

# Gravemakers and Gunslingers

By Sylae - Nov 7 2010

The station orbited around the dark mass of the gas giant Thellyn V, its lights blinking strongly in the darkness of the void. Ships clustered around the station, awaiting their turn to dock. The Thellyn system was known for its mineral wealth, with vast mines on all of its seven rocky planetoids. Unfortunately, the area's Ring had been destroyed in a collision ten years past.

Inside the station, first officer Hans Larric was taking the night shift when he was interrupted by his navigation officer, "Sir, the *Falcon* has arrived in-system."

"Oh, right," Larric said while stifling a yawn, "Cap's big order. I'll handle the comms." he glanced down at the screen before him and pressed a button. "CMS *Falcon*, this is Thellyn station. Come in."

An image of a portly balding man in a uniform appeared on the room's primary wallscreen. "Thellyn, this is *Falcon*. Beginning standard approach this time."

"Roger that." Larric terminated the connection. "Logistics, get their metals rea--" he was interrupted by the navigation officer.

"Sir! We've got another vessel inbound! Heading towards the *Falcon*!"

"What?" Larric yelled. "Bring it up!" an image of a sleek warship appeared on the wallscreen.

"Sir," one of the officers said, "That's a Derilict frigate. An older model, looks about 50 years old."

"Comms, get me that ship's captain, now!" *Why is there a Derilict warship here?* Before he had time to answer the thought, the wallscreen changed to show the merchanter captain again.

"Thellyn! This is *Falcon*! What is the meaning of this?" An explosion sounded over the comms, and the fat man was knocked down. The screens cut out again, to display an image of a woman-- little more than a girl--smiling softly.

She said nothing, so Larric yelled at her, "You! Who are you and what is the meaning of this? Why has Derelict shown this aggression?"

The girl smiled, "The Calamity Merchant Ship *Falcon* has been seized to fund our operations. Make no move towards us until we leave, and you will not be harmed."

"You haven't answered who you are!" he yelled again.

Her smile broadened slowly. "I am Captain Jiendra Manolin of Manolin Enterprises." Larric's breath froze. Manolin. The notorious crime family, here?

He quickly remembered the manual's policy on piracy and terminated the connection. "Security. Launch all fighters at that ship." *In the event of piracy, terminate all communications and exterminate their ships ruthlessly.* "Send a general call to arms out to the merchanters, too."

"Sir, are you sure that's a goo--"

"Just do it, now!"

"Yessir."

The command floor watched as a horde of green blips on the wallscreen swarmed towards a larger red blip. Suddenly, green blips started disappearing. Soon, they were all gone.

"Sir, the pirate ship is accelerating towards the station!" Navigation yelled.

Larric sighed. "Someone go wake the captain."

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"All enemy fighters eliminated."

"Good. Deploy the Starlancers and bring us in to the station. Let's teach them a lesson."

"Heading set. ETA five minutes." Chang, the nav officer, said.

"Very well. Is the *Falcon* subdued?" Jiendra asked, leaning casually against the brass railing of the captain's dias.

"Yes, minimal casualties, and all engines disabled." Chang said.

"Good. Sanner, have the Starlancers hit them. Knock out all engines on the merchanters, and neutralize that damned station," she laughed, "Can anyone else believe they just wasted all their fighters?" The bridge laughed with her, then the Starlancers struck. Ten minutes later, it was done.

"Good. Sanner, call Dad and tell him we're ready to clean up. Not bad for a first hit, eh?"

The *Cloudsoarer's* new captain grinned as the final Starlancer returned to the docking bays.

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Lorn Manolin's grizzled face creased into a smile as his daughter entered the officer's club of the *Love and Shadow*, the family yacht. He gestured for the bartender to pour her a drink as she sat down.

Jiendra grinned as she sat down at the bar, "They were just as stupid as you predicted, Dad. Not a single loss on our side."

"Ah, we'll be set for a long time, thanks to you. You would've made your mother proud." Lorn patted her on the back. "Now your mother, she was a piece of work. Almost lost her a hundred times, but she put up with me. Did I ever tell you about the time she crashed the old yacht trying to show off?"

"No, Dad," she said, even though it was his favorite story to tell.

"Well, it was twenty years ago, about. We'd been in Yalri for about a week..." Jiendra was worried about Dad. He'd been losing his memory for a while, and now it seemed the only thing keeping him there was the old military implants he had in his head. "...And I said, 'Baby, there's no way you'll be able...' It pained her, but she'd had to have him watched, for his own safety. All of the personal family servants knew what to do in case things went for the worse...but the business had to go on with or without him. "...when that yacht came in, I knew something was wrong..." The youngest of five, she was somehow the first choice for heir in the family. Two of

her siblings had chosen more legal business practices, another was a no-good slacker, and the other would be nothing more than a hotshot pilot and knew it. That left her, Jiendra Eyrina Manolin, in charge of making sure Dad didn't lose it and mistake the airlock for the bathroom. "...and that's why you always belt in during landings. Only reason nobody was hurt."

"Yes, Dad." Jiendra said, nursing the drink. "You still need to talk to the Jariolan man today."

"The Jariolans? What'd they do?" Dad asked, confusion clouding his eyes.

"Nothing, nothing, they're just looking for a good deal on dreamdust, and they think we'll buy it."

"So we're buying from them?"

"No, Dad. Their dust is second-rate and we already have suppliers." Jiendra said, smiling soothingly."

"Oh..." Dad said, "I'm sorry. Sometimes it's just so hard to remember these things now...but I'm not worried, I know I'll have you to look after things when I'm gone."

"You're not gone yet, Dad. Don't worry, you've got plenty of years left in you." She was so used to that lie it barely stung coming off her tongue.

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## The Astro Empire

By Zoe - Nov 24 2010

5 fast scout ships entered the system. 5 out of 8. Thankfully, the three that were lost weren't of special importance. Heartless to think, but after everything that has happened... Amethyst, a man very young looking for his age of 40, was cut off from his thoughts when his eldest daughter, a beautiful, strong 18-year-old, appeared on the comms.

"Yes, Opal?" "Hey Dad. I've spotted a ship headed for a moon in this here system." "Do you know anything about it?" "It appears to be some design of an Outpost Ship. Dunno from where. Methinks we should take it."

Amethyst thought for a bit.

"I'm going to have a talk with them," he replied before cutting the comms.

He moved his ship towards the OS, attempting to establish communication.

"Yes, yes. What do you want?" questioned the commander of the OS. "Yeah, we are in need of some assistance..." Amethyst was cut off from his lie. "WAIT! You're one of the escapees!"

"Fuck..." Amethyst said as the comms were cut off.

Amethyst opened up a audio comm to all of the other scout ships and ordered an attack on the OS. He barely dodged an attack from the OS. He looked to his scanners to grimly notice a horde of other ships on the way. Amethyst fired, hitting true on the OS's weapons. Everyone surrounded the OS and closed in. It was helpless as Opal and Amethyst boarded them.

The five man crew drew weapons and attempted to fire at the two, but the pair were too quick. Opal grabbed one of the surprised men and redirected his weapon at one of the others; Amethyst doing the same. Those two men were knocked unconscious, leaving on the OS's commander. He was promptly tied up, with the other four sent out of the ship and blown up. Everyone else boarded. The OS was now inhabited by the former commander, Amethyst, Opal, Ruby, Emerald, and the family's remaining elite guard. Amethyst and Emerald pulled out a device from their pockets. They directed the family's ships to the OS. They attached themselves to it, changing and moving their different parts. They were now standing in a modified ship.

The four remaining from what was once a large powerful family all had black hair and blue eyes. They dressed in rather dark clothing. Each had a necklace with a perfect stone matching their name. The guard had a similar dark uniform, but had no necklace. All were in excellent health.

The modified ship set off for a new destination. Amethyst wanted to make sure they get away. Ruby walked over to him and sat down. "Hey daddy, what were they doing here? I thought you said that we would be away from them forever..." she looked down. Emerald sighed. "Do you seriously think that we could completely get away?" "We have no choice but to make our presense here. I know it's hard after everything that has happened, but if we build an empire here, we will have a chance."

The family sat in silence as their new ship set off to a more remote location.

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## A Fighter's Rise: Over an Oceanic

By Jewels - Nov 29 2010

On. Off. On. Off. The tiny light kept steadily blinking, changing every second from on to off to on to off. Cadet Patella Knox stared at it. Unceasingly she stared at it. For days... no weeks... maybe even months she had stared at it. She couldn't tell any more. All she really knew is that it had been a very, very, very long time.

