

\*Boom\*

"GAH!" I screamed as my brain rattled inside my skull as I woke up.

It was cold... freezing cold. Cold enough my breath was coming out in puffs of white vapor and my lungs hurt from the cold air I was gasping down.

Where was I? Through the windows that surrounded me, I could make out the glittering of countless stars in the distance. Inside, the lights of various gauges, buttons, and displays cast an eerie glow.

"Is this real?" I asked myself, my teeth chattering as I rubbed my arms.

I recognized some of what I was seeing, but not all of it. I was sitting in the cockpit of what I assumed was a small star fighter. Most of the systems appeared to be offline, judging by the various red warning lights that had been blinking for a while.

I say I recognized some of it, but the only place I had ever seen stuff like this before was in the video game I was playing just before going to bed. Wait...

"Am I dreaming? That has to be it... hahaha... of course." I began laughing to myself as my brain denied the reality in front of me. "Alright then. Let's see what we can play with."

Deciding not to worry about it, embracing the idea that this was all a dream, I allowed my numb fingers to brush against the ship's console as I attempted to reboot all of the offline systems.

"Manual Reboot Initiated." the mechanical voice of the ship's built in AI support said.

The lights on the display began flickering one by one as the system performed its preflight checks.

"Reboot Successful. All Systems online."

"Sweet." I responded to the computer. With the ship's systems seemingly operating how they should, I flicked through the various displays on the console until I reached the life support controls. "O2 looks good. Let's get the temperature in here figured out."

With the press of a digital button, the life support system began to hum, warm air beginning to pour into the confined space of the small cockpit. As the temperature rose, I took a second to look around again.

The ship I was in seemed to be an old, 3rd generation interceptor meant for chasing down frigates and other small ships. According to the system information, the ship was a ATX-03 Interceptor, Call sign 'Wraith'.

I wasn't entirely familiar with this particular model, but I remembered reading a number of posts on the game's forums that described it as an incredibly nimble short range fighter with a focused forward shield, 2 front mounted 30mm Auto-cannons, and an internal weapons bay that could carry up to 8 rockets or missiles. Overall, it was a lower tier ship compared to what I had been piloting before logging off, but it was functional enough for a dream world so there wasn't much for me to complain about.

"Well... While I'm here, I might as well take it for a test drive... WHOA!"

As I pushed forward on the ship's control stick, feeding power to the forward thrusters, the ship lurched before accelerating hard enough to slam my back into the well worn pilot's seat.

"This thing's got some pep! HAHAHA!"

I was familiar with the principle behind the controls, though I was coming from using a controller on my PC rather than using a flight control stick. The thrill of its near instant forward acceleration was enough to get my heart pumping. Swinging the stick to the left then back again caused the ship to translate in my desired direction. Pulling back activated the reverse thrusters mounted on the front of the ship. My left hand rested on the ship's vertical controller and my feet rested on pedals that controlled the ship's RCS system to control the ship's 3 axis of rotation.

You'd think that the violent motions caused by rapidly changing speed and direction would make the pilot uncomfortable, but it seemed that this ship came equipped with some kind of internal inertial dampener. Basically, minus the slight vibration coming from the thrusters, generator and the feedback coming through the flight controls, I felt no other forces acting on me, making for a surprisingly comfortable experience.

In the game, I had started out in a ship not too dissimilar to this one, flying escort missions for the various player run merchant companies that made up the in-game economy. If I wasn't busy with that, then I spent time exterminating pirates that would randomly spawn in around certain routes between the various orbital stations and their local slip-points.

Thinking about it now, it really wasn't strange for me to be having such a vivid dream about a game I played to the point of near obsession. I mean, how much time and money had I dumped into it just to get the ships and fittings I wanted. It was unfortunate that I wasn't experiencing this dream in my own, hard earned ship.

"Oh well."

I continued to fly around haphazardly, getting a feel for how the ship responded to my input. But something wasn't right...

"How long am I going to be here in this dream?"

My question went unanswered in the lonely cockpit. Despite the second seat for a co-pilot or operator behind me, I was alone out here with no direction or purpose.

"Hmmm... I guess while I'm here, I can see what else my brain has in store for me."

I slowed the ship down, engaging the external inertial dampeners, allowing the ships RCS thrusters to bring the Wraith to a stop.

"Computer, send power to the Lidar and Scanner, Let me know what you find out there."

"Activating scanner. Displaying." The computer promptly responded as the center console changed to display the results of the long range Lidar scans. "Unknown object detected. Range 1,238 kilometers."

