

Behind the Mask

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Part One

"Yo! Check this out!"

The call came over the suit-to-suit radio on a public wavelength, so Kevran decided to investigate. He bounced smoothly across the gritty surface of the asteroid to land beside Rock. The big man was leaning over the edge of a crease in the surface, beside Jackyl. The two were staring avidly into the crack, eyes wide. Kev flipped his helmet beam up to high and looked in to see the wonder for himself.

"Oh. . . gods. . ." he breathed.

Laying there in the embrace of the asteroid was the body of a man.

"All right, you, back to work!" Old Hardass, the supervisor, arrived on the scene with an aggressive bounce. "Standing around ain't gettin' 'er done. What the fuck?"

"Dunno, Hardass." Rock shook his head in bewilderment. "Jackyl found 'im. Can't say's I make what he's doin' out here, no suit an' all."

"Is he one of ours?"

"Not with that thing on his face," Kev muttered. There were two bars of black metal extending from temple to temple, framing the dead man's eyes like a mask.

"Who asked you, Feather?" Hardass glared at him. He winced. He hated that nick, short for Featherweight, just because he wasn't some burly beer-guzzling ass-pinching lout of a brain-dead idiot. It wasn't his fault he was built lean and wiry.

"Nobody asked, but it's still true. You ever see anything like that on one of our boys? And just look at what he's wearing. That much leather would buy you and your mother both."

Kev immediately wished he could somehow stuff those words back where they'd come from. *Idiot!*

"You leave my mamma out of this, boy," Hardass growled, advancing a single menacing step.

"Uh, Boss?" Rock came to his rescue. . . not for the first time. Rock was the one who'd let slip the fact that the crew called old Willie Hardass. Who'd have guessed the bastard would like it? Come to think of it, that had been another attempt to save Kev from a thrashing. "Weren't you here for a reason?"

"Yeah, yeah." The supervisor shot one last glare at Kev, then dismissed the matter from his mind. "Get your asses back to work, y'ain't gettin' paid to stand around."

"What's it to you, man? You ain't paying us yourself!" Jackyl tore his gaze away from the dead man to grin at Hardass.

"But if production drops, so does my commission. Now move it!"

Kev lingered as long as he dared by the crack, absorbing every detail of the body. He wasn't sure what was so compelling about it, but he was extremely curious about who it had been and how the body had gotten onto an airless asteroid in the depths of space.

Kev finished out his duty shift with less than half his attention on mining. Questions about the dead man gnawed at him obsessively. Who was he? Where had he come from? Why was he dead? And most of all, *what* was that thing on his face?

Kevran lagged behind when the shift was over. If he was lucky, he could grab another look at the man. . . yes, no one was looking at him. He slipped back to the crack, keeping one ear tuned to the activity around the shuttle. Only a brief look, wouldn't want to get stranded here. . .

The sound of gravel shifting was all the warning he had before blackness overwhelmed him.

Part Two

Typically, Rock was the first to notice Kevran's absence.

"Hey!" he called, searching the crowded passenger compartment of the shuttle. "Anyone seen Kev?"

"Not since we closed up ops on the surface. Why? Ain't he here?" Hardass craned his head about, searching for some sign of his least-favorite miner.

A quick headcount showed clearly that Kevran was indeed missing. Hardass grumbled and swore loudly, but all could see the concern in his eyes.

"I'll make a report when we get back to the fuckin' *Zelda*, and they can send out an S&R team. They're going to rake my ass over the coals for this, the lousy little bastard. I ain't never lost no one on my duty shift before. What in all hells does he think he's doing, running off like that? I'll rip his measly hide to shreds. . ."

All grumbling aside, old Hardass was the first off the shuttle and was talking to Core before the last miner had emerged from the hatch. Rock found a way to include himself on the S&R crew.

But it was no use. The crew returned to the asteroid to find it devoid of all signs of life. Rock found the crack that had fascinated Kevran so and swore in shock.

The dead man was no longer there.

"Someone's taken 'im!"

"Taken who?" Perry, head of the S&R crew, bounced over to land beside Rock.

"Both of 'em! Kev, and the dead man."

"What dead man?"

Curious about what they were hearing on their headsets, the other members of the crew began bouncing in.