The light was the only beacon of hope she had that she would not die out here, alone, in the vacuum of space with this little hunk of metal as a coffin. That it was still blinking at least meant that the ship still had enough energy to send out her distress call. She was still transmitting. Someone might still come. The chances of someone *friendly* coming were still slim, but right now it was the only chance she had.

Patella, known as Ella to those close, was a fighter pilot, an expendable army grunt, and she had been for far too long. For over a year she watched as cadet after fellow cadet was promoted. It wasn't too long before Ella noticed that those being promoted now had started months after her and those who had been promoted in the beginning were now on their third and fourth promotions.

The only difference she could see between herself and the rest of them was the fact that they were either guys, or had muscles just as big as the guys. It was typical. She had expected it to an

extent, but not really this blatantly. Especially since her flying skills had always received rave reviews. She was a *good* pilot despite her tiny frame and no one would dispute that fact, but it seemed that she kept getting overlooked.

The day she had confronted her commanding officer about it was the day that started the events which had brought her here. He had barely looked up to acknowledge her presence. The field report he was studying was obviously much more important. After taking only a few minutes of his time to plead her case, 'Cadet Knox' was nodded at, told "I'll see what I can do", and waved out the door.

After two days with no word, she began to worry that he hadn't even paid attention long enough to know who she was, but on the third day a loud rapping came to her door at O-five hundred hours. Groggily Ella got up to answer the door only to find her commander standing at attention. She saluted smartly a little cringed that she was in her nightgown but still asked, "Orders, sir?"

"Get dressed cadet, and report immediately to Hanger 7D. You have been assigned to an away mission. Don't bring anything. All needed provisions have already been taken care of."

She couldn't help but smile as she answered, "Yes, sir!" It took her only ten minutes to get her clothes on and report to her ship. Ella had never been so excited in her life. So naive, she had been.

The assignment proved to be less exciting than she had hoped, but at least they were giving her a chance to prove herself. After being ordered to keep radio silence during the flight, her little Fighter was loaded up into a Frigate with three other Fighters as well.

The flight to her destination took almost a week even with the base's Jump Gate which made travel eight times faster than normal. She didn't even know what she would do when she got there. Only the one Frigate had been dispatched so it couldn't be anything big. Still, getting the assignment kept her spirits high on the whole trip.

The astro they finally pulled up to was an oceanic moon that orbited a gas giant. It was the only inhabitable astro in the solar system, but no one who understood the importance of production ever made base on an oceanic. An asteroid belt circled the star in a wider orbit, but sensors confirmed that none of them were large enough to even orbit a ship around. It was about as close to the 'boonies' as one could get.

After her ship was unloaded from the Frigate, she was told that she was to maintain orbit around this moon and scan the surrounding region continuously for any fleet, or base activity and report any changes to command central using encrypted sub-space carrier waves.

And then the Frigate left her there... alone, and undefended.

Ella supposed it wouldn't have been all that bad of an assignment, what with the replicator to keep her fed, the onboard archive to keep her entertained, and the promise of promotion to keep her spirits up. No, it wouldn't have been a bad assignment at all... if it hadn't of been for that asteroid belt.

She had tried to keep track of how many times her little fighter had been hit, but after the first dozen or so she gave up. How many asteroids had hit her was not important. How much they had damaged the ship *was*.

The first thing that had been knocked out was her sensors. The ship had shuddered violently and all computer readouts went blank. The only thing that she could use to tell what was going on was the front window. Hundreds of small bits of rock zoomed from the asteroid belt towards the moon below. It seemed to be a constant stream, and the ping, ping, ping of them ricocheting off the unshielded hull started to gain in volume and frequency.

The next big one, took her weapons systems off line followed shortly by the replicator. Realizing that she was a sitting duck, Ella maneuvered her ship to the far side of the moon before any more damage could be done. She made sure her new orbit kept the moon between her and the asteroid belt at all times now. But it was too little, too late. The ship had been crippled.

The main power reserve had been punctured leaving only the emergency backup reserve. With minimal usage, it should be able to keep the life support up and going for up to three months. Providing she didn't starve first, though. Since the replicator went down, Ella had been eating the standard issue, emergency rations. Terrible stuff, that. The older ranks still torture the new recruits by telling them they have to eat only the rations for the first year. Some have been known to quit because of it. Ella had only allowed herself to eat half a package per day, or rather she had only been able to choke down a half each day, but she still only had a dozen packages left. If only she had counted them before... then she would know how long she'd been out here, sending her distress signal, with no reply whatsoever.

The thought had crossed her mind that once her message reached homebase, it would take at least another week to reach her. In addition they had no guarantee if she would still be alive when they arrived and would have an exponentially longer return trip with no Jump Gate to assist. She was just an expendable grunt after all... Would they really spare someone to waste all that time and energy to come and get her?

Still... as long as that light kept blinking, Ella held out hope. It was always possible that someone might be in the vicinity and be willing to help. She closed her eyes for just a few minutes, to rest them. The strain of staring at one spot for however long it had been was tormenting. After a good rub, she opened them again and blinked... and blinked again. Then she tried not to blink as true fear started to creep in. Her transmission light was out and not coming back on. That also meant that life support would be failing soon as well. This was it... No one had come.

Ella looked out her front window at the moon below. No one was coming, but it didn't have to be the end, did it? Transferring all available power from life support to propulsion, she decided she was either going to land this hunk of metal on the surface or die trying.

Life alone on an oceanic? ...Only a little preferable to death, but still preferable. With any luck, the commander who had ordered her dropped off here would someday send someone to retrieve her.

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# Aldari Radiance

By Nioca - Dec 31 2010

"We're approaching Katherine Star, admiral."

Admiral Frae brushed a few wrinkles out of his uniform. "Good. Set a tight orbit and deploy solar fans. Any word from our scouts?"

"Negative, sir... But you should see the view."

Admiral Frae stood up on the bridge of the AIS *Radiance* as the view screen switched to the ship's forward view. "My god..."

In front of the capital ship *Radiance* was an incredible view of the Trisol system. The left quarter of the viewscreen was blotted out by the massive blue giant known as Katherine Star. Beyond that, they could see Hena Star and Charon Star, the latter of which had its own molten ring. And darting between these three stars was a mind-boggling array of planets and moons, a stunning number habitable. All of which was framed against the stunning backdrop of the not-too-distant Emerald Nebula.

"*It was worth it*," thought Admiral Frae. This nigh-impossible mission here was worth it, just so he could see this view. The entire bridge crew stared, transfixed at the screen for what felt like an eternity. Finally, Admiral Frae pulled himself out of his reverie and signaled the comm officer to switch to tactical view. "Alright, gentlemen, ladies... we've got a job to do. Commander Vaughn, set up the selective jammers and scanlocks. We don't want to draw the attention of every pirate and thug in this system. Commander Winston, send a message back to Fleet Command. Tell them we've arrived and our scouts are looking for a suitable location for a base within the system. Append that the Solcruiser *Radiance* is performing marvelously on its shakedown cruise."

Admiral Frae sat back down in his command chair. "Ensign Winters, start long-range scans and keep me apprised of any other vessels in the area. Ensign Striker, switch to full LAMFM engine power, and perform a full systems check. Everyone else, stand ready."

The bridge crew quickly set about their duties, pressing touchscreens and buttons, watching consoles, and performing checks. Several moments passed in relative silence. Admiral Frae sipped some coffee and looked over some old intel regarding the system. According to it, Myon was withdrawing its interests in this system... which left just Derelict and Borea. Not to mention a wide variety of rebels, radical factions, freelancers, pirates, and overzealous corporations. All competing for one of the largest known systems in the galaxy. And the Aldari Empire expected one small fleet to secure it.

This was going to be a rough assignment.

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# Broken Glass

By Sylae - Jan 3 2011

"We are sorry to hear about your loss, Miss Manolin..." the Jariolan envoy hissed, picking up his glass and taking a drink. Severe dreamdust usage had begun to turn his eyes a ruddy orange.

"Thank you. My father's death was a blow to us all," she said, thinking back to the funeral a month ago. "However, we all know that is why you are not here..." she looked across the table.

"Ah, yes...we have come upon hardship recently, and with the recent troubles in Borea--"

"The execution of three hundred of your dealers in your largest market is only troubles?"

"in light of these troubles," the envoy said loudly, "we ask that you and your company lower your transportation costs one part in ten." He smiled, showing yellow-stained teeth.

Jiendra glared at the man. "You think that because my father is dead you will be able to coax a deal from me? The transportation costs will stay. This meeting is over." she stood and turned to leave.

The Jariolan's eyes bulged. "You have the nerve to speak to me like this? You will get back here and speak to me, wench!" he stood angrily and smashed his glass against the deck. His two 'associates' behind him stiffened.

