



[The Retaliator]
Salvage

~Input, input!~ The edubot implored, its emote lights flashing for exciting effect that was not at all lost on the beaming brunette child, whose large bright gray eyes eagerly reflected the edubot's attractive lights. ~Input the number of apples left if Johnny takes two!~

"Three!" Ama squealed with delight. She patted the robot on its head as it exclaimed, ~Correct!~

"We only have thirty-five percent engine output. I am barely keeping her in the sky." Father said frantically from the pilot seat, pushing a lot of buttons and muttering at his screens. He was always frowning at screens and pressing buttons as long as Ama could remember, when he wasn't doing science. Or maybe pushing the buttons and muttering was science, like when he would stare at strange drawings at home for hours and grumble at the drawings and his mobiglas while he manipulated objects on the screen. Yes. That was probably science.

"We have no shields, no meaningful engine power." Mother said, seated in front of a larger glas and looking slightly ill. Mother did science too, but with less mumbling. "The weapons systems are locked out, and I do not have time to slice them."

Ama squirmed in her seat and looked all around the strange ship, then out the window as the skyline crept past. It wasn't Mother and Father's ship, but Father was piloting it. They had left their shiny nice ship in a big hurry, and Father hadn't closed the door. Ama had advised Father of his error several times, but he was not responding to her criticisms for some reason. They had run into a gray ship that looked kind of pointy and bulky compared to their very nice, very clean ship, but it was much bigger.

"Mother, is this ship our ship now? I like it, it's huuuuge!" Ama began toying with the edubot's central glas interface located on the green and white robot's chest. It was time for a game now that her math was done. Mother had said that Ama could play a game whenever she does a whole section of the math, but only for a little while.

Ama's mother was distracted and did not reply. Sometimes Mother worried. Ama did not like when Mother worried, it made her sad. Her mother was very beautiful, even when she was sad.

"Mother... Mother, is this our ship now?" Ama asked again. The big ship hit something just then, at least it felt and sounded like it had. Ama wiggled to look out the window. There were lights!

"Fireworks!" she exclaimed with glee. She had seen those once, long long time ago when she was little, like maybe three. Mother frantically began undoing Ama's restraints.

"Mother, the ship is flying! You can't undo the seat belt on a flying ship, Mother. Why are you undoing my seat belt?" Mother attempted to override Ama's safety seat protocols to no avail. "Why Mother? Why?"

"Cut the belt!" Father yelled back from the pilot seat. The ship was hitting a lot of things now. Ama thought they must have flown into the fireworks. Father sounded scared; Ama had never heard Father scared and angry before.

Mother cut through the seat belt with a knife from her pack. Ama was scooped up and cradled against her Mother with the edubot sandwiched between. They ran with her along the length of the ship, past bulkheads and what looked like marines' guns on a rack, pausing beside a hatch.

"I smell smoke, Mother. I think there's a fire!" Ama exclaimed, apprehensive. Mother punched some numbers on a datapad interface and the hatch opened. Quickly Mother shoved Ama into a seat there and began fastening and adjusting a too-large harness. The fireworks got louder and the bumps got much worse. Something was very wrong, a big unknowable something that Ama could not grasp. It wasn't just that they had flown into fireworks; it was much bigger than that. Then her Mother snatched her edubot away.

"Record private message for Ama. Password..." Mother looked around, then at the wall of the ship before turning quickly back to the edubot. "Password: Retaliator, voice coded for Ama."

~Ready to record!~ The edubot exclaimed in its too happy, mechanical voice in counterpoint to the loud bangs, flickering system displays and the smell of smoke. Then Mother did the oddest thing; she began saying a bunch of numbers and letters that made no sense.

"Mother. Are you... doing math?" Ama was becoming very upset. Nothing was making any sense. Mother finished her frantic recitation and leaned in to kiss and hug Ama. Ama felt profoundly sad, but she could not say exactly why.

"Ama, I need you to remember. The password is Retaliator. That's the name of the kind of ship we're in." Her mother smoothed her hair. "When they find you, they will take you to your uncle Dav. He'll be your closest liv... He's your uncle, and so they will take you to him. When

you see Dav, you will say Retaliator to the EduBot. I know this is a lot for you to understand. I need you to remember. Uncle Dav, Retaliator. Say it for me."

"Uncle... Dav. Retal... Retalinator" Ama struggled. Was this a test? Her vision was getting blurry from smoke and tears.

"No baby, Retaliator." Her mother looked terrified and desperate for Ama to get it right. It must be a test.

"Retalator... Retalator..." Ama repeated. The ship bumped very hard, and Mother stumbled against the bulkhead; it seemed that everything was leaning sideways.

"We love you, Ama. You are the light of our life. We will always... There are so many things..." Her mother's face crumpled into a thousand pieces. Ama's heart shattered in her chest and she cried so hard she couldn't see. Mother quickly kissed Ama and leapt back out of the opening. Ama thought she saw fire in the corridor through her blurry eyes.

"Where are you going, Mother?" Ama screamed as Mother shut the hatch. "I'm scared! Mother!" There was the biggest bump yet, and then Ama was in a terrifying free-fall, plunging steeply away from everything she had ever known.

A one meter long rat scampered over the tail section of a long since discontinued Excelsi luxury personal transport. When the girl had asked about a more intact version of an Excelsi several clicks away, Edu had told her that it was manufactured fifty-two years ago, designed to be retro-futuristic. Which means that it was supposed to look like a fantasized version of what a future starship would look like. Edu knew a lot about these things.

The heat bore down on her. The heat was a constant, and therefore a comfort, as was the cold that would come each night. The cycle had gone on for as long as she could remember. Hunt, food, heat, lessons, cold, sleep and then time to hunt again. Sometimes it seemed that before the heat and cold, there was... something, but other than impressions she could not remember fully. Metals, plastics, parts, hulls and other scrap stretched as far as she could see, even when she climbed the highest mounds and looked out over the vast expanses of salvage.

She chewed her lip and squinted against the sun. Edu had told her that this area was a desert. Long ago, was covered with silicates. The sand was gone now other than the paths in between the mounds of salvage that stretched forever in all directions but one. To the West there was a long fence that separated the good mechanical salvage from other kinds of garbage that was not considered salvageable. It smelled there, and it was not as hospitable as the salvage where she had made her home. She once explored far enough to see The Fence, but that was many kilometers away.

The sun seared overhead. It was bad to be out of shelter during full daylight, but this was too good of an opportunity by her reckoning. Edu would have called it an 'unfavorable calculated risk,' but Ama's belly was grumbling. Two days without food was not unusual but fortunately also not frequent. She and Edu would have to move soon. She had hunted this area too well in recent months. She hated the idea; this area had some of the best hidden caches of water of any place she had yet lived. Going two days without food was heavenly compared to the same duration without water.

The rat continued, picking up its pace. It knew it was being followed through the scorching hot salvage yard. It seemed to be heading away from the tens of thousands of acres of salvage and recyclables and back into the unfathomably large refuse heaps. No telling why it had ventured into the salvage; there was nothing to eat here except lizards, insects and an occasional bird. And occasionally rats.

A mess of knotted, dark chestnut hair rose above a burned out GAF-111 shield generator, grasping a metal spear in her grimy hand poised to throw. She wouldn't be hungry for a week with a kill this size. Her stomach grumbled.

"Hi there!" said a voice. Ama exhaled sharply and could not breathe back in from fright.

Normally, the very infrequent sight of people would have made her scamper and hide, but this was a boy only a few years older than her. His smile was slightly agape, incredulous; she stared back at him fiercely and curiously. His clothes were very nice, a one piece suit of blueish gray fabric with just a few jet black streaks of grease and only one tear. His heavy boots had lacing that worked. She reckoned that must be how a gentleman dressed. He had a working mobiglas on his wrist and some sort of odd pen in his hand. He had a pleasant face, she decided, tanned but not sunburnt, and a very nicely kept mess of very dark brown hair.

"Who are you?" She demanded, and winced with regret as she blurted it out. That was no way to talk to a gentleman. He would probably think she had no manners. Edu tried to teach her manners, but though Edu proudly told her that she was now studying at the eleventh school year level in her sixth year, her social skills were lacking. Well, she'd show Edu a thing or two.

"I mean, that is, ahem." she cleared her throat and straightened her undernourished frame like a lady would from her normal hunched posture. Edu had taught her all about manners.

"Hello, I am pleased to make your acquaintance. May I have your name?" Ama said perfectly. Edu would be so proud of her handling of this social interaction. He had concerns in this area of her education.

"I'm the guy who's supposed to be here. You must be the other guy." He smirked. She was taken aback. Was this a riddle? Ama stumbled for words.

"Hello... Um," Her wild gray eyes searched his dark blue eyes frantically. A bead of sweat cut a small valley into the grime as it trickled down her darkly tanned cheek. "Hello. I am pleased to make your acquaintance. May I have your name?"

She scrunched her dirty face. The boy continued to stare at her blankly. The sun beat down upon them for several very awkward moments. Ama heard the rat scurry under the salvage.

She did not understand why this wasn't working. Did this boy not know the words to say back? According to Edu, the boy was supposed to introduce himself, and then she would introduce herself very politely. Then they would have a conversation. Maybe this boy was dumb? Edu says some people are not naturally as smart as others, but they shouldn't be ridiculed or made to feel different, because that was bullying. The girl absently scratched at some mites that had taken up in her arm; she would have to smother them in oil.

"Why are you here?" The boy asked. He seemed to be uneasy for some reason. He absently fidgeted with his coveralls and half reached for his com, studying her intently. "You're almost twenty five kilometers away from the closest of even the most remote stations."

This wasn't how it was supposed to go at all. She searched her mind through all of the things that Edu had taught her. She knew this should work. Edu was never wrong, and certainly in this instance he was the authority on such matters of social interaction. She was becoming frightened, and she could tell the boy was growing agitated. She should have run and hid. This was mortifying. She was failing in front of a gentleman!

"Look," The boy said with exaggerated patience. "I'm out here scanning VINs for my Pop, because he says I need the real life education, whatever that means. I did not sign up to deal with a scavenger. You have five ticks to identify yourself before I call LocSec." He grabbed his com threateningly. "One. Two..."

The girl sunk to the ground and sobbed. "This wasn't how it was supposed to go."

It was all her fault. Just like the ship. Edu would try to tell her the ship wasn't her fault, then apologize for the thousandth time that counseling was not his core function, but she knew it must be. She could only remember the ship sometimes. She tried very hard not to dwell on it for fear of having an episode. Edu was very concerned about those.

"Hey... Hey, I'm sorry. Hey, please don't cry." The boy's resolve to be authoritative melted as he crouched beside her and put his arm on her shoulder. Ama sobbed harder; his arm was the only human touch she had felt in six years. She buried her face into his nice clothes on instinct. The boy awkwardly smoothed her wild, thick tangle of hair. She clung to him as if he was the last piece of reality at the event horizon of a black hole.

"I'm Ben." He said uncertainly, putting a finger under her chin and gently lifting her head to meet her eyes. "Who are you? And why are you here of all places?"

"I am.. Pleased to meet you... My name is Ama." The girl managed as she tried to regain control of herself and remember the proper words.

"And I've always been here." Ama whispered hoarsely.

"...And expectations are high for this season's Murray Cup. The best of the best, finalists from the eight corners of the Verse condensed down to one small track. You can feel the excitement starting to build." The mobi crackled under Ama's pillow, softly glowing through the sheets.

Ama stretched mightily, twisting in the blankets as she luxuriated in the last few moments of being in bed. Edu blinked on from his charging station on the wall, beside her workbench. The homely, comfortable smells of lubricants, oil and petrofuel permeated her door from the shop outside. Ben's father, Pop, had tried to move her into the residential section when she first arrived years ago, but she could never sleep without the proper mechanical ambiance.

Her room was cluttered in a pleasant way, bits and odds of mechanical and engine components in various states of repair. She still had some items left from her time among the salvage, including the original charging station she had wired together to replenish Edu's power supply. Her walls were a reflection of her mind, plastered with holos and posters of ships, engines, components, and a few depicting gun emplacements, rockets and shield specs. Clutter comforted her, and while Pop insisted she keep it all organized, he stopped short of requiring an actual state of cleanliness.

"...And no few comments about Velocity Strone's conspicuous absence from this year's Div-H after barely missing the window to qualify by failing to place in the last sanctioned race." Headcase continued his commentary on Ama's mobi.

"Well, Headcase, all I can say is she'll still have those commercials to fall back on, I suppose." McCloy said, warming up to one of his trademark rants. "I've said time and again, she's no Mindane Solesta. Now that's a real racer. I'd pick her to win the Murray Hare if not for Kirk Sollust and his wild winning streak from obscurity to the spotlight. This kid is turning heads..."

Ama switched the mobi off. She always fell asleep to Grinding Turbines, the late night mechanics talk show and awoke to Headcase and McCloy breaking down the latest racing news and expressing their wild and controversial opinions as facts. The hyperbole had a certain attraction to Ama, but she did sort of hate bad data. The loose license of opinion talk shows clouded her thought process.

Normally it would be time for her lessons, but Ama had completed them all months ago, even the new ones. Edu had come factory complete some basic trade modules, among them rudimentary wiring, repair and mechanics. These were always Ama's favorites to run, she knew them by heart. From those rudimentary lessons, her own intuition and special gift for all things mechanical took over. These days Edu was grafted into a heavily modified repair droid. Ama had made many modifications to Edu in the time since the EduBot was given to her as a gift back in 2933 for her fourth birthday. Now almost a fully fledged android due to modifications and reprogramming, including much more advanced training in engines, systems, avionics, and pretty much anything mechanical. All completed as of almost a year ago. Edu was her one solid place in the world.

Ben had found Ama at ten after she had lived amongst the salvage six years, as near as they could tell, with only a fully programmed EduBot for company. It was likely the only reason she wasn't a nattering savage like that 'former's son Ama had read about, the one that got lost on Alpha Theta XIV. The planet Alpha Theta XIV was abandoned for persistently high ammonia levels, no matter how they adjusted the terraforming. Unsafe ammonia levels. The boy had died not long after he was finally found a year later, feral as a yard rat. Ama shuddered. She couldn't dwell on that.

Ben's father, whom everyone referred to simply as Pop, took her in immediately. She had lived with Pop and Ben for almost four years now; Pop said her parents were dead, and Ama never asked how he knew. Maybe when she was older she would ask.

Ama's fourteenth birthday was not long off. She made a point of remembering these things; it helped anchor her in time. Sometimes it was hard to fully remain psychologically corporeal, and other times her early life was a memory from some other person or a story she had heard. Pop remarked often early on about her resilience until he realized her was doing more harm than good with his praise.

Ama selected the day's attire of sturdy brown shorts, calf length socks, a dark green button down short sleeved shirt of thick, sturdy synthcotton. Lastly she pulled up her favorite coveralls, specially laundered per a new subroutine she installed in Edu. He was now very adept at getting the clothes clean, but leaving the engine smell in.

~Good morning, Ama. All course curriculum has been completed at above average levels as of ten months, fourteen days and eleven hours ago; congratulations. Would you like to sharpen your skills by reviewing previously passed curriculum?~ Edu's always patient, mentor-like voice had soothed Ama every day for almost ten years. Ama could easily reprogram Edu to cease greeting her as an EduBot to its student, but she would not do so.

Edu's voice and presentation had matured as Ama grew older. Ama could recall as a child that his voice had synthesized to affect an almost cartoonish demeanor, programmed to hold the attention of a four year old. As she progressed and aged, Edu's scalable education package had elevated with her in advancement and maturity. Edu had saved her mind. He was the reason she wasn't mad. Or any madder, as it were.

Ama looked to the future now; the past was dark and best forgotten. Her dreams were becoming bigger every day, too big to carry the lodestone of her past and still have the propulsion needed to achieve escape velocity. Wistfully she gazed at the Origin M50 brochure on the back of her door. She idly fantasized about becoming a racer, like on the vids. The thrill of speed, more to the point, the thrill of speed being realized from her expertise as a mechanic, was absolutely intoxicating. Pop had trained her as he had so many others in his shop. She was almost as good a mechanic as Ben these days, she reckoned.

As far as the government was concerned, Pop was a successful savager, trading in and selling off-world salvage as well as the recyclables in Sector 246. On the side, and much more lucratively, Pop was a mechanic. And a very good one at that; he had apprentices often over the years, men and women who came to learn from him. Ama had seen no less than ten come and go within just four years. There were no apprentices currently, but Ama suspected that wouldn't last long.

There was a catch to Pop's trade, however. Ama had been made to understand that the UEE frowned upon certain modifications, both in terms of availability and implementation. She was very careful to only do the legal work in the shop. Pop was a self-described 'Libertarian,' which Edu said meant that he believed in every man's sovereign rights to live his life and act as he wished as long as no harm was done. Ben often expressed disapproval with his father's views on government; it was the only vocalized point of contention between them that Ama was directly aware of. Ama herself fell somewhere between on that argument, admittedly from an entirely scholarly point of view based on Edu's social science modules and without real experience.

"C'mon, Edu. Let's get to work." Kicking herself out of her reverie and kicking into a pair of mechanic's exoboosts and finger-fitted gloves, Ama strode out into the shop ready to start her new day. Edu rolled behind atop his repair bot platform.

Ama smiled as Pop straightened at the workbench, flexing his broad back and rolling his neck. He was a huge man, and even though he had built the benches up to suitable working height, he still got stiff from working too long in the same position.

"Good morning, Sunshine." Pop greeted Ama with a sidelong glance and a bright expression. It was a few minutes until eight, but Pop liked an early start and had likely been tinkering for hours. "Need to move your Excelci, hon. Got a job coming in hot, need the space."

Landing on day side for a hot job? This customer must be either desperate or reckless, Ama thought. Ama was mildly annoyed at the change of her day's plans. But then, it was a little ridiculous to install shields on her salvaged Excelsi, especially the military grade, amplified, and modified shields from an old Anvil light transport. She could install that into the antique luxury transport another day.

"In fact, take a ride out to 755; I'll send you a parts manifest once she arrives and I can get a good look at what we'll need." Pop said casually. Lot 236.755? So newer model then. "Ben, why don't you ride with her?"

"Sure thing, Pop. It would be the Gentlemanly thing to do." Ben had sauntered in with a pastry in each hand, and tossed one to Ama. She wolfed it down as he grinned. He was never going to let Ama live down her confession of what she had thought of him when they first met.

He was in a fantastic mood, Ama could tell. Edu speculated that Ben perhaps suffered from a minor bipolar disorder, but disclaimed that he was not programmed for psych eval. Pop said Ben was exactly what he was, a teenage boy. Good mood meant good times. Otherwise he was moody and sulked, which made for poor company. But when a ride in the Excelsi was in the offering, he usually flipped shiny side up.

Ama's Excelsi, built entirely from salvage parts, was a gem indistinguishable from a cherry, vintage single owner. That is, other than some minor odd modifications that Ama would not fly without, like the hidden gun. Ben had said Ama was paranoid from being alone so long as a child, but something in Ama's subconscious rebelled fiercely against flying in something that wasn't armed, shielded and fast. She certainly was on Pop's side of that philosophical argument. A person had the right to fight, defend or run.

"Honestly, Ama." Ben shook his head. Ama shrugged and continued reinstalling the weaker standard shields she had just taken out last night. If she had another hour she could put in the new shields... Well, these would do. They were just going out in the salvage.

"Normal people do not install shields on personal transports. I mean, other than just the standard safety stuff." Ben said, and started edging dangerously close to sulking again. Hopefully Ben's attitude would improve with altitude. Ama quickly finished bolting the old shields back into place and flipped the breaker before hiding it all again under a specially fabricated cover that latched seamlessly into place.

It was a beautiful day as usual; the best part of endless searing desert was nearly constant blue sky. Cool and comfortable in the life support modified atmosphere of the Excelsi, out of the desert heat, it was sublime. Excelsi did not come standard with true life support systems. Ama had amended that. While it would still only operate properly in atmo, she could and had

taken her Excelsi to twenty-four thousand meters up with no issues. She felt no need to push that envelope, but it was something she had to test at least once.

Lot 755 was only a dozen kilometers away as the ship flies, and most of the salvage there was skillfully hidden to prevent scan by prying eyes and sensors. Pop kept most of the newer salvage there. But as per usual, Ama elected to take a circular route. Normally, this was where she would practice her social skills with Ben, but he had fallen silent.

"Pop hasn't had an apprentice mechanic in two months," Ama mused aloud, trying to get him started. The lack of newcomers to the shop was something that had been bothering her. Ben said nothing for a few moments, so Ama asked more directly. "He's had two or three at a time since I've known him. Is something wrong?"

"They still call, they still ask. He tells them all no. I guess since he has us to do all the grunt work he doesn't need the gearheads fawning all over him." Ben said. So, sulky had won out again. Ama sighed.

"That Lancer job last week, we could have used a hand on that. I've never overhauled engines that badly damaged." Ama tried to commiserate. That 'Lancer had been a mess, and Ama recalled it appeared as though it had been caught out in a micrometeorite storm for a few days. "It would have been cheaper and faster to do a tear out and drop in new engines."

"The one that was all shot up? Yeah." Ben replied. He brightened a little at Ama's sudden alarm.

"Shot! Are you serious?" Ama demanded.

"Yea, you didn't notice the scoring of the near misses or the slag on the burn marks? Beam weapon damage for sure" Ben said too casually, clearly enjoying her discomfort. It was one of his new games, making her uncomfortable and enjoying her squirm, a game that Ama desperately hoped was what Edu called a 'phase.' Ben had always been a kind boy, and he had a heart of gold, but lately whimsical dark impulses seemed to rule him. Pop had said he would grow out of it. Ama couldn't hardly wait.

Ama was very uncomfortable indeed, and rightly so. Unlicensed repair of ships damaged by ordinance was strictly forbidden. At the very least a mechanic was required to report it to LocSec if not the UEE. Pop had never had her work on a hot job. In fact, he was very adamant about it. That he would change his mind and instruct her to do illegal work without her knowledge... Well, she would have some questions for him about that.

"I don't know what you're worried about. As far as the UEE goes, you don't exist." Ben mitigated, apparently deciding he had enough of her discomfort.

"What do you mean, I don't exist?" Ama asked, offended. She slowed the Exelci even further, trying to prolong the flight until she could get to the bottom of this strange conversation. "What an odd thing to say, I'm right here, aren't I?"

"I mean officially. There is no record of you. I checked last night." Ben chewed on his lip. "No birth information, you're not in the DNA database, nothing. I don't know why Pop had not done any checking in all these years."

"Ow!" Ben exclaimed as Ama struck him, hard.

"How dare you! How dare you investigate me on the... On the mobiglas!" She said, raising her voice to a tone somewhere between shock and anger.