"Cool. Set a nav point and lets get within scanning range."

"Nav point set."

From this distance, the outdated scanner the Wraith was equipped with wasn't able to pick anything up giving me no choice but to get closer. With the nav point displayed on the monitor, I pushed on the control stick, the generator and thrusters humming in response, and maneuvered to bring the ship closer to the unknown object the long range Lidar detected.

"As soon as we're in range, let's get a scan going."

"Command Received."

In the vacuum of space, traveling at absurd speeds wasn't unusual, and the 1000+ kilometer trip took less than 10 minutes, allowing the close range scanner to finally begin its job of identifying the object floating in front of me.

"What are you seeing?"

"Sending information."

The radar-like display lit up, showing the relative position of the object in front of me. According to the limited information the scanner could pick up, the object appeared to me a small frigate of some kind. Its thrusters were powered off and the surface seemed to have a thin film of frozen space dust and debris on it, obscuring any definitive markings that might identify the ship's origin.

"Hmm... I've never seen one like that before. Looks kinda like a Meerkat, but it's too small." I muttered to myself. "Are we picking up any life signs?"

"Unknown."

"Hmmm..." Hearing the computer's response, I glanced back down at the radar display. Even with the thrusters off, the scanner was still picking up the faint traces of the Meerkat-like frigates generator, but at that level, even running the ship's life support would be a task.

"I'm going to bring us in closer, focus the scanner on the bridge and let's see if we can figure out what's going on."

Ignoring the sense of foreboding I was having, I gently pushed forward on the control stick, careful to avoid the jerky acceleration from before.

As the range decreased, the voice of the on-board AI blared over the speaker and a blue dot on the radar identifying the frigate as a neutral target began flashing red.

"WARNING. SCANNING DETECTED."

"Shit..." The once dormant looking frigate suddenly roared to life, the fine space dust caked on its surface suddenly scattering as the Meerkats thrusters and shield suddenly came online. "Activate communications. Get me on an open channel!"

"Com line open. Begin transmitting."

"This is Captain Mikio, call sign Wraith, I come in peace." I said over the open line.

Several moments passed as the larger ship in front of me slowly began accelerating towards me.

"Anything?" I asked the computer.

"No response."

"I say again, this is Captain Mikio, call sign Wraith, I come in peace." I said, trying to hide the nervousness in my voice.

"God damn..."

"WARNING! ENEMY WEAPONS SYSTEMS ONLINE!" The computer called out, cutting me off. The Wraiths displays all began lighting up as the frigate's weapons began trying to lock on to the Wraiths heat signature.

"SON OF A !!!! Activate weapon systems and send power to the forward shield."

"Weapon systems online. Forward Shields Activated."

My heart began pounding in my chest once again as the Wraiths two Auto-cannons began spinning up. Against a ship like the Meerkat, the 30mm auto-cannons along with their tungsten coated rounds should be enough to punch holes through their armor plating. The one drawback to projectile based weapons was the relatively short effective range.. While they would never lose their speed while traveling along their fired trajectory, the amount of time between firing and impacting with the target was extreme.

Auto-cannons like the ones equipped on the Wraith were meant for extremely close range engagements against soft targets. Soft targets were basically anything without a shield. Its one redeeming quality was the insane volume of fire when compared against the standard laser cannons most small fighters came equipped with. In the same amount of time that it took for a basic laser cannon to fire off two High intensity beams, the Wraiths twin 30mm Auto-cannons would have already sent 12,000 rounds of tungsten coated hatred down range, eviscerating anything unlucky enough to be caught in their path.

As the range between us continued to shrink, through the cockpits windows I could make out the faint glow coming off of the Meerkats heavy laser turret.

"GIVE ME A BREAK!"

\*FWOOOOOM\*

Suddenly, a bright blue beam of concentrated light streaked off the bow of the frigate, crossing the 30 kilometer distance between us at the speed of light. The Wraith shook violently as the beam impacted the right side of the forward shield, sending the reflected beam off into the void of space.

"WARNING! Forward Shield at 20%."

Ignoring the obvious warning coming from the computer, I slammed forward on the control stick and pressed my foot down on the pedal that controlled the ships reaction control system (RCS), sending the nose of the Wraith into a dive.

The heavy laser turret on the enemy frigate was mounted on the top side of the ship, meaning if I could drop below their ships centerline, then they would be forced to either roll the ship over or dive to match my descent in order to aim the laser cannon at me again.