"The dead man that Jackyl found. He was right here, and Kev was starin' at him like you wouldn't believe. Betcha anything he slipped back here for another gawk and someone snatched 'im, someone as came back for the body."

"The Mazuri," someone murmured, in a tone half fearful and half awed.

"Stop that, right now!" Perry glared at all of his men. "I'll have none of that kind of talk here. The Mazuri are just a children's tale, and you all know it. Now back to the search. Now!"

Rock lingered, staring at the empty crevice. The Mazuri. . . a shiver went through him, a primal feeling of horror. Everyone knew the tales of the space-roving demons, who came to snatch you away without a trace and turn you into a monster. . . Had the masked man on the asteroid been one of them, the ultimate enemy? Had he been among the only three people ever to see the face of the Mazuri and live to tell about it?

Rock felt a claw of cold terror clutch at his guts, then shook it off with an effort. Of course not. The Mazuri were just tales used to frighten naughty children. He turned from the crack without a backward glance and rejoined the search effort, despite a private certainty that it was completely futile.

It was a quiet and disheartened crew which returned to Base Ship *Zelda*. Not a trace of the missing miner had been found, a completely unprecedented situation. Usually, there was some sign, some indication of what had caused the disappearance: a broken tether line, an accident scene, even a scorch mark from an exploded jetpack. Most often, the missing person was found waiting at the shuttle site, embarrassed and sheepish. More than one person had simply missed the shuttle launch. None had ever vanished without a trace.

Rock took it upon himself to break the news to Kevran's partner. Knowing Kellina, she wouldn't take it well, and it was better she hear it from a friend.

Part Three

The sleek silver Council ship flowed smoothly through space, unaffected by the antics of the intruders as they tried to escape the deadly accuracy of the symbiont craft. Nothing short of a nova affected that serene hull.

The organic unit performed its assigned task smoothly. There was nothing to mark this unit as different from any of the hundred other units assigned to fly escort duty on the council ship. Nothing at all out of the ordinary. . . on the surface, at least. But something happened within the unit as it carried out its duties.

The Zelda.

A thought formed in the void of the organic unit's mind. It felt a vague need to report the malfunction to base, but did nothing.

Home.

A concept took shape, filling the void. Home. Comfort. A name, Kellina.

Rock. Jackyl. Hardass. Feather—no! Kevran. My name is Kevran. I have a name!

Excruciating pain shot through the unit—no, *Kevran*. He groaned and clutched the bars of his mask. Movement felt odd, unnatural. He quit moving, sent his shipself into a breakaway roll. He could see his objective ahead, the open shuttleport of the *Zelda*. He twisted himself through the barrage of defensive fire with contemptuous ease, then brought himself in for a landing in the shuttle dock. He sat there passively as armed guards surrounded his craft, while the *Zelda's* surviving fighter pilots limped in for a landing. Behind them, the Council ship and her escort had vanished into a blur of nonbeing.

Noises came closer. The organic unit—*Kevran*—could feel their disgusting human hands on his sleek skin, feel the pain as they began to pry at his shipself. He flicked open an entry port and felt distant amusement at their shock. Then they were climbing him, weapons at the ready.

Part Four

The bridge crew was still in shock from the unexpected battle—battle!—when Astrogator Kellina suddenly swore loudly and abandoned her post. Startled eyes followed her into the lift, but no one did anything to stop her.

Kellina ignored protocol and *ran* through the halls, shoving people aside if they didn't move quickly enough to suit her. The call had come across her private channel: *We've found Kevran. Get to MedBay, right now.* That was all the info she had. Core had disconnected, and the call had come over a secure channel so she couldn't raise a response. She'd tried, but given up in favor of following instructions.

There was the door ahead, drab green against the grey-white of the corridor. She hit it at a dead run and exploded into a disturbing tableau.

Medtechs hovered around a still form on a gurney. She knew instantly it was Kevran. That dark hair was unmistakable, even dulled and laying in lank strings against the sterile white of the gurney. But what was that thing on his face?

"Who are you?" A medic noticed her as she stared in shock, taking in the details of her contract partner's appearance.

"Kellina," she choked out. Gods, but he was thin! Wasted away to nothing, even to her space-bred eyes.