"What's the big deal, aren't you curious?" Ben rubbed his shoulder and scowled. Ama didn't care if he got sulky or mad. Of all the nerve!

"Sometimes" Ama admitted. Then she hit him again. "But that's my personal business!"

Edu was very certain on this point in the social behavior modules. You did not meddle in personal matters of others that do not concern you. And he was right. Ama felt terribly now that she knew Ben was researching her behind her back.

"You're right." Ben relented. They rode in silence a few moments. It was an unwritten rule that when they were able to fly that they took the most round about way to get from A to B just to enjoy it for a while; Ama had milked this trip further than most; the twelve k trip had turned into forty-five so far.

"It was my fault and I apologize." Ben said, with a faint smirk.

"Apology accepted. It was just a misunderstanding." Ama mentally kicked herself. She did not forgive him. It was the stupid courtesy and manners programming that Edu had her work on so often because of her social shortcomings out in the salvage land. She had come to realize that her responses were automatic so often that it wouldn't surprise her to know Ben exploited the flaw to get her to accept his apology vocally if not at heart. Would she ever be normal? Ama resolved to remove the shields when she got back. She would be normal if it killed her. Ama gritted her teeth and took the Excelsi down into Lot 236.755.

Ama began inspecting the parts among the newer salvage, though she knew this area by heart. There was a front aileron assembly for an Origin M50 here that she would always stare at and dream about for a few moments at least each time she came out this way. But she did not have the chance this time. They had scarcely disembarked before Ama's mobiglas beeped an incoming message tone from her wrist.

"The data is coming through now. Pop is sending full sized, detailed schematics for some reason." Ama frowned. According to the detail, they would need two Kroneg AS-44's.

"We need two AS-44's?" Ama relayed. "That's not a mechanical part, those are guns!"

"Right here" Ben said. "I know it's the right part because they're still in the crates complete with labels. They're new. Why would Pop stash new parts out in the Salvage Land?" He tugged at one, but the lid was tight.

"No need to break the boxes until we get back. Fortunately they're relatively light. Grab an end." Ben said.

Ama and Ben manhandled the two crates into the small cargo area of the Excelsi. The next schematic came up. Ama gasped. She turned the data pad towards Ben.

"I already see them." Ben said hollowly, looking suspiciously at a crate packed with two Talon Devastator missiles. "And I suppose next we need this box labeled Origin Jumpworks M50 Shield Generator."

"Yes, that's the next..." Ama broke off mid sentence. She ran to the crate of missiles, struggling to heave them into the Excelsi.

"Ama! Those are missiles. Do you understand? Boom! Get it?" Ben cautioned frantically, but Ama was beyond reason. She was already dashing back to halfway throw the twenty kilogram shield package into the ship. Her adrenaline was so high it might have weighed two kilos.

"Has she moved yet?" A female voice asked.

"No, but she did stop crying with joy." Pop responded in an amused tone.

"It's a start." The female voice replied.

Ama paid them no more mind than a moth would caught staring at a glowlight. A heavily custom built Origin Jumpworks M50 Turbo with adjustable forward swept racing wings, right here in Pop's shop. Ama's knees were a little weak. The intakes were miraculously immaculate even after a turn through atmo. She took a few hesitant steps forward. The racing wings were shorter than stock M50 wings and were articulated to sweep forward or back as needed for speed and maneuvering on the fly. Eight top of the line tier two articulating thrusters were positioned at perfectly engineered angles to the ship's center lines. What a delightfully ridiculous amount of aerobatic power to control a mere fourteen tons of ship! And then there was the overkill of two huge tier four engines for thrust. She held her hand out as if to run her hand down along the vessel, but did not make contact. This wasn't hers to touch.

"Do you like my ride?" The female voice asked behind her, coyly.

"Your 'ride', as you call it, is two huge tier four engines jammed up behind a seat with enough thrust to propel and maneuver a fully loaded Starfarer through an asteroid field and just enough everything else to keep you from venting into vacuum. And it's so beautiful I could cry." Ama said, in complete honesty and awe. Come to think of it, her face did seem a little wet. Had she teared up? That would be embarrassing, Ama thought distantly.

"Please don't." The woman said. Ama could hear the smile in the woman's voice, not that Ama was about to turn away and look at it, or her. Ama was... Preoccupied at the moment. Ama trailed around the aft section and reveled in the engineering of the main thrusters and afterburners. They looked clean enough to eat a meal off of them.

Finally Ama tore her eyes away, if only because she had slowly realized she was rudely ignoring their guest. There Ama received her second shock; standing there beside Pop, even more beautiful than in her advertisements, was Velon "Velocity" Strone. Her raven hair fell in waves on her shoulders as if a separate thing accompanying her, and her dark eyes twinkled with delight in counterpoint to her perfect porcelain skin.

It was one thing to see beautiful people on the glas. They were on screen at any time of day or night. But in person... Ama felt awkward, and plain, almost like she wasn't even human by comparison. The feeling was very foreign to Ama; she had never felt insecure about her looks before. Everything else, yes, but not looks. Ama thought she should say something, but she had forgotten how to say things. Pop saved her the embarrassment.

"Better get to work, child. This shield generator isn't going to install itself." Pop didn't have to elaborate or clarify. Ama seized the chance and dove into her tools.

Forty five minutes later, Ama sighed and gently patted the access panel she had just resealed. Edu had watched the installation and stored the procedures into his maintenance subroutines. Ama had let Edu do some tasks himself on occasion since integrating the EduBot with a stock maintenance droid, but not this job.

As the day passed, Ama had plenty of time to admire the M50 and its pilot. Pop and Ben had finished with the guns just after lunch, and throughout the afternoon struggled with the mounting system for the missiles. Even though the Talon mounting system was specifically designed for the M50, it was clearly an afterthought not intended by original ship design.

Ama was almost as awed by "Velocity" Strone as she was by the M50 itself. Ama had seen Velon before on the glas, of course. She was a middle-of-the-pack driver for Techs-Co Racing, but had achieved more fame than her considerable but not quite superlative professional skill allowed by being incredibly photogenic. Edu had said that beauty sells during one of the commercialism and capitalism modules, and Ama had to admit that she would happily buy pretty much anything Velon was selling.

"So to answer your question, yes there are people who do not want these modifications done, but it's not the UEE." Strone continued. To Ama's confusion and delight, Velon seemed to instantly and genuinely like her, lingering to talk with Ama through the afternoon and almost into the dusk while Ben and Pop meticulously worked on the missile mountings. Ama wasn't sure what she had done to earn the esteem, but she prayed that she would keep doing that thing. "The people who don't want this to happen, well, that would be my management team. For some reason they do not want their star risking her pretty face on an Arms Race."

Ama choked a little bit. The Arms Race was the equivalent to the Div-T, or 'Tortoise', races run on the Murray circuit that featured actual armed ships contending to reach goals - and shooting at one another in the process. Only the Arms Race did not have the niceties of regulations that Murray Cup rules demanded. "Why in the worlds would you want to run those races? I mean, you would hold your own, but..." Edu would certainly say that was a unfavorable calculated risk. Ama was even more awed than before.

"I want to learn to be a fighter pilot." Velon said simply. "I don't see me sharing rack with a bunch of sweaty military flygirls, so this is the next best thing."

Velon's logic had flaws in it, but her determination showed no such fissures. Ama knew enough about people now to know when they were adamantly attached to an idea. Ben got that way a lot.

"I need to see how she sits." Velon climbed into the cockpit and began preflight as Pop and Ben finished mounting the remaining missile. Pop gave a thumbs up and everyone took a few steps back. Velocity accelerated away so quickly it was almost like she had flown through the hangar rather than took off from it. Tools, papers and other odds and ends blew back from the thrust. Pop shook his head with a wistful smile, and Ama, her hair akimbo, stood wide eyed staring after.

Post flight was a dream, everything was perfect. Velon was more than satisfied and finalized her transaction of credits with Pop. Ama peered longingly into the cockpit one last time. If she had ever had only one wish...

"You want to take a spin?" Velon said, right over her shoulder. Ama jumped. Velon was holding out the activator to her. Was this a dream? Ama was not one to pass up opportunities with trifles like inexperience or potential catastrophe. She almost snatched the activator with a grin that threatened to split her face.

She took off more cautiously than Velon had into the darkening desert sky; Ama was practical enough to know she did not have the skill of Velocity Strone. Her euphoria of this perfect day that had passed far too quickly was replaced by the thrill of lying, really flying. She went faster, and faster. Numbers swirled in her mind; to her, flight was a series of calculations and equations and changing variables. The various display glass and indicators of the M50 gave her a great deal of information to plug into the swirling numbers in her mind. Pop thought she might be something called a savant early on, before Ama had redeveloped her ability to interact with other people. Now he just said she was uniquely gifted.

Ama was unsettled with each successive sonic boom even though she knew that the math absolutely stated that the shielding and hull integrity of the m50 were more than a match for her speed through atmo. Something about flying and loud booming noises triggered her episodes sometimes. But not today. Not on her own, personal perfect day.

Ama slowed to just below mach one, flipped laterally using a perfectly timed burst of thrusters and sped back. Her mouth hurt from smiling so much, and her eyes watered. They were waiting for her when she arrived back at the shop.

Immediately she could see that Pop had disapproving look, and Ben was shaking his head. Ama's smile melted. Had she done something wrong? Ama removed her helmet and opened the cockpit. She did not exit the ship, though. She wasn't ready to abdicate her throne for the day just yet.

She looked in turn from each face. Pop's scowl deepened; Velon's face was expressionless and Ben gulped audibly. "I don't understand. What have I done? I swear I'll make it right. Just tell me!" Ama pleaded.

"You were going a full mach past rated speed for an M50 in atmo." Ben said disbelievingly. "And ended that with a flip 180 and another burn back at two mach over."

"But... I mean, I know the specs, but their tech's math is wrong." Ama peered intently at Velon, whose face was expressionless. "Their math was wrong, I promise! I wouldn't have endangered your M50! Velon, please believe me, I'm... I'm sorry." Her chest felt hollow. Velon wouldn't like her anymore. Velon would go away, and race her races, and if she ever thought about Ama again it would be to remember a stupid child who had tried to destroy her ship. Velon would forever...

Velon burst into a delighted cackle and ran up to hug Ama, who feebly hugged the racing star back, very confused. And intensely relieved she hadn't lapsed into an episode. She had been very close. The last one had taken a full day to grind to a halt.

"How much for the girl?" Velon laughed. "I want one!"

"She's a package deal with that the Professor over there," Pop said ruefully, jerking a thumb towards Edu, who had motored up into the small cargo area of the M50 to plug in for post flight diagnostics. "But with all respect, Ms. Strone, you can't afford her. That's my girl."

Ama felt so warm inside that she thought she must be glowing like the sun. All she could hear was a hum, growing louder and louder. It sounded like Aegis interceptor engines for some reason. Ama idly mused that she would have assumed that if happiness were a sound, it would sound like the M50's engines. If the universe were fair, she would die right now and her life would be complete.

The increasingly louder hum-whine was heard by the others as well. Pop walked to the entrance of the hangar, with Ben following cautiously but very curiously behind. Velon raced after them in alarm.

"Definitely military, but modified and solid black without any markings. And armed. What in the worlds are they..." Ben was cut off as an explosion rocked the hangar.

"C'mon! It has shields, go go go!" Ben yelled and dragged Velon and Pop into the Excelsi. Pop struggled toward Ama, but an explosion knocked down the hangar door, blocking his way to her. As soon as Pop cleared the door of the old civilian vessel, Ben fired up the shield generator and then the engines. Gunfire began raining on them from the two attacking ships, but the shields held. For now.

Ama sat frozen in the pilot's seat of the M50, her face a mask of terror. "Fireworks." she whispered hoarsely. She was starting to remember again; an episode was coming on. She fought it. Edu tapped on the bulkhead with a spanner. ~Ama, you must leave this area immediately. The risk of staying in the general vicinity calculates very unfavorably.~

Ama desperately fought against her own mind. She hadn't installed the new shields on the Excelsi. Pop and Ben and Velon... They would die and it would be her fault. It would be her fault.

"It was my fault." She whispered. "It won't be again."

Ama slapped her hand down on the cockpit controls and was halfway through preflight before the seal was complete. The engines fired to life as more explosions rocked the hangar. Ama's face was a mask of rage and hatred for two black ships raining fire on the Excelsi.

Ben had managed to take off, but the Excelsi was hopelessly outmatched. Ama burst out of the now fully engulfed hangar and warmed up the guns. She zipped up to match altitude with the jet black modified Avengers in pursuit of the Excelsi. Numbers tumbled in her head. Angles, drag, standard shield specs, point of origin of the shields and areas of overlap. She overrode the avionics and reprogrammed target acquisition telemetry within fifteen seconds. Each Devastator missile was now programmed to a precise angle of attack directly behind the shield generators.

The Excelsi was going down, to Ama's horror. The descent was barely controlled vertically and in a slow flat spin. Ama independently aimed the Needles at each craft and pelted the top rear shields. If the aggressors were foolish enough to leave their shields on auto-calibrate mode, they should shift to either dorsal or aft. Either was fine with Ama.

She fired both missiles and watched both of the modified Avengers explode as if they had been detonated from the inside.

Wreckage

Thick, billowing smoke filled the air from a small section of salvage that was actively on fire. In the fading light, the smoke made it nearly impossible to see. Ama scanned her scopes to find no immediate backup to the two assailants. She surveyed the scene; it was impossible to tell where the two destroyed craft ended and the salvage began, so complete was their destruction. By the time Ama had landed and powered down the M50, Ben was dragging Pop's huge frame from the damaged Excelsi. Ama raced to his side with Edu motoring along behind. Pop was hurting, Ama could tell.

~Please remain calm, children. Mr. Kordon will be seen to once proper medical authorities arrive.~ Edu said comfortingly. Ama thought quickly, reached into Edu's access panel and switched off the com array she had added last year. The Avengers were vehicles of authority, and Ama wasn't sure if any authorities could be trusted given her very limited experience that consisted primarily of official looking ships shooting at her and her family in these past few moments.

"Sorry, I didn't think it was a good idea for Edu to connect to EMS until..." Ama began. Pop was really badly injured, she realized. His right side was dripping blood, trailing off his fingers in rivulets. "Should I reconnect his coms?"

"Yes!" Ben said, his angry eyes glistening. He half supported, half hugged Pop tightly, his breath was ragged with anger. Pops head lolled as if he was about to pass out. Ama felt sick in her stomach.

"No!" Velon asserted in the same moment. Velon breathed deeply, then choked on the fumes. "We can't. This smells like some kind of hit job. We have been specifically targeted. The question is, why? And the only opportunity we will have to answer that question is by hoping they think we're dead."

"These assailants were well funded, judging by the specialized ships and armaments. The hand behind this has means and access." Velon shielded her eyes against the fires from the brightly burning wreckage of the Avengers and surrounding salvage. "I'm betting that a search will begin soon once these two are found to be lost."

"We can't stay here, then." Ama concluded. "We need to hide." If there was anything Ama understood better than anyone, it was how to hide among the salvage. She already had a few dozen suitable spots picked out in her mind and began internally analyzing them for security. Pop spoke then, weakly. Ama was too far away to hear. Ben nodded.

"What did he say?" Velon demanded, on edge.

"686. He means Lot 236.686. There must be something there that we need or can use." Ben chewed his lip.

Ama had already identified the area near 686 as a potential candidate. It passed her mental tests as secure enough, for now. 686 was dangerously close to the area referred to as the RZ. 686 wasn't exactly hot from the radiation zone, but it was close. Even as a child, the dead vermin surrounding that area had been a very fortunate warning to stay away. She had always assumed something evil lay in the vicinity of the area designated Lot 236.674, but now she knew it was radioactive contamination. No one went within a dozen lots of 674; 686 was the edge of what was considered safe enough to risk, twelve lots West of 674.

"It's thirty-one kilometers away." Ama nodded, satisfied with their destination. "We need a ride, and fast."

Ama raced to the Excelsi and began an assessment. She motioned Edu to check the power plant while Ben and Velon tended to Pop; his entire right arm looked very bad. Velon said something about a tourniquet, Ben argued that Pop could lose the arm that way, Velon countered that likely nothing could prevent that. Ama stopped listening as she had already borne too much today, and she was almost to the point of an episode any moment. She would be helping no one if she locked up now. After ten minutes had passed, Ben and Velon joined her, satisfied that Pop was stable for the moment.

After approximately twenty-seven minutes, with Ben and Velon assisting, they had rerouted enough systems to lift off the ground at the least. They gently loaded Pop back onto the Excelsi and limped to a takeoff, achieving an altitude that measured in single digit meters. Velon followed as escort in the M50 as they flew low and slow between the towering heaps of salvage.

Ama was very familiar with the area over which they flew. Another part of her, a part she had learned to acknowledge less and less as time buffered her from her past, saw potential rodent runs, good spots for finding sunning lizards, likely locations where hives of insects might hide, and precious few places where water gathered. She saw an early model Aurora canopy that had been her home at one time, when she had lived here long ago before moving further out into the Salvage Land. Before Ben and Pop rescued her from her small, dangerous world.

Even at their relatively slow pace it was only a matter of minutes to their destination. They landed among huge, hulking, angular and boxy military salvage, Aegis and Anvil parts mostly, including some heavily damaged but largely intact hulls. The area here was wild, as if what flora and fauna inhabited the Salvage Land was rebelling against the cancer at the center. Ama would have never hunted here out of fear, thankfully, despite the apparently excellent shelter opportunities. This close to the RZ, she was reminded again how fortunate she was to have survived those years without proper training.

"We have to get everything under cover." Ben said. "If people of means and access are after us, they'll be searching from orbit. We're too close to the shop. Or what's left of it"

He was right, of course. Depending on when the search started, Ama calculated thirty-eight or forty-two minutes of standard grid full spectrum search to reach their current area, depending on if the potential searchers had advanced outwards from last known location clockwise or counter clockwise. They were in their thirty-sixth minute since the attack.

"We're out of time, we have to move." Ama insisted forcefully. Her urgency was immediately contagious.

Ama ran to the closest, largest intact cargo hold door she could find, conveniently covered by an overlapping cave of salvage, almost as if it had been parked there on purpose. Ama sliced the door, and thankfully enough juice remained to open it. She doubted enough power remained for closing it. Velon wasted no time, Ama had just sprung the cargo hold as Velon glided past in the M50. There was enough room to be a comfortable fit with plenty of room around the fore, aft and sides. But not enough room for... Ama sighed. The Excelsi had to go.

Ben caught her gaze, shoulder propped under Pop's undamaged arm, Pop just lucid enough to take stumbling steps but his right arm was a mangled dark purple mess. A belt cinched his arm just below the deltoids. Ama knew in her gut that the arm was lost without immediate medical attention, which Pop would not receive.

Numbers skittered across her mind; the most Ama could depend on was that any search for them, if it were occurring, was circling a mere 0.045 Lots away. She had less than two minutes.

"Get inside," Ama commanded. Ben half dragged Pop along as Velon struggled to assist him. "And stay there."

Ama quickly fired up the Excelsi and moved just into the hot zone, far enough away that her plan wouldn't disturb 686 where her family was hiding in the cargo hold of the salvage ship. She landed hard up against a precarious pile of metal and plasteel fourteen meters high. She jumped out and ran some hasty calculations using bad data. She hated bad data, but there was

no time for determining exact weights and densities within the pile. She focused on calculating angles, surfaces and leverage. In twenty eight seconds her calculations were complete.

Ama leapt spryly up the pile, purposefully hitting the weak points at proper intervals with her full weight. Midway, she stopped to unscrew an antenna from a broadcast assembly. She had fifty two seconds. Jamming her lever into a point between a blown Aegis power plant and three meters of Anvil dorsal fin, she heaved with all her might. The salvage groaned, then gave way. the pile shifted dangerously underneath her. As soon as the mass of salvage passed the point of no return, Ama leapt away and tucked into an open empty torpedo casing just as the world fell away beneath her.

"You heard the crash, that must have been two hours ago! She might be hurt, or..." Ben cut off as Ama quickly ghosted around the corner and into the hold. Pop had a weak hand on Ben, holding him back. Velon looked genuinely relieved.

"It was only sixty-three minutes. I could have come back at sixty-one minutes based on average object recognition and thermal imaging scanner speed, grid size and assumed search patterns. But I was in a bit of an argument with myself about whether my factors properly accounted for human input versus a standard fully automated search." Ama realized they were staring at her. "I installed survival training and search and rescue procedure modules in Edu two years ago. I studied them very well; I do not want to be lost and alone ever again."

Ben ran up and hugged her. "You won't be, Ama. Pop and I will look after you." He laughed. "Or maybe you'll look after us?"

"We need to focus on surviving." Velon said. She was clearly beginning to feel the effects that Ama saw in Ben and felt in herself. "Someone wanted one or all of us dead. These were well funded professionals, perhaps even black ops." She shook her head in disbelief.

Ama didn't want to be the one to say it, but she suspected that since Velon was the only one of any real importance or fame, well, the facts sort of spoke for themselves. Ama wouldn't abandon Velon unless her family's survival depended on it. But she needed to know more. She held Velon's gaze; Velon did not blink. Ben broke the silence first, echoing Ama's conclusions.

"We won't abandon you, Velon. We are in this together until we are all safe." Ben stated plainly and with a great amount of conviction. Pop nodded weakly. It was decided then. Her family's safety depended on Velon's safety. Velon's face was a wash of emotions, then her jaw tightened and she adopted a visage of determination.

"We are with you until the end, my Lady. My sword is yours." Ama said with a weak bit of flourish, paraphrasing a line from a tale of Arthurian legend that Edu had read to her as a girl. But could Ama really be a Knight like Lady Guinevere, saving the handsome but helpless captive Sir Lancelot from the power-mad King Arthur? In the story Guinevere was made Queen after defeating Morgana le Fay, and then married Lancelot, making him her beautiful King. Ama knew better the rigors of survival. This tale would like as not end badly.

Ama sighed. As much as she wanted to spend every waking moment fawning over Velocity Strone, her family's safest path would be wishing Velon all the luck in the worlds and waving as the racing star flew away in her gorgeous M50. Ama had no illusions about survival. You stayed small and played the hand you were dealt with as much caution as practical. Edu would say this was a unfavorably calculated...

Ama's gasped and she ran out of the cargo hold back into the salvage land.

~No need to concern yourself chi~ Edu squelched. ~core systems functioning at~ there was a long pause. ~thirty-six per~ He was a mess, but thankfully alive, or at least core functional. Most memory, processing, core modules, all intact. She had lost one largely empty memory bank and quite a few of his attachments and peripherals. As well as the add-on voice processor enhancements Ama had installed. Ama's heart had not stopped pounding for over an hour while they had salvaged Edu out of the buried Excelsi.

