

Selling various scrap paid well. Selling deftly salvaged chips, modules and modified components profited at a nice margin: with respect to where the item was in last. Military's paid top tier credits when it came to rival technologies. Clients would give a general direction—vague coordinates to where the site is. The actual zones' required a lot of effort to find, and having a good spot to start extracting was an absolute must. Since space is large and the items to obtain can sometimes be less than the size of a person. Obtaining the items had many methods, though, a true and tried method of Quinns' was a simple process. A touch of carefully put in thought, and the item would either be extracted via drone or they'd use a compact engineer's vessel to get towards it—doing so would require setting the temps to near freezing. No thermal source would be vented. That way—no heat signatures would come off either and it was undetectable to both radar and unviewable from windows. It was like trying to spot an ant from atop an orbital elevator. Nearly impossible.

Using the compact engineer's vessel wasn't a known method to most—getting the temperature precise and not having the user become shaved ice was a difficult thing. It required measured testing, a lack of heat signatures and a properly tested emergency venting solution that would allow any thermal signatures to register as noise. The vessel itself was too expensive for normal scavengers and bounty hunters alike. It was a creative solution that they planned all the way back during their time in a higher education schooling program—and when their scholarship source: Lennthirps' Corporation went defunct. Quinn had chosen that specific vessel from them as a cash alternative due to their need to liquidate and get obligations out the way. They sold some of the internals that they knew they could create themselves and install; then actually used the programs' makerspace—created the internals, and then installed what was sold away. Just alternative open-source modules. It was something that helped put Quinn above the rest. The sold internals went towards finishing paying off their tuition in a lump sum while still enrolled.

It was that idea that got them into Runil's crosshairs. Runil was who they went to for contract requests; the old guy had some interesting offers from time to time. The most common ranged from material requests, component requests—and these were usually because some people didn't want to switch new ships entirely for one thing or the market standard was extremely higher than average, then there were the not-so-normal requests which usually involved guilds, militaries or governments. They didn't come too often—but they were a choosable offer, it was usually lucrative, and a type of vetting system was in place. It isn't good for business if the module was stolen by the contractee and sold in the underground market for better returns. If illegal software with a rampant virus was traced back to Runil it would damage some contracts for quite some time.

The usual meeting spot couldn't truly be called a club; it was more of a relic of a bygone era. Though Runil always loved meeting people there. Quinn could have sworn it was that-- which had kept the places lights on. Any more ancient and it would have had computer systems that no longer work. Anytime something fucked up: Runil paid an exorbitant amount of money converting parts.

People like him were what made some of the older ships and derelict hubs on planets worth searching through. Most people just let the sands-- or the flora overtake those places. The parts? Quinn knew if they had found a replacement in good shape it would count as a type of credit towards nearly anything.

It could either pad the next contracts pay well or a model, tool, any resource really— put straight to Runil's tab without any question. It was secrets like those that also kept specific Hunters like Quinn in business.

Quinn usually complained about favoritism in giving the more private clients requests to them—to which Runil replied, "You've made the bar a bit too high for these particular requests. You were specifically sought to be the receiver." That's fair, but it meant less time for some of the easier requests that weren't too high stakes. Some of the offers were on a time limit too; so, ship expenses, repairs and such needed to be triaged. That was fuel, water, food, medical drugs (expired ones were replaced for a fraction of the cost), normal ship diagnostics and waste disposal. Enjoying some of what the station had to offer in entertainment and leisure was usually rushed. Just to be sent out into the infinite expanse in record time.

Once everything was set together: the destination courses' coordinates were entered into the computer module's system and then it was smooth sailing provided that they didn't get accosted by pirates. Sector patrols were usually extremely quick to deal with any would-be pirates; so that meant it was nothing but leisure, checking the auto-navigating system and course correcting until the destination was reached. Residual blasts from long past and current space battles echoed in the stars until a part of it had met a stoppable force. While Quinn didn't have an amazing cryo-stasis component, there was a more optimal different module that would make for the passage of time to these points a bit less of a monotonous venture. That was entertainment and skill-refining.

Quinn Gambit primarily made their living going into old battle sectors and salvaging as much as they could; the easier stuff could be done, but there was something to be said about the rush; even if there wasn't any mortal danger. There were thirty-five days to the cycle in the calendar system that was used by many, including them. Some sects didn't go by it-- but that meant missing out on deadlines and common-shared time-schedules for businesses. The first five days would be setting up shop, and the next two weeks was using the plasma cutter and their re-configured mining rig to navigate through places and collect what all they wanted— as well as needed to collect for contract fulfillment.

