

Awakened Again

Slumbering safely, the mind races as synapses are fired, experiences and sensations created. Elements meld, faces are remembered, concepts are formed and then, a puddle appears. Your foot touches it expecting no less than to feel the firmness of the ground. But it's a lie, everything is wrong. The fall is unexpected as it is quick. You are ripped from your dream. Plummeting into the abyss. Filled with dread. Filled with fear. Black. Flailing. Screaming.

You jolt awake.

Chest beating. Pupils are dilated. Your hands are trembling. You are roused from your sleep, coming to your senses. Everything that you just experienced, vanishing as you cross the veil into the real world. As you look around the darkly lit room, covered in a cold sweat, you see familiar surroundings and objects and it feels like you're seeing them for the first time, like arriving home after a long journey.

Capsuleers knew that sensation all too well. The disjointed separation of senses and reality, the complete disconnect, if only for a few fractions of the second that seem to go on for eons; it only added on top of the nightmarish anxiety they felt each cycle.

This time, Anna woke up shivering with every inch of her body. Not that her clone station was malfunctioning; all displays green, sensors were reading nominal, that wasn't it. A vessel just-filled by her consciousness, the body was pristine as well. The mind on the other hand, having just made a cross-galactic jump, was still sending out residual feedback to the sympathetic nervous system to raise defenses for a body that was no longer alive.

The truth was that the shock of having your entire brain destroyed by the imprint scan procedure, tossed across the void via quantum entangling and delivered to the mind of a fresh clone was still a complex matter. An inhumane, beautiful, brutal and precisely executed procedure this technology; merger of capsule and capsuleer, 'a step closer to godhood' they say.

But no one mentions the staggering pain, the hazy disorientation, the short-lived after effects and the pure mental composure needed to be upheld to not return a brain-dead ruin of flesh of what you were before. Nor does anyone mention the falling feeling.

That dreaded falling feeling.

If it weren't for the bone-chilling cold to sober Anna out of the haze, she'd take a minute just laying there on the tilted clone pod, going through the mental gymnastics to puzzle together all the pieces of her mind back into place. Not this time, though.

She felt frostbitten, synaptic responses that had fired madly and blindly slowly beginning to realise that the danger is gone. Grasping herself to stop the shivering, her arms closing around her lithe figure, the dislike for the side-effects of activating microwarp drives grew even more firmly rooted in her.

The deep gashing pain as armor disintegrated off her, ship she found bearable. The violent muscle micro-contracts of firing high calibre artillery cannons across the vastness of space was also something Anna could control. She even found the nausea of engaging the negative friction warp drive oddly soothing. But not microwarp drives.

They made her cold, oh so cold.

A glacial chill raising up from your lower back, spreading slowly through your body, its effect only compounding wave after wave, enduring, latching, ever-present. This was what forcing a thousand tons of metals alloys and component polymers against their will felt like. Storming across the red-tinted nebular sky at three kilometers a second toward her target while her microwarp drive was spooling and pulsing. Spooling and pulsing. Spooling, pulsing. She winced every time she had to feel the frostbite. It reminded her of a far off icy planet and of scattered memories almost belonging to someone else.

Ragged-looking technical engineers began flocking around the clone pod station, working diligently but fearful. The transparent pod-like silicate covering hummed open revealing the fair-skinned female, her body slightly shaking, rattling her short cropped hazelnut hair as she tried to hold herself upright on the angled platform.

The room filled with a low mist of compounded gases surging from the cloning pod, the minmatar slaves cutting through it as they sprinted from terminal to terminal. Dull flashing warning lights were reflected off of the nanosteel-lined walls, diffusing throughout the room in a thin haze and ending in the mist that caked the floor. For all the soulless technology involved, this process managed to create a sacramental mood.

Out of all the stations where she could hand-pick to awaken in, Anna preferred Amarr. It wasn't the culture she found interest in, not at all, but in the side effects. The cloning stations were often manned by frightened slaves that just wanted to fulfill their obligations and leave, content with scurrying to survive another day. It was that sensation of palpable humanity, the ephemeral fragility of it that they left behind in their wake that she wanted to see as she came to. That she needed to see.

Outside that room she was a catalyst, changing the lives of billions of people and weaving the web of her own fate with her every thought and whim. But here, now, temporarily stripped from her 'divinity', she would look into the eyes of those she would only discount before. Seeing the tarnished faces and scarred flesh, the sadness with a hidden tinge of hope in their eyes, these things grounded her into this transient reality. Made her remember.

Climbing out of the clone pod, Anna frailly put her feet on the grated floor, her toes reacting to the rough texture as her body slid down the side of the machine. Immortal with tons of nanosteel and plastiform protecting her from the void, but in this very human state she knew she was weaker than the slaves who just took her out of neurosleep. Ask any commoner and they think capsuleers just awaken like unbreakable titans immediately after death, surging to climb back into the fight on steeds of glory as if the defeat they were subjected to only inflamed their spirit tenfold.

As Anna was kneeling on the floor naked, her knees scraping against the rough grating and breathing erratically from the pungent, horrid, gasses, she didn't feel very titanic.