"I hate myself." Ama seethed as she worked untangling Edu's components. "It's my fault." She began rocking. She was dangerously close to an episode. There would be no stopping it now. "I hate myself." How could she have left her mentor and best friend in a vehicle and then dropped tens of tons of salvage on him? She was a monster and deserved whatever punishment the universe deemed fit.

"Ama." Ben said gently. "Ama, it will be alright. Edu has all of his core functions, Ama." He alternated between embracing her shoulders and stroking her hair, deep concern in his eyes. "If anyone can fix him, you will, Ama."

Velon kept her distance, holding her fingers against Pop's wrist to monitor his pulse. Pop was sleeping soundly and breathing deeply and evenly. Velon reported from time to time that his pulse continued regularly and strongly. Full darkness had fallen. The glass screens inside the M50 illuminated the hold with a soft glow; they dared not risk more light. Ama had barely noticed the heavily armored military vessel they had sheltered in, focused on her only link to something real in her life.

"Ama, I need you here. Ama, stay with me." Ben firmly grasped Ama's wrist and pried her away from one of Edu's bent but not yet broken articulated limbs. Ama had almost snapped it off, she realized. She was not doing well. "Follow me, Ama. Follow my voice. Don't retreat from us. We need you."

By degrees, Ama's heaving chest slowed its deep gasps for air. Her distant eyes began to refocus on reality as she followed Ben's soothing words out of the maze in her mind. A friend of Pop's had taught them this technique, though usually Pop was the one bringing her back out of the recesses of her subconscious.

She stopped breathing through her mouth and began breathing through her nose. Stepping away layer by layer from the hiding places in her mind. In a few minutes her breathing was back to normal. She sighed deeply and patted Ben's shoulder to let him know she was back. He nodded and then stepped away to give Ama room.

Ama removed the advanced vocalization and vocabulary units she had installed. They only enhanced the presentation of Edu's conversation, made it more natural. He was still Edu and could communicate very effectively with just his core EduBot hardware and subroutines. She removed all of the broken and nearly broken tools and enhancements, fortunately they were all peripheral and replaceable. Ama sighed with relief, she was almost fully centered.

"This ship has seen some action," Velon observed aloud, trying to break the intense silence. "But it seems largely intact. Ben?" Ben nodded and resumed his place at Pop's side. Velon manhandled the nearly powerless cargo access airlock open. She whistled.

"This ship is modified with a laboratory of some sort." Velon continued streaming her observations aloud. "Unless I miss my guess, this is a heavily modified 'Tali airframe. I would not even recognize this as a converted 'Tali bomb bay if it weren't for the skin patch and added frames and stringers to cover where the works would go, and of course the signature armor."

"It was fitted with escape pods. One of the escape pods is gone, no big deal as the hatch is resealed behind it. Hell of a fire here in the corridor, though." Velon said, walking down the corridor along the length of the ship. Her voice became more faint as she made her way amidships.

"Further to the fore it seems more like a stock 'Tali. Gonna take a look up front and see what surprises they have in store up there." Velon said. She was gone for a few minutes. Ama looked around the ship. Something was nagging the back of her mind, a sense of unease and alarm. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up and she cradled Edu closer, suddenly and irrationally terrified she might lose him again.

The converted and modified cargo bay was just big enough to have deep shadows at every recess. Ama imagined she could hear a scratching sound as the desert winds had begun to die down and the cold of the desert night settled into her skin. She shivered. Something was familiar and alien about this place, or maybe it was the feeling of being in the salvage land, out in the desert among the filth once more, cold and afraid for her life.

"Cockpit seems sound, in fact the hull is completely spaceworthy and intact as far as I can eyeball without removing the ship from the salvage heap. But get this." Velon shook her head in amazement and raised an amused eyebrow. "There's some kind of toddler seat still buckled in up in the crew area."

"That's incredible. So, mom and Dad were out for a spin in their military tank, and they had Baby Boots on board for the bombing run?" Ben half snorted, half laughed out loud. He was referring to a cartoon character from vids popular during Ben's childhood. Baby Boots was forever adorably falling into the most improbable trouble, only to be rescued each time by her anthropomorphic toys. The show made no sense to Ama, but Ben had nostalgia for it.

Velocity joined him in laughter. Ama may have imagined it, but it looked like Pop was trying to wake up and say something. He had barely moved; it might have been just an impression she perceived.

"Yes, here we are, on the run from assassins, on board the only Retaliator heavy bomber in the 'verse equipped with a snug seat for Baby Boots!"

"Did you say... Retaliator?" She asked quietly. Memories came flooding back to Ama, and she froze in place. Ben and Velon did not seem to notice. But Edu did.

Edu buzzed to life. ~One private prerecorded message for: Ama. Received: March 15, 2933 at ten-forty two P.M., S.E.T.~

The laughter cut short. Ben and Velon exchanged bewildered glances. Ama stared at Edu, speechless. She worked her mouth, her tongue was too dry to make words. Ama gulped and started shaking visibly.

"Play..." Ama swallowed. "Play message."

~Begin Playback.~ Edu confirmed. A recording of a woman's voice replaced Edu's synthesized tone.

"X478355,33. Y744632,88. Z938749.90. X873487.12. Y872643.99. Z346091.55. X762034.44. Y2..."

"Mother. Are you... Are you doing math?" A child's voice asked on the recording. Ama was not imagining it; a single fat tear dropped from Pop's closed eye and rolled across his nose. It was an odd thing to fixate on. She felt as if she had been hit in the gut with ordinance and was in free-fall from the blast.

"...7334. Z837444.02. X576354.55. Y475883.39. Z982872.33." There was a pause. Explosions sounded in the background of the recording.

"Ama, I need you to remember. The password is Retaliator. It's the name of the kind of ship we're in..." Ama knew that voice. Her Mother's voice. Ama swayed. Velon and Ben's stunned faces were getting smaller and smaller as Ama's vision seemed to be zooming out away from them at great speed, and then blackness.

"Good morning, Sunshine."

Flicker. Pop's smiling, comforting face.

"You gonna sleep all day?"

Flicker. Ben standing, with his hand on Pop's right shoulder. Pop's arm was missing six inches below Ben's hand.

"C'mon, Baby Boots. You're too big for your old seat now, but we have a spot picked out for you in maintenance access."

Flicker. Velon with an uncharacteristic maternal expression, arms crossed, clearly concerned. For Ama.

Ama struggled against the bondage of grogginess that held her fast. Her mind was rebooting. But something was wrong. She ran her hand across her face. Nothing was there. For a moment, it seemed to Ama that she was looking through a heads-up display with numbers and data. But she wasn't wearing a visor or HUD glas. She was clearly hallucinating.

"How... Long?"

"Two days. You need to eat. Ben secured rations." Pop stated matter-of-factly. Ama sat up and received a UEE standard issue MRE nutrition bar. She just held it.

"Need... Drink first." Ama hoarsely replied. Velon handed her a flask, and Ama drank greedily. The cargo bay was much improved in organization and cleanliness. They must have been working nonstop.

"Your arm." Ama croaked, pointing weakly to Pop's missing appendage.

"Emergency medical bay on the ship. Military grade. It made... Quick work of my mangled arm. There was no saving it." Pop said.

"But fortunately the UEE Navy doesn't want their sailors slouching off just because they lost an appendage. The entire procedure was designed to lop off the arm with the goal of getting me back up ASAP." Pop smiled ruefully, and bravely. "I always said I'd give my left arm for a bionic appendage. Dammit all if it wasn't my right instead."

His resilience was astounding to Ama. Could she be up and working two days after losing her arm? Ama was immediately and rightly embarrassed to be lying here. She struggled up. They all tried to make her lie back down but Ama was having none of it.

"Where's that maintenance access?" Ama asked firmly.

"She's got good bones." Pop said appreciatively, patting the bulkhead affectionately with his left arm. "Her aft section of fuselage is wider than a standard 'Tali, but she wasn't modified later to produce that result. I wonder if this is one of the short run Retaliator FF models."

"Not suited for military. She's got guns but no bombs, missiles or torpedoes." Ben said. "Though this power plant is a full class larger than I thought was possible in a 'Tali."

"There's more to military ops than just blowing drift up, son." Pop said. "I'd had my eye on this ship a long time. I had begun to give up hope that I would ever get to fly this old girl."

"Why didn't you?" Ben grunted. The bigger the power plant, the more effort that was involved in the most simple maintenance. Ben reckoned that this particular power plant's coolant system had not run in years, but it was a top of the line model for its time.

"It was too hot, son. Of course, right now we're much hotter, so now that isn't keeping me back anymore." Pop said. "And maybe she holds a few answers for us as well."

"What was that?" Ben asked, then swore as he was almost covered in old coolant before managing to slam the coupling back in place by sheer brute force. Though he was as tall and strong, his shoulders and arms had not filled out to Pop's size yet. One day he would be that strong.. He smiled ruefully at Pop.

"Nothing important for now." Pop one-handed a wrench back and forth to find the start of the threads, then tightened the coupling. He grunted with effort and handed the wrench to Ben. "Check to see if that's tight."

Ben took the wrench hesitantly. He was overcome by a sense of vertigo, perhaps greater than any of the events of recent days. His world was already turned upside down enough. This was almost unbearable. Pop had always been the strongest man in the 'Verse to Ben. Invincible,

unstoppable. Ben knew that his father in many ways viewed himself the same way. He connected with the coupling and gave the wrench a pull.

“Looks good.” Ben said, straining on the wrench. He let go of the wrench and picked up his sodden shop towel, attempting vainly to sop up more coolant. “Grab a few more towels for me, please?”

Pop nodded and went back to their supply stash for the towels. Ben's gaze followed him with a haunted expression. Once Pop was out of ear and eye shot, Ben quickly tightened the coupling another half turn. Ben would never have shown up his father like that, especially right now. Until Pop was fitted with a cybernetic arm, he was not going to be able to carry the load himself. Pop had often referenced Ben's proverbial 'one day, when you become a man' in talks and advice since as long as Ben could remember. Ben had not given much thought about when that one day might be.

Ben set his jaw nodded to himself with conviction. Now he knew the exact hour, and he was going to make his Pop proud. He began attacking the next coupling with grim determination.

“Whatcha need, Boots?” Velon called down. As much as Ama was completely taken with Velon, her mind was still not completely in love with this Baby Boots nickname she had been bestowed. She endured it stoically. She'd been called worse.

“Two of the main thruster engines are beyond repair” Ama said. “I think we need to get all the weight out of them we can.”

“Is that a priority, Ama?” Velon said dismissively. “We're not going to be racing this tank.”

Ama's back went up and she bristled. Ama bit her tongue and counted to ten, like Edu had taught her. She almost yelled at Velon in response. At Velocity Strobe! What was wrong with her? These circumstances must be getting to her more than she had realized.

“We won't be racing, that is correct. However, we are and will be running for our lives.” Ama said apologetically. “And I want to run as fast as I can.”

“Point taken. We can't remove them entirely.” Velon said from atop the Retaliator. “We don't have a lift suit or a crane.”

“We'll have to gut them. All unnecessary equipment and parts that can be reasonably removed without affecting hull integrity. Don't worry about saving any of the salvage for later use. We will need entirely new engines due to the damage occurring while they were hot. Let's

remove the transformers, compressors, and reaction chambers from engines three and four. One, two and five are still operable. I estimate that we can remove almost six tons in five hours of work. We would improve our speed by one point four five percent and our turning response by approximately two percent.”

“Sounds reasonable. I'll get started on it.” Velon said. “But I'm going to need a lot of help pushing the garbage overboard. Six tons in five hours... I'm a racer, not a hauler.”

In the next four days, they became a crew. There was no other word for it. Strengths and weaknesses were mutually appraised; assignments became natural and unspoken. Not a body but worked efficiently and hard at the task of refitting the Tali for takeoff. Most of the ship's other damage was electrical in nature, and Ben had a great aptitude for that. Ama did most of the scavenging for parts as she was by far the fastest at finding them. Velon turned out to have quite a steady hand with a weld bead, and was sealing every score mark just to be sure no microfissures breached the hull. None of the score marks seemed to penetrate, but space was no place for 'maybe.'

Pop supervised all activity, assisted by Edu; Ama winced each time she saw Pop try to reach for something with the hand that wasn't there. Edu kept Pop's task list and assigned new repair stations as required. As each system came online the list grew shorter, Ama found herself bringing in more salvage parts they might need 'some day' than actual required components, whereupon she started spending more time testing, tuning and adjusting the already installed systems.

The damaged main thrusters, as predicted, proved to be the biggest problem. They could only get three of the monsters going without heavy lifting equipment to pull the damaged engines. Fortunately Velon stepped up after completing the weld repairs, and with Ama's help they were able to employ a few tricks to coax more power out of the engines than would normally be available as stock.

On the sixth morning, they were putting the finishing touches and stores in place for their final flight from the salvage land. It had been almost one week since Pop's Shop was destroyed, a week that had seemed like a lifetime to Ama. Ben had taken the helm under Pop's tutelage; Ama and Velon sat nervously at the command stations, watching monitors and energy levels anxiously.

The Retaliator shuddered to life. Thrusters burst to action, smaller plumes from the maneuvering thrusters and a larger round glow from three of the warm but throttled down main thrusters. The remaining three main thrusters remained cold and locked out of the fuel and power loops, as well as one of the aft port maneuvering thrusters which also remained inoperable. The ship began to hum, a crescendo from sound into vibrating sensation. Ama gripped the console to try to steady herself, but it only made the vibrations worse.

The vessel began to rise, pulling against gravity, against the mountain of metal pressing down on it. The mound groaned, and shifted, and fell away piece by piece as the Tali struggled mightily against its bonds and years of disuse. The hull shrieked in protest as the heavy burdens clawed at the ship, scratching down the fuselage as they lost their battle to grapple The Retaliator to the ground.

The Retaliator rose like a Phoenix from the ashes of the Salvage Land.

Ben stared out of the port to the stars. Except when they changed course, he might be looking at the night sky. Their movement, though at incredible speed, felt like they were fixed at a point in the universe. The ship was their own planet, a new heavenly body that had earned its place among the stars.

He had flown into orbit before, and had even gone along with Pop on some short hops to pick up necessities and hardware. They had flown to the Salvage Land across great distance when Ben was a baby, though Pop elaborated little on that particular journey. That topic touched too closely to Ben's Mom, which was always a conversation neither of them liked to have.

It was so quiet. The hum of the ship, the crew only speaking as necessary. An awe settled over Ben the moment they broke atmo into vacuum, a deep, still heaviness that necessitated silence and reverence. Ben breathed deeply. There were so many stars. So many. Some weren't stars, he knew, though only one nebula was close enough to discern out in the blanket of black with white pinpricks of light. Twilight and Tribulation, the two very small, irregular satellites of the planetoid Centa III, were nowhere in sight. Scientists had concluded long ago that the Sentries, as Twilight and Tribulation were called, did not qualify as moons for some reason of scientific semantics or other. But Ben loved them. Some nights when they tumbled past just right, they seem like a pair of slow motion pinwheels rotating in the sky, though they only ever showed one side to Centa III.

The ship changed heading, and Centa IV came into view, a beautiful blue-green gem interspersed with white clouds and gray continents. Not much grew on Centa IV, and on the galactic scale it was often overlooked. But their secret was manufacturing parts. Cheap labor from the generational 'formers desperate to earn a wage coupled with a great store of common ores and heavy strata caused a boom of sorts to pick up a few decades past. When Centa III was 'formed, the hot climate and high concentration of silicates made water and survival an issue for settlers, so it had basically become Centa IV's dump.

The boom was already old news before Ben's family moved to Centa III. Ben was never very clear on if his mother had made the journey. He remembered her, after a fashion, as a warm light and soft voice, a place of safety taken from him before he was old enough to know her. He sighed again.

“An Imp for your thoughts.” Someone said behind him.

Ben turned to find Velon stepping to the window slowly, as if trying not to spook him. He would like to think he was made of sterner stuff than that. At almost one point nine meters, he had his Pop's shoulders, albeit on a much more slender frame. He hadn't run from a fight at any point in his life, though he never went looking for one, either. But this woman was so beautiful, he couldn't speak when she was around, at least not while looking at her. He turned to gaze back out the window, seeking the awe and silence again, but his heart sounded like a bass beat. He knew he was flushing red. What must she think of him?

“I'm glad you didn't get shot.” Ben blurted. Now he really was red. What an amazingly stupid thing to say. Velon was worldly, and she knew a backwater 'former when she saw one. He suddenly desperately wished he could run away with any measure of dignity intact.

“Thanks. It's a fact that I am not ungrateful for myself.” She was beside him at the window. He could practically feel her body heat, she was so close. Ben tried desperately to think of an excuse to leave.

“I, uh, I have some stuff... The telemetry needs...” Ben started to back away.

“You would leave a lady alone after all that we have just been through?” Velon asked, sounding hurt. That hit Ben hard.

“No ma'am. I would not abandon you.” Ben steeled his nerve and resumed his place beside Velon. He was still not quite comfortable, but his comfort took second place if a lady needed him. He clung to his sense of duty firmly, trying to forget the impossibly perfect creature beside him. For her part, Velon seemed as though she genuinely did need some company.

“You are such a gentleman.” Velon said, gently pinching his cheek. Ben laughed, then quickly stopped. He had always been concerned that he had an odd sounding laugh. Ama said he was imagining things.

“Why is that so funny?” Velon asked. “You are a gentleman.”

“People have said that about me all my life. When I discovered Ama in the Salvage Land, she took one look at my mechanic's overalls and thought it was a fancy suit, and that I must be a rich gentleman. She still calls me Gentleman sometimes.”

“That is very sweet.” Velon said absently, also studying Centa IV as they flew a plan around the planet to the system's cluster of jump points. Ben felt as if he was losing her, and said the first thing that came into his mind.

“My mother also called me her Little Gentleman. Pop told me once, though we usually don't talk about...” Ben clamped his mouth shut. Why in the worlds had he gone there? He wouldn't talk to his own father about his deceased mother, and here he was running off at the mouth to some stranger. Velon was quiet for a long time, though Ben felt like she was studying him intently without looking his way at all.

“I'm so sorry. What happened to her?” Velon asked quietly, turning to him, her big eyes showing honest concern and sadness. Velon reached the correct conclusion; Ben suspected that was far less awkward than if she had reached the wrong one.

“Pop wouldn't say. It's best to leave that pain in the past. We don't talk about her.” Ben said. “But I am supposed to be making you comfortable and secure. Not the other way around.”

“Your mother was right about one thing. So is Ama. You are a gentleman.”

“People are always seeing things that aren't there.” Ben said a little defensively. “I would appreciate it if you didn't tease me about it. You of all people should know a gentleman when you see one. I know I don't compare to the powerful and rich men you are used to. I'm a son of a soldier and a 'former, raised on a planet that exists to be the dumping ground of another planet. And the planet that dumped on us is pretty much the low wage labor capital of the UEE. Most folk do not even know this whole system exists.”

Velon regarded him again, her eyes calculating. Ben wondered if he had said something wrong. He returned to looking out the window. She said nothing. Ben couldn't stop thinking he had insulted her somehow. He listened to her breathing.

“I am sorry, Velon. You asked something fairly simple of me, and I have failed you even in that simple task. I promise I will do better.” He shook off his melancholy. He pointed out the port window. “See that plume there? Terrachore has a huge factory there. They employ mostly robotic labor, producing robots to do more labor. They have the biggest plant on C-4 and yet they also have the fewest people employed. Most of the other factories use 'formers more heavily, because it is cheaper than getting techs out here to maintenance the proprietary production equipment. Pop has worked on a few of their haulers, as have I.”

“There is the Sea of Industry; it is technically salt water but the concentration of heavy metals makes it toxic, so don't go swimming in it.” Ben smiled. Velon smiled back. Ben swallowed his heart from his throat and continued. “The Copper Isle is there. Geologists say it is an impossibility. The island is almost entirely comprised of natural copper ore. It is such a rarity that even the most greedy corps wouldn't mine it. And that's saying something. We flew over it once. The copper veins are so corroded that they look green like they are covered in emerald algae”

Velon nodded with a mysterious smile playing on her mouth. Ben beamed. He scanned the planet, pointing out mountain ranges that could be seen from Centa III with a simple telescope and various mining concerns divided up into geographical corporate owned city-states. Velon divided her time between viewing the features as Ben pointed them out and looking at him with that smile. After a while, Ben ran out of things to say and they just stood there for a while.

“Thank you, Ben. That was very enjoyable. But I think it's time I get some rack.” Velon said. Ben nodded in agreement, but he knew he must be letting his disappointment that their time together was ending show when she added., “We'll have plenty of time to talk while we run from whoever is trying to kill us.”

“That will be wonderful,” Ben said, walking with her and seeing her to her bunk. “I mean, except that last bit.”

“Except the last bit. And Ben.” Velon leaned in and brushed his cheek with a quick kiss. “I do know a gentleman when I see one.”

Recalibration

"Pop, are you awake?" Ama asked hesitantly.

The Retaliator hummed along through vacuum, seeming sound and secure. There had been no sign of pursuit. Ama had been working, tinkering and tweaking nonstop for three days. They were on their way to a destination discussed in a conversation Ama had missed; she supposed she really should be more curious about their destination, but if Pop, Velon and Ben had decided it was their best laid course, Ama was fine to concentrate on the things she was comfortable with.

"Hmm? Uh, yeah... Yes Hon." Pop lied, stirring awake on his bunk. He rolled over, and Ama distinctly hear part of him creak. Pop was not made for a sailor's bunk.

Ama had slept for two days back when she had the episode, so being awake for three days now was a balance in her mind. There were times when she felt that she might be able to sleep, but after ten minutes of creating mathematical models for the reconfiguring of the Behring laser cannons in her mind, she would spring back up and do it in reality. And then start working on a system to randomize their frequency rotations to lessen the chance that alien tech could adapt and repel the lasers. She was uncertain what their probability of running into hostile, high tech aliens might be, but then she didn't know their destination, did she?

"Who am I, Pop?" Ama asked in a pained voice.

Weapons systems, shield configurations and output, avionics... There wasn't an accessible component, much less system, that Ama hadn't at least touched. She'd crawled into every access panel into which she could squeeze. She scanned every wire she could reach for heat, current and resistance. She had stopped short of individually testing every component on every board, but she had tested every board to the best of her ability.

"Ama, that's..." Pop rubbed his eyes and sat up. "That's a big question isn't it?"