The rig itself wasn't too bulky despite the different hardware components that were either built-in by factory or spliced into it via modification. All mining rigs had a type of tag that acted as a beacon for the vessel and for drones to be able to pinpoint where the user's relative location was in space and go to them. The most common module was an alchemists' vision which was software that allowed for scanning and to read what element an object was or what alloy it was with the specific concentration that it was made of—and how pure it was to that alloy type. This distinction allows for accurate prices to be displayed when it's sold at current market prices. Underneath the rig, was a simple undersuit that allowed for radiation protection and very temporary protection against any exposed part that met with the vacuum of space. There was a slightly newer model that had temperature regulation and biomonitoring so they could keep an eye on their vitals for immediate concerns.

For zero gravity, the suit had specific slots that allowed for it to be tethered and a very robust safety lock and cable system that—realistically they could sleep in the void and wake up perfectly fine while hugging and being clipped onto a rock. Which was an experience that the school they went to had offered at some point; it was an honorary thing to go through as someone who learned how to pilot also. Though that very thought of doing so was— it had not been desired. At least two drones of a relatively small size

could attach themselves to the rig without issue—the drones had thrusting so they doubled as quick stabilizers and ways of turning or stopping. The worst thing to do inside of a rig was to constantly increase the speed since there was a chance that absolutely nothing would stop the speed except for a quick exhaust to simulate braking. The amount of Gs a person can experience in the rig was... concerning.

Their job was something simple: place spikes, find dog tags and the black-box— transport them back. They were going to also secure any notable or worthy salvage while inside of the cargo bay. Quinn used drones to place nav spikes and would dock them back inside of the drone bay. They kept themselves tethered on the lines and fished their way to the desired debris. The spikes placed had a dense carbon fiber line that connected to each other like spider-webs. The lines could be used by drones or Quinn, they would find whatever salvage seemed right and what they had been contracted to find and then once the most important part was done. Securing the salvage inside of the cargo bay meant cutting some down into a box, just trimming off any sharp edges and the filings could be saved and melted down later.

Old military sites meant damn good salvage usually; if it was not always picked clean or specific militias hadn't already sifted through it yet. This meant Quinn needed to be a bit smart about the pickings. Their contact, Runil, told them of hidden skirmish zones and forgotten distress signals. Quinn was a finder: the best part of the military ships was getting salvageable hardware and specific metal alloys that can be used to weld a patch on the ship or be sold to the underground economy. The hardware salvage was usually brought— the more esoteric the system the higher the price— companies and all sorts of people would do their best to crack the software and resell it as an underground-economy commodity. There were some people that were so damn good and repairing the hardware they would be able to nearly resell it for new. A hard part was defining what was good salvage? The simple answer was that all of it was— a simple flayed or scorched wire could be used to solder and replace one that is close to failing but it didn't pay well at all. The prices were also fluctuating but there were always some specific things that were the same no matter what. As in—all structures that needed to protect souls against the void of space needed a specific alloy type— hulls and cables that would immediately freeze if exposed.

In those particularly tough to navigate areas of note— Quinn would use a specialized drone to navigate through it. If it was too tight of a squeeze or more of a general health issue to navigation such as the radiation of a ship's exposed core. A fighter used a more basic engine system while something close to a freighter used radioactive drive cores. Needed to warp in and out of a location and eloquently use a small percentage of the thrusting fuel. A fighter? Constantly refueled and very few had emergency warp capabilities.

Quinn wondered who was stupid enough to have a dogfight inside of an asteroid field. Their contact was giving them extra pay for found tags on both sides: anything else was fair game but they were going to give the contact a good thirty percent of the other earning. A bonus for good business. All of it meant just more. The window of frame for passage was constantly changing as rocks collided with one another and sometimes nearly bypassed each other—trading scuff. On the way out, they would have to manually navigate it and allow the ships 'auto' piloting sensors to gain control if something got a bit too close.

They switched their seating to the drone control station and began to start the first drone. There was a stick to manually pilot but that was an if needed solution— there was enough control that Quinn could

use from the seat with a keyboard. The drones were usually simple enough to pilot and due to some standardization, they could recognize places to access. There were diverse kinds; the most effective ones for Quinn were the arachnid-by-design drones but the simplest ones to use was a simple disc form. There was an interesting variety to choose from; as the arachnid drones could spike into surfaces but their hydraulic and pressure sensitivity had to be manually set. Otherwise, it could step too hard and need even greater force to pull out. That gave a moderate possibility of damaging the drone and jettisoning itself into space. It had happened once—with an older model—rest in peace: Sir Seeksores.

The selected drone was then piloted out of the airlock and docked outside of the selected vessel's bay doors of the ship. The process would allow for remote access into the ship's systems—while the drone that Quinn selected had been one of the more basic ones it had upgrades that allowed it to remotely interface into almost any system barring very custom ones and ones that needed access keys. A mod that was against the law for most—and they weren't above the law—they just didn't use it on any active, public space. Had anything happened to that, there would also be backups ready. Quinn liked to call their maintenance and recharging hub the Swarm Centre.