"Deploy countermeasures!" I yelled to the computer as the internal inertial dampeners went into overdrive trying to counter the extreme g-forces I was placing on the Wraith's small frame. As I

ducked below the Meerkats centerline, I pushed hard on the right pedal before rocking both pedals backwards and slamming the stick forward to execute a hard 90 degree turn.

"WARNING! THERMAL LOCK DETECTED!"

"ACTIVATE EMERGENCY COOLING! DEPLOY COUNTERMEASURES!"

With a hiss, an external vent on the rear of the ship began throwing super heated iron dust into space, rapidly cooling the ships systems. I continued to weave back and forth as I pushed the Wraith into a dive trying to stay below the frigate's centerline. Using the Wraiths' significantly higher speed and maneuverability, I closed the distance between us.

Just as I was about to bring the nose around and unleash a hail of hardened metallic violence, several doors on the bottom of the Meerkat popped open, revealing the Meerkats internal weapons bay.

"WARNING! MISSILE LAUNCH DETECTED!"

"FLARES!" I yelled as I once again banked my nimble fighter to the left and right. In an attempt to trick the incoming missile into targeting the burning chunk of magnesium behind me. With the combination of the super heated iron dust and the burning flare, the Meerkats heat-seeking missile began moving erratically.

\*BOOM\*

Moments after the Meerkats missiles narrowly missed my ship, the flash of the missiles impacting the flares lit up the inside of my cockpit.

"Fine... Guh... If you want to play like that..." I grunted, as I pulled the Wraith into a slide, with the nose pointed up at the underbelly of the frigate that was now within 1000 meters. "Eat this."

The internal weapons bay on the Wraith opened and in a momentary flash of light and smoke, two missiles, guided by the Wraiths forward laser targeting system zipped away, screaming towards the still exposed weapons bays of the enemy ship.

Due to their relatively large mass compared to the missiles, the Meerkat was unable to avoid the impact of my anti-ship munitions, and a glorious flash of orange and yellow light lit up the darkness of space. Like a shattering piece of glass, the shield protecting the thin armor plating on the Meerkat vanished, exposing them to the coming onslaught of bullets.

As I squeezed the trigger, ensuring the nose of the Wraith was pointed at their tenderized underside, thousands of red hot rounds of 30mm wrath turned the unprepared Meerkat into little more than a floating hunk of scrap. I watched as multiple rounds tore through the all important internal components, generator, thrusters and...

\*BOOOOOOOOOOM!\*

"Ooooh, fireworks." I said as the remaining missiles in their internal bays collectively exploded, sending hunks of metal and scrap hurtling away at unbelievable speeds. With their frame cracked, the ship began tearing itself apart due to its inertia, eventually drifting into 2 larger pieces surrounded by a cloud of smaller metallic debris.

"Computer. How's it looking out there?" I asked as I reactivated the external inertial dampeners and allowed myself to drift as the RCS brought me to a stop.

"Target offline."

"What about life signs?"

"Unknown."

"Damn..." I said as I let out a sigh of relief. "But... this is strange."

Normally, even in a lucid dream, slamming myself around like this or doing anything too intense was enough to wake me up. But despite the life or death battle just a moment ago, I was still here sitting in the cockpit of the Wraith.

"What if..." I didn't want to think about it, but so far, all of the evidence was there, suggesting that what I suspected was most likely the truth.

"What if this isn't a dream?"

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So far, everything I had seen looked like it came from, or was inspired by, the game I was playing before going to bed. And I say that knowing that I haven't really gotten a look at more than the destroyed frigate in front of me and the Wraith I was piloting. Even so, the sheer realism of what I was experiencing, upon closer inspection, was enough to make me doubt the idea that this was all some kind of intense lucid dream.

No... If I go by the sensations I've experienced, there is no possibility that this is some kind of simple dream. This was real. As real as the real world... but in space...

"Well shit. The fuck am I supposed to do now?"

Despite the shocking conclusion I came to, I was surprisingly calm. If anything, my outburst came from habit more than shock.

"I don't have any choice I guess. Unless something changes, I should treat this as the real world. So...."

If this was the real world for me now, then what should my next step be... I already knew through my experience in the game, that I would have to find somewhere to dock the Wraith both to repair it and to resupply the fuel and ammunition I spent dealing with the overly aggressive frigate.

"Computer, Set a course for the closest station."

"ERROR! No known stations available."

"What... fine, bring up the star chart."

"Displaying Star Chart."

