, and we are back on the road. It is still raining heavily, and the night is both dark and cold. The youngest, Ashley, will not be attending school the next day.

"The frame on the stroller is bent..."

How the hell did you manage to do that!" He shouts from the front door, his voice carrying down the length of the hall to the occupied bedrooms. His breath steaming in the icy morning chill air. "Sweet cheese babe, the two swing arms that are supposed to move up and down are bent entirely outwards. It's a steel plate you've bent, how? Just how? Why would you - why on earth, just what were you even trying to do?" The stream of consciousness is rambling out of the man in an irritated staccato. Followed intermittently by loud sighs and

gasps of suppressed rage. "You had to unfold it to use it, didn't you look to see how the mechanism worked when you set it up?" With a sudden whoosh the front doors shut, and loud stomps across the front porch can be heard. His voice fades into muffled exclamations of indignant confusion. It is Friday morning. The sun is shining, though mostly obscured by wispy clouds on a brisk early morning breeze. Life moves on.

"Do you know what I'll do?..."

He exclaimed rising from his overly soft sofa cushion, finger jabbing menacingly into the air. "I know just what I'll do!" He bellows into the chaotic room littered with wrapping paper and shards of open gift containers. "What's that dad?" A tiny voice asks from the corner of the sectional. "I'll steal their Christmas! Ha ha ha ha...." roars the plump middle aged man whom is likely to do no such thing. "But dad - it's already Christmas!" .

Those dark shadows in between.

Could be the lack of brilliant sun shine, it could very well be the onset of the winter cold. The feeling of being adrift and starting to float reminds me of being depressed in my teens due to medications, & fatigue from Crohn's Disease. I find myself wanting to sleep more and more, losing interest in hobbies, and also having angry or violent dreams at night. My sleep is restless and every day feels the same regardless of holiday, weekday or weekend. I realize the pandemic has us all on edge and have recently discovered what a low level panic attack feels like, and bud, I feel for all of you whom have had to deal with a full fledged version, because, WOW!, unpleasant. I also know that I'm really getting inside my own head of late, and that's not a good place to spend too much time. I do have introverted tendencies, so I love alone time and being quiet, but that's when it is by choice and not foisted upon me by external

forces I have zero control over. It can sometimes feel like a weight pressing down on my shoulders while the tide is trying to kick my feet out from under me. However, soon enough there will be sunshine, warm, grass and flowers and the ability to get outdoors more comfortably. It's not all bleak and gloomy though. I did get the last book in a great series to read for Christmas, so I do intend to enjoy that as much as possible. And, reading about the exploits of the James Webb Space Telescope has been rather exciting! (JWST) For the potential science win. Woot woot!

"And you've had a job before this one correct?"

"Yes, that's true I worked at an aquatic zoo."

"Is that like an aquarium?"

"Oh, you know that term, I assumed that was just insider corporate jargon."

"No, no - that's a fairly common term for water based fish conservation."

"Hmmm. I respectfully disagree."

"Well, can you tell me what lessons you learned working at the aquarium."

"There you go, throwing that corporate jargon in my face. The fish zoo I worked at had several kinds of penguins and bottle nosed dolphins."

"Ok, do go on please."

"Sure thing. Ah - the first piece of information is that penguins can be vicious. And dolphins like to engage in rape."

"COUGH! - Goodness I wasn't aware of that. How did you learn those things and what actions did you take because of it?"

"Yeah, ok, right. Well, what can I say - penguins can't take a punch. And I don't recommend retaliating against a dolphin by raping it with said stunned penguin. That's for sure. No sir."

"Wait - were, were you raped by a dolphin?"

"To be fair... what do you know about lady dolphin vaginal secretions?"

"Good lord , nothing. I don't know anything about female dolphin vaginas."

"Count yourself lucky then doll. That shits like Valhalla. Only way there is to die in battle!"

"What does dying have to do with dolphin vaginal secretions, vicious penguins and rape?"

"Well skinny dipping in the tank and taking a dolphin dong in the bum will ruin your hole weak if you let it. Taking a short cut through the penguin exhibit nude is also not suggested."

"Jesus H Christ."

"Welp, the little bastards jumped up and bit me, so I punched it in the head. And even unconscious it was rigid which gim'me an idea, so I trekked back to the dolphin tank for a wrestle and to settle my score. You'd be amazed at how helpful an octopus can be when..."

"Oh my, well I'm sorry to say that it has just come to my attention that the current supervisory position here at Little Tykes Nursery School has been filled. Good day to you sir."