"Oh, good. You're his partner, right? We need you here, as next of kin."

Kellina tore her gaze away from the black bars across Kev's face. "What is wrong with him?"

The medic backed away a step from the intensity in her eyes. "We don't really know," he said, twisting his hands in an unconscious motion. "We think it's to do with the mask he's wearing. We need your permission to remove it."

"Let me see him." She pushed through the crowd of medtechs without a second thought.

He was pale, with sweat shining on his hollow cheeks. He thrashed and moaned weakly. She reached for his hand and the contact seemed to reassure him. He gripped her hand hard and stopped thrashing, but the low moaning continued unchanged.

"How did this happen? Why is he like this?"

"He began to go into convulsions when the tech crew cut the line connecting him to that ship. We had to sedate him to get him this calm."

"You call this calm?" she muttered. "Okay, then, you have my permission. Get that thing off him!"

As if at a prearranged signal, medics went into action. Four of them strapped Kevran's body securely to the table, while two more positioned themselves at his head. Once the straps were secure, everyone stepped back to allow the two a chance to remove the black bars from Kevran's face. One of them touched the mask uncertainly. He jerked his hand away, shaking it, with a muffled oath.

"That thing zapped me!"

"Great," the other medtech muttered. "Insulated gloves, now!" he barked.

With the gloves on, the two medics positioned themselves carefully again, hands poised above the contact points of the mask. In a synchronized movement, they pried the mask away from Kevran's face.

Kevran went into a massive convulsion, then lay still. Kellina stared at his temples. Where the mask had rested were two silvery metal things, which looked like spiderwebs.

"Implant technology," sighed one of the medics, clearly in awe. He touched the silver webs carefully. "Whoever did this to him must be incredibly advanced."

"Will he be okay now?" Kellina couldn't keep the edge of fear out of her voice. Kev was so still, so quiet. . . She couldn't bear to lose him again. He'd been gone for over a month without a trace. She'd thought he was dead, and had begun to adjust. But now here he was, miraculously returned from the dead, and she didn't think she could bear it if he died again.

"We don't know yet." Medtechs could be so reassuring at times. "We'd like to run some tests first. . ."

"What kind of tests?"

"Just a basic body scan to start with, then it depends on what we find."

"Go ahead with the scan, but nothing else, understand? I'll not have him poked and prodded like a lab animal."

He hid disappointment well.

Kellina watched as they rolled Kevran's gurney into the scanner, afraid. She didn't like medtechs, or tests, or. . . anything to do with MedBay, in fact. The only time she'd ever set foot on a planet she'd contracted an infection which had kept her in MedBay for two years. Those two years were a part of her childhood which still gave her nightmares. She'd wake up screaming and crying, then Kevran would hold her until the fear had passed. . . She blinked back stinging tears. He would be okay. He *had* to be okay.

She heard an excited flutter from the medics clustered around the scanner readout and made her way over there. "Well? What is it?"

"Come see this, miz!" One of them—she couldn't even begin to sort them out, and didn't much care who was who anyway—made room for her by the scanner. She was treated to a grainy, black and white view of the inside of Kev's body. There were shiny silver things which stood out clearly in the image. They were attached to every major organ.

"What are those things? Like the ones on his head?"

"At a guess, I'd say they were regulating his vital functions," said the head medtech, distinguished only by his rank pin. "We'd like to study—"

"No," she interrupted. "You know as well as I do that this technology is beyond yours! I won't have you messing around with Kevran's life."

She glared at him, satisfied when he dropped his eyes. She took a deep breath and hoped no one could see how she was shaking.

"What's going on in there?" The blond medic at the console frowned at the readout and tapped keys rapidly. "He shouldn't be moving like that!"

"Get him out of there." The head medtech opened the door to the scanner and the gurney rolled obediently out on the conveyor belt. Kevran's eyes were open, and he was struggling against the restraints, trying to sit up.

"Kev!" Kellina shoved through the excited medics and reached his side.

"Kellina! What happened? Where am I?"

"Oh, Kev! You're alive!" Kellina felt her face nearly split in two with a huge grin. "You're in MedBay, safe back at home."

"Home. . ." He smiled. Then he tried to sit up again. "Will somebody let me out of this damn bed? At least let me sit up!"