The center console's display changed over from the radar to a 3d image of the local space around me. Or... at least it was supposed to. What I got instead was a 3d sphere with a point in the middle representing the Wraith, and a nearby blue dot representing the wreckage of the Meerkat I had just destroyed.

"What's the range on the map?"

"Answer. Map Range is set to max. 1,000,000 Kilometers."

"And there is nothing out there? God damn it."

In reality, just based on the fact that there was a pirate vessel out here, a station or frequently traveled route had to be nearby. Even at the ludicrous speeds that could be achieved by spacecraft, crossing over 1,000,000 Kilometers at sub-light speeds would take forever, and you could forget about scanning the entire space looking for a station. Without even having to do the math, the amount of time it would take to map the entire area with the limited range of the Wraiths Lidar system would take months, if not years.

But... there was a way to solve all this... or so I hoped.

"Computer, prepare the emergency mag-lock."

"Command Received."

Gently pushing on the control stick, I brought the Wraith up to the relatively flat underside of the larger half of the bisected frigate. Using the RCS thrusters, I gently brought the bottom of my fighter up to the metallic underside and engaged the emergency magnetic lock, securing the Wraith to the floating Meerkats' remains.



"Depressurize the cockpit and prepare for me to disembark."

"Command received. Depressurizing."

The sound of rushing air roared through the cockpit before fading away into silence. With the air gone, the only sounds I could hear came from my suit brushing against the worn pilot's seat as I unlatched the harness and pulled on the lever to open the canopy.

Carefully, being sure to maintain 3 points of contact with the ship at any given time, I moved away from the Wraith and planted the soles of my shoes on the cold surface of the Meerkat.

With a quick tap on my suit's built-in control panel, my feet suddenly glued themselves down to the hull. My suit was designed to endure the vacuum of space for a limited amount of time. It was also equipped with a limited micro-RCS thruster pack and magnetic boots, allowing me to safely traverse the zero-G environment of the disabled pirate ship.

My goal was to find the Meerkats bridge. There, I could download its star-chart to the memory in my suit. With that, once I was back on the Wraith, I would be able to access the map in the ship's navigation and make my way to a station. If I was lucky, the enemies map would also include the location of wherever these pirates were based. I could sell the pirates' location to this sector's local security forces or to the mercenaries who made their living hunting down pirates.

With my footing secured, I carefully made my way over to the open doors to the Meerkats internal weapons bay.

"There should be an access hatch to the inside of the ship in here somewhere... Found it."

After making my way inside, I finally had a moment to notice the equipment I was wearing. The pilots suit I was in seemed to be an older style of the military jumpsuits pilots of the United Star Kingdom wore. On top of the Micro-RCS and Magnetic boots, I also had a small bag that seemed to be empty alongside a handheld laser pistol designed for use in the vacuum of space. At a quick glance the pistol would be completely useless against even the lightest armor plating on the exterior of a ship, but against a human or alien target, the high intensity beam would be more than enough to nearly vaporize anything unfortunate enough to be shot.

Walking along the dark corridor, I made my way to where I assumed the Meerkats bridge would be. Fortunately, even though it was far larger than the Wraith, living and working space inside the small frigate was little more than a handful of corridors and small rooms for the crew. As I passed by the cafeteria, I noticed the first sign of actual life I had seen since arriving here.

Or... What was once alive.

Floating around the interior of the cafeteria were the bloated, frozen remains of 4 of the pirate crew that died due to the sudden decompression. Fortunately, the vacuum of space caused any liquids to instantly boil away and few remaining chunks of gore were all frozen solid. Whatever blood didn't evaporate, floated in glittering red clouds that reflected the light coming off my helmet's built in headlamp. The light cast an eerie red glow around the destroyed space.

"Guh..." I groaned while I shuddered involuntarily. Despite the fact that I had played many games in the past that depicted graphic and gory scenes, my heart was unprepared for the sight of fellow humans that died due to my own actions. For a moment, I found myself lost in thought as I tried to justify my actions to myself.

If I hadn't engaged the pirates directly, perhaps they would have survived, and left me with a clear conscience. But that would also mean that I'd have left these pirates alive where they could pose a threat to other innocent people in the future. In the game, pirates were little more than annoying pests. They would randomly attack you on your way to deliver cargo, or ambush you while escorting other ships through Low-Sec space. Of course, there were players who took up piracy too, but in the end, after you destroyed their ships, the players would just respawn back at a local station. Their only losses being their ship and cargo. NPCs were nothing more than randomly generated data, and killing them didn't even leave a body behind, meaning no players ever had to deal with the moral consequences of their actions.