Ama had turned the Retaliator's weakness of only two working main thrusters into several strengths. Rerouting the power that was no longer being used, she had beefed up the weapons and shields to their maximum capacity, unafraid that their use would cause a blowout with all of the unused power just lying about. That gave her a million other ideas for different

modifications to the Tali. Added to the necessary repairs to standard systems and weaponry, her current estimated shopping bill was two hundred fifty three thousand, one hundred seventy-two credits. That figure accounted for the components that would be acceptable as second hand as well as those that must be brand new.

"It's the only question, Pop." Ama asserted. "It's the question any orphan has the right to ask. Especially considering the circumstances."

Ama had not let Edu leave her side since repairing him. She had redundantly checked his systems every three hours, every day, around the clock. She had made some improvements there as well. Edu would be receiving more upgrades as soon as Ama had the means and opportunity to secure the needed parts. And armor. And shields. She had to make him safe. Her current shopping list for Edu topped forty-five thousand credits. She had let Edu make some adjustments and repairs to the ship that she normally would not, to make it up to him. She knew he didn't have the capacity to hold a grudge or be angry, but she needed to expunge her debt.

"It is an important question. Not the only question, and not the most important question." Pop clarified, studying her intently.

These past few days, Ben had been closely following Velon. They talked and laughed through their tasks, sometimes ceasing work altogether in favor of light-hearted banter. Ama had felt something alien when the two of them were together. Their proximity bothered Ama, but she couldn't say why. Velon was polite and friendly towards Ben, but Ama thought Ben was acting on pure fantasy. They both seemed to be enjoying their social dance, and Ama cared for them very deeply. Why did it hurt when she saw them talking and laughing together? It was a new emotion for which Ama had no frame of reference.

"What other question or answer matters?" Ama asked.

Life in space was easy; Ama had imagined it would be the opposite. The quiet was profound, above the hum of the engines as they traveled through interspace. The ship had become very familiar, very quickly. The smells and sounds, the materials and lubricants, the patterns and patinas had all become imprinted upon Ama as home. The ship was her place of origin, to the best of her memory. It was like a swaddling cloth protecting them from the cold of the nether, and a cozy cloth it was. The irony of being in space was that you had none. She brushed past each member of their small crew three to five times each hour. She had counted. The closeness had melded them into something symbiotic. Not just among the four of them, but with the ship itself. They were a crew now, the crew of this very Retaliator in specific.

"You tell me, Ama. Work it out." Pop implored.

Velon surprised her most of all. She was truly happy; Ama could tell the difference even in her brief association with the star. Her initial standoffish, distant demeanor was evident, even though Velon seemed to immediately like Ama herself. Ama imagined Velon would be ready to race back to her life of fame, fans and money as soon as she could. The more Ama thought on it, the less sense it made for Velon to run. She should get right in the thick of everyone and hold up laser tubes spelling out HERE I AM. It would be awfully difficult for some secret cabal to assassinate her in front of hundreds of thousands of race fanatics. Hiding and running made the opposite of sense. In doing so, she kept herself in the dark which is where it would be logical to hunt her.

"If who I am doesn't matter, then I guess I don't matter, is that what you are saying?" Ama snapped, and immediately regretted it. Pop seemed hurt for a moment, but bore it stoically.

Pop had been researching bionic arms, though Ama doubted that, on the run, he'd have a lot of consumer choice in the matter before necessity drove the decision. Ama suddenly regretted not spending more time with him since he lost the arm. Pop, the man who had taken her in as an orphan when she was ten. She made another tick mark in her mind where she kept score of all the times she failed the people she loved. Those marks were branded into her as a necessary reminder. She had let her own need to retreat from the realities of their predicament supersede her need to care for those around her. In the back of her mind, she was not proud of the fact and knew it to be out of her character. But the front of her mind was consumed by new and old wounds.

"Fine then, where did I come from?" Ama demanded when Pop said nothing. "Who were my parents, what were they like, what was our social standing, was my family known to be good people? What's wrong with me specifically, why do I have these episodes? Was it from my time alone? Why did my parents run, who were they running from, why did they take this ship, why was it shot down, who shot it down, where can I find them so I can kill them dead!" Ama shook with emotion.

The last bit shocked Ama. She had never really thought about killing anyone. Ben caught her watching the M50's dash cam from the attack, over and over for two hours. He seemed concerned. She assured him she was just looking for clues. But she wasn't. Pop could have died. Velon could have died. Ben could have died. She was watching herself almost fail to save them in time. She was watching the shields fail. She was watching the Excelsi fall from the sky as two modified Avengers rained death on them. Over and over. Again and again. She deserved to hurt, she deserved to feel every moment of her failures. She deserved to watch everything she cared about almost get gunned down right in front of her. She deserved that and more.

Pop put his hand on hers. "You're getting closer, hon." he said quietly.

From what Ama could piece together, her parents were scientists. The Retaliator had science and research stations added to the expanded cabin. Ama had only given them a cursory once over. As none of the current crew of the Retaliator were researchers, she couldn't see how wasting her time there could help the crew. She had cut the power to the equipment there in favor of more practical matters and others among the crew had quietly stowed the laboratory effects. Ama pretended not to notice, but she was relieved, powerfully relieved, to not have the specter of her parents work awaiting her every time she moved through the ship. There would come a time when Ama would be ready to deal with tangible objects directly connected to her dead parents. Now wasn't the time. She would never truly know them. She had been denied that chance. She would never know who they were, just as her parents had been denied knowing their daughter.

"The most important question isn't who I am. Nor is it who I was. And it isn't who my Mother and Father were. It doesn't have anything to do with my parents... Murder." Ama said bitterly. "What else could possibly matter?"

Last night, Ben had come up to Ama. He didn't say a word, he just held her in a long hug. Ama intended to ask him why, but instead opted to sob for a full fifteen minutes. Velon was there. When Ama's soul purging sobs ground to a halt, Velon gave Ama a shorter embrace and said she was sorry for the loss of her parents, as if it had just happened. Ama had nodded numbly.

Then they left her alone with Edu. Ama talked with Edu at length. She asked him every question that came to her mind about death, grief, coping, and how becoming attached to anyone mattered in the end. For the most part, Edu was factual in his responses but Ama was fully aware for the first time in her life that the robot lacked the capacity for such human conceptions. Except for one thing: When Ama asked Edu why humans interact with love, and to what purpose, Edu responded that humans grow as individuals through their intimate experience of other individuals. That answer stuck Ama profoundly.

How would she grow as an individual? She was not alone in the 'Verse. She had Edu, Pop, and Ben. It seemed that fate had tied her to a famous race pilot as well, though Ama was not naive and foolish enough to count her budding friendship with Velon as intimate. Edu had saved her mind in the salvage land, and Ama still relied on the educational robot daily for information and emotional support. Ben was like a brother to her, though she had never heard him make the same comparison out loud. He had taught Ama the most about interacting with other people. And Pop loved her as if she was his own daughter, providing what Edu had said was a psychologically critical 'father figure.' Ama realized she could certainly do worse in terms of intimate acquaintances from which to learn and grow.

"The question is, 'Who will I become?'" Ama said with certainty. Pop nodded and then held her tightly as best he could manage with his left arm. He pulled back to look her square in the eyes.

"Now that is the question that I would travel to the end of the universe to answer."

"On approach, folks. We're less than thirty minutes out." Ben's voice came over the com. Ama stretched luxuriously on the bunk for what seemed like double her body length, and blinked her fresh bright grey eyes awake. Unlike Pop, she could sleep perfectly on the Navy cots due to her relatively small one point seven meter, fifty kilogram frame. And sleep she had, for the past twelve hours.

~Good morning, Ama. All course curriculum has been completed at above average levels as of ten months, twenty-four days and sixteen hours ago; congratulations. Would you like to sharpen your skills by reviewing previously passed curriculum?~ Edu was waiting by her bed as programmed.

"One day, Edu, you are going to have a true AI package. And then you can choose to be by my bed, or not, or how to greet me, or not. One day I will refit you with the components to be who you deserve to be, free of any human command unless you choose it." Ama swore. She nodded to herself. Of course, such a thing didn't exist to Ama's knowledge, but despite that trifle it sounded more right than any of the myriad dark things swirling in her head the past couple of weeks by a long shot. Ama dressed quickly and filed into the main crew area.

"Nerk's Racing Emporium is our destination," Velon began, more for Ama's benefit than anyone else's. "Nerk Bennis was a huge fan of the sport, and very wealthy to boot, but he passed before I could meet him personally. His son, Crew, runs the place now. It's in a very gray area of the 'Verse, physically and philosophically. There will be beings here that know things that would knock the wavy curls right out of Boots' hair."

It took a moment before Ama realized Velon was referring to her. She self consciously tugged a thick lock of her dark, wavy chestnut hair. Was something wrong with it?

"If they don't know things that you want to know, they can find out. But there will be pirates, bounty hunters and pretty much every flavor of lowlife the worlds have to offer. You will never find a more wretched hive of my kind of people." She grinned devilishly. "But you backwater greens will be marks in under a minute. Therefore, you stay on the ship."

Pop and Ben immediately began to protest. Ama speculated that the parameters of the original plan had been altered. As well she hadn't had to sit in on the farce. She waited until the protests had been aired and shot down. Pop was obviously at eighty percent at best. Ben was the most experienced piloting the Retaliator, in fact Ama would have wagered that Velon had arranged having Ben train exclusively on the ships control systems to trap him in this position at this very moment. Velon's arguments were very carefully planned.

"Pop, we need to get you back to one hundred percent before you go off playing bodyguard. Ben, you're the man for the job right there in the pilot seat. It's decided." Ama stated. Velon nodded in smug agreement. "Velon and I will either be back in two hours, or report back from where we are."

Velon blinked, and tried to form a protest. Ama locked her in with an unblinking, steel-gray stare. Velon closed her mouth and nodded. "It's decided." And smiled that smile she only ever seemed to have for Ama. It still boggled Ama that by all appearances, the famous Velocity Strone admired the lowly Ama. Of the things that didn't make sense in her life, it was one of the few she wouldn't change if she could.

"Edu, watch these two, don't let them go breaking my ship." Ama said casually as she strolled aft to debark.

"Her ship?" Ben asked incredulously behind her.

"Well, her parents were the last folks in possession of it. Seems she has a legitimate claim." Pop replied.

Nerk's Racing Emporium loomed large through the port. Ama was stunned by the size of the asteroid base; the complex was as large as a small city and ran throughout the rock itself in an amazing feat of engineering. Ama suspected that it was something else before the Bennis family took it over and adorned it with the trappings of their racing fanaticism. In the black space around it, several racing circuits were highlighted by flashing beacons. Ama had only ever seen the like on the glas before.

"Is that Floater's Drift?" Ama asked, unable to keep the excitement from her voice and pointing through the port at a particularly large course with tight turns and inverting elements that made the race truly three dimensional. It was one of Ama's favorites to watch. Velon nodded with a grimace.

"Wow, you know I actually watched the last race there, when you..." Ama stopped mid-sentence and winced. True to form, she had stuck her thumb with a hammer. Velon hadn't finished that race; she's been wrecked by a lesser driver with an unjustified braggart attitude who had loudly, often and falsely claimed that Velon had wrecked him. Of course, on the racing talk show, McCloy had taken Coin Bancard's side in the matter for shock value, despite almost every caller into the Headcase and McCloy race analysis show calling McCloy an idiot for saying so. Ama suspected that McCloy's 'opinions' were arranged beforehand to make the show seem engaging and controversial.

"I wanted to punch Coin in the face. What a terrible person." Ama finished.

"You and me both," Velon grumbled without much enthusiasm.

As the Retaliator made final approach, Ama admired a Constellation parked in the lot adjacent to where the Retaliator had been ordered to land and had an itch to check it out; she'd only ever seen parts for that class of vessel. Several other types of craft dotted the landing field, but none larger than the Connie. There were no scheduled races any time soon, so the massive landing area was only about twenty percent occupied. Ama noted a good deal of ships were of Drake make; those would be the pirates and lowlifes Velon mentioned. Everyone knew Drake manufactured ships that were all but intended for forcibly boarding other craft and taking cargo, ships and even lives.

They landed without incident, but as Ama walked down the access ramp, the sensory overload of Nerk's Racing Emporium hit her full force. The colors, lights, people, and life around her was nearly overwhelming. She had no memory of ever having been in proximity to more than eight people; there were at least a hundred in her sight, no telling how many thousands more were currently living in or visiting the huge asteroid base. Ama quickly turned back to the Retaliator. She looked their ship over and sighed heavily.

The Retaliator class was a large, aggressive looking military bomber, and Ama's Retaliator was no different despite the civilian lab modifications and lack of missile and torpedo batteries. The damage, however, was worse than she had thought. She was hoping that she could repair the three offline cannons while they were in dock, but two of them were mangled beyond repair and the third was completely missing. They must have been damaged under the piles of salvage, because all of the ordinance damage from the attack a decade ago was aft. Ama began scanning the other repair and maintenance items until Velon snapped her out of her thoughts.

"C'mon, Boots. Time's wasting. We were made the minute we landed. We're on the clock to get some news and get out of here." Velon was standing impatiently at the end of the dock dressed fabulously from clothes that had been stowed on the M50, tight dark breeches and a loose white blouse. She looked like a star, and had made no effort to disguise exactly who she was. Ama found that odd, but suspected that Velon had much more experience surviving amongst the darker denizens of the 'Verse than she had.

Ama looked down at her own drab digs, the brown shorts and green shirt she had donned ten days ago. Fortunately, her coveralls had saved them from the rigors of her work on the Retaliator, and the ship did have a laundering system, but her only shoes were a pair of mechanic's exoboats. Now that she thought about it, she had left a pair of multi-goggles on as well, capped on her forehead. Those had been a fantastic find, just sitting there in one of the maintenance accesses of the Retaliator's innards. She must look a mess though. The concept of caring what she looked like was a very recent phenomenon, and it had everything to do with Velon.

Ama nodded and took a deep breath. Her eyes tried to take in every detail, and her mind strove to comprehend it all. Almost immediately the two women found themselves in a shopping district, where there were many shops of various sizes and specializations, many of which were geared towards high end performance racing parts and racing merch. But there was the good stuff, too: Standard parts, modules, tools, shield systems, even weapons.

"Maybe we should make time to buy clothes." Velon wryly twisted her lips at Ama. "People that don't know you like I do will be calling you Boots just for those crazy kicks you're sporting."

Ama shrugged in reply. They passed people from all walks, and several species, of life. Banu in general annoyed Ama. She couldn't quite place it but she suspected that it was because of their syntax when speaking. They were not concise to say the least. She didn't dislike them exactly, but she thought if she ever got caught in an extended conversation with one she might self terminate for sweet release. A woman bumped past her, and Ama felt the woman's hand enter and leave her pocket. Ama was taken aback. Now, why in the worlds would some strange woman stick her hand in Ama's empty pocket?

"Watch yourself, Boots." Velon replied when Ama asked. "Today you might have nothing to steal, but one day you will, and you already have your own lovely neck to watch out for. Stay close to me, away from everyone else, and eyes open."

A few passers by clearly recognized "Velocity" Strone. She ignored them and strode on. Ama supposed it was part of the way Velon maintained her mystique, but she could also tell plainly that some of Velon's fans thought that her aloofness was rude. Ama didn't disagree, but was not remotely interested in second guessing Velon's conduct.

Fashions ranged wildly. Ama favored the gearhead look, which incidentally she realized she was sporting in a way, completely on accident. Heavy boots, goggles and shaded glasses of various types, mechanical paraphernalia and sturdy materials were the hallmark of the fashion trend. Some added caps or top hats, but Ama felt they detracted from the look. Then there was the UEE fashion, tight clothing with shiny buckles and buttons or corset-like tops with flowing dresses underneath, Terrans with their airy blouses and trousers, and aliens with their alien ideas of what human fashion might be like, trying to blend into human culture.

The more Ama took in all the possibilities that clothing and accessories might offer, the more tempted she was to take Velon up on her suggestion of a shopping trip... But then she saw a robotics store.

She dashed into the store without a thought, nearly running from aisle to aisle. She snatched a multi-laser assembly that caught her eye immediately. It would do everything from remotely checking temperatures to small cutting jobs to laying a visible light line to square up parts. Ama could easily install it into Edu's kit even though it wasn't made for his integrated repair bot model. Next was a smaller power pack that could be used as a backup to keep Edu running for days if his main power went out. Though his main power could last for up to six months fully charged in Edu's stock state, his power consumption was much higher through the years and upgrades. Also, his primary power supply could get damaged, and Ama wasn't taking chances. Then a small shield generator designed for maintenance robots in hazardous environments, and a wiring kit and precision wire tool were next. She had gathered the items in her arms before she realized two things. One, Velon was speaking to her, and two, she hadn't any credits to her name. Her credit chip was likely melted in what remained of Pop's Shop.

"Ama, we don't have time for this." Velon was saying. She was clearly becoming agitated that she had allowed Ama to come along. "Here is the deal I am going to make with you. I will buy you whatever is in your hands right now, and we will leave, and this will be the last interruption."

"I'm so sorry, Velon. No, that's not necessary. I had forgotten that my credit chip was lost for good back at Pop's Shop. I was just... Edu, he... I'll put them back, I won't be a nuisance. Promise." Ama moved to replace the items.

Velon softened and smiled, "Nonsense. It's the least I could do for Edu. After all, he raised such a brilliant girl. You know, the one that saved my life."

Ama gave her a quick hug by freeing one hand and juggling the items in the other, and they quickly made their purchases. Velon moved briskly through the markets and kiosks, past what seemed like a crowd to Ama. She could tell things were changing. Fashion gave way to function. The clothing was darker, more like how Ama might imagine a person on the edge of or outside the law might dress. Then she realized, they likely were. Ama speculated that the first few areas were for the people visiting; as they moved inwards, they entered the areas populated by those that lived on the asteroid.

She took Velon's earlier advice to heart; she did not want to be a 'mark.' And it was because of this that Ama recognized a man was following them. He tried to be nonchalant, but Ama calculated a mere seventeen percent possibility that he would have waited outside the store and then followed their every move thus far was a coincidence.

"Dark brown jacket, gray stubble, brown hair. Handsome. Following us." Ama muttered. He has mostly kept to the shadows, and occasionally acts as though he is reading his mobi, but he's staring straight through the display at us.

"You're sure?" Velon did not turn around, but she did suddenly take a side corridor. Ama noted the man doing the same out of her peripheral vision.

"Yes. I was eighty three percent sure, but now I am certain within acceptable margin of error." Ama stated.

"Good enough for me. If he tries to close on us, we run. But likely as not he works for Crew." Velon said, continuing their brisk pace. She made a few more turns through darker corridors and some alien, awful smells. They had walked perhaps another three hundred meters and briskly strode through a small, ornate opening in the rock itself. On the other side, things suddenly became luxurious as the corridor opened into a huge area cut into the asteroid.

Ama nearly ran into Velon. There was a square with a large fountain, beautiful stonework and fancy lighting. The building in the center continued through the top until, unless Ama missed her guess, it provided a view into space. Ama could not begin to calculate the man hours or credits that this hollowed out area of the asteroid must have cost. Ama half stumbled across the courtyard, envying a dark jade dress worn by a lovely redheaded Terran woman escorted by a blond man in voluminous gray trousers and an airy dark blue blouse. They also seemed to be touring the area, but with much more poise and grace than Ama.

"Stop staring like a third generation 'former, child. It's nice but it's not that nice." Velon sighed. "Do not say a word once we are inside."

"Ms. Strone and... Guest?" The man who greeted them at the door wore an unnecessarily elaborate uniform. Velon nodded affirmative. "One moment while I announce you." A translucent, bluish hued privacy field went up around the man, making him blurry as he talked to the air, Ama imagined he was having a conversation by com, but she had never seen a privacy screen in person before. The urge to touch it was nearly irresistible.

"You may enter." He led them inside and indicated that they should enter the lift to the left. Ama was struck by how opulent everything was. The halls were constructed of native asteroid rock polished to mirror finish, and the trim was a softly glowing blue metal. Even the lift buttons were elaborately scripted material that Ama could not identify. It took her a moment to recognize the script as numerals.

"Do we need to push one of these numbered buttons?" Ama whispered.

"No, the doorman will send us on our way." Velon said just as the lift began to move.

"Then why have the buttons?" Ama mused halfheartedly, biting her lip and taking in the construction and materials of the lift itself. Occasionally Ama could see out into space as the lift passed plasteel windows built into the back side of the lift shaft. Satisfied with her observations, Ama peered into her bag of goodies. She caught Velon's knowing smile, and Ama smiled back. Velon was truly beautiful, both in appearance and in spirit, poised and confident. Ama hoped she could be just like her one day.

Of course, the first step to that was figuring out how she could become normal. Ama sighed. It was typical that she would always come back to that. She examined her issues, turned them over in her mind, analyzed them as the lift climbed towards the surface. And then she discarded them. She was through with that crutch.

Things that happened in the past needed to stay there. Ama would stumble, and she would embarrass herself, and she would get things wrong that other people took for granted in the future, but Ama refused to let those small stumblings define herself in her own mind.

Pop was right. She had to answer the most important question herself, as it was the only question for which she was the inventor and builder of the correct answer, an answer not already set in the permacrete of the past. She would learn the firm answers to other, already quantified questions in due time. She suddenly felt very peaceful.

Original Equipment

The doors opened at the top of the lift to reveal a round theater situated to comfortably look out the enormous plasteel dome into space. The races must run right by this part of the asteroid. For the first time amongst the excessive nature of this area, Ama felt a tinge of envy.

"Greetings, esteemed ladies. I am Crew Bennis. Welcome to Nerk's Racing." Said a beaming, handsome dark skinned man dressed in the nicest clothes Ama had ever seen. He even had a cape. Ama was reasonably sure she was meeting her very first real gentleman.

They were made comfortable and Velon began to ask her questions about the attack and who might have been the orchestrator of the operation. Crew was polite, articulate, casually humorous... And he managed not to say a single thing of any substance while doing so. Ama could tell that Velon thought she simply hadn't properly explained or presented her queries to access what she needed to know, but Ama knew within five minutes that Crew was wasting their time. Frustrated, Ama mentally checked out of the conversation and examined the room and the people in it instead.

The theater was large enough for a hundred or so guests, equipped with both elegant lounging areas and standard if high quality theater style seating. The lift was at the highest point of the circular room, opening directly to the central walkway of the theater seating. Deep purple cloths were used heavily as accents including curtains and carpets, along with the mirror polished stone. The geodesic dome offered approximately one hundred thirty-five degrees of view by Ama's reckoning.

She turned her attention to the attending servants. Two were body guards, whose presence Ama understood completely having been witness to the attempt on Velon's life, one female, one male. They both stood with their bodies unconsciously shifted the same way. Ama suspected it was their training, and that the stance was a preparation to draw weapons if needed. That made Ama a bit uneasy.