The head medtech himself undid the restraints, and Kevran sat up.

"It's cold in here. Can't I have some clothes? Why do you medics like to keep people naked, anyway? And when can I go?"

Kellina smiled, wiping away happy tears. That was definitely her Kevran!

Part Five

Kevran walked rapidly through the corridors, pushing himself to his limits. He was appallingly weak, with next to no muscle left. He was having difficulty with simple movements, like walking,

after so long of being immobile. He frowned, trying once again to fight his way through the blank spot in his mind. He had been at work on the asteroid, and then he was in MedBay. Nothing in between, not even a blink of memory. Just a feeling of emptiness, then pain and a need to reach the *Zelda*. Nothing to tell him what had happened in the five and a half weeks Standard he'd been missing.

He continued on his unchanging orbit of the *Zelda*'s outer corridor. Three trips around. . . four. . . and he absolutely could go no further. He sought the comfort of the lounge, to rest before returning to the quarters he shared with Kellina.

Kellina. Now there was something of a problem. He hadn't realized how dependant she was on him before. His disappearance had damaged her badly, and now she was becoming increasingly neurotic about him. If she knew that he'd pushed for four circuits of the ship, rather than two, she'd look at him with those faded blue eyes full of reproach and flay him alive without even raising her voice. She had no peer when it came to reducing him to a guilty, grovelling worm in as few words as possible.

He reached the lounge and ordered a dark ale, first making sure there were none of their mutual friends about. Friends who might snitch on him, might tell her that he came in red-faced and panting for breath. . . friends who might look at him with thinly-veiled fear in their eyes.

Surreptitiously he touched the implants. He didn't *feel* any different, even knowing there were little machines controlling all his vital functions. He had allowed that much testing out of sheer curiosity. But he heartily agreed with Kellina about not becoming a lab rat. And besides, the technology was obviously beyond human levels.

His ale arrived and he sipped it, ignoring the furtive glance of the server. Let the humans wonder. He was. . . what? What was he, anyway?

Kev groaned and put his head in his hands. It had happened again. He was starting to think of himself as other than human. *And won't that go over well with Kellina.* . .

He finished his ale quietly, then returned home. Kellina was there already.

"Hello! What are you doing home so early?"

"Early! It's not early. Where have you been all day?" She rose from the seating unit and threw her arms around him.

"All day? It's only midmorning!"

She drew back, concerned. "Are you doing okay? It's after dinner hour. I was worried sick about you."

"But it can't be. . . I left here at ten hundred, took a walk around the ship, stopped for a drink, came home. There's nothing that could have taken me until dinner hour!"

"Look at the chrono," she shrugged. "It says it's now 18:34, doesn't it?"

"I'll be damned. . ." Kevran sank into the cushions of the seating unit, staring at the digital timepiece on the wall. It switched over to 18:35 as he watched. "It just can't be this late. . . where'd all that time go?"

"Kev, this is scary." Kellina sat beside him and rested her head on his shoulder. "I don't like this."

He stroked her ash blond hair. "I don't either, love. I don't either."

Part Six

Life became increasingly strange for Kevran. Gone was his easygoing good humor, his willingness to laugh troubles away. A brooding quiet grew in its place, along with a state of nervous tension. Under the surface of his thoughts, Kev could feel a nameless longing. He grew listless and discontent. He argued with Kellina frequently, over her protectiveness, over her concern. . . over anything.

Soon he was able to put his finger on what was bothering him: the *Mask*. He wanted to have his Mask back. Without it, he was nothing- not human, not. . . *other*. He managed, despite the alarming chunks of missing time, to find where it was kept.

It was in a locked box. He could feel it within, calling to him in a voice that matched his own longing. But he couldn't break the lock, he could only stand there and stroke the hard plastic

surface.

Kellina found him in the lab. "Kevran?"

No answer. She flipped on the light switch. "Kev, I know you're in here, Joel saw you come in here hours ago and never leave. . ." Her voice trailed off as she saw him at last.

He was on the floor, curled tightly around a plastic box. Tear tracks ran down his face from red and swollen eyes. "Help us, Kellina," he begged.

Us?