A flashing color let Quinn know that the interfacing had succeeded and then switched to a different drone to scout the ship. An Arachbydies drone was selected and was successfully moved into the inside of the ship by usage of a command on the first drone. The mission was simply to find all the dog tags they could: which would be slightly difficult but nothing that Quinn could not handle and then scour for the blackbox for recovery.

Quinn took note of everything going on in the derelict ship—there were multiple hull breaches, the center core was evidently leaking radiation, but it was not strong enough to interfere with the subtle dog tags' detection frequency. Quinn's gloved hand went inside of a box-like object to manually control the drone, their fingertips would interpret as which direction the Arachbydies should move and would allow the dexterity to finesse the dog tags.

The task given was a sizable amount to find—scattered across six ships and a few structures built on the asteroids. Quinn inhaled deeply and sighed. They split the task: one drone on an automatic search for tags and the other they would use to manually look for resources. Quinn had queried for fuel, drones, intact hardware or semi-intact though not fully destroyed. It was a monotonous muscle memory, one dedicated to navigating the Arachbydies and another was typing into the console.

There were enough buttons and a configurable hard-light input device attachment installed, that Quinn made it work with great efficiency. The mini fleet of drones had always hastened the process when they could use it—they didn't always because charging them required using some of the ship's energy. The areas with too great of a deal of radiation to enter had been logged; other resources such as Palladium and Platinum, were marked for extraction.



Every decent asteroid facility that existed long-term had a series of interconnected tunnels. Some large enough for people to go inside but not too many, and others only small enough for a very basic drone to

be able to go through without turning around. Though those—were more for data transmitting than anything else and those specific tunnels didn't have any structural support. So, there was no use searching in the small drone-ways...

Quinn checked the standard drone service tunnels for any humming noises or other sounds that would indicate that it's still in use. Drone schedules could run for a while without any sort of program modifications and they'd rather not collide their drone with another. It was also sufficiently large enough to crawl inside and use it as a sort of quick travel to another place. Its insides were lined with metal support beams—like an old mining shaft with some cables flowing through it and the faintest lighting.

The video feed coming from the drone showed nothing of concern. Just pitch blackness and the occasional docking area. A good amount of the visible drones were unharmed as well. It was just a quick check to see if there were any poor souls who may have died trapped inside the tunnels. Searching it didn't take too long—the center was reached and the charged ping was allowed to relay throughout the tunnels. Quinn watched as the radius on some other—more sensitive instruments on the ship gave back data as it traversed until it dispensed out of other entry points. The only things of note on the imaging were drones at rest and then—a sudden odd anomaly. It went away just as fast.

Odd.

A few presses and soon the drone was set to autopilot and en route back. Quinn got geared up and paused momentarily. They had the sneaking suspicion that there was something more to the station but whatever more was above their pay grade and not in their interests. They stepped out onto floating rock and started the more intimate part of the scavenging mission. Not everything could be done from inside of a vessel.

The device that Quinn needed to get dropped in a puddle of sorts. The first thought that popped in their mind was it was either oil, tar or some synthetic substance. The Alchemists Vision couldn't figure out what it was in the slightest—not even a trace composite was founded. They needed the object though—they reached down to grab it. A long exhale as they did.

The substance was thick and seemed to mold around their gloved fingers. They saw blood drip before a sharp pain registered in their mind. It latched onto their skin with what was now hooked sharp ends—a searing pain grew into a sharp one as they quickly retracted their hand. Small circles of blood pooled in five rather straight spots with enough to form a line. Stopping at the base side of their pinky finger.

As Quinns heartbeat had increased; it pounded inside their chest as they held their hand in the other to inspect it. The object long forgotten—yet had been quickly attached to a hook on their chest. They made their way back to their vessel with an increased speed. Never noticing a blackened mass that formed from the black substance. White bone first and then flesh forming second.

What followed afterward was an alarming appetite of cold cadavers. Seeds floating up from the blood like the very stars that surrounded everything.

[REDACTED]

An unknown contagion had slipped into Quinn's bloodstream. That much was true. At least that is what the medical scanner said – their fever flared up and their body switched between experiencing chills and getting heat flashes. They had already nodded off inside of the med-waste model, a ship module that allowed it to be used as a restroom or medical bay with the press of a button. Quinn's teeth chattered for a good while like one of those novelty wind-up toys.