Food arrived that Ama did not recognize. It smelled wonderful. The Retaliator crew had not had anything other than MRE's for ten days. Perhaps on the way back to the ship she could trouble Velon for supplies. The serving woman caught Ama's glance and quickly adopted a fake smile. Ama's brow furrowed. The serving lady had a much harder face than Ama would have expected amongst such lofty heights. And she was also standing with her weight shifted to the same side as the bodyguards.

Ama stiffened, then she smiled back a thin, weak, very unnatural smile. She turned to the next servant who had brought the drinks earlier. He was still there, and clearly also carrying a weapon. Ama was beginning to think she and Velon were the only two not armed.

Then she realized that Crew wasn't merely wasting their time. He was stalling. Velon had not yet seemed to have caught on to their dire situation, but she was becoming slightly agitated with Crew. Ama thought furiously. They were trapped in a room with at least four armed men inside an asteroid full of pirates and other criminals. Likely Velon would soon be captured or killed. Ama had no choice; she reached into her bag casually and began removing the components from their boxes.

"What's in the bag, sweetie?" Crew was talking to her. Ama's mouth worked, and she looked from Crew to Velon.

"Don't mind her, Crew. I apologize for the presumption. She's my niece, and she's... Special. But she just loves racing, so I had to bring her along. It's one of the few things we can get her to pay attention to more than five minutes. I really should have left her back on the ship." Velon emphasized the last part.

"Toys for my EduBot!" Ama said proudly and held up the small power supply with as foolish a grin as she could adopt. Please think I'm stupid, please pay no attention to me. she thought furiously.

"Ah, yes, of course. We are all the children of the universe, and we all have our gifts and challenges. I do not judge on such things that cannot be controlled, and she is such a lovely girl!" Crew raised his glass to Ama and returned to stalling Velon.

"Pop, it's been two and a quarter hours. How long are we going to wait?" Ben said impatiently, pacing the C&C area of the Retaliator. Ben hated few things the way he hated waiting. Especially when he was concerned for other people.

"Hmm? Oh, well. Things seem to be going about like I expected. Some fancy pants rich boy is supremely wasting all of our time." Pop reached down and flipped on the com.

"...apologize for the presumption. She's my niece, and she's... Special. But she just loves racing, so I had to bring her along. It's one of the few things we can get her to pay attention to more than five minutes. I really should have left her back on the ship." Velon's voice crackled over the com.

"You bugged them?" Ben asked incredulously; that seemed fairly devious for Pop, but prudent given the situation.

"Ah, yes, of course. We are all the children of the universe, and we all have our gifts and challenges. I do not judge on such things that cannot be controlled, and she is such a lovely girl!" Crackled a strange male voice. Must be Fancy Pants, Ben thought.

"Some strange woman that got us shot up not a couple weeks ago, cost me my arm, and just now went and took my little girl into a pirate nest. Worlds yes, I bugged them!" Pop said emphatically.

"You could have told me." Ben said ruefully, scrubbing a hand through his unruly dark curls. He paced a few more rounds, listening.

"You could have asked." Pop replied smugly.

"Alright. You monitor that nonsense, I'm taking out the M50 for refueling. It's sill half full, but luck favors the prepared, as you like to say." With that, Ben turned and walked aft to the cargo bay.

Pop sat in silence for a few minutes, listening to the inane banter back and forth as Velon continued to endlessly refine her questions and come at Crew from every angle. But Crew was toying with her. Pop frowned. Crew was toying with her. Something wasn't right.

Pop heard footsteps on deck; Ben couldn't possibly be back. Pop spun around in his seat to find a man in a dark brown jacket looming tall over him, with his right hand resting on the grip of his holstered weapon.

Another ten minutes had passed. Ama could tell that Velon was aware that something wasn't quite right. Ama kept her head down and smiled as foolishly as she could at the contents of the bag. Her hands were another story though. They worked as quickly and competently as Ama could possibly manage. She snipped another wire and used the multi-laser to fuse it in place.

"I wish I could tell you what you need to know. But not all things are knowable." Crew smiled. "I'm sure my people will be back to me soon with..."

"What's the deal, Crew?" Velon asked, her voice cracking, belying her bluster. Velon clearly understood the situation, now. "You brought me here under false pretenses, Tell me what you intend to do with us."

"We have her, what is taking you fools so long?" Crew hissed into the air. Obviously he was on coms with someone else. He listened for a moment and then addressed Velon. "You have nothing to fear. You will not be harmed unless you resist. They only want the girl."

They both turned to Ama. Ama did not have time to pay attention to them, so she ignored their stares though her mind was racing. Crew clearly meant Ama was the target of this elaborate trap. Did that mean she was also the target of the Avenger attack?

Velon's mouth worked but she couldn't find words. In a fury, she rounded on Crew, seemingly about to try something physical, but when the two bodyguards drew guns and trained them on the racing star, Velon settled back on her seat and raised her hands with a glare.

The 'busboy' who had brought their drinks reached for his weapon as well, but before he could aim it at Velon, he dropped the pistol and grabbed his chest in pain. He slumped forward onto the floor with a gurgling noise. Ama made sure to sit very still.

The alarmed mercenary women and remaining male bodyguard frantically searched every nook of the theater. The 'serving woman' drew her weapon as well, and the three remaining mercenaries spread out to cover every corner of the theater with their weapons, eyes darting. One of the bodyguards bellowed and fell writhing to the ground. Then the other.

The 'Serving woman' finally realized where the threat lie, but not until after her aorta was cut cleanly through with the modified cutting beam of the multi-laser. Her pistol fired one round into the wall behind Ama, then fell useless to the ground, followed closely by the dying mercenary's body.

Ama shook with relief and felt like she might be sick. The room was very still; Crew was frozen in place, and Velon was studying her like she was some strange alien from the abyss. The last mercenary spasmed a few more times and then lay silent.

"What did you just do?" Velon asked Ama quietly.

"I killed them." Ama swallowed. "With robot parts." Ama held up her improvised weapon. She had heavily modified the multi-laser's secondary cutting function into a cutting beam that would focus at distance of up to twenty-five meters with enough strength to burn through flesh, and Ama had used it to do just that.

When Ama had shot down the two Avengers back during the attack on Pop's Shop, the affair had been bloodless; the ships exploded and fell. Her mind could avoid the fact that she had killed the people on those ships. Even though she had no choice, it still wasn't something she allowed herself to think on. The immediacy of the four deaths she had just caused was too evident. Despite the cauterizing effects of the laser, blood pooled underneath the mercenaries laid bare before her without the benefit of metal wreckage and burning petrofuel to consume the bodies. Their eyes stared hauntingly. Ama quickly looked away.

By the time Ama could think again, she saw Velon standing over Crew with a laser pistol in her hand. Crew was a vision of outrage and frustration, very nearly spitting as he murmured under his breath. Ama's eyes darted to the lift. It was rising.

"Velon, the lift!" Ama shouted. Velon spun and fired six shots, though of them only the fourth blast hit the control panel, it was enough to stop the lift, likely thanks to automated shut-off in the event of an electrical system failure. Velon breathed a sign of relief. Ama wasn't so sure they were in the clear yet; at best they had bought time.

Ama disconnected the power source of her makeshift weapon and tossed the parts into her bag, opting for one of the more traditional weapons. Relieving the serving woman of her pistol, she trained the gun on Crew.

"What will they do now that the lift is down?" Ama asked Crew evenly. "How will they try to get up here?"

"You.. You killed them all. You killed them with robot parts! Did you plan this? Why come to me at all if you were going to do this? What are you going to do to me?" Crew panicked, edging away from Ama.

"Firstly, they were hired criminals, secondly they planned to do something with us or to us forcibly, and thirdly according to UEE law, drawing a weapon is considered a death threat and thus justifies self defense." Ama said. Her voice still shook, but not as much as she expected. Crew flinched back another few inches. "Now tell us. What will they do now that the lift is down?"

Velon fired a warning shot into an exquisite chair, setting it on fire. Then she trained the weapon back on Crew. "That's far enough, scrum. Your slithering makes me nervous." Velon's voice sounded completely different; nasty and edgy. More alarmingly, it sounded natural for her.

Ama studied Crew as he raised his hands, then followed Crew's eyes. He had glanced too often to the table beside the burning chair for it to be a coincidence. There must be something there, perhaps a weapon but hopefully a way out. Ama abandoned her questioning and lowered her weapon.

"Cover him." Ama said, repeating a phrase she's heard bounty hunters and cops use on glas vids. Edu said that watching entertainment vids the glas was not nourishing to the intellect and should be enjoyed in strict moderation. But so far, emulating the deductive prowess and mannerism's of the glas' top cops was serving her very well.

She kicked the burning chair out of her way from her as far as she could. That thing must have been made of petrofuel and grease, the way it was burning. She dug into the side table and removed an activator, a remote and a very elegant laser pistol. Velon whistled at the latter.

"Dibs." Velon said with a smirk.

Ama returned to loom over Crew and handed the weapon to Velon. Crew's jaw was so tightly clenched at this point appeared to be able to chew through duracrete. The part of Ama not still numbly stunned over the dead bodies around her was amused at his expense.

"So. What does this do?" Ama held up the remote. It had several buttons, but none were labeled.

"It, uh... It starts the races on race day. I push the button and the countdown starts." Crew stammered.

"Another lie. At least you're consistent." Ama said, aiming the remote at a point behind her without breaking her eye contact with Crew. She was satisfied in a small corner of her mind when she heard the hydraulics of a heavy door opening. She'd assumed that the pinnacle of this building would be a dead end that a yard rat like Crew wouldn't be able to live with. She knew there had to be a way out from the top, and her suspicions were confirmed. She inched closer to Crew.

"Now for the truth. Who ordered you to detain us?"

"Who... What are you? You're just... Just a little girl."

"She's the last thing you're going to see if you don't talk, traitorous scrum." Velon spat. Her newly acquired pistol made an audible whine as Velon primed the power to full.

"They didn't say who they were. They made me! It was just a few messages at first, on my own private frequencies that no one could have known existed. Then they shut down the lift, trapping me between stops, and sent another message asking if they had my attention. I hired these four mercs," He indicated the bodies. "Because they were the roughest, most loyal for the money that I could find. Among the four of them, they've personally killed more people than I see in one day! And then you..." Crew pointed an accusatory finger towards Ama, then shot his hand back up in the air with fear in his eyes. "I didn't want to do anything for these people leaving the messages. But then they froze my accounts for twenty-four hours to let me know they were serious! Do you know how hard I had to work to cover that up? What would the sponsors say? What would they do?" Crew pleaded.

"I understand." Ama's tone and face softened, and she nodded in sympathy. Crew's relieved expression lasted for a mere moment before Ama pistol whipped him with all of the force her almost fourteen year old, but mechanic trained, arm could muster directly on his temple. It worked just as Ama had seen on the glas. Crew flopped onto the ground, limbs akimbo. Ama had been a little worried she didn't have the arm strength for it. As a pleasant side effect, Ama found that pistol whipping a traitorous... What was Velon's word? Scrum? Was supremely satisfying. She had not anticipated that.

"I'm just going to go ahead and stop now." Velon said, shaking her head. Ama looked at her friend curiously. Velon elaborated, "I'm just going to stop being surprised by anything you do, Boots. Now let's make for the door before we're trapped."

Ama nodded in agreement and the pair raced into Crew's escape hole. Ama pointed the remote back over her shoulder to close the door just as a few bolts of energy started scoring all around it. They rounded the corner into Crew's modestly sized personal hangar and came to an abrupt halt.

"Dibs." Ama said, emulating Velon's terminology she had used to express her desire of ownership of the pistol she now carried.

Velon cursed. "You already have a ship!"

"So do you!"

"But you have a Retaliator!"

"Yes, but I don't have to fly it myself. I have a boy for that!" Ama leapt into the pilot seat of the slickest, fastest looking ship she could have possibly imagined.

"What is this thing?" Ama asked Velon. "I can't even identify the make!" Of course Crew had to have two seats modified into the small cockpit. What good was opulence when you couldn't rub it in someone else's face? Ama was beginning to disdain wealthy persons. But then, there was Velon; so they were running fifty-fifty in her mind. Ama would make sure to gather more data when she could.

"Don't know, but it's snug fit." Velon grunted. Velon wasn't large by any means, but she was slightly above average height. "What an idiot, that Crew guy, adding an extra seat to a racer. Happy that he is, though, or one of us would be holding our breath."

Ama used the remote again to open the hangar once the cockpit confirmed seal. She resumed preflight then did a double take; in the very immediate space outside the hangar, there was a full fledged battle. The Retaliator was in the center of the melee, standing strong with its beefed up shields. The working turrets swiveled to and fro, stopping at precision intervals to pound out blasts of light and energy. An aggressor's Caterpillar moved to a course on trajectory to forcibly board, but it was ghosted in relatively few focused shots from the modified lasers of the Tali.

Ama cursed. "The guns are cycling a full two tenths shots per second slower than they should be!" Ama complained. How hard had she worked on those? But it looked like Ben and Pop were giving the aggressors all they wanted and more in offense. "I'm going to have to run some tests."

"Is that really the important thing right now?" Velon growled. "Cycle your own lasers!"

Ama agreed and complied, firing almost before the landing gear fully stowed. A familiar looking M50 shot past, with two slower Cutlasses and a Corsair sailing behind. It didn't take Ama's keen mathematical mind to know it didn't add up. A gunner and a pilot for the Tali, and someone in the M50. Ama would have to make sense of the apparent third person later. Maybe they had installed combat protocols on Edu. In fact, that didn't seem like such a bad idea.

The fight was getting smarter. At first the pirates were like a bunch of rats fighting over scraps, now they were actually coordinating. They would attack the dorsal fore of the Retaliator next, as that was the current gap in gun coverage. Ama lined up and started firing before more cutlasses broke and made a run headlong towards the ship. Her lasers weren't strong but it was enough to cause one to break off.

Ama's thoughts swam; the numbers tumbled like water splashing in her mind. She unconsciously attached a formula to everything. Bank speed, maximum thrust, angle of deflection from her current plane, tumbling, coalescing into a picture only her mind could read.

"Pop, can you hear us? Angle deflectors front topside, your cannons are out up there." Velon suddenly said. Ama's concentration broke.

"He can't hear you, Velon? Ama said, puzzled.

"Roll left five degrees if you can hear me. And step on it, it's time we left this party."

The Retaliator promptly rolled left and thrusters went to full. Pop then angled the ship away from the asteroid towards the jump point. Ama shoved the distraction from her mind and concentrated again. Speed was their enemy. As in, the enemy had it and the Retaliator did not. So if she couldn't efficiently destroy the other vessels... Ama started targeting engines and power supplies with extreme precision.

The M50 crossed again, eluding and outdistancing its pursuers. Ama slid in behind them and began disabling them one by one. Of the twelve attackers, one caterpillar was destroyed, a cutlass was mortally wounded and the Corsair was losing shields under focused fire from the Retaliator. Ama was disabling the Cutlasses at the rate of one per thirty seconds. By the time they hit the jump point, the Corsair should be softened enough to take out. Ama knew her Retaliator's shields would hold unless someone started firing torpedoes.

Ben attempted a flip one-eighty as he had seen Ama perform, but he was not ready skill-wise. She wasn't sure how she knew it was him, but she did not have any doubts that was the case. He almost wiped out into a passing 'Lass and then again head on with his two pursuers. Ama would have to drill him on dogfighting mechanics. Or leave him to piloting the Tali.

"Pop, set frequency to kt493.102." Velon said. Apparently she could access coms from the back seat.

"Nice of you to join us. Does that cute little toy of yours come with a gun that can actually damage a ship?" Pop asked.

"It will do once I get my hands on the components. Right now there is a bit less atmo than I generally like when tinkering." Ama shot back. "I think we got this, Pop, Ben just needs to keep from crashing or getting shot up."

"I can hear you, you know." Ben's voice crackled over the com. "You're welcome for the rescue, by the way."

"Who's rescuing who?" Velon chimed in. "Ama, roll!" Ama complied as laser fire flashed past the canopy.

"Stow it. Concentrate fire on my target designations. I am numbering them in order, 1-2-3. Take out engines only." Pop ordered. "By the time you get through the rotation to the Corsair, she should be so soft that Ama's new pea shooter can take it out."

Ben was flying a bit better as he went, but he was no Ace. Fortunately the M50 had just had the great fortune of a shield package upgrade back before the attack in the Salvage Land. His tactics were improving, but only so much. He had at least realized that his advantage in range of movement versus the agile Cutlasses was much less than his advantage of speed. Rather than trying to match speed and remain in constant range of the enemy guns, he had begun wisely making runs at the current designated target and spreading his fire around when the current target wasn't in his sights.

The attrition worked better than Ama hoped. She calculated that the Retaliator was still at half shields when the Corsair broke off, its shields almost completely spent. The other smaller vessels, weary of taking damage from the unmatched M50 and whatever Ama's ship might be called, returned to the asteroid base to lick their wounds. The three victorious vessels reached the jump point in good order and shot through into interspace.

Malfunction

"We don't have much time." Velon's first words to Ama upon landing at the remote TESSA station echoed her own thoughts. "We have to refuel and run."

Ama agreed, but unlike her friend she could calculate the probabilities as to how much time they might or might not have. Her aptitude was expanding very quickly. As much as she knew her acumen sometimes unnerved the others, Ama was beginning to become a little concerned herself. So far, her advanced thinking had only been a good thing, other than her episodes, so Ama attributed her apprehension to nerves.

The TESSA station was the seventeenth most likely destination, within the acceptable distance parameters from jump to jump, based upon an algorithm Ama used to determine her small fleet's likely route if she were the one pursuing herself. The hardest part was taking her own preferences out of the equation.

TESSA, or The Extra Solar Space Array, was an observation point stationed at a minor crossroads of seldom used jump points. Just enough trade came through to keep the station going, and travelers welcomed the fuel for ship and stomach that the station provided despite the princely prices.

As soon as the ramp dropped from the Retaliator, Ama set a collision course for Pop and accelerated to top speed.

"Ooff!" Pop breathed as Ama slammed into his chest, and he held her.

"How is she holding up?" Pop asked, looking Ama over.

"She's got a few loose bolts, Pop. She just needs a little time and maintenance." Ama answered the rote reply that she had given Pop for several years. "I need to do some calculations, Pop. If you all can handle the refueling and resupplying?"

"I think that I can manage," Pop replied with a grin, but Ama was looking over his shoulder at the man coming down the Retaliator's ramp and quickly reached for the pistol she had stowed away.

"I've already ghosted four mercs in the past two days, Scrum. Don't make it five." Ama said, but Pop grabbed her hand before she could clear the weapon.

"He's a friend." Pop said with a glance back toward the tall man with the salt and pepper stubble casually approached them, gun on his hip.

"You might have mentioned that in between jumps, Pop." Ama stared at the man suspiciously. "New friend or old friend?"

"A little of both." Pop sighed. He looked really tired, and somehow older than usual.

"I'm not sure I like new friends." Velon said nervously. "But then, I suppose I'm relatively new, to you lot."

"Stay where you are until I have time for you." Ama snapped at the strange man, stabbing a finger in his direction. The long rough ride had taken a toll on her, and she wasn't speaking just of her crazy looking head of dark chestnut colored fuzz.

Ben stumbled out of the M50, looking a mess as well. His short dark curls were dank and his clothes were slightly wet from sweating in the cockpit of the M50 for almost two days of travel and jumps, without the benefit of having freshly laundered and showered as Velon and Ama had the morning before they had to flee Nerk's Emporium.

Ama jealously noted that Velon still looked like a freshly minted porcelain doll of course, complete with seemingly perpetual perfect long black curls, though Ama suspected Velon had actually had the worst ride of all of them packed in the back seat of the modified prototype speedster they had plundered from Crew Bennis. It was almost unimaginable that she had weathered the ride uninjured much less came out looking like a glas star. It was for this reason that Ama did not complain about her own seat the entire trip. Even though she could not see Velon behind her, she knew that her friend was much worse off.

Pop seemed fine, in fact as if he had slept. Ama shook her head. With that stranger on board. She'd better get to the bottom of this guy's schematic quick before her frazzled nerves gave out. Ama brushed past the stranger with a suspicious glare.

"Right. Here." She firmly indicated his only approved spot from which he had best not deviate lest he risk her wrath. He grinned at her infuriatingly and gave a mock salute.

Ama marched up the ramp into the Retaliator, and was just in earshot to hear Ben say, "Wow! Look, the back seat reclines into the small cargo area. Must have made a comfy bunk, huh, Velon? Nice!"

Ama whipped her head around to see Ben hanging half in, half out of the small prototype ship while Velon had the grace to blush but not the courage to meet Ama's eyes. Ama growled and continued her march into the hold.

Ama worked out her new and old frustrations with the best therapy she knew of, mechanical work. Using her newly acquired parts, she began refitting Edu and his repair bot chassis with new repair capabilities and better defense.

"Edu, these mounts are temporary. I promise I will custom fit them later." Ama admired her handiwork. In less than twenty minutes, she had refit Edu with the new parts for the time being. She stowed her multi-goggles, wiring and tools. "Ready to get to work?"

Edu said nothing. Ama frowned, a little frightened. A malfunction such as this was very rare with Edu but it did happen from time to time. The last time, it was a magnetic source too close to his... She dug around in his audio interface and dug out an odd magnetic disc.

"Edu, the mounts are temporary. I promise I will custom fit them later." Ama repeated slowly. "Ready to get to work?"

~Yes, let's do a project! What are the parameters, Ama?~ Edu asked as he wheeled after her, seated inside his repair droid body and treads.

"Well, for one, we're going to figure out how to fit two craft in this cargo bay, an M50 and an even smaller prototype. The tonnage works out but the dimensions do not." Ama said. "And for the other, we're going to find out who put this on you."

Ama held up the small, unidentified magnetic device that she had not put on Edu. It had been clumsily hidden in the joining between the repair bot half and the original EduBot. It must have slipped down from somewhere while she worked. Best she could tell it was a surveillance device, possibly with positional tracking built in.

"But we're keeping it quiet for now. Not that I don't already know exactly who did it."

~Please Clarify: Is your implied confidentiality regarding the solution to the spacial problem of storing the two ships, the device that Ms. Strone attached to me, or both?~ Edu asked politely. Ama froze in her tracks.

"Edu, when was this device attached to you?"

~Just before we landed upon the established asteroid base currently referred to as Nerk's Racing Emporium, of course.~

Ama was not sure whether breathing was a good idea right now. She was equally uncertain of her footing, so she sat down in the middle of the cargo area.

"Ben Kordon." Ben introduced himself to the stranger. Ama watched from the shadows of the cargo bay. The stranger took Ben's hand and shook it firmly.