"We can't be apart like this. . . we're dying in here, in this dark airless place. We need to be complete. . ."

"What do you mean? Kev, are you okay?" She knelt beside him and felt his forehead. He was cold and clammy.

"No, not okay. . . must be complete."

She checked his pulse, to find it thready and racing. His breathing was shallow. Suddenly he burst into activity, trying to get into the box. He whimpered in frustration, then clutched the box to his chest, panting from the brief exertion.

"Help us. . ."

Kellina sighed. She thought she knew what was in that box, the mask they had removed from Kevran. Perhaps it was more important than anyone had realized at first. She pried the box loose from Kevran's grip and examined it. He kept reaching for it, pleading with his eyes.

It had a simple combination lock on it. She fiddled carefully with the tumblers, feeling the slight catch whenever she passed the right number. She had all three of the numbers in the right order quickly and the box popped open. Kevran sprang forward with a cry and was in the mask before she had a chance to blink.

"Ahhhh. . ."

Kevran sighed with intense relief and sank back against the wall. The bars of the mask framed his brown eyes, which went utterly blank. The pupils were mere pinpricks, nearly invisible. He turned that blank stare on Kellina and smiled.

"We thank you, human."

Kellina shrank back from that harsh, cold, inhuman voice. "Who—*what* are you?"

"We are the one you know as Kevran, but more. We are complete now."

Kevran gazed at his surroundings with wonder. This was surely how things were meant to be seen, this glorious clarity brought by the Mask, everything in preternaturally sharp detail, outlined in colors no mere human was capable of seeing. He saw the female—*Kellina*, whispered a small voice of humanity—move away from him in a predictable reaction to the voice distortion. Humans were incapable of hearing the beauty of the tones produced by the Mask. To another of his own kind, the voice of the Mask would be as sweet as the finest music.

"Kev—" the human started to speak, then paused and swallowed. She tried again, with more success. "Kevran. What happened just then? Why do you sound different? Why are your eyes like that?"

"It is the Mask," he said simply. Humans were such limited creatures. They had no appreciation for the subtleties of the Mask.

Something inside of him responded to the human's disturbance at a deep emotional level. He smiled in an attempt to be reassuring. "Do not worry," he said. "We are still Kevran, and we still love you."

"I hope so," Kellina muttered, quietly enough that an ordinary human wouldn't have heard.

Part Seven

Kellina sat in the darkness, alone. There was no one else up at this hour, save the poor souls with the night watch. She could feel the hum of the *Zelda's* interstellar drive as it propelled them through space in search of yet another asteroid belt to mine.

She shifted on the cold metal. Ahead of her was the airlock door. All it would take was a single push of a button, and it would all be over. No more worries about Kevran, no more fear of what he had become over the last few weeks. . . Why hadn't he stayed dead? It was easier to deal with the

news of his disappearance and probable death on the asteroid than it was dealing with the Mask.

He had changed, without a doubt. Whatever the unknown enemy had done to him had changed him completely. Kevran no longer bore even a superficial resemblance to the light-hearted, cheerful man she'd contracted with. The Mask had changed all that.

She shuddered at the thought of the obscene thing, stretching its twin bars across his face from temple to temple. It was disgusting, unclean. . . She hated the sight of it, hated the way it made his pupils shrink to mere pinpricks and turned his voice into a harsh, nearly metallic croak. She hated even worse the way he spoke of it. . . as if it were a living entity. More, as if it were the most important living entity ever to exist, worlds away more important than *her*. He always spoke of himself as *we* now, and she was not a part of that *we*. Only the Mask, only that revolting piece of technology which had stolen her lover away.

She smiled at the blackness outside. Before, she had held on to life because she didn't want to hurt Kev. But now—now, she wasn't sure he would even notice if she was gone. Now there was nothing to hold her here.

She slammed a fist into the unforgiving metal of the deck in sudden anger. "Damn you! Why are you doing this to me? I thought you loved me!"

Love. It was supposed to be strong enough to withstand anything. But whoever said that had never had to deal with a situation like this. A loved one missing, presumed dead, who returned miraculously. . . only changed. Full of little metal implants, which kept all internal organs functioning smoothly, completely at one with the alien technology of the Mask. No longer human, but something else. Something *more*, he'd said.