"One more reason... that this isn't like a game." I mumbled to myself as the weight of what I had done finished sinking in. Shaking my head, I managed to snap myself out of my negative thoughts.

This was reality. They were pirates and they attacked me first. Even after telling them that I came in peace, they still chose to attack me. My actions were in self defense. That was all there was to it. In the end, what was done was done. I couldn't take it back and I couldn't apologize to the dead. Dwelling on it any more would absolutely become an anchor holding me down.

Firming my resolve, I turned away from the destroyed cafeteria. I then made my way towards the large sealed door near the bow of the ship. With the ship's generator destroyed and drifting away in the rear section of the ship, the automatic doors had to be manually opened. Fortunately, there seemed to be an access panel in the wall with a hand crank inside. With a grunt of exertion, I slowly turned the never before used crank. I could hear the sound of metal grinding on metal being transmitted through my feet and hands.

When the door finally opened enough for me to step inside, I saw another scene like the one in the cafeteria. 3 more floating bodies, frozen and bloated due to the sudden decompression caused by hundreds of 30mm rounds that punched holes through the various surfaces in the bridge.

"God... Ok..." Steeling my nerves, I slowly pushed my way inside and tried to find an intact terminal or computer.

Along one of the walls that my auto-cannons managed to miss, I saw a number of stations with an array of blank displays and controls. I had no idea what these terminals were used for originally, but if they were still intact on the inside, then I should be able to pull the ship's logs along with its star-chart from them.

Pulling on a small tab near the personal terminal on my wrist, I extended a small, retractable cable and inserted the end into one of the corresponding sockets on the nearest panel. As soon as my terminal was connected, the micro-generator installed in my suit sent a small amount of power to the Meerkats system and began scanning for any stored data I could harvest.

"YES!" I cheered to myself as the display on my personal terminal lit up letting me know that it was accessing the frigates backup system and downloading all of the data I was searching for.

"Hm... What's this?" As the download completed, I quickly scanned over the data on my terminal.

According to the ship's most recent log entries, it had been patrolling back and forth between two recently added points in the star-chart. Going back a little further, I could tell that the most recent route was significantly different than its old route. The ship had traversed these older routes hundreds of times. I wasn't 100% sure, but to me, it looked like the frigate was being used as an armed transport ship for a company called 'Neshers Trading Company' and it was delivering cargo between a nearby local station and a remote security outpost on the edge of the systems high-sec space. That was before the pirates managed to capture it and it began patrolling between the new points.

The information on the pirates' behaviors and locations was interesting, but it wasn't what I was after.

"Finally... Now I can get to a station."

Knowing I would be able to dock at a secure station and get out of my ship in a safe environment caused a wave of relief to wash over me. I could feel the tension in my shoulder relax as the first step towards an unknown future became clear to me.

"Let's get... wait... oh wow... that's..." Just as I was about to look away from my terminal's display, my eyes glanced across the ship's cargo log, the contents of which made my eyes go wide and my heart start pounding in anticipation. Without hesitation, I disconnected the cord from the Meerkats terminal and began making my way to the frigate's forward cargo bay.

In the game, most pirates were NPCs and their ships typically had a small amount of loot on them which the player could collect after defeating them. There were laws in place in the lore that appeared as mechanics in the game, one of which being that the captain or ship that successfully destroyed or captured a pirate vessel, became the new owner of the vessel and all

of its cargo, whatever that may be. In the game that usually came in the form of low tier ammunition and ship fittings the pirates looted from players and NPC that failed to subdue them.

In rare circumstances, you might come across a pirate ship carrying other, significantly more valuable loot in the form of rare elements and metals used for manufacturing or other various components that players could either sell off or use to upgrade their own ships.

However, what I noticed buried in the Meerkats cargo was one of the rarest, and most valuable pieces of loot you could ever find. So much so, that despite the fact that I was most certainly out here alone, I was still running like my life depended on acquiring the all important item.

As I listened to the sound of my boots impacting the metallic floors and my own panting as I ran, my heart began pounding out of excitement and I could feel adrenaline starting to make its way into my system.

Reaching the forward cargo bay door, I tore the access panel open and began furiously cranking the door open before slipping inside.

The cargo bay was relatively small, though I suppose it would be on the larger size given the overall size of the ship. The inside was a mess of haphazardly floating crates and boxes, many of which had numerous holes blown through them due to my unrestrained shooting earlier.

"Please be in one piece!" I began praying as I began quickly scanning over the crates searching for one that was about the size of a small briefcase. "YES! YES YES YES!!!"