Her hand reached for a terminal and upon glancing at the amber display she noticed she'd been out of the fight for a good half an hour by now. The screen scrolled quickly as Anna waded through subspace messages and notifications only to finally stop on one, sighing of relief. She had awoken to a message from her CEO, giving congratulations. Pushing herself to the brink allowed her corporation to secure the kill on a capsuleer-piloted pirate battleship they were chasing, an expensive Rattlesnake class. The message continued saying she was also expected back into her corporation's Fortizar, in the dark beyond of wormhole space, to continue operations as soon as possible.

That'd have to wait, she thought, as her left hand weakened for a moment losing grip on the terminal, with the rest of her arm falling limply by her side.

The door to the room opened with a low rumbling sound and a heavily-cloaked man entered, carrying a large box and a set of clothes. As she saw the man she instinctively touched her lower lip, her hand falling closer to her face than she expected. A slight deja-vu. Defeated, Anna leaned back on the cold wall and let her body slump uncomfortably as she waved the amarrian in the doorway closer.

Coming near, he was happy to be able to avoid her gaze. The woman's view was now transfixed on some dislodged cabling and tubing above her. Out of the tangle of technology and machinery melding together like a stained glass window, she realised she knew what those parts were, protoenergetic manifolds. But something made her pause. It wasn't odd for her to have knowledge of advanced station construction or prototype electrical systems, but it was odd for her to take this long to recall when and where she'd learned that bit of info.

Tick. It came to her like a surgical needle in her neural pathways. A time before death, a dark crawlspace, a scolding guardian.

She gritted her teeth.

Her mental journey didn't get to reach any further as she found her thoughts derailed by a pair of warm fingers gently grasping her lip. Anna's gaze raised to meet the long face of the cloaked

figure, measuring him up as he stood frozen in place, surprised. With a quick movement she twisted his wrist painfully, bringing him down to her, and stared into his viridian eyes.

She saw fear. Unremarkable and predictable, but marking of the time. It was past due for her to become what she needed to be.

Twisting the wrist further, the man collapsed alongside her on the floor, dropping a device he was still holding with his other hand. Anna released the grip and the hooded amarrian backed off steadily, tucking his arms into this cloak, visibly shaken. She grabbed the device he had been carrying and inspected it for a moment before turning her head to the large box he had brought with him.

With a smidge of renewed vigor, Anna lifted the hefty lid to reveal a slotted interior with rows and columns, three-quarters empty, lined with sets of tiny metal rings. Her fingers ran over the empty numbered inserts which were labeled 0 to 40 until she felt metal under her fingers; number 32. She took the first metal ring of the twin set, placed it into the tip of the gadget and then raised the device up to her face. A tiny tinge ran through her lip, followed by a chilled sensation and the slight metallic taste of blood. Without wasting time she took the other metal piece, inserted it into the device and clamped it around her lip yet again.

As she let the device fall on the floor with an audible clank, Anna began to feel around the interior of her skin with her tongue and noticed that this time the rings were ever so slightly further apart than last time. If the amarrian still standing there wasn't so focused on chanting some forgotten prayer in a broken voice, he might have noticed a short burst of joy that surged upon the immortal's face. A rare sight to see an 'egger' still capable of exhibiting emotions after such a long career.

All the other capsuleers she'd met only held their physical bodies in contempt and disgust, calling them 'meat-suits', almost beckoning for the Jove to disseminate the technology that'd allow them to become true infomorphs and release them from this material existence.

Anna disagreed.

Spend enough time in the pod, with all the tethered lines that keep this world interconnected visible and accessible to you, subspace beacons relaying information from light years upon light years away, and it doesn't take much to think yourself omniscient. Couple that with the raw power of the engines of creation and destruction that a capsuleer could yield, the strength to challenge planets, systems and whole regions and it is an easy fantasy to fall into, to think yourself a God.

But all of them awoke to the same cramped cloning bays. Alone and powerless. Vulnerable and exposed. Broken and defeated. Most capsuleers thought of this weakened state as but

something to be forgotten, something to be excised from their limitless memory, something never to be mentioned.

That's why she insisted. Insisted on performing the procedure after each pod death, even though it was a simple matter to have the piercings printed with the clone. It made her feel human again to be flawed, to be different than last time, and not just a perfect imitation reliving life stuck in a loop, a God-like observer and manipulator from somewhere high on above, immovable as the world swirls around them.

She didn't suffer these rebirths as lapses in power. She knew she died, and she knew she was reborn. She was alive, each time, truly, and not just living. For her, as the nightmare that went on repeat in her head, the deep falling feeling always lead her to a reminder of her own original humanity. Something to be respected, a shrine you'd light a candle at before you continue on your journey, and not just discarded as an inconvenience.

Grafting those metal rings into her skin would be the last human thing she'd do before exiting that room. Before returning to the world a capsuleer.

Her thoughts flew away with her as she finished getting dressed with the clothes brought by the amarrian, the latest fashion on Kador Prime, she was assured, and her view shortly fell over the remaining sets of rings still visible in the box.

All were imitations of the ones she wore on her first pod death, the one that allowed her to graduate the capsuleer program and which marked her forever as an immortal. Such a long time ago that was, and so many deaths had she succumbed to since.

Gently, Anna's hand grazed over the remaining metal pieces for one last time before she would touch them again. As she made a mental note to replenish the empty rows of inserts, the terminal flashed and alerted her to an urgent communique sent from her corporation's Fortizar.

She'd need more of them before long.

**Written by
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