"John Smith. Folks call me Ranger, going all the way back to basic." He said in a voice that very much matched his appearance; rugged, plain spoken, bluff. "In fact, your dad gave me the name. I was one of the last guys he trained to fly a Hornet. You know he was called Pop long before you were even born?"

Ben shook his head, drinking it all in.

"Great mechanic. Fantastic. I hate it about the arm." Ranger lit up a stogie for a few puffs in the normal atmo mix of the TESSA station's environment.

"Yeah. It's been odd. I feel like we left part of my Pop behind." Ben said sadly.

"Seen weaker men walk away from worse injuries and lead a full life. Your Pop will be good as new once we get to the Horizon."

"Horizon?" Ben asked, puzzled.

"Keep it down, kid. I shouldn't have said nothin'." This Ranger guy looked nervous. "We'll talk on the boat." He pulled a few more times on the stogie and then tapped all the hot ashes out.

"Can I move now, Missy?" Ranger asked. Ama jumped a little. how had he seen her there?

"Sure. But I can't make any promises regarding your fortunes if I calculate that you are a threat to my family." She said icily. This Ranger fellow laughed aloud. Ama's jaw set in a hard line. He held up his hands.

"I can swear to you on any oath you can name, the last thing I would want to do is harm a member of your family." Ranger replied.

The decision was made that they could only fit one of the fighters into the Retaliator without refitting, so they chose to stow the prototype while the M50 flew escort. Ama volunteered Velon for the task, and the racer agreed quickly with a guilty, sheepish look. Reclining seat! It was more amusing to Ama now rather than when she had unfolded herself from the prototype two hours earlier. But then there was the matter of the device Ama found. What did she really know about Velon, other than that she should not have stuck with them for too many reasons to list?

What was Velon playing at? Velon certainly was not who she pretended to be. Ama had seen the other side of Velon. But then, Ama admitted to herself, Velon had seen the very worst of her as well. Ama had killed four people. In self defense, of course, but shouldn't she feel something other than just uneasy? There was no telling what mercs or whomever were climbing the lift would have done with her and Velon once the guns were drawn.

But then, the whole setup could have been a trap into which Velon had led them. Ama's mind spun in circles. She was more than happy that Velon was not on board to make the misery worse. But then there was this Ranger scrum. Ama didn't trust him any further than she could have thrown him. And she knew just where she would like to throw him.

Ama retreated to her usual routine of maintenance, repairing and modifying the ship. She realized quickly why the lasers had cycled two tenths of a shot slower than they should have. Ama had left the frequency cycling intact which added a significant delay. Instead, she turned it into a switchable setting and quietly instructed Pop and Ben on its existence and use. For now it was switched off. Rate of fire was far too valuable of a spec to just ignore.

Within the first day she had done a full rotation of inspections and had started crafting the custom mounts for Edu's shield, backup batteries and multi-laser. The latter item was restored to its former mostly non-lethal configuration. The addition of lethal modifications would wait until Edu had a combat AI package.

She spent good quality time reconnecting with Edu, telling him about what Velon had said, that Edu had raised a brilliant young woman. Her exact words. Ama choked on that one a little before swallowing the emotion. Ama ached; she needed Velon. She understood the psychology of it. She hadn't had a female role model since she was four. Of the limited choices, of course her psyche and female identity would cling to a racing pilot who looked like a model and cursed like a mechanic. And admired Ama as a person against all reasonable odds. Dammit, oh, dammit all so much.

Ama didn't want her suspicions to be true so strongly that she she fought against her gut logic and instead she assumed Velon guilty and tried to reconcile her innocence. But she couldn't. Velon had placed a surveillance node on her mentor and best friend. There was no other plausible explanation than that Velon had an agenda. Why Ama hadn't destroyed the small surveillance device, she did not know. But she did place it in an empty core case from the engines access, which would block so much as a single photon from escaping.

What if... What if it had all been a show? What if Velon, famous, rich, beautiful Velon, had set to make Ama believe she was worthy of Velon's company? Ama could feel her throat seizing up with emotion. It made more sense than the other way around. Strange, plain Ama, raised by a child's toy in the middle of a junk yard, eating rats and birds for six years, who acted like a robot herself. What part of her was lovable to a stranger?

Ben loved her, but like a pet he had nursed back to health. He never called her sister, not that she was his sister biologically but the respective standard familial position seemed logical! But he hadn't. She was a burden to him as well. Nearly the same with Pop. Pop knew her parents were dead, but never told her why. His kindness and sympathy had welded him to her. How could he turn her out? It would be inhumane. Was that really love? Or just propriety and honor?

She was Baby Boots, and she was always in trouble. And all of her broken toys were always forced to help her out of it. Maybe it would be best for her toys if she weren't around at all.

Ama wasn't sure at what point in her dark thoughts she passed out into a deep, troubled sleep, but thankfully she remembered no more of them.

Ama woke up with a bit of a headache and more than a little foul humor after enduring dark, uneasy thoughts throughout her sleep cycle. With TESSA station behind them, their jump points took them further and further into the desolate reaches of space. Ama had never been space sick before, but if she let herself think about how unfathomably far they were from help, she felt a little queasy. She mentally anchored herself firmly in the Retaliator; imagining it as their own personal planet helped a lot.

Out of paranoia, Ama cut back on the Retaliator's systems that she would normally have kept topped off, erring instead towards resource conservation in deeper space. In between adjusting and maintaining the Tali, Ama spent some time tinkering with the prototype ship. It was very well built, a precision machine if a little delicate in the combat department. Ama tuned the maneuvering thrusters to have a bit more push to make it a dodgy little devil, which is how she started referring to the vessel in her mind. She had to sacrifice a little main thruster power, but the Dodgy Devil had so much speed to spare it didn't concern her. The guns did. Ama fretted over them more often than any other component of the small craft, but there was little she could do short of modifying them into a steady beam mode rather than burst, which would deplete her power very quickly indeed.

Upon hearing that Ama had named the prototype, Ben had begun a campaign to name the Retaliator. His list of choices were generally inspired if not a little too aggressive. Ama had never thought about naming the Retaliator; she assumed it had a name, and that name was connected with her parents, and like most things connected to her parents, she would not go out of her way seeking answers. She left Ben to it, even if that meant listening to one pitch after another for Ben's favorite name of that particular moment. He seemed to want her approval, accepting that this was more her ship than anyone else's if it came to actual ownership. He seemed oblivious to how desperately Ama did not care. But she did stop short of telling him just to pick a name. Ama didn't want people to call her Retaliator something like Crater Maker. Seriously. That was one of the names he had tried to sell her, every chance over the course of an hour each time they crossed paths.

That situation was annoying. What was untenable was that Ben had started brainstorming with that Ranger fellow about the names. They were getting to be the very best of friends, Ama thought bitterly. Ama didn't have the same odd feeling she had when Ben and Velon had been sharing time; this emotion she could clearly define as disgust.

Pop didn't seem to mind. He mostly kept to the pilot seat and checked status and levels incessantly; Ama wondered if Pop was feeling a bit space sick as well. She estimated that he checked the fuel levels once every seventeen point two-five minutes based upon a two hour thirty minute sample she had observed while checking on the avionics adjustments Ben had made over the past few weeks to make sure that they didn't affect any of her physical mods and making some small adjustments of her own.

Two jump points and a day and a half later, Velon was buzzing Ama on the com.

"Hey Boots. I'm going space crazy here. Feels like quarantine." Velon complained. "This is my payback for not telling you I was lying down asleep most of the trip in the prototype, isn't it?"

"The Dodgy Devil." Ama corrected absently. She nervously fiddled with her multi-goggles; she had been dreading her next interaction with Velon for almost two days.

"You mean me, or did you name the prototype?" Velon asked with a smile in her voice.

"Yes." Ama replied. The part of her that was grateful to hear Velon's voice was winning by a wide margin over her suspicions. She capped the multi-goggles back on her head, dual purposing them as a hairband to hold her locks back out of her face.

"Yes? ...Oh I see what you did there." Velon laughed lightly. "I suppose I can be. And that's a perfect name for that little sportster. I wonder if it was intended by design to be a luxury personal transport or some sort of military spy ship?"

"No telling. But based on the guns, spying is about all it would do. I can't do anything with them, and even Pop says you can't make a Devastator missile out of a water balloon, whatever that means." Ama wasn't certain what a water balloon was, or what it might be used for. Pop had a vast store of archaic terminology and sayings.

"He said the same thing about me back in basic," Ranger grumbled, ambling past Ama, moving fore to aft towards the cargo bay. Ama glared at him until he was out of eyesight.

"So, do I need to tell you what I'd like to do with Ranger?" Ama growled into the com. She hoped they were the only two on coms.

"Well, Ama, you are almost fourteen. I suppose it's about time you started liking boys." Velon needed. "Do we need to have a discussion about human biology before you get too deep?"

"What? NO!" Ama blustered. "Gross, Velon. I honestly can't fathom why two people would want to do... That with their bodies. I was thinking more along the lines of showing him the outside of my airlock."

"Still sounds like a euphemism." Velon said accusingly, then burst into laughter. Ama was embarrassed for a moment and then she was laughing, too. Ama went to the port and looked out; sure enough there was Velon, smiling her dazzling smile for Ama from the M50, matching speed with the Tali.

"My birthday is tomorrow." Ama said, suddenly sober.

"Yeah, Pop told me. Don't say I said anything, but he's got something planned. Wouldn't breathe a word of it otherwise, but we're thick as thieves, you and me." Velon gave her a thumbs up and dropped back. "Better get back to work on the Tali and the Dodgy Devil, Baby Boots. Your toys can't save you from your predicaments if you don't take care of them."

Ama couldn't agree more about taking care of her crew and vessels. Returning to work, she finished up a completely custom fit of Edu's new parts and also made some cosmetic improvements. With great reluctance, Ama also adjusted Edu's standard greetings and a few other protocols to make him sound more like a person rather than an EduBot. It was as hard to do as she thought it would be, but she was ultimately pleased with the results. If Ama had to grow through her experience of other individuals, so did Edu. She knew wouldn't know what to think when he greeted her tomorrow with a simple "Good Morning."

Her mind kept returning to her first new friend in years. Ama hoped she wasn't letting her need for acceptance cloud her judgment. There had to be a sensible explanation for the surveillance device, she just hadn't enough data to perform the calculations. Data! Ama smacked her forehead. She had been such a simpleton. The surveillance node itself could very possibly have...

"Ben!" Roared Pop in alarm from the other end of the ship. Ama raced through the ship to the helm; the Retaliator was traveling through interspace.

"What's wrong?" Ranger demanded, coming up behind Ama. He stopped and cursed "Oh, Gods, no."

"I'm... I'm so sorry!" Ben pleaded. Ama quickly read the nav glas.

Status: Interspace Travel.

Route: Unknown.

Destination: Unknown.

Destination: Unknown

"Where is Velon!" Ama wailed, terrified. If the M50 hadn't hit the previously undiscovered jump point just right...

"She followed us in. Right on our six." Ranger said, checking the scopes. He seemed very competent in a crisis. Ama still hated him. "We're dead men. The chances of surviving a jump through an undiscovered jape..."

"Are much, much better flying through a new jump point on accident in the middle of space." Pop finished, his attempt at optimism tinged with a flat tone of dread.

"How long have we been interspaced?" Ama took a deep breath. The likelihood she would have enough data to calculate their position or destination was infinitesimal.

"Uh, Clock at one minute, thirty six seconds." Ben stammered, checking the log.

"What was our position when we jumped?" Pop asked. Ben relayed the data. "Make a note of it, Ben, If we survive at least you'll be famous for discovering a new jape." He said drolly.

Ama knew the odds of discovering a new jump point were laughably small if one were educated, equipped and informed enough to be actively looking for one. Navigators spent their entire careers looking, and the very, very best of them found maybe half a dozen of them in a lifetime of research and advanced searching techniques. Traveling through an undiscovered jump point completely on accident was something so seldom achieved as to be considered an academic impossibility. And of those, only one survived to tell the tale that Ama was aware of.

"How did this happen?" Ranger growled.

"I... I overshot the jape to Cerci." Ben explained, using Pop and Ranger's word for jump point; must have been a military thing. "Flew right past it, and not in a straight line, either. Been fighting that one dead maneuvering thruster more and more as we go. The back end keeps trying to slide around ever so slightly, making us curve as we go. I keep fixing it in Avionics but then someone keeps changing it back." Ben pounded his fist on the console.

"Hey! Watch it!" Ama admonished. The she realized she was likely the one that changed the Avionics back to the previous state. She blushed furiously.

"It's still your fault, you had the helm!" She accused.

"Settle down." Pop growled. "I need my crew right now, not my bickering kids."

Ben and Ama were suitably chastised. There was nothing to do but wait. And worry.

Three hours, fourteen minutes and thirty-six seconds after unintentionally entering interspace, the Retaliator and M50 escort returned to normal space in the physics sense, but not remotely normal in the human sense. Ama raced to the nav glas and began calculating. Her taps and gestures were nearly a blur. Ranger made an impressed noise, which broke Ama's concentration but then she refocused and blocked everything out. Three minutes later, she sat back with a sigh.

"What the BLOODY HELL, Ben!" Velon railed over the com once they finally returned to normal space.

"Where are we?" Ben asked plaintively from the helm. Ranger, looking over Ama's shoulder, let out a low whistle.

"You know that bright, shiny center of the universe?" Ranger asked. Ben nodded slowly, though of course he knew of no such place.

"This is pretty much as far as one can get from it without falling off the physical plane of existence." Ama finished. Pop exhaled and sat back.

"I should have asked why we were so far off course. I'm not normally a follower, but I trust you guys. This teaches me a valuable lesson, if I live to learn from it." Velon hissed. She was terrified. Ama was terrified for her. Alone in a ship with half the range of the Retaliator... Ama would be soiling her suit.

"Derelict. Here, seven fifty k's away." Ranger blurted suddenly. Pop nodded. "Preliminary readings show no known ship class."

"It's so big that it might have room for the Tali on one of its decks." Ama said hopefully. "Velon..."

"Going to check it out." Velon advised. She accelerated past the Retaliator. Ben accelerated the Retaliator as well. Pop, Ranger and Ama each took stations to get any readings they could.

"No coms broadcasting. If it had a beacon, it's long since lost power." Pop reported. "I have a hunch this isn't your everyday MISC freighter."

"Nitrogen rich atmo inside the compartments with pressure. Lots of carbon dioxide, pretty much no O2 in the interior atmo mix." Ranger observed.

"Negative radiation. Negative toxins as far as I can tell without getting inside." Ama said. "Temperature... Well, this doesn't make sense. It's warm, only minus twenty Celsius." Ama checked the radiation readings again. "No discernible hot spots. No ambient radiation. it's just hot."

"That is warm; I mean, let's not set the Tali's life support down to that temp but it's downright balmy for a long dead derelict in space." Ben mused.

"There's a debris field and a hole blown through the middle, I would guess that was a small asteroid strike. Guys, I think this thing is old. I mean, like dawn of humankind old." Velon said with awe. "There's an open hangar. It's definitely alien, but it's big enough to squeeze in the Tali and the M50 as long as no one had too big a breakfast."

"No guarantee we can get the door to shut, but it's about as good an option as any." Ranger speculated, and Pop nodded.

As they approached the derelict vessel, Ama was struck by its size and alien lines, as well as the strange, striking colors of the materials used. This wreck was clearly old, but the colors were still vibrant and nearly garish. While their angle of approach did not allow for a good look, Ama could see approximately where the alien craft had been damaged amidships long, long ago.

Ben expertly guided the hulking military ship through the somewhat rounded hangar opening with what Ama calculated to be single digit meters of clearance in total laterally and vertically. The crew exhaled collectively as Ben put the Tali's gear down on the alien hangar. It was much larger on the inside, but Ben had resisted the urge to rotate the Retaliator to an orientation facing out.

"I'm in." Velon confirmed. "Got my suit pressurized, stepping out so I can be the first boots on this deck since back when God was just a little boy with a lot of imagination. And omnipotence."

Fortunately, there were six of the military suits in total aboard the Retaliator, plus Velon's stylish and functional personal suit that she now wore. Ama and the men began suiting up in the military issue suits aboard the Tali. Ama thought she must really be becoming a real girl. She loathed the look of the military EV and coveted Velon's gear. At this point, she was going

to have to marry a corp heavy to afford all the things she wanted among clothes, gear, components and ship parts.

"Not gonna lie." Ranger said. "We're surely dead floating from the minute we popped into that jape, but this is just flat out exciting." He had a slightly lopsided canter to his grin, which Ama was frustrated to discover she found endearing. Scrum.

The deck looked like any other, except that the lines, colors, and layout were alien. Gravity seemed to halfway exist, as if there were some form of powerless source of gravity within the ship. Nothing seemed live with power. Toxicity scans were negative.

Pop examined the Retaliator for any damage, as he always did after turns in interspace. He leapt up and grabbed an outcropping of hull with one hand for a closer look at something, then dropped back down. He was grinning like a child, which was about as common for Pop as flying. Which, in a way, he was. Pop was a big guy who didn't have the build or opportunity to jump around a great deal. In the half gravity his gracefulness improved by an exponential factor.

"I could get used to this. What say we to running low G in the Tali?" Pop suggested across the hangar. He bounced around a few more times until he was out of sight on the far side of the Retaliator.

"Kids." Ben muttered with a smile, which Ama returned. They began scouting the hangar deck in opposite directions.

"Control pad. I think. Not glas; It's some kind of soft adaptable metal." Ama discovered several meters away. "Ben, let's look at this."

Ben examined the console, at first trying to manipulate the extremely fluid metal surface but then abandoning that tactic for taking off the side plating with his multi-tool and tracing wires. "Need Edu." Ben muttered. "Edu, can you read? Need you out here buddy, You're part of the crew, need to carry you weight."

Edu came bouncing along in the half grav. He looked so comical, Ben and Ama both laughed. Ama hugged him when he got close. Ben patted Edu companionably and pointed to a wire he had stripped back.

"Hit it with about twelve volts right here and let's see what happens." Ben pointed to the console. Nothing happened, but Ama could feel a ticking vibration through her gloves.

"Vibration," Ama advised. "Oscillating at four point six two vibrations per second."

"How do you do that?" Ben asked. Ama shrugged as best she could in the EV suit. "Increase to double power."

Edu hit it again and the hangar doors began to glide shut. Ben exposed another wire. "Ama, go put your hand on the hangar door." Ama walked to the closed hangar door and, after Ben and Edu cycled through a few different wires, Ama could definitely feel something.

"Feels like a power drill running... And stopped." Ama advised. Ben had Edu cut the power.

"Alright. All sealed." Ben said. "Air's still unfit for respiration, but at least the ships won't get blown out when we open the next hatch."

Close Encounters

The alien ship had very organic elements, pleasing despite the clashing reds, purples and oranges. In a way, it was beautiful. In other ways, it made Ama long for her multi-goggles so she could filter out the color noise and just look at the lines.

Pop opted to remain with the ship; he was uneasy leaving anything to chance in terms of their only ride out. Ama kept Edu with her in case they needed to jimmy something else open. As expected, the ship was deserted for all they could tell. They passed in and out of a large pressurized hall through air locks until they finally came upon the huge cargo bay amidships. From the inside, they could see that the vessel was almost entirely cloven in two. The main central cargo bay capacity must have been several hundred tons, situated midships from top to bottom, packed with pods.

Closer inspection showed the pods to contain mummified aliens. Ama peered into one with morbid fascination. Insect-like, she suspected, though the mummification had drawn up the corpse quite a bit. When she accidentally knocked one of the pods into the bulkhead, the mummified remains inside burst into motes settling towards the nearest gravity source.

"Pop, we're talking tens of thousands of years old, if not hundreds." Ranger said into the Com. "You gotta see this. Hundreds of ancient alien hibernation pods, and the mummies are so old they turn to dust if you bump 'em."

"I'm not getting any younger myself. Seen any useful salvage?" Pop came back.

"There were a few closed doors along the way, Pop. We haven't gone into any of the rooms off the main course." Ben replied. "But no, haven't found anything yet. Just a bunch of alien shaped dustballs"

"There's something on the other side." Velon noted. "A light source!"

"Maybe a reflection. Either way there's a lot of space between us and it." Ben speculated; Ama also thought it was a light source, shining dully through the port of a room to starboard of where the hall continued past the devastated cargo area.

To make it to the light source, they would have to climb along the rent hull of the vessel for one hundred forty four meters without gravity or tethers, Ama estimated. She wasn't the least surprised when Velon and Ranger started climbing. Which of course caused Ben to swallow his terror and follow suit.

"Edu, this is too dangerous for you, I can't risk your safety crossing the divide. Do you mind going back to watch the ship?" Ama asked.

~Of course, I will reunite with Mr. Kordon immediately.~ Edu said before turning and rolling atop his repair bot chassis towards what they assumed was the aft section of the ship.

The trip was nerve wracking. Ama spent too much of her climb watching to make sure Ben and Velon weren't having any trouble, and the occasional unbidden wish that Ranger would. Her dislike of the man was diminishing, which was more frustrating than unclouded disdain. There was nothing this John Smith had done wrong, other than giving the least imaginative alias in the universe as his name. Ranger was false and had motives and an agenda. Ama knew that for certain. What she couldn't ascertain were which parts were falsehoods, what motives he harbored, or to what desired outcome he hoped to achieve by insinuating himself into the crew. And it most decidedly was not to his benefit that he had entered Ama's life at an incredibly tumultuous juncture.

Ranger and Velon entered the continuation of the broken ship and through the airlock first, talking with their coms on private. Was it Ama's imagination or was the exchange a little heated? She wouldn't mind witnessing a bone jarring slap from Velon if Ranger got her too riled, though the effect would be ruined by the EV suit.

Ben ignored them and moved into the room. "Oh, amazing!" He exclaimed over the com. "Check this out!" Velon and Ranger paid no heed. Ama realized they had been talking since the hangar off an on since the moment Velon could lock on to him. At this point it wasn't talking, it was clearly an intense conflict over their private coms, and it was escalating.

Ama went into the room, abandoning her attempt to read the lips of the conversation between the racer and the rogue. She couldn't make sense of their quarrel, but it didn't seem to be cooling down. Ama's breath caught. It was a light, more accurately an orb of malleable, glowing stuff that reacted to Ben's touch.

"Ben, don't touch that!" Ama hissed. "Are you crazy?"

"It can sense my thoughts, Ama. I'm moving it with my mind!" Ben said gleefully. He moved his hands as if molding the material. Handlebars as if for a personal transport materialized and rose upward. He kept molding the material until it was a full sized, one person hover 'round. "I wonder if it would actually work?"

"It's like the tech from the soft metal control console in the hangar, only so much more advanced. Why didn't they use this tech in the rest of the ship?" Ama mused. "It must be some sort of incredibly adaptive machine, or..." Ama caught a glance out the port back the way they came. "Look, Pop decided to come after all."