Jiendra paused at the sound of breaking glass. For her seventeenth birthday she had received a large collection of antiques, some dating back to Old Earth. Among those were a set of glasses from the Cronus National Stills. They were the only twelve known to exist. Now there were eleven.

Jiendra turned and met the man's eyes. Then she pulled the pistol from it's holster at her hip and put a shell between his eyes. Two more bullets for his men. Her fault for not using the new china.

The hatch behind her opened and two uniformed men jumped in, carrying Rean pistols similar to hers. When they saw the bodies they lowered their weapons. "Get these scumbags out of here, would you?"

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The hatch doors slid open and the men snapped to attention as Jiendra entered the bridge of the *Cloudsoarer*. "At ease," she stated as she settled into the captain's seat.

Chang stepped forward as she sat. "Captain, I heard that there was some trouble in the yacht...might I ask what happened?"

"The Jariolans decided they deserved a reduction in transportation costs. They thought breaking my glassware would make their point," Jiendra stated, "So we threw the bodies out the airlock and left. Is everyone back from shore leave?"

"Yes ma'am. We're ready to break orbit. Oh, and this came in for you." he extended an envelope to her.



Jiendra opened it and read the note inside, cleanly written: *The trader has the sword. Willing to trade.* Amazing, she had thrown that out to be a dead end months ago... "Mr. Chang, have you heard anything about Trisol?"

Chang frowned, obviously confused about the question. "Er, Myon pulled out about a week ago, according to the latest reports, but it's still nobody's system. Derilict and Borea are still squabbling over it but they have no control."

Jiendra smiled. "Message the rest of the fleet. Tell them to prepare for travel to Derelict. I've got some things I need to grab for a trip."

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## Regression

By Sylae - Nov 27 2011

"*Love*, you're cleared for descent to Derelict V," the smooth voice stated through the commset of the sleek yacht as Jiendra cycled the last systems online.

"Roger that, Cloudsoarer. *Love and Shadow* is off," she said quietly. A quick pulse of the thrusters and the yacht pulled away from the frigate orbiting around the planet.

"Good luck down there, Captain," the comms said, and Jiendra smiled. She doubted the venture down to the surface would be anything other than ordinary, but the idea of being planetside always unsettled her. It unsettled everyone who worked for the family. When you didn't have a planet of your own and had lived most of your life in a ship, the idea of gravity you couldn't turn off was very alien.

"Thanks, Cloudsoarer. *Love* out." Jiendra programmed in the descent path and leaned back as the surface of Derelict V slowly came into view. It was a small planet, and cold, most of its atmosphere stripped away. Most of the surface was glittering white, from the ice that covered most of the planet's surface. Here and there the grey specks of mines dotted the serene landscape. Derelict was known for its massive ships, and this planet was why: massive pits dug into the rock littered the surface, where huge machines forged steel ingots by the freighterload, most going to the massive shipyards orbiting IV.

It was into one of these pits *Love and Shadow* descended. One of the first mining operations on the planet, the mine had long since been abandoned to more profitable ore belts. Fifty years ago, however, this had not been just another hole in the planet; it had been the location of the IceStar's outpost in the Derelict system. As the stepped walls of the pit rose up around the yacht, spots of char and rubble began to appear. When the Republic found out about the outpost, it had not taken well. At the base of the pit a larger pile of rubble stood, alongside old mining equipment and the dust of years past. As *Love* came closer, Jiendra keyed the comms for a quick second, then released. A second later, a series of beeps sounded over the comms and a speck of light appeared in the walls of the pit. Jiendra smiled and landed the yacht next to the speck, then stood and walked back through the corridors to the airlock and donned an environmental suit.

The ground crunched underneath Jiendra's booted feet as she stepped off of *Love's* loading ramp. The speck was actually an airlock built into the walls of rock. She walked the fifty or so yards and stepped in. After cycling the airlock shut, she took off the suit's helmet and took in a deep breath of the stale air. "My, it has been a while, hasn't it?"

A computerized voice crackled from speakers mounted in the ceiling, "It has been 329 days since you were last here. Welcome back, Miss Manolin."

Jiendra sighed and nodded to nobody in particular. "Thanks, Colony. I need to take the ship artifacts," she said as she stepped through the airlock's inner hatchway and into the colony proper. In truth, it could barely be called a colony: the space was the remnants of the ISA outpost, repaired and upgraded by her father. It was now used as a space to store the Manolin's various goods that were too rare or expensive to be around people for very long. Inside was a large chamber, filled with row upon row of large crates. Her father had always said that power lay in the hands of the past; looking at the collection before her, Jiendra was confident that the Manolins had enough power to last awhile.

"The artifacts? Very well, shall I load them for you?" Colony crackled over the speakers. Jiendra nodded silently, and a small wheeled machine rolled into view, latched onto a nearby crate, and wheeled it out into the airlock. Two other bots joined it, each with their respective crate. As the airlock cycled, Jiendra walked down the aisles, reading the manifests displayed on the large containers. The Confederacy flag that flew over the Capital, a model of a prototype movable Ring, the pen used to sign the colonization charter of Derelict IV. Most of the items, though of unique historical significance, were of little practical value except to a museum.. A select few, however, Jiendra stopped at. Those were the true treasures in this chamber. Stolen plans for a prototype Aldari frigate, a strain of nanovirus that the vaccines couldn't stop, the private encryption key of the Derelict military command channel--these were the true treasures in the room. She hoped to add one more piece to that bit of the collection soon enough...

"Miss Manolin, the artifacts are loaded," Colony stated, jolting Jiendra from her thoughts. The airlock cycled and the three wheeled bots rolled back to a corner of the room.

"Thanks. Colony, you stay out of trouble, y'hear?" she said jokingly as she stepped into the airlock and put the helmet back on. As the airlock cycled she sighed, then stepped outside. Behind her, the airlock doors cycled shut, plunging her into darkness as she walked towards the yacht.

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The crew stood as Jiendra stepped onto the bridge. She acknowledged them with a wave of her hand and settled down in the captain's chair. "Mr. Chang, are we good to go?"

"Yes sir," Chang replied, "the cargo is stored and the fleet is ready."

"Good, good. Signal the projector ship, we're heading to the Rendezvous system," she said.

"We've got one more thing to pick up."

Rendezvous wasn't a named system, just one of countless thousands scanned and passed by for more useful systems. Manolin Enterprises had designated it as the meetup point if the fleet ever got divided for an extended period. It was distant, far from any habitable planets. As far as they

knew, the Manolins were the only people to have visited it since it was scanned by the scouts centuries ago. It was also the perfect spot for another cache, much like the one on Derelict V.

"Yes sir." Minutes later, Manolin Enterprises left the Derelict system, as silently as it had entered.

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As soon as *Cloudsoarer* passed through the other side of the jump vortex, the comms officer, Mr. Olson, turned in alarm. "Captain, we're receiving a distress signal!"

"What? From who?" Jiendra stood and ran over.

"I...can't tell, the signal is too garbled, but it's coming from around the moon," Olson stated. "It's...incredibly weak, sir. We're barely picking it up...I'll try and decode it, but no promises."

"Very well. Mr. Chang, do we have scanners up yet?"

Chang nodded from his console, "Yes sir. It's hard to tell but it looks like the signal is coming from a small ship of some sort. I can't ID the model, but it's surrounded by a lot of deuterium, I'd say a reactor issue." Chang pressed a button and an image of the ship appeared on the primary viewscreen. "There's nothing else coming up on the scanners."

"I'm polling the cache now; we'll see what it recorded on its comms array," Olson said.

Jiendra thought for a minute, then nodded to herself. "Scramble the Starlancers, I want everyone battle ready ASAP, I don't think it's anything, but we're not going to take chances. Move the fleet forward to intercept that ship," she said, looking up at the screen. It was small, maybe a little larger than a Starlancer. Manipulating the controls to zoom in, she scanned the screen intently, "It's a fighter of some sort, or a scout. Looks like it's got some sort of laser-based weapons, but they're all beat to shit...Mr. Olson, do we have the cache's data yet?"

"Yes sir, bringing it up now." The ship disappeared, replaced by empty space. The bridge watched as a time-lapse video began to play, First, the flash of a jump vortex and a ship appeared. Small, about the size of a non-Derelict frigate. It pulled into orbit and deposited the smaller fighter, then left in a flash of purple. *Why would they just leave a fighter there like that?* Jiendra thought to herself as she watched the craft position itself over the water-covered moon. For a long period of time it orbited the planet silently. Suddenly, however, the ship was struck by an asteroid, knocking it off course into more asteroids. The pilot, whoever it was, pulled back to the other side of the moon, but it was too late. The ship was crippled.