A fog of confusion had clouded their brain as they awoke—or at least they felt like it— looking down at their shirt in slight confusion. They stared at it. Wondering if they were truly losing their mind? A silent dance of thoughts presented itself: how much time had passed, could they even comprehend? They got up and slogged their way over to the ship's controls and checked the oxygen levels. Everything was all clear. Neither was there a carbon monoxide leak that was shown, if there was, the alarm would have sounded as soon as it had been detected. An outline of the damaged part would have been highlighted, showing where the leak is occurring.

Despite all reasoning suggesting otherwise, Quinn still held up their breathing apparatus to their lips and inhaled deeply. Oxygen rich blood pumped through the system alleviating their discomfort momentarily until they switched it off. Oxygen was still a precious resource to use in excess even as the ship systems converted the breathed-out carbon dioxide they breathed.

It would be dangerous, but they still had more work to do. A quick medical booster was lined up against their skin: the injection spot chosen was one where it would be most effective and Quinn clicked the button, three small needles pierced their skin to inject the solution directly into their body. Helping it acclimatize to whatever it was. They used another cosmos-walk suit since the last had a micro-penetration. It was still being re-woven, but it'd take too long to wait it out. It was a precise ordeal that couldn't be rushed. The spare fit just as well as what they had on.

Among the debris was a hidden military depot—already obliterated in a few wars. Aside from what was beginning to be a nightmare with their health; this was going to be a good haul. The Finders Fee percentage that was added to the contract alone was going to guarantee future work—as if Runil didn't already have something lined up as soon as they were going to dock into the station when they get back from this job.

Quinn might not have had any crew members aboard the ship—at least anyone who was living in the flesh. Their crew was effectively drones; they were satisfactory enough in picking up the monitoring and extra hands that having other humans aboard would have—even if it had caused their social skills to decay overtime. They had to remember to think aloud—else their voice would become gravelly. At least the Common Riggers Sign Language that they knew was still up to par since the bots were designed to also be able to receive input based on signing using the CRSL.

A pin-prick piercing skin was the last thing to do before Quinn made sure that their suits' seal was airtight against their skin. An underlayer of protection that would need to be upgraded—which was more a matter of available synthetic material. But at least their magnekicks were working just fine. They fumbled slightly and held themselves against the chair until the medicine kicked in.

All debris had a story to tell. Seeing it was so different from piloting the drones—and where a hefty part of the work began. The structure itself was housed in-between asteroids—metal keeping everything from floating apart but not crashing against each other like energized chemical bonds. The first set of the harder-to-retrieve tags were in a wreckage, the energy that had likely collided against it was so staggeringly hot that it partially fused with rock, and the area around the rock had been turned into glass. The body was nearly untouched and stuck both due to the magnekicks and bone was fused due to the heat. The poor sod wouldn't have been able to escape the situation and get to safety even if they wanted to.

Quinn pulled out the plasma torch and began cutting through the canopy. Two hands firm on it and cut as precise as possible. In their bag, they pulled out a chip and pressed it against the inside. Marking a soldier who met an unfortunate end before retrieving the dog tags from within. It'd be a transport that had gotten fired upon. After tagging the site, they went towards the next nearest signature. The second site was a little further in, the easier tags had already been retrieved by the drones. Those so powerful the magnetic boots were still left standing against the metal floor and separated. Quinn grabbed a security cord from a body that'd been identified as an officer and ventured further into the complex. There was no need to use drones yet and some of them were currently recharging. Any system that could possibly come online had a chance of overloading and attacking a bot connection on start-up.

'Why do you persist Quinn' They heard a voice, their voice whispered—rattled on their vocal cords. They really hadn't talked much during it all—there was no point. Quinn's voice scratched their mind as they wondered.

Quinn took in a deep breath of air. They checked their vitals to find it all to be good. A slight fever still wracked them but still good. The maintenance and security sector were easy to find, but always well defended. In this case, it still had a little power routing to it, but the door was malfunctioning. Quinn retrieved a piece of telescoping metal that would cause the door to stay pried open and deftly installed it.

The console was glitching and that had to be promptly dealt with—no open in fixing the terminal. Quinn used the access code from the card they retrieved early to get a more exact picture of what happened until now. They didn't care too much about the details, just what dangers may lie ahead. The installation's black box was no doubt recording. They were able to confirm that but they needed a more complete map which included sealed off or irradiated areas. The map displayed areas with and without power, which had oxygen and was simply not safe to go in. The screen flickers occasionally, and the operating system was a bit more different than what Quinn was used to—but they all held common features. It appeared to be a closed system so—even if beacons were logged, it had nowhere to send too, unless there was a nearby allied ships' transmission buoy to ping off of and relay out into an open system.

Quinn selected a type of virus to attack the other system; a rather strong one that had been given to them via the client. The virus was able to enlarge the amount of control and give their device a great deal more control. Specific data was isolated into Quinn's wrist display—a circular interface filling as the information was downloaded and sequestered away. A couple drone models would be navigated with the wrist device but not as well as the peripheral. Quinn navigated the drone to reroute the power from the security console towards the life support systems. Some modules had barely been functional but

also some critical ones had been decently okay—okay enough to make a quick temporary fix of it with their tools.