Buried inside one of the wrecked crates was a shiny black case wrapped in an extremely hard outer shell. As I lifted the case out of the box, my heart nearly sank as I noticed one of its corners was severely dented and the seal on the case was broken open. Apparently one of my bullets impacted the case, nearly destroying it, but whatever the hard metallic surface was made of managed to hold together despite facing off against a super heated piece of tungsten traveling at over 2000 meters per second.

With the case secured in my hand, my body once again relaxed. With my momentary excitement over with, I managed to glance around the remains of the cargo hold again. Floating amongst the debris from destroyed crates and cargo, I noticed a number of small glittering pieces of metal, entirely different from the metal scraps I had seen in front of the Meerkats' destroyed hull. These metallic chunks were in a variety of different colors and were each in various states of refinement.

These floating chunks of raw or semi-processed metals and elements were one of the most common forms of loot you would find aboard pirate vessels. The in-game explanation was that the pirates used these metals like currency due to the difficulty in tracking its origins and determining its lawful owner. And in the event that the pirates needed to make a purchase with

legitimate currency, liquidating vast amounts of these rare metals would be a fast and smooth process.

With the death of the pirates and the destruction of their ship, leaving the metal behind would be a complete waste. As soon as I made it to the station and reported what I encountered to the port authority or security forces, dozens of scavengers were sure to rush from the station as fast as they could to get their hands on anything I left behind. Knowing that, leaving behind the second most valuable part of the pirate loot would be a waste of potential profit.

"Actually... I'm probably broke right now. Hahahaha." I laughed at myself. If I came here in my own ship, I would have more than enough stashed away loot in my cruisers cargo bay to live a cushy life for a while. Considering the decrepit nature of the Wraith, I doubted there was anything of value in its miniscule cargo bay. Meaning that outside of selling my only method of transportation, I would have no access to easy money and I wasn't even remotely interested in having to get a mundane job in some random station somewhere now that I was in a cool, sci-fi fantasy game world.

As I was thinking about all that, I collected as much of the rare metals and other elements as I could reasonably handle and began making my way back to the hatch nearest the Wraith. As soon as I stepped into the void, I carefully manipulated the micro-RCS thrusters on my waist and back and glided towards the small cargo hatch on the back side of my small fighter.

I repeated this several times, wanting to stuff as much of the good stuff into my ship as possible, knowing that by the time I made it back, the only thing left would be the scraps and debris that weren't even worth reprocessing.

With my work completed and the fuel in my Micro-RCS starting to run low, I finally made my way back to the pilots seat along with my precious case and closed the canopy.

"Computer. Pressurize the cockpit."

"Pressurizing cockpit." The mechanical voice played through my helmets built in coms. In the background, I could hear the life support system activate. A rush of air blasted out of the vents and the cockpit's internal pressure stabilized to a safe level.

With a slight hiss, I pressed the release button on the side of my helmet and tossed it into the operator's seat behind me. My brow was covered in sweat, either out of nervousness or excitement. Sitting on my lap was the glossy metallic case.

It was shiny enough that I could see my own reflection on its surface. This was the first time I was getting a look at myself in this world, and I was surprised to find out that I wasn't in the body of my game character. I looked exactly how I was back on earth. I was your typical, 23 year old Asian-American man, with short black hair that would cover my face if I looked down too far and

sharp black eyes. My eyes looked tired after spending far too much time staring at a computer screen, both for work and from gaming.

Carefully. Gingerly. Delicately. I slid my fingers over the outer surface of the case, finding and releasing more than a dozen small high strength latches that were meant to ensure that the contents stayed safely locked away.

You might ask how I was able to open a case that was very clearly meant to be highly secured. Well, to answer your question... It was sheer dumb luck. The bullet that struck the case, happen to hit the small electronic control panel, and the nearly 4 million joules of kinetic energy the case absorbed managed to break or otherwise destroy the various security measure in place, allowing anyone with the knowledge on how to undo simple latches to open the broken security case.

As the final latch came loose, the entire case popped open slightly. The depressurizing hiss I was expecting didn't happen due to the previously described broken seal, but fortunately, the contents were designed to function in the vacuum of space. As I lifted the case open, I swear I hallucinated the sound effect you get when opening a chest on one of those famous games with the green wearing elf kid.

Sitting inside a form fitted, impact resistant foam was a small jet black data terminal. What separates this terminal from the ones most players would recognize was the fact that this terminal was clearly built to be rugged and the single button on the front was the only possible way to interact with it. The screen was an old school non-touch model and there were no ports, seams, screws, or any other way to interact with the terminal beyond the singular red button sitting just below the bottom edge of the screen.