"That's all, sir," Olson stated. "The rest is just it sitting there giving off the distress signal. The cache recorded all their communications, though, but it's encrypted in an unknown fashion; it'll take a while to decrypt it."

"Get working on that, I want to know who this guy is and why he's above our cache. Chang, hail them. I want to speak with its pilot."

"Yes sir." The first officer pressed some buttons, then waited for a response. "Nothing, sir. I think their comms must be--wait, sir, they've turned off their distress signal!" The screen flashed back to the present, and the bridge watched as the engines of the ship began to glow fitfully. "Sir, we're still several minutes out."

Jiendra nodded, "Keep the Starlancers in formation, let's see what he's doing."

"Captain," the officer from Engineering piped up, "Looking at his energy readings, I don't think he's doing anything but a crash landing. His primary reactor has to be down, that leaves him on emergency power. Based on the strength of his distress signal, he has barely enough power to steer that hull, much less break from orbit."

Jiendra glanced at the man. "You're certain?" Not waiting for his nod, she continued. "Of course you are, you wouldn't be on this bridge otherwise." She thought to herself for a minute, then nodded. "Chang, have six guards meet me at the yacht. We'll meet this guy landside. The bridge is yours," she said.

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Jiendra could hear the LAMFM coils humming as she slammed the yacht to full thrust. *Love and Shadow* had been custom-built for the Manolins, and it showed. On the outside it appeared to be a fairly standard passenger yacht, albeit a very expensive one. But on the inside was a beast waiting to be awoken. Four Mark-IV engines could propel it almost as fast as a Starlancer and extensive shielding and weapons turrets meant it could hold its own in a skirmish. She cycled the sensor arrays as the ship shot past the larger ships. "Cloudsoarer, *Love*. Lock-on on the target established, what's he up to?"

"Roger that, *Love*," Olson's voice came in over the comms. "He's headed into the planet, too early to tell where he's going to land. I'm assigning two of Alpha squadron to escort you down."

"Very well, *Love* heading in this time." Jiendra nodded to herself and cut the comms as the water-covered moon filled the cockpit of the yacht. As she flew closer, information appeared on the cockpit displays, highlighting the fighter. As the sounds of atmosphere rushing by became more and more obvious, she slowed down the yacht down to match the speed of her target.

The cockpit displays enhanced the fighter and displayed it in a smaller screen to the side. By some sort of miracle the ship was holding its course--either a sign of a great pilot or an incredibly lucky one. As they descended further and further into the atmosphere, the yacht's comms crackled, "*Love*, we've confirmed the target's trajectory, he's headed for a ground landing."

"Roger that," Jiendra said as pieces of the craft continued to fly off. "The target is disintegrating rapidly. Ready a dropship in case it reaches ground in more-or-less one piece." As she finished talking the fighter disappeared behind a layer of clouds, the Manolin yacht following in stride. When they came out the other side, she saw land appear at the horizon. The fighter's engines sputtered to a halt, and it began to fly more erratically. *What little power it had must've finally given out*, she thought to herself. Without the engines powering it, the fighter was literally just a flying hunk of steel, and it had begun to slow down rapidly, the damaged hull providing plenty of drag for the thick atmosphere to grab onto. It began to lose altitude rapidly, coming ominously close to the waves below. Lower and lower it sank, until it stuck a wave, ricocheting it back up like a stone thrown across a pond. Jiendra lost sight of it as the yacht sped over the wreck, now spinning about and greatly slowed. Cursing, Jiendra pulled the yacht around to get a second look as the escort Starlancers soared above her. She watched as the fighter, seemingly in slow-motion, threw itself into the ground, barely ten yards from the ocean's waves. A huge plume of damp

sand flew up as the hulk slid across the beach, careening wildly and leaving a massive gouge in the ground. Finally it stopped, steam and smoke pouring off of it, half-buried in the alien soils.

Jiendra quickly set the yacht down a short ways away from the wreck. Ordering all but one of the black-clad guards to follow her, she ran out into the light of day and towards the blackened mass. As she ran forward, a hatch exploded open, propelled by an emergency charge of some sort, and a thin figure staggered out and fell onto the sands. Jiendra and the guards drew their firearms, advancing cautiously as the figure, a woman, struggled to stand up in the sands. "Someone call and tell them to bring down a medical ship ASAP!" she yelled as the woman fell again, blood streaming from a wound on her arm. Running ahead of the group, Jiendra kept her weapon pointed at the woman. "Make any sudden moves and you're dead!" she yelled as the woman tiredly held out her hands to show she was unarmed. Jiendra stepped forward and quickly removed a strange-looking pistol from the woman and threw it several yards to the side. "Who are you and why were you in this system?"

The woman smiled softly, ignoring the obvious pain she was in. "Ella Knox, at your service."

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## A Beautiful Apparition

By Jewels - Nov 29 2011

Commander Roger Westmer walked slowly across the floor of the conference room for the umpteenth time in the last hour. His top adviser (and long time friend), Gary Hawthorn, stood with his back to him looking out one of the large floor to ceiling windows that made up the entire western wall. The silence between them stretched on with an air of understanding that did not need words.

There was a short rap on the door but Hawthorn made no move to turn around. Roger stopped his pacing to face the door. "Come in," he commanded. The messenger entered the room closing the door behind him, saluted, and stood at attention awaiting further direction. Commander Westmer addressed the private with all the authority his title gave him. "What do you have to report?"

The soldier held out a field report to the commander. "Between ourselves and our allies, we have eyes in every region of the Thelton galaxy, sir. All but one region reporting in within the last 24 hours. Enemy and neutral fleets alike are being monitored and their movements tracked. Everything is in position. Awaiting further orders, sir."

Westmer nodded as he took the report and flipped through it. "Thank you, private, you are dismissed." The messenger saluted a second time and marched out the door closing it securely behind him.

The silence in the room lingered on only interrupted by the sound of a page turning every now and again. Gary's deep, yet quiet, voice finally broke the silence. "I don't know why you're looking at that thing. It will be the same one as yesterday. The same one that has not reported in

for two weeks now." He paused as he finally turned towards his friend with a condescending look on his face. "I did advise against it, sir."

Roger's previously stoic face turned to a frown. His words were hard and forced. "Would you have me hold her back forever?"

"No, not forever." Pausing again, he smirked when Roger looked his way, "Just until she quit out of frustration."

Roger raised his voice mostly from his own frustration. "She's not a quitter, Gary. You know that. Stubborn as bull, she is! If I never gave her the chance, she would have eventually gone to someone who would. I can't stop her any more than I can a black hole." He gave a thoughtful look at the file in his hand. "It's what makes her the best pilot I have."

Gary walked closer to face his friend. "I see three possibilities here Roger. One, she lost control of her ship and crashed..."

Roger interrupted, "Did you not just hear me say best pilot? No, I have a better chance at winning the Filshaj Galactic Lottery than her losing control."

Gary rolled his eyes as he continued. "...two, she went AWOL..."

"In a fighter?! Even if she wanted to, which she wouldn't, where would she go? We left her on an uninhabited moon with no other astros in the system. Maybe, maybe a really good fighter pilot would be able to coax their ship between astros in the same system but she wouldn't have enough power to even attempt to take it any further."

"...or three..." Gary emphasized, "...which I believe is most likely to be true; she was spotted by an enemy vessel and taken down."

Roger started shaking his head at the one option that had plagued his fears since the day he decided to send her on this mission. "No... NO! I refuse to believe that!"

Gary put a hand on his friend's shoulder. "You can't take this so personal. We lose people all the time. That's war. Face it, Roger, she was expendable and you have to move on."

The backhand that suddenly caught Gary's jaw was forceful enough send him staggering backwards. He managed to catch himself on a chair and sit down before he fell over completely. Roger's eyes were alight with rage as he grabbed Gary's collar to jerk his face to within an inch of his own. His words were quiet but seething. "Never say that again!" He shoved Gary back into the chair and stormed out of the room.

Gary stayed where he was rubbing his jaw as he watched his friend leave. He pitied him more than anything else. The poor fool. Getting attached to a lower rank never turned out well, no matter what those reasons might be.

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Ella looked straight down the barrel of the... whatever-type-of-hand-held weapon that was being pointed at her head. She wasn't sure if it was the weeks of isolation, the pain and adrenaline, or the good knock of her head against the console from the rough landing but she found the whole situation rather funny. After weeks of absolutely nothing, there was suddenly a whole throng of

people around her. She couldn't help but laugh, wincing with each movememnt. She had probably cracked a rib or two.

The woman with the gun repeated her earlier question a little more sternly. "Who are you? I want race, galaxy, quadrant, allegiance, nationality and rank. Why are you here?"

Ella took little breaths both to try to ease the pain and to keep herself from laughing more heartily. She looked up at the woman and asked her seriously, "Am I hallucinating?"