Quinn wondered about that black goop that a drone got stuck in on the outside. It was in the total vacuum of space and either should have frozen over or become a bubble. Some things haven't been making sense. In this place since before they'd gotten a suit rupture. They blinked their eyes wondering about how they'd completely forgotten about that and lost a drone. They used their pointer finger to swipe against the screen to switch the display on the wrist device to check their vitals, again but briefly. No Co2 build up was detected. Quinn found that to be adequate—but still it didn't explain this odd feeling they'd also been getting.

The other task. They weren't too sure if they were up for completing the task. Retrieving the station's black box was the main one. What they were hired to do. The dog tags were important to logging the deaths accurately and making sure the MIA report was to be updated retroactively. That station record—black box had important data. There was a body clutching a holo-tablet in their hands. Quinn connected their device, not bothering to move the guys hands. The insertion port was still available for use: the male port was extended and clicked as it connected to the female port of the device—and hers would make sure to keep the tablet juiced to not turn off while reading it.

THE RIVAL GROUP COCHLITE HAS BREACHED THE PERIMETER. NO ACTION HAS BEEN SLIGHTED AGAINST US. WE BELIEVE THEM TO BE MORE SHIPS—INVISIBLE TO OUR MONITORS SINCE THEY ARE MOVING IN A SPECIFIC FORMATION. PROCEED WITH CAUTION SOMETHING IS OFF, GREATLY. THEY SHOULDN'T EVEN KNOW THIS LOCATION. I'VE BEEN RECALLED TO THE RESUPPLY TEAM FOR DEFENSE. THE COMM BUOY ISN'T—

That was all that was written—the guy must have died as they were typing the report, the tablet's personal ID commented this guy was an officer—wait, they briefly met this guy—very briefly. While they were in the same cohort, the amount of people connected to one was so large that it was nigh impossible to get to know the entirety of a graduating class even with the associated network forum. It had been ironic really, they'd briefly met during one of those asteroid camp-ins'. Both of them had been one of the few people in the small group brave enough to dig-in inside of a created hole and spend a night inside. He joked about the microscopic rock-mites sleeping alongside him.

The old classmate got blasted before he could even go and warn his crew of the impending threat. Now Quinn was curious. Curiosity and an unknown affliction didn't mesh well for them. It wasn't their purpose to figure anything out. What could have happened could have been anything but there wasn't any actual boarding done nor any scratches along the floors that indicated heavy storage units' had been stolen.

Their mind got lost in thought as they looked more. The expanse of space was often lonely and devoid of contact in specific professions. Before this Quinn had just finished at a highly prestigious and respected college—full scholarship and great pilot scores. The company sponsoring them went under which allowed them to have no obligations for completing. They wondered what their life would have been like as a pilot for a strike force? Maybe they would have been here—dead. Anything now beats just working menial station jobs and their TGAT (Trans-Galactic Aptitude Test) scores allowed for nearly—well most jobs to be available to them.

Quinn went and grabbed some metal squares from some of the maintenance areas, holding them in their arms. There were integrity breaches that specifically needed to be patched for access to areas to be available. Else the atmosphere would be sucked into space as soon as the door opened. The patches were created with haste: the welded hull that they'd patched had definitely kept up.

The atmosphere was stabilizing across a few sectors in the ship, and most importantly—the medical facilities were available. They enabled a hard-lock on the door— Quinn felt lucky that it was barely destroyed. Just some slight micro-breaches. Larger breaches would have made some areas far more dangerous—and needed to be navigated like an intensive game of rock climbing. After the breaches were sealed they exited their retro-fitted mining rig and proceeded with letting the automated medical patch them up— and fix their undersuit.

The medical stations' automated procedures had quickly started patching them up. Quite a large amount of resources inside of the medical facility were still damn good— and near top shelf grade: medicine, tools and spacer stims. A good assortment of goods to either keep for later or sell to the right people; usually they'd donate a good bit to low-cost shelters. It all depended on how everything went and how much resources would have to be replenished.

Everything felt better to them now. The chills had left and so did the unending pain that was breaking through with each step. The relief of feeling—not noticeable until it was going away. Cryo-stasis wasn't a thing in their vessel because it didn't have the resources to accommodate for that. They'd read whenever autonomous control was enabled in the vessel or listened to audio documentaries, holo-plays and listened to familiar and strange distant signals traversing the void.