"Computer, disable all data recording and purge the log from the time that I re-entered the cockpit until I give you further instructions. I want you to double, no, triple check that any and all data has been purged."

"Order Received."

What I was about to do. Pressing the red button on this particular terminal was something very... VERY illegal. At least that's how it was in the game. If you were ever discovered to be in possession of one of these terminals after it had been activated, you would immediately shoot to the top of the games most wanted list, and every security officer and bounty hunter would be on the lookout for you and your ship for the rest of your time spent playing the game. The first players to discover this were forced to delete their accounts and start over from nothing due to the impossibility of standing up against the entirety of the player base and the games own NPC security forces.

After they learned the hard way and wrote about it on the games forums, players collectively agreed that the only good option with these terminals was to either completely destroy them

using high powered weapons, or to completely ignore them by blasting them into the void of space where the chance of randomly discovering it was effectively 0.

There was one exception... or should I say, one theoretical exception. If a player somehow managed to utilize what was stored on the terminal, the difficulty of evading, or even outright crippling the NPCs and Players that would come for you would become laughably easy. If properly controlled, this terminal's contents would become a weapon, or more correctly a tool that would allow you to bypass nearly all the obstacles that you might come across in your game.

Yes... there was a risk to me using the terminal. But I still wasn't 100% sure that this wasn't some kind of elaborate dream. I could be in a coma in a hospital somewhere, not that I would know why or how, but that was the one thing that could have happened to me that would allow me to experience such a long vivid dream. So if this was a dream, then even if I catastrophically failed after using the terminal, then there was no risk to me, at least that's how it seemed. If I had been transported to a real universe that was entirely similar to the game I was playing, then properly using the terminal would allow me to live almost completely unhindered for an uncountable number of reasons.

As the thoughts continued to swirl in my head, I heard the voice of the computer come over the speaker.

"All the requested data has been purged and all sensors and recording devices have been disabled. All input and monitoring systems are on standby. Voice commands will be disabled. To reenable, press and hold the illuminated button for 10 seconds."

The voice faded away and many of the lights indicating that data was being recorded went dark, leaving only the ship's core piloting functions active and the single illuminated button for rebooting the system.

With my preparations now complete, I looked back down at the most dangerous item known in the game and allowed my finger to rest over the surface of its singular red button.

"Here we go..." I said, holding my breath as I was about to do something that should absolutely, definitely be avoided. "Haha... hahaha."

With a nervous laugh, I felt the smooth action of the never before pressed button and the terminal in my hands suddenly blinked to life. Seconds later, the displays in the ship suddenly began to flash, the illuminated buttons and switches began strobing in random patterns and I could feel the ship shudder the same way it did during a preflight check. The Wraiths center console flashed before displaying the same loading bar that was displayed on the top secret military data terminal.

Upload at 80%.... 85%... 90%... 95%...

Upload complete.

As the data from the terminal finished uploading itself to the ships system, all the lights and displays in the cockpit went dark before the center console display slowly turned back on, displaying a blue, 3d orb.

"Hello. I don't know who you are, but I thank you for reactivating me. I operate as an Advanced Tactical Humanoid Electronic Network Assistant. Callsign: Athena."

An evil grin slowly spread across my face as I heard the once mechanical voice of the Wraith change into the elegant voice of a young woman.

"Ha... haha... hahahaha..." I couldn't help but laugh. The sheer exhilaration I was feeling from doing something that should never be done was too much to contain. "Haha. ha. Haaa. It's nice to meet you, Athena. My name is Mikio. I look forward to working with you."

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"This is Mikio Braxten, Callsign Wraith, Requesting permission to dock."

A moment of silence passed before the Wraiths com system picked up the response from the station.

"Wraith, this is Galbek-3 port Authority, Callsign Julien-2. Please standby."

"Roger Julien-2, Wraith Standing By." I responded before turning off my mic and glancing down at the blue 3d orb displayed in the ship's center console. "You think they know?"

"Unlikely. I've been careful to disguise my data signature and I've altered the ship's original data to match your information. In order to discover evidence of tampering, it would require the dismantling of the Wraiths core system and performing an in depth diagnostic on the core and all related subsystems."

"Oh, alright, so we're good then."

"Yes. You are good."

"That's good to know." I let out a sigh as I slipped a bit lower into the pilot's seat.