The woman looked irate and confused. "What? No. Answer my questions!"

Ella instead ignored her questions. "Because I've been waiting weeks and weeks without a soul in sight and now," Ella raised a hand to gesture with it, "POOF, here you are. Out of no-where, here you are. You have to be a hallucination," she concluded. "I mean, if you were real you could have at least had the decency to ask me who I was *before* you let me attempt to make a landing I had a good chance of not surviving. It's just common courtesy after all, so you can't really be real." She started laughing again, "It's just not possible."

One of the men stepped up to the woman holding the gun and spoke softly. Ella thought she heard the word "delirious" but couldn't make out anything else. "Isn't that what I just said? Delirious, I completely agree. But of course I would agree with you, you're me... or a figment of my imagination anyway. See we're on the same page."

The woman took a step towards her and smiled while addressing her, "Ella?"

Ella lifted her chin and smiled back, "Yes, beautiful apparition of a woman pointing a gun at my face?"

The woman's smile turned to a frown as she yelled, "SHUT UP!" With that the gun came down at her and a new pain exploded at the side of her head. Ella's last thought before passing out brought one last pained smile to her face. She'd bought herself a little time.

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## A Miner Setback

By Nioca - Nov 30 2011

"Admiral, the Collection Satellites<sup>[sup]1[/sup]</sup> have been deployed." Admiral Frae watched the viewscreen as the captain of the *Ivory Sails* gave her report. "All 30 satellites are reporting a positive intake. In addition to our own, our scanners are reporting a number of solar and hydrogen collectors orbiting the star."

"Good to hear, *Ivory*." Frae responded coolly. "What's your status?"

"All systems show green, *Radiance*. Heat shields and cooling systems are well within tolerances. Ivory wing's also reporting an all-clear. We're getting a little sick of the color blue, though. Wish we were having fun like *Bold Horizon* and *Panther's Claw*." The captain of the *Ivory Sails* chuckled slightly, and some of her crew members could be seen nodding in agreement.

"I can't speak for *Panther*, but the only thing *Bold Horizon* has been doing is following us around like a lost puppy." Frae replied dryly. "Anyway, I'm afraid you're going to have to get used to blue, *Ivory*. I need you there to watch the satellites for the time being and make sure everything goes smoothly. I'll contact you once I have further orders. *Radiance*, out." Frae motioned to cut comms, then leaned back in his seat. The *Radiance* was currently in an empty bit of space roughly 46 light-seconds out from Katherine Star. Out of the corner of his eye, Frae spotted a side-screen with the *Radiance's* surroundings; sure enough, the sleek privateer vessel *Bold Horizon* was following the *Radiance* in match-step, staying just off her starboard side.

Frae was waiting on word from a scouting group sent to one of Katherine Star's inner planets. He had already decided on which planet he wanted to form a beachhead on. The first planet from Katherine, Kath Aries. A tidally-locked<sup>2</sup> world with a thin atmosphere. It wasn't ideal for building a settlement, but it wasn't that much worse than Aldar, the Aldarians' home planet. Plus, there was a good bit of mineral wealth for the taking.

A small beep caused one of Admiral Frae's officers to jump to attention. "Sir, we've got inbound on scanners. Checking IFF indicates *Panther* Group, requesting key... Match, confirmed as *MMV Panther's Claw* and wing."

"About time." Frae sat up straight. "Send 'em our key and open a channel. I want to know what took them so long." Frae waited as the comms officer pressed a few buttons, and the face of a scowling Myon captain appeared on screen, along with the brightly-lit control room of a Myon vessel. "*Panther's Claw*, this is *Radiance*. Report."

"Admiral, we're sending a damage report. Requesting clearance to dock and debrief in person." The captain of the *Panther* growled. One of the smaller side-screens on the bridge lit up with a damage report and an image of the *Panther's Claw*. The retro-fitted Myon light cruiser certainly looked like some sort of menacing shadow creature; the angular, kite-shaped craft was painted dark, with two missile-fins<sup>4</sup> jutting from the rear of the craft. Despite the fact it was barely larger than a frigate, it had a lethal vibe. However, looking at the report and outlines of the damage, it looked like it'd be out of action for a while; one of its LAMFM engines was torn to shreds, and the hull was breached in three different locations.

"Request granted, Captain." Frae said, his tone becoming somewhat strained. He had hoped he wouldn't have to test the fabrication abilities on the *Radiance* so soon.

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Gathered around a long table inside the *Radiance's* darkened war room, the command staff of the *Radiance*, *Panther's Claw*, and *Bold Horizon*, along with two squadron leaders, were all listening to the report from *Panther* captain Michael Poln, the tale told illuminated by the blue-green glows of holograms and screens with various minutiae. The news was a mixed blessing. A small group of slaveminers<sup>5</sup> had set up shop at Kath Aries, selling minerals and atmospheric gasses to the various outlaws around Katherine Star and Trisol, in exchange for either weapons, food, or slaves. A small station had even been set up in orbit, acting as a waystation and neutral trading post for outlaws to come together. On one hand, it meant that some of the hard work of getting the planet settled was done. On the other....



"...they're willing to shoot anyone they get twitchy about." The *Panther's* grizzled captain irritably added on to his report.

Admiral Frae raised an eyebrow, glancing briefly across at the young freelance captain of the *Horizon*, who seemed similarly bemused, before turning back with a reply. "Twitchy, Captain Poln?"

"Aye, twitchy," the captain confirmed, "especially regarding unknown vessels. They're used to the Boreans and Derilictians nipping over, I think. But I screwed up and took too long scoutin' the place; apparently, when they saw a Myon-built vessel dancing on the edge of sensor range, they musta thought we were Myons coming back for round two."

"I see..." Admiral Frae subconsciously started tapping his finger against the table. Some of the officers amongst them started talking about details. Ships, weapons, defenses. Frae's mind was elsewhere, however; this was a setback, and not a minor one. It forced him into either trying to locate another suitable planet in the system, or take Kath Aries by force. The former was difficult; most planets of any sort of value were claimed by some faction or another. And the latter showed a bit more of Frae's hand than he desired. The Aldari Empire did not want to commit to additional ships and resources for the system unless the *Radiance* could set up a stable beachhead first, meaning that Admiral Frae had only the ships he was sent with, and whatever he could salvage or confiscate. Revealing the Solcruiser's full power this early could cause a chain reaction within the system, ultimately resulting in the various criminals ganging up on the tiny Aldari armada; Frae sincerely doubted they could take on a third of the solar system and come out on top. The only real advantage they had was that they currently had access to some of the most advanced and efficient technology Aldari had to offer. Indeed, the Sunfury Fighters that were with the *Panther's Claw* had performed excellently; only two of them were damaged and in for repairs.

The *Horizon's* captain brought up a hologram of a small station in orbit around Kath Aries. "Wait, is this station undefended?"

Captain Poln shrugged. "Hard tellin', Captain Lamos. There's the ships around it, and the ground defenses. But our scans didn't pick up any defense satellites or weapons on the station itself."

Admiral Frae watched as Captain Lamos continued, "So all we'd have to do is clear out the slaver ships and knock out planetary defenses, and the station would be ours?"

Captain Poln sputtered for a moment, then started guffawing. "Is- is that all, then? Just knock off a couple dozen slavers and their pals?" Captain Poln settled down, albeit he still seemed to be having difficulty hiding the smirk on his face. "Boy, you don't have a clue. These slavers are vicious. We only fought a small group of them; the only way our 'armada'," Poln adopted a mocking tone at that word, "would avoid being completely annihilated was if *Radiance* herself were to deign to join the fight." Captain Lamos seemed to sag slightly at Poln's words, his confidence shrinking. He sat back and spoke not another word.

"Well then I guess *Radiance* needs to join this battle, Captain."

Everyone in the room went completely silent, all eyes turning to Admiral Frae.

"Aldari's finest didn't come here," Frae continued quietly, "to get turned out by a bunch of half-bit thugs flying ships made of scrap metal." Frae's voice was level, but each word seemed to harbor a growing intensity. "Maybe Imperial Command made a mistake sending so few here to secure this system. Armada 3 certainly isn't my idea of a mighty command. But we've currently got some of the most advanced technology Aldari- no, this *galaxy* has to offer. If this is a mistake, then I damn well want to make it a mistake Aldari can be proud of."

Admiral Frae eyed the others, who were giving Frae their full attention. "Now. I have an idea for how to take Kath Aries with minimal or no casualties. But it requires your ship," Admiral Frae nodded at Captain Lamos, "to live up to its name. Can I count on that, Captain?"