Their thoughts returned to the situation at hand. Now, there was no doubt or medically induced hallucination. It was the creature: a growing fear from, now, fabled night-stories and drugged pilots. It was grotesque in a beautiful sort of way. The cosmic ghoul. It didn't notice them as it was too busy feasting on cadavers and through ribcages of dead men. Its jaws would unhinge as it ate to devour bigger pieces. A projectile wouldn't do anything to protect them against harm from it. And if it was a hallucination. They started to try to pay no mind to it.

Quinn pulled up the display on their wrist to control a drone—and most importantly record the ghoul. Evidence was good and when its gaze looked toward the camera: the display gained artifacting. It didn't notice the drone approaching and Quinn selected a very tiny tracking device. Only good for immediate tracking within a good number of meters. it moved—possibly looking for more. It phased through walls and even went outside into the vacuum of space to eat. Its rib cage opened and pulled the floating deceased in and crumpled it—eating it like a cephalon eating an aquatic animal alive—and whole. It was

unending. It just ate, ate... and ate. Quinn saw it with their own two eyes—if the drone captured it—the waveform would also detect sound. Obviously from eating but not— there was something else. The tears which came through had its own interference. Quinn had to check different frequencies. Aside from the drone it could be tracked by vibration and sound; Quinn activated the augmented lenses and watched for the ping coming back.

Quinn felt sick at the thought of having to listen to flesh tearing—yet they did. Bone snapping, ripping and scrapping bits of flesh off—then the bone and its marrows were grinded down and swallowed. Quinn surmised that they likely had until the last body was devoured until it came after them. Which was an unpleasant thought and the source of constant dread. It didn't mind the drone—it's heat signature but when Quinn's body hadn't gotten a little too clam and cool – it grabbed their leg making them trip. They yelled and their hearts raced. It let go and left as their monitor warned them of their irregular heartbeat.

It had to be confirmed: there wasn't a single person alive in the station except for them, it and Quinn. If it was *even* alive, there were a few creatures that could survive the poor vacuum of space, and even extremely low gas filled atmospheres. It was just—it and Quinn. The danger was now no longer a medical concern but a physical threat. It seemed to always be nearer to them. As if keeping Quinn close by until it was their turn to be eaten.

“Never should have left the damn—” There was a soft tremor and then alarms blared. Asteroid Contact. Damaged Sustained—a synthetic voice alerted.

Asteroid Contact. Damaged Sustained. The alarm had repeated itself for the 'nth time. Then it stopped. It'd been fifteen minutes—with some alarming shakes. It would have been shut off sooner, likely had repairs been detected or if someone were still alive and near that control system to stop it. At most alarms only rung for several minutes uninterrupted before it stopped and was logged into the system. Quinn's pace had quickened, and their irritability had grown since the first two minutes of the alarm. They've gotten nearly all of the dog tags. The only ones left were in the rooms with the station's heart and likely its adjacent rooms. The drones had already gotten what was needed. Quinn left only a few support drones up. And if only for their sanity they decided to see which part of the place got scrapped by an asteroid and route power away from that sector. That access panel would likely be in the main control bloc.

Following the guiding lines to the main control room was going to be one of the easiest things that Quinn had sought out to do this entire time. Most groups had their own methods and ways of navigating their ships. If anything was the same—it would make a raiding or boarding party have an easier time making it to the more important parts.

Some groups used full colors and others patterned markings along the line that leads to different areas. Common types showed that Green was medical— and it was sometimes green patterned with backslashes to denote for those poor souls who were colorblind. This meant that no other guiding-line in that space used either green nor a backslash pattern— but a forward slash was fair game. Which is why interfacing with things was important— the right item would make it easier.

However, this wasn't the first time that they were aboard a ship of this faction. Far from it. The newer made models have already changed their visual guidance coloring and patterns. So, the room with the black box, as what was remembered in the dossier— had a new type of guiding. They didn't feel too comfortable going deeper inside of the complex but they needed to. Getting the black box out of an installation though—that was a new one thing to be told to do.

They had to remind themselves, they had done this countless times— abandoned ship, facility or station— off or on-planet. This was something else. To think that no one was able to leave with the black box, while it wasn't unheard of, it had been rare. The few other times where they did something like this was met with a large reward.

That was usually the first thing to be transferred then wiped; once the ship or installation was effectively lost. They were the digital brains of the dtructure—but there was also no artificial presence to help. A loud snap had brought Quinn away from their thoughts and to the present. Right. They felt their heartbeat race a bit faster as they started going the right direction.

With a practiced ease—relax— Quinn hadn't quite done this to this degree, only dumb decision. Like asteroid ziplining. Quinn marked areas and prepped it for extraction as they made their way towards the room. Unsurprisingly, their heart raced with fear— but at the same time, excitement beat alongside it. They knew they could do it—all that considered.— The slight pink that tinged their vision. With a deep breath, they used a cipher— a substance and a specific wavelength spectrum to find the guiding lines to the command room.