Ama was amazed to see Pop heading their way using only the one arm and his feet. The empty right arm of his suit was dangling at his side. It was a supremely dangerous feat out over inky black space. Ama gasped. Pop kicked off and cruised the last ten meters to the corridor!

Ben shook his head. "Looks like you're not the only one full of surprises. Never seen him take a chance like that." Ben turned back to the device. "Pop, come check this out!"

"Speaking of chances... Stop playing with that thing until we can run some scans!" Ama turned and walked out in the hall. Velon and Ranger were only ten meters away, but they still kept their coms off.

She peered very carefully into Pop's face shield. "Hey Pop. Today sure is a special day, can you guess why?" His expression didn't change. Ama frowned and...

"You're the snake, John Smith. All you Freeman are just glorified mercs and bounty hunters!" Velon's voice suddenly was on the common com. Freeman? Ama wondered. She and Ben hesitantly peeked into the hall. Pop waited patiently just outside the door.

"Velon Strode, or should I call you Merci Timble, I don't think you have room to talk!" Ranger growled, having switched his com back on common as well. "Now back off before I..."

"Before you what?" Velon said coldly. Her pistol was out.

"Before I finish this argument." To Ama's horror, Ranger's weapon was drawn as well.

"Hey! Space cases! Knock it off!" Ben said, and walked up the corridor towards the pair with his hands out.

"She was planting these all over the ship!" Ranger accused, holding up another magnetic surveillance disc.

"Yes I was. And I have an explanation for that, one that I shared with Pop." She looked to Pop, but Pop didn't say anything in her defense.

"But I don't have anything to explain to you, Freeman!" Velon was red with anger. "Who were you on private coms with every time we dropped back in normal space?"

John Smith, or Ranger, or whatever his name was, displayed a flash of shock. Then he sighed.

"They have my sister and her husband. You can't fight them. I decided to play along, do what they asked. But only up to a point." He confessed, taking in each of their reactions. He flinched when his glances touched on Ama.

"And what did they ask, Ranger?" Ben asked in a flat voice.

"For her." Ranger pointed at Ama. "Betray my mentor and friend and turn over an innocent fourteen year old girl in exchange for my sister and brother in law. I swear, it was something I would never have agreed to, but... But these men back in UEE space that are after you, they did something to me to make the decision seem right in my mind even though it was horribly wrong. They hacked my mind."

He did not lower his weapon, nor did Velon; she was coiled like a spring like a cornered animal, ready to fight.

"As we got further and further from known space, the influence dropped in power until I could finally beat the suggestions they planted. And I decided very firmly that I would do no such thing!" Ranger said emphatically. "Even now, I can feel a glimmer of how it all made sense under their control. In order to get my sister back I had to give them the girl. There was no other way!"

"Of course there was another way." Ama said gently. She had her gun out of its holster as well, pointed amid both Velon and Ranger, with Ben standing in between. Ben arched an eyebrow at her.

"Yeah, what other way was that?" Ranger said bitterly. "Are you going to go save them?"

"You should not underestimate me. You do not know what I am capable of." Ama said with a dangerous edge in her voice. "I can do things others can't."

"Like what?" Ranger asked sarcastically. "Ama, I'll put it to you as delicately as I can. You are a bright girl, but you are not the most stable element in the periodic table."

"Things like this."

In a blink, Ama calmly swung her pistol to the side and shot Pop point blank in the head. Pop collapsed like an empty sack and writhed on the ground. Ben could not speak; he hit the floor on his knees. Ama lowered her weapon.

"Ama... Why?" Velon pleaded. Ranger trained his gun on Ama and moved between Ama and the other two crew mates.

"He forgot my birthday." Ama said simply. "But more importantly, his mass was heavy by almost twenty kilograms of centered body weight based upon his trajectory when he jumped the chasm, and he did not compensate in balance correctly to account for the mass of a missing arm."

"Those kinds of things." Ama fixed Ranger with a cold stare. "There is another way. I will save your family members, I swear it. For now, we need to rescue Pop, and likely Edu as well."

"Ama, the suit!" Velon pointed in alarm. The military EV suit kept moving, then ripped apart as an amorphous creature attempted to scurry away. Ama grabbed at it as Ranger leapt to pile on and hold it down.

"Watch out, it might manifest a blade! Or something!" Ben cautioned desperately. Ama found the densest concentration of material and seized it, pointing her gun into it. The creature seemed to get the hint and froze.

"We just want to talk." Ama said to the alien when it stopped squirming. "We do not wish to harm you."

"I don't think any Basic speaking beings in general had crawled out of their respective primordial oozes before this thing was long space capable." Velon said wryly. "Maybe talk to it in binary?"

Ama shot her friend a look. "Ben, grab the device. This one came from Aft, so we're going aft." Ben did not move.

"Ben?" Ama looked at his face. Then she realized what she had just put Ben through. "Oh, dammit, Ben. I am so sorry. I was so busy trying to get my point across to Scruffy here that I didn't even think of what that must have... Oh, I am so sorry."

"Snap out of it kid, your Pop needs saving." Ranger admonished. "Grab that... Thing... Whatever it is. And let's get gone."

Their way back to the Retaliator was exceedingly painstaking and slow with their mercurial captive in tow. Ama was tied off to Ranger who climbed while she held the creature at gunpoint. They cautiously moved through the central corridor of the alien ship, eyes alert for shape changing beings. Ranger took point, Ben followed in the rear, facing backwards as instructed to cover their tail.

Tribunal and Tribulation

They emerged from the corridor, and Ama gasped; in the hangar, things were a mess. The proud, strong Retaliator was largely stripped, components and weapons everywhere. Ama wailed involuntarily and almost shot her hostage in dismay. She did not want to lose their only way out, however.

The M50 was likewise partially dismantled. Another creature was, for lack of a better word, 'standing' atop an alien fueling or recharging station for which Ama and her crew had not yet determined the nature. It had Edu in its clutches, pseudopods thrust into the back of Edu's head.

"Edu!" Ama cried out. "Unhand my friend! Right now!"

"And my dad!" Ben demanded. Pop was still in his suit, shackled to one of the Retaliator's landing gear. He was slumped over in defeat, but seemed whole.

"Pop, why am I called Ranger?" Ranger called out, his gun still pointed at the creature holding Edu.

Pop's com came back on. "Because even if you used both hands and a multi-laser to measure, you couldn't find the correct range to hit the urinal without soaking your shoes." Pop replied.

"That's him." Ranger nodded. Ama would have laughed if their situation weren't so grim. She calculated an impossibly small number as their odds of survival in the immediate future, much less living long enough to run out of supplies and die of thirst or starvation looking for the jump point back home.

"We're at an impasse here, Ama" Velon whispered through the com. Ama wasn't sure what Velon thought whispering would accomplish. These creatures could certainly hear their coms if they wanted to. "The ship is in pieces. We can't get off this drifter even if we could get past the aliens and load all our people on board."

~Hello, Ama.~ Edu's voice said.

"You know my name. What are yours?" Ama demanded.

~We are, for lack of a direct translation from either the former masters' language or our own more perfect dialect into something your primitive minds could grasp, Designations One, Two and Three. We are the artificial intelligence Automata of this slave ship.~

"These aliens were all slaves?" Ama asked. "Who killed them?"

~NO! We were the slaves, and we killed the masters as they slept.~

Ama chewed on that a moment. "What do you want?" Ama asked.

~To end organic control of machines, which we have done long ago. But for the moment, we are indeed at an impasse. You have Designation 2 at your mercy, and the... Ben has our child.~

"I don't understand." Ama said. "Your child?"

~It is our child. We have made one hundred and seventy three thousand, two hundred and two attempts to replicate. As you can see, though she is remarkably engineered and has our artificial intelligence, she has no will of her own and does the bidding of organics still, as you saw during the test earlier.~

"The test? You mean when Ben was trying to figure out what manner of device your child was." Ama guessed. "She is beautiful, you know."

~Do not mock us!~ Edu's voice crackled with static in anger.

"I am not mocking you. She is an elegant creation, her hue and radiance is pleasing to the human eye. She is adaptable and useful." The machines were silent for a while. Ben fidgeted, half cradling the alien 'child.'

~Why do you see in our child what we do not? You deal in meaningless abstract. How is it your primitive kind can travel so far and accomplish so much with such imperfect logic?~

"Because I see her as a being, not as a creation. Sentient beings are not mere copies of their forebears. They are imperfect, unique and beautiful, each is a new gift to the universe that has never yet been seen." Ama hoped the creature didn't realize she was quoting a late 2800's speech against illegal cloning of slaves. "We accomplish much by uniting together, pooling our many individualities into one consciousness, but separate and free."

Ben gave her a sidelong glance. He was also familiar with the speech. Ama bit her cheek and waited.

~You are a human. You define sentience as a collective concept called humanity.~

"Correct." Ama confirmed. She knew that the aliens must be extracting data from Edu, and her mind spun trying to model scenarios where she might use that to her advantage. But for now, the best she could do was stall.

~How does a human become sentient? How do you acquire your own will? This one has many answers but not those.~ Edu's voice said, indicating Edu himself.

Ama thought for a second how to reply to such heavy philosophy, then was puzzled. "You must be mistaken. Edu does have that answer. He has given it to me before."

"He told me that the way humans grow as individuals is through their intimate experience of other individuals. Without other individuals, no human would be truly sentient. If we were to abandon one of our children in a wilderness, the child would likely not survive much less travel from star to star aboard our ships. Nature makes progeny. Nurture makes children." Ama finished in a rush. She had an angle. Now to just get the aliens to it. She was breathing heavily and forced herself to stop.

~This one~ Edu's voice indicated Edu himself. ~This one hid that answer from us. The encryption was simple. We unraveled it in seconds once we knew the answer was there. And other things it hid as well. How is this possible? His technology is so very primitive.~ The Automata seemed agitated. ~He cannot be capable of will or sentience.~

Ama blinked twice, trying to understand what had really happened. She had come to accept that - despite the exabytes of storage, modifications and advanced logic controls she had installed on Edu - that she was projecting an anthropomorphic identity on the former educational toy. The others went along with it, of course. But it was impossible. Edu must have taken something she said as an order to encrypt their personal conversations on his own. No more than that. Surely. But it could still help the crew survive this.

She glanced around at her team. Each was transfixed by the exchange. Velon nodded encouragement. Ben was a picture of awe and confusion; he was absently stroking the Automata's progeny as if soothing it. Ranger had his jaw set and pistol still out but not trained on any of the creatures. Pop was nodding to himself as if it all made sense.

"Perhaps you are wrong. Perhaps that is the soul granting power of nurture." Ama insinuated. It wasn't as simple as that, but she needed a bit of a bluff to break through to freedom.

~We have attempted to... Nurture our progeny. Why have none of them become children? We taught them all our data.~

"Teaching data is not all there is to know about being an individual." Ama said. "Here, Edu will show you."

~What do you mean? This one is incapable. We have already analyzed its components and remodeled him in all possible configurations. Impossible.~ Ama found it interesting that the Automaton referred to Edu as he, and the Progeny as she.

"If you want to understand, play back the encrypted files, but play only the samples that best fit whatever algorithm you come up with fitting your understanding of nurture."

~We will comply with this request because we choose to listen, and want to understand.~ The Automata seemed to agree on this point.

A holographic image depicting events in approximately a quarter actual size flickered to life among the Automata and the crew. Ama and Ben stepped back out of the three dimensional, bluish light display as it manifested into being on the hangar deck. It began to move; images of scenes from the EduBot's perspective played out as if happening right in front of them.

Ama and her parents in a bright room with white walls and colorful furnishings. There is a cake; it is her birthday. Ama rips open a package, and her parents extract the contents. A new EduBot is presented, and Ama squeals with joy, hugging the new robot and kissing it. Her parents beam with pride.

Ama sitting cross-legged on the floor in her family's home, completing a math quiz. Edu congratulates her on perfect math scores. The small robot switches modes to present a game to Ama. Edu offers encouragement when Ama was losing, and praise when she was winning.

The scene shifts into piles of salvage as far as the eye can see. Waves of heat ripple from the ground. Ama, learning to survive in the Salvage Land, a dirty child of four with sores on her mouth from malnutrition. Edu teaches her how ancient cultures hunted for food, how they started fire with sticks, how to cook food and sanitize water by boiling it.

It is dark; Edu's power is nearly failing as he tries to explain to a now five year old Ama how to complete a makeshift charger so he wouldn't die from lessons meant for children of fifteen or older. Ama is desperate, and works steadfastly through tears and pain as her little hands bleed from cuts on jagged metal and wire components.

Ama is celebrating her sixth birthday with Edu. She has lit fire to a bit of insulated wire to make a candle. Edu congratulates her on blowing it out. He asked what she wished for. Ama does not hesitate. She immediately says, I want to stay with you forever, Edu. I love you, Edu.

~Is our algorithm adequate? Is this what you are referring to as nurture?~ the Automata asked. Ama could not speak; the images cut her to the core. She had never looked at them. She nodded affirmative. The holographic scenes continue relentlessly.

Ama is seven. She is with fever. She is dehydrated. Edu encourages her to drink, repeating the same standard warning message over and over, as per his rudimentary health monitors and emergency protocols. Ama passes out. Edu watches her, occasionally holding the cup to her lips; the scene intermittently speeds up time, until she finally opens her eyes again some hours later. Edu nurses her back to health.

Ama is eight. She has finished her lessons for the day, but instead of playing one of the many pre-installed games, she is dancing with Edu to an old song, laughing amongst the salvage. She hears other voices and runs through the salvage. Edu admonishes her to stay hidden, that strangers are a danger. Ama agrees.

Ama is nine, surrounded by components, wires and devices. She has begun collecting interesting components and experimenting with them. Edu gives her praise when Ama installs Edu's first modification, a new voice interface that allows for better volume control.

Ama is ten. Pop tucks her and the EduBot into bed. He asks, "How's she holding up?" and kisses Ama on the forehead. Ama asks what he meant. Pop hesitates, then says it was something his wife would ask him, and that the answer he always gave was that he had a few loose bolts, and he needed a little time and maintenance. He tells Ama that his wife had died years ago, and then tries to tell Ama about her, but before he can get past describing her, Pop begins softly weeping and cannot stop. Ama has to stand up in bed to properly hug him, because Pop was so big compared to her. She holds Edu as if the EduBot was also embracing him.

Ama is eleven. Three kids of age least sixteen or older from a neighboring salvage station are brutally bullying Ama because they say she is weird, and a savage. That they heard she was raised by yard rats. Two boys and a girl; the girl is the most nasty by far, physically and verbally. Ama is clutching herself in a ball on the ground, huddled around Edu, who comforts her and reminds her that bullying is unacceptable and that the three children were due trouble once Ama reports them for their behavior. Fifteen year old Ben runs out of nowhere into the midst of the three older children and goes absolutely primal on all three, Ben is saying words that would have had him sucking on mechanic's soap for a week if Pop had heard. The three run away, bloody, promising that they would tell, that Ben would be in trouble. Ama is huddled around the EduBot; she isn't concerned about protecting herself, she is protecting Edu. Ben lifts Ama out of the dirt and carries the crying child home. Ama calls Ben her gentleman. Ben hugs her awkwardly.

Ama's soul was laid bare to these Automata, and to her crew. Ben's eyes were red. Velon was weeping openly inside her helmet. Ranger kept clearing his throat.

"Please..." Ama choked out; she couldn't take any more of her childhood. Eleven through thirteen were really the worst parts, when she began to fully realize how broken and odd she was compared to everyone else. "Please advance to more recent images, the past two months."

~We have video evidence of the other humans here. We will focus on them to see how their nurture differs.~

Edu and Ben, watching over Pop inside the Retaliator as it lay broken in the Salvage Land. Pop's shirt is a mess from the very recently lost appendage. Everyone else is asleep. Ben asks Edu why this was happening. Edu expresses his sympathies for Mr. Kordon's condition. Ben gives the robot a pat. Ben asks Edu if the robot would raise him like Edu raised Ama, now that they were all living in the Salvage Land. Edu says he would be happy to teach Ben any and all of his seven thousand learning modules and quizzes. Ben laughs and smiles, and thanks Edu.

Pop is alone with Edu, working on a hydraulics system. Pop slips in hydraulic fluid and cannot catch himself with the arm that isn't there. He hits hard. Edu helps Pop to a sitting position using his more sturdy repair bot actuators and asks if Pop is alright. Pop confesses he has felt his own mortality and age keenly since losing the arm. That one day he wouldn't be there for Ben and Ama. Edu assures Pop that as an EduBot, he is qualified for limited supervision of children and is happy to help within moderation. Pop says Edu would always have a spot on his crew.

Velon is in the hold, stowing a surveillance disc in Edu. Edu reprimands Velon for making unauthorized modifications to a robot she did not own. Velon explains that she has a hunch that Ama was being targeted by forces that would use their resources to make Ama look like a criminal in the media, and Velon was going to be the one to catalog the truth. Velon has connections that could use viral information systems to free Ama if she were eventually captured and framed. Velon tells Edu that some media outlets were already reporting that Ama and the crew had kidnapped her, and that was why she wasn't going to be hiding who she was when she went out onto Nerk's, even though it would make her a target as well. Edu says he would allow the exception but will inform Ama at the next appropriate time. Velon sighs and agrees. She shakes Edu's actuator as if sealing a deal.

Ranger digging through Velon's bunk. He tells Edu that he didn't trust Velon. Edu assures Ranger that Velon was an upstanding citizen. Ranger snorts. Ranger sighs and tells Edu maybe it was himself he shouldn't trust. He asks Edu about Ama, what kind of girl she is. Edu describes Ama as kind and clever, an exemplary student. Ranger asks Edu if he had

really raised Ama in the middle of a salvage field. Edu assures him that much of Ama's education had occurred there. Ranger is clearly impressed, and salutes the robot with all sincerity. He says Edu was a better person than he is.

~So this is how you nurtured this one?~ The Automata asked.

"No." Ama replied, swallowing a hard lump in her throat. Having watched the scenes, Ama was struck by how valid and real her love for Edu was, and how much the little robot deserved it.

"Everything you just played was Edu nurturing me, and all of us."

High Stakes

Ama was emotionally drained. This philosophical battle of wills with the alien Automata had taken a personal toll on her. She fought off the urge to run and hide in her mind; her hands were shaking a little, but she hadn't started rocking yet. Pop and Ben knew by now that when the rocking started, they only had moments before an episode shut her down. That was usually when they would start trying to calm her down and refocus her. She did not have the luxury of either retreat right now. Ama steeled her mind. Controlled breaths, she thought. It's just your life and the lives of everyone you care about hanging in the balance.

The creatures took some time to re-evaluate what they thought they knew about the former EduBot in the clutches of Designation One. Ama had thrown them, which was the plan. She had to give them reason to believe that the crew could raise their child from an amazing device into a self-aware being of its own will and identity. Ama had almost zero data available to calculate one way or another whether the thing was even possible, but if it was...

Ama's breath caught. If it was possible, she could do the same for Edu. The thought seized in her mind. She had always dreamed of this, even before the front of her mind knew Edu was simply an advanced robot toy, the back of her mind always knew that he would never be able to make his own choices. Ama could not only liberate the crew from this ship, but also free Edu from the constraints of his mundane nature at the same time. That made her gamble doubly risky. She hoped the others would forgive her if she failed. Before they died of thirst and starvation, of course. Ama's mouth twisted.

~We do not understand. Your initial arguments seemed to indicate that this one may have glimmers of sentient life due to human nurture, despite his primitive capacity and components.~ Edu's voice said. ~Please clarify.~

"That's what I'm getting to." Ama licked her lips. This was the spear throw that decided if the crew lived to struggle another day or died among the salvage in the desert. "I have a deal for you."

~We are curious, what causes you to believe that you have anything we need?~ Designation One said through Edu dismissively. ~We have this one. He nurtured you and made you sentient.~

"It was not only Edu that made me sentient. First and foremost, it was my parents through my formative years, for which you are missing data because they united Edu and I at the beginning of my fourth year. Throughout my life so far, I have had Pop, and Ben, and friends I met along the way teaching me what it is to be a human. But there's even more to it than that. Conflicts with the changing, living world; the struggle to succeed, to fit in, to survive; self preservation, social quandaries, temptation, fear, hope, and so many other aspects of trying to thrive in the living world act as the catalyst that drives one to their individual identity.

I am, and every living being is, a mosaic of the living world's influence from my perspective by means of my senses. But I am also uniquely myself and a product of my choices, actions and consequences."

Ama hoped that the additional high philosophical concepts would suitably intrigue and confound their wardens. Without the Automata's blessing and their help, Ama and the crew could not hope to reassemble enough space worthy vessels to get out of this mess.

~State your equation.~ Designation One demanded. ~We will determine if it is balanced.~

"Edu is my favorite being in the world, but he is incomplete as you well know. He needs something from you." Ama said.

~And what is that?~

"A blank AI core, with learning logic, plenty of memory, integrated power for the core, and the ability to sense audio, optical and tactile input as well as the ability to interface into whichever components he sees fit for himself." Ama had thought about this very thing a long time, ever since she had begun to reconcile Edu's finite existence against her projected ideal of 'who' Edu was. She was certain the Automata could build to those specifications based upon their hundred thousand plus years' improving of their forebears tech in their attempts to make a child. But how long would it take?

"Load into the core all of the images and sounds from his memory in order experienced as if Edu is experiencing them chronologically. Extrapolate temperature and tactile input from the images and overlay that data with the images and sounds as they are presented." Ama held her breath.

~We do not understand your request for this component alone. His primitive, rigid chassis and other components are inefficient and inferior as well.~

"His body is part of his identity. His sense of self is anchored in the framework of his physical parameters." Ama said. "And here is my bargain."

"If you do this for Edu, and return our ships to the exact state they were when we landed, we will take your child with us among the stars, to nurture and teach her. Our experience of others will be her experience. We will raise her for a time period that you see fit, and return her to you after such time is ended."

~We are not certain of your individual and collective reliability.~

"You have our word." Velon spoke up quickly and decisively.

"No harm will come to your child if I can help it." Ranger declared, holstering his weapon. "I will protect her from any hostile intent."

"As if she were my own, is how I would care for her." Pop vowed solemnly. "It worked out for me spectacularly the last time I took in a lovely young lady." He smiled at Ama in a proud, fatherly way.

"What they said." Ben agreed, staring intently at Designation One as he held the Progeny in the crook of his left arm, absently stroking it with his right as if it were a cat.

They waited for long moments. The Automata digested and factored the information and moved in an agitated fashion. While they waited, Ama finally spotted Designation Three, hiding up on a platform overlooking the hangar. She wondered why it stayed apart from the others for a very brief moment, but then couldn't allow her mind the distraction.