Captain Lamos nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Good. Colonel Manolin, I want your squadron joined up with the *Bold Horizon*. You're there for when things get messy."

A Dereliction pilot nodded. "No problem, sir. But what's going to get messy, if you don't mind me asking?"

Admiral Frae smiled. "Oh, nothing much. It just requires *Bold Horizon* to bait a trap."



1 Collection Satellites: Small satellites that, when set into a fast orbit around a star, utilize a combination of solar paneling and ramscoops to gather fuel and energy. They're typically designed to be deployed, left to their own devices, and then returned to after they've gathered sufficient energy and/or fuel. Most satellites only allow ships with a compatible IFF tag to dock and pick up, though commercial collectors will usually allow anyone to dock and refuel at a cost of credits.

2 Tidal Locking: The locking of the rotation of a moon or planet to its orbit, such that one side always faces the body around which it is orbiting. In this case, Kath Aries is tidally locked to Katherine Star. [See Wikipedia for more information.](#)

3 IFF Tags: A transponder identification system used by most ships of Evoron. Consisting of a short-range broadcast carrying basic information (usually name, class, model, and affiliation), IFF enables ships to reliably identify each other. While it's fairly easy to spoof an IFF, most ships (particularly military ones) also have a separate, unique encrypted IFF key that can be broadcast to confirm identity; spoofing such a key is nearly impossible without physical access to the transponder. Particularly advanced IFF systems even include "Trap" keys, false IFF keys that, when broadcast, alert the receiving vessel that something is wrong on the broadcasting vessel (like a boarding party taking over the vessel). All known Evoron governments consider deliberately flying without a transponder or using a false transponder an act of piracy (although, depending on the law, there are sometimes loopholes about broadcasting information that is *technically* accurate.)

4 Missile Fin(s): A non-aerodynamic fin or fins on a ship, designed to hold an array missiles, torpedoes, and other ordinance outside the hull, where an accidental detonation is less likely to inflict considerable damage. Missile fins also enable a ship to carry a wider variety of payloads (even ones larger than the ship carrying it) and make for easier re-arming whilst in space. However, they also tend to increase the ship's target profile, and increase the risk of the payload being hit by hostile fire.

5 Slaveminers: Criminals who claim a mineral-rich planet and use lobotomized slave labor to dig out and/or process the various minerals and materials. Generally only found in the more remote or lawless corners of Evoron. Slavemining is incredibly illegal with most governments. It's also inefficient when compared to proper mining techniques and equipment, but most outlaws usually lack access to sophisticated mining equipment.

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## Tip of the Iceberg

By Sylae - Dec 3 2011

The pieces of the strange ship filled a good portion of *Cloudsoarer's* primary maintenance bay. Technicians scuttled around the bits and pieces, trying to make sense of the wreckage. Jiendra stood to the side, talking with the Master Tech in charge of the wreckage.

"So, have we made any progress?" she asked, turning a piece of charred steel over in her hands.

"Some, Cap'n," the squat man said in a deep voice, "The ship, it's like nothing I've seen before. 'nd I've seen a fair amount of spacecraft in my day. There's many similarities, but more differences. The damage it has sustained is considerable, though, that make's it 'arder to figure out."

Jiendra nodded, then walked over to the hull and glanced up at it. Under the char of reentry she could make out faint lettering. "Have you been able to get this?" she asked.

"Aye, it looks like an ID number of some sort. There's other insignia on it, but we haven't been able to lift them yet."

"Ah." Jiendra nodded and climbed up a ladder propped against the hull, up to the top of the ship. Standing atop it, she stepped over a technician cutting into a panel and walked back to what appeared to be a docking port, although it was certainly not of a Confederate standard. "Hey," she called down. "What's up with this docking port?"

"It's an old colony ship design, according to *Cloudsoarer's* database. Nothing uses it anymore but old Barbarian ships, but they'll use just 'bout anything. I sent a guy to fabricate an adapter to Standard Confed ports, in case we need it. Dunno why it wouldn't use a modern design, though."

Jiendra climbed back down the ladder, "I don't know either, but I intend to find out. Signal me if you discover anything."

"Yessir."

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"I've kept her under, Captain, just like you ordered," the chief medical officer stated. "All of her injuries are healing rapidly. I haven't gotten around to any major tests yet, though, so there may be something else going on."

Jiendra nodded. "Is she healed up enough to where I can speak to her? I'd like to get some answers."

The doctor sighed. "I guess. She's not great but ... it won't hurt," she said, then walked over to a screen and typed a short command. Nodding at the door towards the patient ward, she said tiredly, "I've lifted her sedative dose. You've got ten minutes."

Jiendra thanked the doctor and stepped into the ward. Four guards lounged around, watching the only occupied bed. As she entered, they snapped up. "At ease, men. I'll only be a minute," she said, and they shrugged and leaned back against the bulkheads of the room. As she approached, the figure on the bed shifted slightly, and two of the men checked their weapons at the noise. Jiendra stopped ten feet short of the bed and cleared her throat as the woman shifted again. "Good morning," she said calmly, and the figure jolted up, wincing as her wounds rebelled.

"Is...it morning?" the woman asked.

Jiendra laughed, "As close to it as you get on *Cloudsoarer*. I presume you are recovering well from your wreck?"

She checked herself over, stretching to see what hurt. "Well enough," she replied shortly.

"That's good. Our medical officer's one of the best...I haven't introduced myself properly. Captain Jiendra Manolin," Jiendra stated. "And you are...?"

The woman hesitated, looking over her questioner as if sizing her up. "Ella Knox," she replied smoothly, "still at your service. But seeing that you're still here and," she patted the bed she lay on, "I didn't really hallucinate you, you probably already know that."

Jiendra nodded. "Pleased to meet you, Ella...I apologize we weren't able to contact you before the crash, our fleet had just arrived when you broke orbit. Leading me to my next question," she stated matter-of-factly, nodding towards Ella's tattered uniform laying on a nearby chair, "just who are you and why were you in my system?"

Completely evading either end of the question she responded, "Your system? I didn't see anything that would indicate this system was inhabited."

"Then why were you here? This is the ass-end of Evoron, why would you be alone in that ship of yours, orbiting aimlessly for months on end?"

Ella looked away for a moment. Her frowning face seemed to harden in determination. Turning back she tried to sit up a little straighter. She looked straight at Jiendra with moist eyes and emotion in her voice. "I was abandoned."

Jiendra arched an eyebrow. "Really now? What did you do to deserve that?" she said. "And why did they waste a ship on you, when dropping you off on the moon would've done just as well? Fighters like that don't come cheap, I assume."

Ella looked at her as if she weren't speaking Standard. Her tone implied 'what rock have you been under?' "Fighters have always been expendable; both ship and pilot. And I've been passed over for promotion long enough to know that I was one of the most expendable," she stated, raw emotion and thinly-veiled anger evident as she spoke. "Sure they said they would come back for me... you see how that ended."

Jiendra stared, aghast, as Ella spoke. Fighters were a huge resource, and any group that could afford to needlessly waste them was either very stupid or very powerful. "Your ship had no form of identification we could discern," she said, changing the topic. "And I don't recognize your accent. Where are you from, and what were your orders?" She almost felt sorry for the Ella woman, to be stuck out there for months on end, consigned to die in that steel coffin...Jiendra didn't blame her for wrecking the thing.

She turned away sharply bursting into tears. Her voice rose in emotion. "What does it matter where I'm from? They didn't want me... they've *never* wanted me. I'm *no* one from *no* where. They told me to watch for ships in the area. I couldn't even do that after my sensors were knocked out. They didn't seem to notice..." Her voice dropped to a whisper, "...they never came to help."

"I'm...I'm sorry, Ella," Jiendra said reassuringly, but the sobbing woman didn't respond. After a minute of no response, she turned and addressed the guards, "Make sure she gets fed and taken care of. We can't stay in this system any longer if it's been compromised."

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"Captain," Chang greeted Jiendra as she stepped onto the bridge. "The cache has been emptied, and the armada is ready for jump to Trisol. Oh, and Maintenance says they found something on the ship hull, 'KGE-48561-734-A'. Some sort of ID number, they're working on getting more meaning out of it."

"Very well, Mr. Chang. Signal all ships to full weapons alert, and have the projector ship begin generation."

"Yes sir." Slowly Jiendra watched as a small bulky ship moved slowly into view in front of *Cloudsoarer*. In a flash of purple light a tear opened up in space, and the small armada slowly filtered through.

Once on the other side, Jiendra stood and announced, "Deploy the long-range scanners. I want this entire system monitored. We can't have someone sneaking up on us while we do this. Mr. Olson, transmit the transaction signal."

"Yes sir."