The room that held the black box was a labyrinthine maze of wires, panels, and flickering screens. The walls were adorned with a patterned gray texture that only the most learned individuals would recognize as a cipher, leading to this very room. The scent of iron, from dried blood stains and the scratch marks left by desperate hands, filled the air, making it a mix of a metallic and musty odor. The cold air seemed to be seeping in from the cracks, but with the intense radiation being emitted, there were hot spots where the walls were almost scorching to the touch. The boots of the crew that had been there before were scattered about, the magnetized soles keeping them attached to the floor. However, the boots were the only sign of their existence, with very few bodies to be seen. The under-suits and synthetic clothing of the crew were torn and shredded, a testament to their final moments.

As Quinn entered the room, they felt a chill run down their spine. The lights flickered, causing shadows to dance in the corners and the dark to become more dominant. The flashlight on their shoulder was turned on, illuminating the room further and giving it a ghostly appearance. The beams of light cut through the darkness, highlighting the grisly scene. The brown spots on the floor were revealed to be bloodstains, and bone shards were scattered about, telling the story of a struggle. A drone was tucked against the line, its motor still humming with life, waiting for its next task.

The black box was nestled perfectly in its holding place, but something was different. A type of flora was jutting from a faint blackened substance, its viscosity and terror from the last time they touched it still haunting them. The flowers were in pinkish-purple cymes, and the vivid green leaves reminded Quinn of planets that orbited red dwarfs. The alchemists' vision showed that its organic composition was related

to an amaranth, something Quinn had never heard of before. The stem seemed to be soaking up the black fluid, but at a painfully slow pace.

"Hope I don't fuck this up," Quinn muttered, feeling a wave of anxiety wash over them. They couldn't help but wonder how the plant got there, but there was no time for speculation. With the correct tools and a quick deftness, they carefully extracted the black box from its compartment. It was less of a box and more of an orb, glittering with the hue of cyan and white data. The black box—no—Occybyte was placed inside of a cylindrical container that would keep it suspended and protected against any strenuous outer force. Quinn placed the cylindrical container inside of the correct slot of their rig and started the drones.

As they worked, Quinn couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched. The room was eerily silent, and the shadows seemed to be closing in. The radiation was causing their skin to itch, and they couldn't help but wonder if they were being exposed to dangerous levels of it. But, they had to see this through to the end, no matter the consequences. The black box was too important to leave behind, and it was their job to make sure it got back to the ship safely. With a deep breath, they steeled themselves and got ready for the rough experience that awaited them. Their shoulder-mounted flashlight illuminating the dark as the line whirred. A woven composite of carbon fiber and an unknown material to even them, its tensile strength was damn great enough to be used in and outside of the atmosphere. Now, their lifeline to safety.

The motors on the drone rigged device started to pull them, the slack along the line tightening as they felt a sense of unease grow within them. The motors pulled them faster and faster through the twisting, winding halls of the station complex. Every time they entered a sub freezing room, their cold shock response quickly grabbed their body as they went through a room with no temperature regulation. The shadows quickly stretch and contort around them. They saw the ghoul passing through the walls in a concerning effort to keep close to them. As it slowed, a corner was approaching. Quinn pivoted their body, and another set of doors opened that led to the resource recycling area. Its head snapped another way and towards the chilled cadavers that were released from the morgue.

The morgue, after a certain point, was also just another part of the resource recycling area. The air was thick with the presence of something otherworldly, as if the very atoms of the space around them were being split and shifted. It made even the hairs under their suit feel rigid. Something was wrong— it had always been wrong. The hit the switch which sent the cadavers around causing the Ghoul to latch onto it. It was enough time to keep it busy— and then to continue. The melding of the present and the in-between time seemed as if it had no end in sight. It was a kaleidoscope of shifting colors and shapes, and Quinn couldn't help but be drawn in. It was around the creature— like an aura, it felt...

The feeling was quickly lost, with another press the drone's motors started to pull Quinn out of the morgue and since it was still charging. It was a way slower; their hand and arm were rigid as the silence felt oppressive; it was nothing and then the sound of friction. They were truly the only people there. They waited for the internals to cool for a few seconds— which felt more than a few minutes, and pressed the button simultaneously starting the faster movement. There was only one more stop until homestretch.

The path was serpentine—the station a labyrinthine, disorienting and the sense of pressure while as equalized as it could be: the state of gravity was in more disarray. The area that they were in had more gravity but now there was way less. As each turn happened the dwindling friction and pull, was overloading their senses. Sourness coated the inside of their mouth. Despite their initial panic, they tried to remain focused on what was now a series of connections that would get them out. They tightened their body as it went quicker but their pathfinding seemed to slow as Quinn was able to check their display to trigger some quick changes. They stopped at a barely closed door, they'd made sure to have it open enough for the line to go through.