After ending the engagement with the pirate frigate and activating Athena, we spent 3 days with just the two of us as the autopilot system delivered us to the Mining Colony Station orbiting Galbek-3.



After explaining my situation to Athena, and learning of her own situation, the two of us decided to work together for the foreseeable future. Athena is a decommissioned Military AI that was most likely stolen during an engagement with one of the large pirate corps that make their home in the Null-Sec space surrounding the Valux Empire. In reality, there's no way for either of us to find out how the High security case that was housing Athena's data terminal ended up aboard the Meerkat.

According to Athena, at the end of her service life, as was a standard procedure in the decommissioning of AI, all of her prior record were purged from her memory and her Military System Access Rights were revoked before she was placed in a hibernation state and stored inside the high security case. If she hadn't been stolen from the military security, she would have been taken to an undisclosed facility in the empire and she would have been purged from the data terminal before the terminal and all records of her existence were purged from the Empires Archives.

In essence, after she outlived the empire's use for her, she was being sent off to die. At least that's how I choose to look at it. Just based on the conversations I've had with her, she seems just as, if not far more intelligent than I am. I guess that's to be expected from a Military AI that has the capability to manage hundreds if not thousands of ships and their subsystems simultaneously in real time.

Regardless of her history, neither of us are supposed to exist here. But none of that matters. Regardless of her past and my sudden appearance here in this universe, both of us need to find a purpose. For her, traveling around with me is her current purpose. For me, I just want to learn more about this universe while I'm here, and the first step to achieving that goal is getting permission to dock here at the Galbek-3 Station.

"Wraith, This is Julien-2, do you copy?" the voice of the port authority worker comes over the cockpits coms, with a flick, I re-enable the mic.

"Julien-2, this is Wraith. Reading you loud and clear."

"Wraith, You have been granted permission to dock, proceed to Platform 5, Bay 1."

"Wraith to Julien-2, Roger, Platform 5, Bay 1. Beginning Docking Procedure."

"Welcome to Galbek-3 station."

As the com-link went dead, I flicked the mic back off and went to engage the docking protocol.

"You wanna bring us in, Athena? Or should I?"

"It would be my pleasure." The voice of the female AI replied, a notable tone of happiness or joy in her voice. The Wraith then began smoothly gliding through the crowded launchways as

Athena guided us into our designated landing point. With the Wraith being a small fighter, we were assigned an internal hanger bay that reminded me of one of those large multi-story car parks found in big cities back on earth.

Athena's piloting of the Wraith was superb, easily demonstrating her command over the entirety of the ship's systems and sensors. On our way here, she asked if she could take over from the autopilot for a while before proceeding to push the limits of the Wraith's maneuverability. If my own piloting, trained through hundreds if not thousands of hours of gameplay, was a 10 out of 10, then Athena's performance as a pilot would easily be a 100 or more.

"Just don't go pulling those moves in here. Knowing what you can do, I'm sure it'd be fine, but I'm not trying to look like a hooligan."

"Are you saying you don't trust me enough to dock the ship? Besides, you don't need me to help you look like a hooligan. The wraith makes it more than apparent."

"... WAIT! What are you trying to say about the Wraith? She's a fine ship for what she is."

"Romana Manufacturing Interceptor Model ATX-03 is a lightweight, high maneuverability fighter interceptor. Designed with a focus on Speed, Turning Capability and Firepower, ATX-03 is a well known and highly respected Fighter-Interceptor that has been in service with the Valux Empires Military for over 50 years. Romana Manufacturing has tried 3 times over its long service life to replace the Militaries use of the ATX-03 with newer models, but in all pilot conducted tests, the ATX-03 has outperformed its competition and achieved high marks for its capabilities. The ATX-03's unwillingness to rest in peace makes the call sign Wraith, a fitting name."

"Haha, stats and numbers. Of course the Wraith is a good ship. It's got me and you behind the stick."

We continued to banter back and forth with each other while Athena guided us to the designated platform and safely touched down in the vertical stack bay. As soon as the Wraiths landing gear locked to the floor of the bay, the subtle hum coming from the mechanical nature of the space station made its way into the cockpit. For the first time since arriving in this universe, after 3, almost 4 consecutive days in the seat of a cramped star-fighter, my body felt the familiar pull of gravity, though in this case, it was artificial.

As soon as the bay doors closed behind us, there was an immediate rush of air as the station pressurized the sealed bay. As the loud rushing of air came to a stop, the com lit up again as one of the Port workers in charge of the bays came on.

"The bay has been pressurized, you're clear to disembark."