"Gentlemen, we stand at the tip of the iceberg. My father was a trader, his parents were traders, their parents were as well. I am a Manolin, and Manolins are traders. That," she said, looking around the bridge, "Is why we are here today. We are traders. For years, we've lived as pirates and criminals. Unfortunately, pirates and criminals like ourselves are on our own. That's why we keep to the shadows, often long-gone from a system before we're even known to be there. That's all about to change. Why?" Jiendra asked rhetorically, "Because today Manolin Enterprises will be purchasing a DAR." The bridge erupted in cheering at these words.

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## Spatial Distortions

By Nalyd - Dec 3 2011

Dì Yī Zhànshì stared at the vast field of light before her. Lights, unburdened by labels, instructions, or comprehensibility, blinked here and there. Were they fires? Messages? Ships? She knew, but did not care to comprehend. There. A question, a mystery, an enigma. Information clawed at her mind through her eyes, seeking a way in, seeking to spread and breed, seeking to infect her blankness. She had deactivated her comm implants, but she could not, would not close her eyes. So she let it pass by without remark or notice. It could not harm her without touching her, and it would not find a home among her smooth, featureless thoughts.

Her ship, the flagship *Palamedes*, was gently spiraling above her world. Leaking air and bodies. Crumbling. Already, it was wrenching itself apart as the artificial gravity collapsed, like a childish god tearing off fistfuls of wrapping paper. Eager for the souls within. It had waited so long, after all, to claim them.

The lights played across her face, making no marks and passing without a sound. They passed much as she would, over the coming weeks. If the death spasms of *Palamedes* did not claim her. She could survive in the vacuum for that long, and she didn't have the presence of mind to tear herself to pieces.

She would not be captured. Not by these zealots. So strong of arm and sure of purpose. Even if her survival was possible, there would be no hope.

She was the First Warrior of her people. Or, as their enemies would say, the highest-ranking military officer of the opposition. Her people had long moved beyond ranks, moved beyond leaders. The enemies could not fathom the absence of leaders. They would drag her through their streets, inventing pain and shame where there was none.

She was one of the Bow Priests: one of the Founders. One of the first to break from the black ship of humanity, one of the first to sing the siren song of exodus. To call the willing into the boundless ocean of transcendence. They would burn her in their temples, the final death of her heresies.

She was a technological artifact beyond their comprehension. Every piece of her broke their laws. Her body and her mind were above theirs. Above their selves, and above their grandest tools. They would tear her to pieces, break her slowly from a living whole into dead parts, and hold the secrets close.

She had been a legendary tactical and strategic genius in their paltry war, holding them off for almost a year of constant battling. She had broken fleets over her knee. Crushed their leaders in her fists. Devoured their warriors, their soldiers. Laid so many of them upon the blank altar of the void. They would have their revenge.

There was no hope in capture. There was only greater dread.

And they would look for her. They knew her. She had seen them, spoken to them, clasped hands and shared meals. Shared names. They called her First Warrior. Backwards, troglodytic, they seemed unable to conceive of any of her further -nyms, unable of recognizing that Dì Yī Zhànshì was her true first name, that all her titles were her names. But no. None of that mattered. There would be no capture. She and all her people were their monsters, their abominations, as much as these barbarians were the objects of her contempt. Small-minded, gobbling beasts, they deserved the name they so coveted. Human. Pathetic. But still more than capable of sacking this new Athens, this new Baghdad. Evidently.

The lights slid over and around her seated form. Enveloping, entrancing, their meaning still lost among their patterns. She hoped it would remain that way, that her mind would not choose now to fail. Knowing the consequences of her failures, of her people's failures, would not help her now. Would accomplish nothing. The people, the greater-than-people, the minds around her would be no less dead, or dying, or tormented. The search for knowledge was an ideal dear enough to her for her to have helped found a society based upon it, but now all she wanted was oblivion.

Ah. But perhaps not. Her comm implant had just been overridden. Questions, such pointless questions. But her Princeps, the best of all her people, had earned the right to intrude upon her death.

The Princeps commanded many things. Dì provided them. No conversation, but the exchange of thought. They had fought valiantly. But militarism had never been a hallmark of their driving philosophy. Nor had industry. The monstrous, over-engineered fleet, dozens of times the size of their own, armed with primitive, smoking, belching weapons and armor like the walls of a bunker, had simply overwhelmed them. Now they lay bleeding and breaking, far above the atmosphere that had sheltered her for hundreds of years. Palamedes' epileptic space manipulator ripping the ship to pieces. Her own, funerary blankness.

The Princeps departed her then, and Dì saw the field of lights all around her dissolve, as the spatial distortions of her ship sawed closer and closer to their source. The atmosphere drained in a slow rushing of air. Dì stared into the blackness. Hundreds of years of life. Hundreds of years

of a society with advances unrivaled anywhere else in the universe. To be wiped away now, because of the ignorance and fear of small men. Goliath was felling David, Zeus eating his own children. The work of her life undone. The toil of countless greater-than-lives undone.

The wall before her sheared away, leaving her to gaze down at her world, already blistering with fire and death. For a few moments, until she was hurled from her seat, bouncing off of debris and shrapnel, falling into the void.

She hoped the next few weeks would pass quickly.

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## Distance

By Jewels - Dec 3 2011

Ella could feel the sedative starting to take effect again, soon she would be back to sleep. It wasn't such a horrible thing, but they weren't giving her any time to think about what she did and didn't want to tell them, or about how she would escape them. For she was a prisoner, the four guards in the room said that clear enough. The woman named Jiendra had seemed nice enough but Ella remembered being clocked on the head by her. She was nothing close to the sweetness she portrayed.

With her last minutes of cognitive thought, Ella replayed what she had just told them in her mind. She had managed to evade any sensitive questions. The pain from jostling her ribs had helped to supply the tears and the real frustration about being skipped on promotions helped supply the emotion. Didn't hurt that she really did feel abandoned, even though a top condition ship would have been able to sustain her for many months, they had to have noticed when she stopped transmitting data, yet she wasn't important enough for them send someone to investigate.

As sleep started to take her, new tears ran down her cheeks. Abandoned? Might as well have been... Left alone to die... With no one thinking twice... about her not... coming... back...

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Commander Westmer stood nervously at the far end of a darkened room.

"What news of the girl?" a deep scratchy voice droned from behind a shadowed desk.

Roger tried to gulp down the lump in his throat knowing that his news would not be received well. He hated how this room made him feel... how Lord O'zaire's gaze made him feel. Even though Roger could not see his eyes, they seemed to burn right through to his very soul. The hairs on his arms stood on end at the uncomfortable energy in the air. Normally he was able to keep his confidence about him, but never in the presence of Lord O'zaire.

Roger cleared his throat but failed at not letting his fear creep into his voice. "The F-frigate in the area reports th-that her fighter was no longer in orbit, my lord. There were no debris in orbit



either but he did detect traces of one of our ships o-on the surface." He paused and took a deep breath before finishing. "N-no sentient life signs d-detected, my lord."

Roger braced himself for a barrage of verbal attacks but instead was assaulted with an unnerving silence. The ticking of an antique wall clock became more and more pronounced as he started to notice an acute headache coming on. He winced at the pain that started to radiate out from behind his eyes.

The cold raspy voice seemed to only add to the pain, stabbing him with each word. "Did I not charge you with the safety of the girl?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Did I not make it clear to you how important she was to me?" Lord O'zaire's anger was evident in his rhetorical question.

Roger's headache had become increasingly unbearable but he dare not say anything about it. "Y-yes, you did, my lord," he managed.

The pain subsided momentarily as O'zaire's tone lightened. "Do not worry unduly, Commander, the girl is not dead. We would not be having this conversation if the girl were dead for I would not have suffered to let you waste my time."

Relief flooded over Westmer coupled with a questioning doubt about how O'zaire could know if Cadet Knox was still alive. It was only a brief respite, though, as his headache returned full-force. An unwilling moan escaped his lips and he staggered forward from it as if being pulled. Closer to the dark figure at the other end of the room. Closer to the unseen, yet burning, eyes.

"*You* sent her across the galaxies on this so-called mission," the words pierced like daggers. "*You* will go and bring her back."

Roger was holding his head now, eyes squeezed shut, but he managed a nod. "YES!" he cried out, "Yes, I will go get her!"

And as suddenly as his headache had started, it was gone. Roger straightened himself a little unceremoniously. "Good..." O'zaire said with a deceptively sweet voice. "I am glad we understand each other. Go and bring the girl back to me."

Roger was now standing close enough to his lord to almost see his face. A glint from O'zaire's eye sent shivers down his back. It was not made of flesh. Quickly, Roger saluted and turned to leave eager to be as far from this man as possible... if he was indeed a man.