Both feet were firmly pressed against both sides of the door as they squatted to enter the keypad code. They were more than happy that they paid for an justifiably expensive suit that could help absorb and distribute the pressure— even if it was old. It was with that and they used their footing to jump— and in one swift go, they activated the device to continue pulling them forward. The speed picked up— it was odd that they were able to now, to really just think.

It wasn't until they reached the end of the line, that the momentum slowed into a complete stop, enough for Quinn to be able to unlink themselves from the device and stumble on their feet. The line continued elsewhere and they felt the snap that followed its end to the vessel. Quinn took a moment and got their breathing together as the docking bay depressurized. There was one more line to attach themselves too that would lead them straight onto the ship.

The attachment process this time was quick—as it had been an item that was geared towards a specific type of material to attach itself too. They were weightlessly pulled to their ship.

The loneliness in their job was never an issue, at least until now. Their world view had shifted and been forced to box up whatever emotions that had stewed inside. A large part of them couldn't believe that the supernatural had likely truly existed. They'd heard of such in children's tales. Their first big trip in flight school had been to watch and document the flight paths for ships performing maneuvers to charge themselves off a pulsing neutron star. They watched the cones until they had their fill and stored it into the back of their mind.

They inside the docking bay and quickly pressed the buttons to close the door— the line making a resounding snap! Even if they had the evidence— they looked down at the Occybyte container. They didn't know what secrets that asteroid base had on it—frankly, they didn't want to know even more. They were curious though, not like they had a system that could even read what was inside of it. Without the right bidder Occybyte's were virtually worthless.

The loneliness, the uncertainty that had grasped them was no longer lingering. It was clutching them. Quinn had no one to turn to for comfort or to share their experience— no release of the immediate trauma. No voice guiding them to safety. The only thing that surrounded them was the machinery that they had brought and configured; reminding them of all the life decisions they had made. For a moment, they wondered about it all—was it a grave mistake? But they had pushed those thoughts aside, focusing on their survival and getting the correct trajectory and coordinates in for a smooth journey. Quinn wished they had one of those fancy stasis pods.

They shook their head as they were inside. Quinn quickly strapped into their seat, making sure they fastened themselves. The cockpit was a series of beeps and flashing lights, the screens displaying a stream of data and warning. There were a lot of procedures, protocols and startup processes that were broken on their way in.

Quinn started to bring the ship to life. The glow of the cockpit was dim and made way for the instruments highlighting as opposed to the varying levels of intense brightness and flickering lights— to total darkness of the asteroid complex. Quinn's mind quickly adapted back to what was familiar— their mind and body completely in sync with the technology that surrounded them. The star navigation chart had updated to the current relative positioning in the quadrant of space. "Quinn?!" Their name rattled in their ears. "Quinn." It was nothing.

They stared. Their eyes were toward the center point of their view. Never had a dull view felt so magnificent. The stream of stars and nebulae streaked past their view— nearly stretching. It was at the edge of their view they saw it: a figure taking hold of a blanket of space— enormously large, but then, suddenly smaller and it was more obscure as their ship had picked up speed. The sudden force made the Gs' much rougher and harder to withstand even with themselves fastened tightly to the ship. Even the fabric was putting pressure against their suit.

Their name was repeated: it rattled in their head. It echoed and raced around their ears. "Quinn!" They tried shaking themselves out of the stupor. Wait. They tried focusing straight ahead— pink slightly obscured their vision, they felt weak. "Quinn. Quinn? Quin?!!" Had they driven themselves to panic—as the sense of security slowly enveloped—fatigue came heavy.

Quinn blinked their eyes fast to focus and looked up at the display. A ship was requesting access. They wondered if it was real. Or was it something else? What was real, was only what was perceived and they were afraid to make sure reality was all that it seemed to be. They needed to be quiet—they were afraid, so afraid of saying the wrong thing.

Among the stars Quinn saw a figure take hold as a part of the blanket of space was getting smaller and more obscure as the vessel's speed had picked up. The sudden force made the Gs' much rougher and harder to withstand even with themselves fastened tightly to the ship.

Passages of space wherein' the ghoul dwelt,
Sprouted from its aura-- Amaranth, blood-lies-here,
A horrid amalgam of ghoul blood and oxygen'tainted,
Corrosive and haunting all within' its touch-- inhale,
Let body fade n' cooling for eternity's embrace.
The last rejoice is a hurrah for the mind,
Became acquainted and unsheathe your will,
Lag and lounge amongst the rot that claims.
Speak true, speak clear-- only in your mind, we'll hear.
Black and red polka dotted along the cornea.