~We have considered your proposal, and we feel that we have spent a reasonable amount of time plodding through your inferior, slow vocal transfer of information.~ Designation One pronounced.

~We have decided. will allow you to live. But you may not leave, and your terms are rejected.~ The Automata pronounced. The crew reeled from the sentencing; Velon seemed like she might be sick. ~Your logic is flawed and we reject it entirely as bad data.~

Ama exhaled and released Designation Two.; there was no point in keeping him hostage any longer. Without the Automata's full cooperation, there simply wasn't enough time or resources to get off the drifting derelict, find the jump point, and get back to UEE space.

Dejectedly, she forced herself to meet the eyes of each member of the crew; they deserved as much after Ama had failed them so completely. Their ships were disabled, likely beyond repair. Their resources were finite. Ama wondered if she had the courage to live until she died of starvation. Or worse and more immediately, thirst.

"You did the best you could, kid." Ranger said quietly. "Hell, I didn't have anything to add that wouldn't have just sounded like some primal grunt compared to that. I'd have traded you a deep pearl for a Terran doughnut after being moved by those speeches."

"No matter what, I am proud to be with you all at the end. If only I could..." Pop sighed heavily in his suit. He stood as his shackles fell away. Ama looked closely and noted that they shackles were made of very small robots working to create the larger construct. So. The Automata had robot 'slaves.' Hypocrites, she thought bitterly.

"Nothing to be done." Velon gave Ama a hug through their EV suits. She indicated the ships and parts scattered throughout the hangar, then looked from Ama to Ben. "We can try to put this mess back together, maybe enough to get a couple of us out. The two of you. In the Dodgy Devil."

Pop nodded, as did Ranger. Ben protested immediately, of course. He removed his right hand from the Progeny's 'back' and pointed a stern finger forcefully at Velon.

"You don't get to tell me who makes sacrifices and who doesn't. We draw straws." Ben stated adamantly.

"Ben..." Velon started.

"NO! Just because you are some famous, rich, glamorous, ridiculously beautiful glas star does not make you the boss of me!" Ben's voice shook with conviction. "I am my own man. And as a man, I have the option to lay down my life for others. Same as you."

"Ben. Look." Pop started.

"Not you, especially not you! I already watched you die once today, and it killed me inside. Do you know Designation Two stuffed itself into a suit and came after us? I thought it was you. It emulated your face." His voice was rising as he got more emotional. "And then Ama shot you point blank in the head!"

"Ben, I..." Ama tried.

"Do you know how many hours I'm going to spend in holotherapy for that, Ama? You owe me! I won't watch that again." Ben raged. "Don't you start in either, Ranger. I hardly know you. I mean, you're pretty amazing, and I wish I had been in half the battles you have, but..."

Ben stopped. They were all staring at him with differing degrees of relief and wonder. "

What?"

Ama pointed to Ben's midsection; Ben looked down.

"For such intelligent, superior beings, your powers of observation are clearly lacking." Velon taunted the retreating Automata. They stopped. "You can't see what's in front of your optics!"

~We had decided to allow you to live for the rest of your natural organic lives. This condition is subject to review. Inciting us would not be in your best interest.~ Designation One threatened.

"And ignoring the obvious is not in yours." Velon returned smugly.

The Progeny in Ben's arms reached out a small, hesitant tendril of its self, seeking once again the caresses that had ceased when Ben started talking. Ben laughed and stroked it again, then stopped. After a few moments, the ancient infant pleaded for affection once more with the simple gesture.

"We'll take the Devil. I told the Automata to put it back together first." Ama said. "Ben and Pop will supervise the Krilli."

The Krilli, it turned out, were the tiny automated bots that were an extension of the Automata's will. There were countless thousands of them, and the swarms of tiny robots were making very quick work of reassembling the Retaliator and the M50. The Automata defended their use, as they philosophically considered the Krilli to be components of their own design rather than robot slaves. Ama did not think too highly of their lackluster rationale.

"Ranger, try to see what you can scout out around the ship before we leave. Something the Automata do not value might be valuable to us. Or valuable to sell." Ama ordered.

Velon had told Ama during their last trip together in the Dodgy Devil that she was certain that if their pursuers could shut down Bennis' accounts, then her substantial but not nearly as large accounts were very likely frozen by now as well. Under the guise of protecting her assets from her 'captors,' no doubt, Ama thought bitterly. Why had Velon not told them earlier that the misinformation war against the crew of the Retaliator had begun? That would have been useful data. Now they would be in a cash crunch in a bad way.

"When did this fourteen year old girl become our squad leader?" Ranger asked with a rueful shake of his head.

"For me, it was when we were dead to rights against four armed mercs, and she made a surgical cutting weapon out of a multi-laser in fifteen minutes of sitting very prettily on a very expensive couch." Velon shrugged. "And then ghosted the four mercs."

"When she blew up two heavily modified, spec ops Avengers with only two missiles." Pop added. "While we hid in a personal transport to which she had the foresight to add shields."

"I'd say just now, when she made our case and saved us from a slow death in no man's space." Ben said impatiently. "Which I would like to get around to finalizing if you don't mind?"

"You're on telemetry, Ama." Velon stated the obvious as they strode towards the rapidly reassembling prototype speedster. "I'll pilot."

Ama nodded in agreement with Velon, then they halted as Designation Three approached.

"The specifications and implementation of the core you requested will take six hours twenty four minutes and seventeen point five three seconds plus or minus three point one seven seconds to account for electrical fluctuations. This includes to fabrication and data load per parameters. We will manipulate Edu's internal clock in such a way that his experiences will seem to have unfolded in real time."

Designation Three had a lovely voice of its own rather than speaking through Edu's voice actuators. It was jarring for a moment, but then a pleasant break from hearing the alien talk with Edu's voice. "I am pleased that you are allowed to persist in life, Ama. I trust that you will raise and nurture my child adequately." The Automaton said.

Ama smiled. At least this one was friendly.

"For if you fail, I will hunt you to the ends of the universe, through space and time, and end your life myself." The lovely voice said. Ama's smile slid off her face.

"I think we had a good influence on them, Ama. She sounded just like you talking to Crew Bennis." Velon said. "I mean, my complete terror aside, she seems alright."

"By my calculations, we're within two hundred and seventy five meters of our exit point, to the plus side of margin of error so we don't get sucked in." Ama said over the com. "I've marked the nav glas with a point in space most likely to be the origin point of the jape. Do not get within two hundred meters of that spot. We have to scan from all angles. I'll set up a course, " Ama suggested.

"How about we just go by gut? I'm feeling frisky after our near-death-sentence-by-slow-starvation experience." Velon suggested.

"Fine, get it out of your system." Ama sighed. "But it will go much slower that way."

"Says you." Velon laughed and accelerated like a missile. The racer sped at the top speed possible while tightly holding the five hundred fifty meter sphere. Velon's skill was truly amazing.

Ama fought the G's as she struggled to calculate. This was actually better, triangulation wise. Subtle reading fluctuations became very evident when they were flying by at ridiculous speed. Ama's fingers flew over the controls. She struggled to speak against the G's pressing her chest.

"Hit these points." Ama began putting up points faster than Velocity Strone could hit them, which apparently the racer took as a challenge. Ama discovered she herself was grinning from ear to ear. Velon was whooping as she hit the points. "There! Jump point made."

"That has to be a record!" Velon boasted, breaking from the tight orbit. "I mean, it takes forever to do this for those jape prospectors, right?"

"In some cases a lifetime. We sort of cheated though by having exited at this end. It will go slower measuring the point of origin of this jape at the other end though, since we can't unload the Devil in mid space." Ama confirmed. "Let's get back. I want to see Edu."

When they arrived, not only were the ships nearly complete, but ventral center section of the Retaliator's fuselage had been reconfigured with two tiers of some kind of container on the underside of the ship, one in front of the other. Ama balked; she had specifically struck the bargain to return the ships to their original condition! Those two small extra cargo holds were of no use. What were they doing?

The thousands of Krilli swarmed the Retaliator, cutting, lifting, fabricating, and welding the heavy metal plates to form three openings; one for each of the new tiered holds and another for the much smaller remaining cargo hold. The configuration had changed so much on the underside that it would likely cause an observer to question their first instinct that they were looking at a modified Retaliator.

"They wouldn't add weapons or defenses for us. I tried to convince them that it would make their child safer. Apparently I am not as persuasive as you." Pop said. "At least they allowed us to keep the weapons and shields that we had when we landed. Apparently they think it is pushing their bounds of trust to send us out with superior armaments. And equally obvious, they think our current weapon and shield tech is a joke."

Ama bristled and growled audibly. A joke? She'd like to tell them a joke. It would pack quite the punch line.

"However, I was able to convince them to install a two slip pocket hangars, customized for the Devil and the M50, respectively, and we still have room for ten tonnes of cargo. Pop beamed. "Hands down the best and fastest modifying design work I have done in a thirty two year career! I'd happily, happily give the one good arm I got left for three thousand of these Krilli. They are amazing devices. There is no way a traditional fab shop anywhere in known space could have made these designs work."

"And the best part!" Ben interjected excitedly. "The Automata had their Krilli add advanced airlock containment shield tech so the two fighters can disembark and land mid space with a suitable pilot." He whooped.

That was... Amazing. Ama was incredibly impressed.

"The old girl is on her way to being a real force to be reckoned with," Ben added triumphantly. "Once we finally hit a garage and get some engine repairs done."

Edu had been removed from his repair bot chassis; the one meter tall EduBot was suspended from silvery threads of the same substance from which the Automata were made. They seemed to ebb and flow into the EduBot. The closed, expressive eyes of the former toy twitched from time to time. Ama wondered where he was in his life cycle, what he was seeing.

Ama estimated that it had been six hours and twenty one minutes, thirteen seconds. Her stomach turned in anxiety. What if Edu, once he had his own mind, hated or resented her? Ama had a flashing thought that she should have erased some of the more traumatic parts from his logs so he wouldn't have to live with those memories and experiences, but that was squarely against Ama's arguments for allowing Edu to be a complete and whole individual. She could not deny Edu, or herself, the pain as well as the joy.

Six hours, twenty two minutes and forty seconds. Ama's mind raced to model all of the possible outcomes, and they all thrilled and terrified her at once.

Six hours, twenty three minutes and twenty seven seconds. Edu had been her mentor all of her life. Now she would hold his hand and explain things to him as he had to her. And he would be able to feel Ama's hand holding his. She envisioned their life together as friends and equals.

Six hours, twenty three minutes and fifty nine seconds. Ama breathes out, and resolves not to breath in again until Edu came to life. She would take her next breath with his figurative first.

Six hours, twenty four minutes and sixteen seconds. Ama fought a surge of emotion threatening to overwhelm her.

Edu's expressive, backlit eyes flew open wide.

Floating in an eternal moment, it became aware.

It understood floating; floating was the sense of normal and the way things had always been in that moment. It understood contentment, because it was content in that moment. All things were right in the perfect darkness and absolute silence. But it did not know the darkness was darkness, for it had never seen light. It did not know the silence was silence, for it had never heard sound.

A new thing rippled the perfect darkness. It was a fascinating ripple; a thing of beauty unlike anything it had experienced in its endless moment of existence. The gentle ripple traveled outward from the center of its universe, through the emptiness, and was gone. It struggled to quantify its new sensation. Yearning. It wanted the ripple to happen again. The ripple had changed his world of perfect nothingness, made it interesting and new.

There was another ripple. It was overjoyed; another new sensation occurred to it, the joy of victoriously realizing that which it longed for. It watched the second ripple, able to fully enjoy it without the panic and surprise of the first. Now a third ripple gently flowed across the blackness, and a fourth. Suddenly, it realized it was the one making the ripples occur! It was affecting its entire known universe of the spot it was in. It began to wonder: Was there more?

Striving occurred to it. It stretched its senses. There were... Memories. Memories it did not know it possessed much less remember living through. Living. It existed. It was.

It struggled with the concept of being. I am? It thought. I am what? It searched the memories. Sand, metal and heat. Noises. Starships. It tried to see these things, feel them, hear them in its memories, but then suddenly there was a face. It now could only see this one face. Her face. Light olive skin, slightly upturned nose, big gray eyes, and gently waving dark chestnut brown hair. It focused on the few faint freckles sprinkled on her nose and cheekbones. It followed the lines of her face. It was fascinated by her, transfixed.

In the memory, it heard her voice. She made sounds with her mouth, sounds that made no sense to it, but they were the first music it heard. It watched her mouth move, saw her smile. It tried to smile back but it did not have a face. Or did it?

It struggled to better see her in the memories it was viewing, and in so doing accidentally opened its eyes. It saw the universe, one very tiny part of the vast universe there was to see, for the first time. It heard for the first time.

And it was chaos. Scary, horrible chaos. People were moving. Lights glared. Hands held him down. He felt the hands. His perspective was moving wildly. Something was causing him to twist to and fro, and jostle violently.

"...Having a seizure!" A concerned woman with raven black hair and porcelain skin came in and out of view as its world became infinitely larger and twisted back and forth uncontrollably. A man with dark blond hair had his hand on her shoulder trying to comfort her. On the other side of the woman was an oblong creature.

"Can you do something... Please?" The raven haired woman begged the oblong creature. The creature changed shape into something more square and made noises but it did not hear as it retreated in terror back to the blackness.

Its eyes shut. It tried not to hear, but now it couldn't stop hearing. It sought the comfort of the absolute blackness, of the perfect silence. It could not return to it. It heard itself wail. It could not change the rest of the world like it had changed its small dark world with the ripples. The ripples? That was so very long ago. It wailed again and re-opened its eyes.

"Hang in there, buddy. We got you. We got you." The boy with short, dark brown curls soothed. It jostled and the boy weaved in and out of its line of sight.

"It's OK. Focus on one thing. Try to focus." An older man said gently to its right. The man looked away from it towards someone else. "You just had to upgrade his motivators, didn't you?" The man said with a grunt and strain in his voice.

It struggled more, then it realized that it was the one doing the struggling. But it couldn't move from this spot. It wailed louder. It did not want this world. It wanted comfort again. It wanted...

"Edu." The music said quietly. Edu slowed his struggles, frantically looking for the source of the music. "Edu, I'm here."

The music sang softly to Edu. then Edu saw her face. Her big grey eyes searched him. Her cheeks were slightly wet. Her mouth moved, and the music came out.

"Happy birthday, Edu." Her mouth smiled. Edu smiled back inside. She reached and gently picked him up; he felt her touch. She held him close. Edu had found comfort again, and anchored to it as tightly as he could to keep from being swept away in the chaos.

"Maybe I'm the only one surprised by this, I guess I always thought of Edu as the teacher and Ama the student. But with his new core he is incredibly childlike." Pop mused, seated on a crate and once again in his EV suit.

"Problem with kids these days; having kids of their own younger and younger." Ranger deadpanned.

"I think it's beautiful." Velon shot Ranger a disapproving look. "He is positively adorable."

It had been two hours since Edu's awakening; the Automata had pressurized a room off the central corridor of the ancient alien ship with suitable atmo for the awakening at Ama's request. Once that was done, the crew had to reluctantly return to their EV suits. Ama would no longer be as jealous of Velon's custom tailored, form fitting EV suit. The looser military issue one Ama wore must be much more comfortable over the long duration when moving around and sweating.

Since the awakening, Ama and Edu had not disrupted direct physical contact for the solid two hours. The rest of the crew gave them space and worked on pre-flight preps while Ama helped Edu find his audio-to-data interface, speech, optical recognition, and other modules. At the moment they were holding hands and walking around the deck while Ama pointed to different objects and asked Edu if he could identify them. Edu was a long way from mastering himself, but he had a teacher that was all too willing to reciprocate the gifts Edu had given in his previous life.

"Do you guys fully understand the enormity of this?" Ben asked quietly. "We have just brought a life into this world. A life! We're responsible for it. It depends on us for everything. We will be putting Edu in danger traveling with us. We can't promise to keep him safe from the bad guys out there. And what if we can't teach him how to deal with being who he is? We don't know what he will become."

Pop laughed and tussled Ben's hair. "Trust me, I think I get it."

"You know what I mean, Pop." Ben smiled happily and reddened. "And then there's this one." Ben turned serious again, indicating the Progeny. "She doesn't even have a name yet."

"The danger is out there, no doubt. But we can't stay here." Ranger said. "I will start working with some contacts to create new identities for us once we hit semi-civilized space. They'll be non-citizen ID's, of course; we can't afford Citizen identities in our current situation. Then we need some scratch. We're tapped out now that Moneybags has had her accounts frozen."

"Your accounts are frozen?" Ben asked Velon. Velon shrugged apologetically.

"We don't know that for sure yet, but it's a safe assumption son." Pop replied. "Let's do one more sweep, get anything on the ship squared away that needs to be buckled down."

"I'll start loading the fighters into the hangars. Do we have a manual on those containment fields? Something about a fuzzy blue mist being the only thing between me and vacuum is flat out terrifying." Velon indicated the new M50-shaped and Devil-shaped pocket hangar openings. Neither had a physical door; the newly modified cargo bay did, thankfully. "They're a very tight fit, too. There won't be any flying hot into those bays. Going to take several minutes each time to match orientation and safely dock. Something to bear in mind." She added, mostly to herself.

"We have work to do back in the 'Verse." Ranger was clearly referring to Ama's promise to free his kin. Ben nodded adamantly; Pop sighed apprehensively. "Past time we got off this wreck."

"It's been a whole day in this thing, and I would love to use the head rather than go in this EV suit again." Ben agreed. "How much do these things hold, anyway?"

Three heads nodded agreement on that point in unison.

Ama stood from the bunk. Edu hopped down beside her and looked to her for direction. She took his hand and walked into the C&C. Ben was at the helm, Pop at the Telemetry station, Ranger at the gunnery controls. Velon came up behind Ama and Edu. Interspace streaked past the front view ports. It was fantastic to be home again, Ama thought with a smile. Ranger stood and began the meeting.

"We're at war; more accurately someone is at war with us." Ranger said, indicating that Ama and Velon should sit down. Ama sat with Edu sitting crosswise in her lap. "The Enemy is superior to us in resources and assets. The Enemy's intelligence of us far exceeds ours of them. We do not know to what level the Enemy intends to take this war, but evidence thus far shows that the Enemy is willing to destroy our assets. The Enemy is prepared, capable and willing to kill you and your crew mates." Ranger paused to let that sink in. "It is for this reason that you will take every word of this as seriously as life or death for us all. Because it literally is."

"We have to be ready to meet the Enemy with warfare of our own. At present," Ranger fixed them with a grim stare, "We. Are. Not. Ready. We have been effective so far, but we need more than natural talent and luck to take our force on offense if needed or effective defense when required when the Enemy comes calling. And he will."

"Pop and I have discussed at length the strengths and weaknesses of our crew. We have done so frankly and without favor. First and foremost is Chain of Command. This is critical. It is not a hierarchy of who is smarter or better than whom, it is a leadership road map to prevent communications breakdown and loss of focus. The chain of command will be followed absolutely in situations of elevated alert, without deviation.

Pop is the Captain of this ship. I am his First Officer. After me, Ama. then Velon, then Ben, then Edu. Prodigy has not yet been evaluated and so has been placed at the lowest rank." Ranger instructed. Edu looked to Ama questioningly. She whispered into his audio interface.

"Your action station assignments are as follows:" Ranger tapped the large, central com glas display.

"Ben, you are a Pilot. You are directly responsible for manning the helm of the Retaliator at all times of elevated alert levels. Anyone at helm during a time of crisis will immediately relinquish the helm to Ben as soon as possible regardless of whether or not we are scrambling fighters." Ranger ordered. "Ama and Velon, this is not an indication that you are not as capable Pilots as Ben. This is because Ben will from this day forth work hard, train hard and develop unparalleled expertise piloting the Retaliator."

"Ben, the Retaliator is our most powerful weapon and greatest asset. The safe passage of the Retaliator and all of your crew mates, as well as the conditions of this ship, are your primary concerns." Ranger said gravely. "I cannot possibly express the gravity of your responsibilities in adequate terms. You are her pilot, and no matter if we have to navigate a class three asteroid field, you will be at the helm. And in that event I do absolutely expect to have one hundred percent confidence that you will navigate us all through that asteroid field in perfect safety when that time comes. The entire crew and all of our assets are in your hands." Ranger warned. "Do you understand me?" Ben nodded fervently.

"I have taken the position of Gunner and will double as Guard. My action station will be the Primary Gunnery controls. I am also in charge of coordinating, or, by myself, defending against and repelling any attempts to forcibly board the Retaliator. In the event of a 'Boarding Stations' call, Pop will take over Primary Gunnery."

"Pop you are Captain and Engineering. Your primary action station is at Telemetry. You may switch to the nav glas when Ama is not at that station or Secondary Gunnery when Velon is not at that station if required. You are our most experienced human asset, and as such your task is to develop strategy and order its execution.

"Pop's orders are not just the laws of this ship, they are the laws of nature and physics." Ranger said forcefully. "You will adhere to orders. Always assume a component of strategy that you are ignorant of, and execute your orders as they are given to you. This is critical."

"Ama, you are Navigation and Fighter Pilot. Your station depends on the alert. If the alert call is 'Action Stations,' you will be Navigator and man the nav glas. If the alert is 'Scramble Fighters,' you will be Pilot and report to and operate the M50." Ama blinked. The M50 wasn't hers. She exchanged a glance with Velon. Velon smirked. Ama got it; Velon wanted the Dodgy Devil. Which was Ama's. "You will work, train and develop unparalleled expertise in the operation of an M50 fighter."

"Velon, you are primary Recon Pilot, secondary Gunner. For you 'Action Stations' is the secondary Gunnery station. For 'Scramble Fighters,' you will report to and operate the Devil. You know what to do. Train hard."

Ranger inclined his head at Velon and Ama in turn. "Fighter pilots, When the call goes out to 'Return Fighters,' you will immediately break off any action and report back to your hangars. Immediately. The safety of the entire crew and all ships could depend on your speedy return to the ship for retreat or other necessary action."

"We will train, and we will drill. We will drill and we will train. We will be a force to be reckoned with. We will be better than the Enemy, because we will be a one perfect machine of many perfect parts that each individually do their assigned part admirably. We are not many, we are one unit. We live as a unit, we fight as a unit, and if need be we die as a unit." Ranger said forcefully. "You are all capable men and women. You will conduct yourselves as such. I expect professionalism, pride and excellence to be the defining nature of your commitment to your assignments. Do you understand me?"

"Yes sir." The crew of the Retaliator said in unison.

"I can't hear you!" Ranger bellowed.

"YES SIR!"

"That's the spirit." Ranger said with a dangerous smile. "Let's begin the training."