Just before he reached the door Lord O'zaire made one last statement. "Oh, and Commander..." Roger turned back uneasily. "Do not return without her."

The sentiment of his words had already been assumed, but now Roger had a confirmation. He would either bring Patella Knox back alive or he would die trying because there were fates much worse than death in the universe. "I understand, my lord."

Roger swore as he put distance between them. The relief to be walking steadily away from the one man he feared was diminished by the knowledge that he had an all but impossible task ahead of him. It would take him a week to even get to the moon Ella had been assigned to scout. And

then the trail of trying to track her from there would already be cold. What a fool he had been to put them both at this risk.

His mind started to turn over different strategies he could take. Strategy was what he was good at, what had brought him to be a commander. War was eminent and now he would be out in the field hunting for a needle, not in just a haystack, but in an endless ocean. He had to be smart about this; one false move could mean his life.

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## Revenant

By Nalyd - Dec 7 2011

And there did Di drift. Alive and conscious, she could not turn away from the breaking of her world. Alas. She listened to the dying flurry of subspace communications. She heard her Huang's last address to her children and siblings, heartfelt and heartbroken. She heard the sobs of her Ti'n Xian Ti La as she watched fire rain from the lazily drifting clouds, scourging the world of their history. The screams of millions of their untitled family burned into her brain. Agony. Fear. Death, from which they would never be revived. Horrors leapt across the empty space, and into her steel-edged brain.

She cried, she cried until her beautifully crafted eyes could cry no more.

It was not so long. A day, perhaps a day and a half. She did not check her clocks. Then, there was silence, and the slow burning of her once-idyllic world. Almost eight hundred years of terraforming, burned away. Almost eight hundred years of striding, heads high and backs straight, towards divinity. Almost eight hundred years of genius. Thousands of years of persecution, fleeing, and fear for their people.

And, now, fire, burning brightly, burning brighter than their light could have ever been.

She commanded that what remained of her own blood, her own saliva, be cried, dedicating these paltry fluids to the loss of all she ever had.

She caught the brief, faint twinkles of their ships departing. And then she watched the atmosphere combust and eventually dim into ashy blackness. And she stared into that, empty and hopeless, until the vacuum and the radiation finally ate away the last of her marvelous technology.

And Di of many more names died there, cradled by the distant black.

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She was reborn into a realm of soft, kind, but ultimately impersonal light. In a chair of the same qualities. Her eyes, new eyes, roared within her head, the vast spectrum of light they blazed into her brain, her new brain, awakening uncountable things. She gasped, though it was but a cosmetic reaction.

Her awakening took too many eternities for her to count. The healing hands that led into her, through her, and all about her, one by one left her, leaving behind a cold but whole body and mind. An impossibly new body, sparkling and clean, unburdened by everything she was. Newer and greater than she could have ever foreseen when last she saw herself. She began to fend for herself once more, a self-contained creature. When she was left alone at last, unfettered by help or hindrance, she was at last allowed to comprehend something other than herself.

She was in a small room, jammed to the brim with both equipment and junk. All of the surfaces were pristine white plastic, the edges rounded and everything faintly soft to the touch. But it was stuffed with a thousand pieces of incomprehensible detritus. Scrap metal, components, devices, random, meaningless junk. Even as she stood, cables and garbage flew from her lap and shoulders to scatter through the air. There was no gravity here. The sheer amount of debris scattered around and mounded in every corner and on every surface was astounding, and the pace at which she could catalog them was even more astounding. What had happened to her?

She hit her head on the ceiling as she stood.

She stopped the exploration of her observational skills then, and focused on the creature before her.

It was misshapen and hunched, some of its limbs bizarrely twisted, its face creased and crunched. It was pale and smooth, an unnatural, porcelain creation, clad in an equally unornamented and equally white jumpsuit that left the neck, feet, and hands bare, it was about a foot and a half shorter than she, and its head did not knock on the ceiling. It hovered ever so slightly above the floor, perfectly still in the lack of gravity. She increased her perception of time, and saw that it was listing slightly. And had been about to speak. In a language she did not know that she knew.

"Revenant, you were a disciple of Q? Meng?" That had been the name of her system and world. "You were one of their titled?"

The past tense did not surprise her, but it still brought a powerful pang of sorrow. "Yes. I was Da Jiang, and much more. I saw our fall, and fell myself to those barbarians. What are you?"

The creature did not seem to take any offense. "That is as we hoped, then, Revenant. You are needed to lead us. And you will want to lead."

She was already shaking her head. "Do not presume to name me, creature. No matter how much of me you have built, you have not defined me. But Di is no longer what I most am. You will use Zai Shang to name me."

The creature's expression did not change in the slightest. "Zai Shang, then. You will lead us against your own enemies. Your resurrection has been a gift, but your compulsion will be vengeance. Now come. There is much traveling before you are to direct our weapons. You will receive explanations once we have begun our departure."

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# On the Inside

By Jewels - Dec 11 2011

*"Papa, papa!" A little girl tried to run forward towards the man who would normally be bouncing her on his knee at this time on a Saturday afternoon, but firm hands held her back.*

"Not now, child. Papa's got an important job to do today." The woman was not her mother. The girl could not remember her mother but at her age, it seemed normal to only have Papa.

Her father turned towards her and gave a little wave before disappearing into a very large, very dark ship. Somehow he had seemed... sad. She couldn't help but feel like the ship had just swallowed him up. And, indeed, he never did come back out again.

A ward of the Krenton Galactic Empire from then on, Ella slept fitfully with dreams of the few memories of her father that she did have

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**CRASH!!!** A chair went flying across a dark room smashing into splinters and springs against the far wall. A string of obscenities exploded from the thrower followed shortly by the sound of breaking glass as one sweep of an arm maliciously knocked three vases from their decorative stand to the cold stone floor.

Stupid!! STUPID!!! What a *stupid* girl! ... What a *STUPID* commander! All his work... All his planning; *for NAUGHT!* Twenty years. *Twenty YEARS wasted...* All at the whim of a stupid commander that wanted to let a stupid girl feel useful. Didn't he realize she was already the most important thing in the universe? And now she was lost somewhere in the middle of a far away galaxy right in the heart of enemy territory. She wasn't dead yet. No, he would know soon after she was, but how much longer could she possibly survive? She wasn't ready. She wasn't active...

Lord O'zaire roared out his frustrations one more time before finding a chair he hadn't broken and slumping into it. He winced at the pounding in his head. Overexertion always aggravated his implants. The technology of them was a gift from the El'Teyno species when the KGE had come to their aid in the last great war. Less than thirty years ago, but it felt like a lifetime. O'zaire had been a commander then, bravely rushing oncoming enemy fleets that greatly outnumbered his own. At least the El'Teyno had called him brave; fool-hearted was more like it. The deed had cost him dearly as he received a grave wound to the head. Under normal circumstances he would have died, but the El'Teyno had cybernetic technology far beyond the Krentons and saved his life. The whole right half of his face was no longer flesh; wonderfully advancing his sight and hearing and giving him an almost telekinetic ability, but at the price of being monstrously hideous. With his advanced vision he no longer needed light to see, but living in darkness served another purpose: to hide him from the eyes of others.

By skill and manipulation and even a little bit of luck, he had been able to advance himself to the highest position among the Krenton people but he was not satisfied with just being Lord over them. No, he would not rest until he eliminated every threat among the stars, reducing them to space dust. That's why he needed her; why the girl was so important. She was the key to the annihilation of every threatening species in the cosmos. The ultimate weapon... and she was lost.

It had not been easy, convincing her father to command that fated suicide mission, but he had needed a child. He had tried to use adults. Many had volunteered for the job but each of them had died, their bodies unable to adapt to the conditioning they had to undergo. Too rigid to conform... but children are resilient. Oh, yes, they heal so quickly. They adapt. Their bodies accept change if incorporated soon enough.

For twenty long years he had overseen the injection of millions of self-repairing nanobots into her bloodstream while she slept. The technology for them: partially reverse engineered from the benevolent El'Teyno - partially stolen in the spoils of war. They were designed to mimic her DNA structure, designed to replace the cells of her body, designed to repair and duplicate themselves until, over time, nothing purely human remained.

In a way, she had been genetically re-engineered to be capable of the greatest feats of strength, of stealth, and of surveillance. But *she wasn't ready*... She wasn't active. The power to take down nations lay dormant across a never-ending sea of stars, and without activation the girl was as vulnerable as any other human. The only consolation Lord O'zaire held on to was the fact that if she died, the nanobots within her were programmed to send a signal directly to the technology within his cybernetic implants exactly one minute before a total self-destruct. Anyone within 100 yards of her at her death would likely not survive either. He would suffer no one to discover her secrets.