"Something less," she muttered resentfully. Emotionless, cold, inhuman; he no longer cared for anything except that Mask.

Especially not her.

There was no room left in his heart, if he even still had one, for her. He had made that painfully obvious today.

"What is wrong?" he'd asked, finding her alone in their quarters. The harsh, distorted voice had made her jump.

"Nothing." She refused to look at him, to look at that *thing*.

"We don't think that is true. If there were nothing wrong, then why would you sit all alone?" He sat on the couch beside her.

"Who else would sit with me?"

"We would."

"Kevran. . ." she sighed. "Is there anything special about today?"

"We do not know. How do you mean, special?"

"Special as in unusual, as in remembering that something different happened—oh, say, two years ago, on this date?"

His blank look had torn her heart out. "We don't know what you mean."

"Nothing, like I said." The depression had settled firmly upon her then. She rose to leave the room. "If you don't remember our anniversary, that's your problem, not mine."

Whatever he was now, he was not her Kevran any longer. Her Kevran would have remembered, would have planned some extravagant evening, would have pampered her outrageously. . . not just given her a blank stare and a pathetic attempt to find out her problem. He really didn't care.

The pain of her loss twisted within her. She turned slowly, fixing her gaze upon the glowing red light of the airlock control. It would be so easy. . . just a single touch, and no more worries about Kevran ever again. . .

Her hand caressed the button lightly. Memories played through her mind of Kevran courting her, of Kevran loving her, of Kevran just being himself. She felt hot tears steaming down her cheeks and let them fall. Her Kevran was no more. Whatever inhabited his body now was a cold, inhuman machine, with no emotions left to care about her.

"I love you, Kev," she whispered, then pressed the button.

[Part Eight](#)

"We thank you for bringing the information."

Kevran shut the door in the human's face and stood for a moment in stunned disbelief. Then he turned to face the room he had shared with Kellina, up until her departure several hours ago. The part of him which stubbornly remained human fell into complete shock. He had just that day determined that he would ask Kellina's help to return to humanity, rather than continue to become whatever he was now. He had been shaken by her revelation that this was their anniversary, because he had not remembered at all. Kellina herself just hadn't seemed that important, not when compared to the Mask. And now the Mask was all he had left. . .

Kevran moved slowly to the seating unit and sat, reaching for the framed holo which stood on the end table. It showed Kellina and himself, both smiling, on the day they contracted. . . two years ago today. The Mask symbiont was disturbed as human emotions directed tears to fall slowly from his blank eyes.

"Forgive me, Kellina. . ." he whispered, but there was no response. There would never be a response again.

An unknown length of time later, a voice intruded upon Kevran's private misery.

Come to me. It is time.

"What?" he said aloud, startled from his silence. The voice had come from nowhere and had only sounded through the Mask, rather than the pathetically weak human ears.

Come, Kevran. It is time now.

"Time for what?" Kevran looked around, but could see nothing.

It is time for you to join us. Go to your ship.

"Why should I?" Resentment flared up in him. How dare someone, even an unseen voice, disturb his mourning!

You do not belong there. You belong here. We are waiting. We are your kind.

Kevran began to feel a compulsion to investigate the voice. Curiosity stirred in his human portion, through the pain of loss. He could feel the symbiont urging him to return to the ship, repair the damage, and go home.

Home.

He looked around the room. Reminders of Kellina were everywhere. Her image in many holos, her favorite wallscreen, her sweater laying over the back of the chair. . . all twisted in his heart like daggers. Perhaps a change of scenery wouldn't hurt, after all. . . The symbiont urged him strongly. At length, he sat the framed holo back in its accustomed place and rose decisively. There was nothing for him here. Kellina had been the only reason he was staying here anyway, and with no hope of her safe return. . . He'd do just as well to follow the voice in his Mask.

The corridors were hushed. The *Zelda* was not a large craft, and the loss of one of the bridge crew was felt throughout the entire ship. He was aware of unfriendly eyes on him, aware of the restless mutterings which followed his progress. The human part of Kevran wallowed in guilt, hearing and agreeing with the accusations. It was all his fault. If he hadn't changed so much, Kellina would still be alive. If he had never come back, she would have been fine. It was all his fault. . .

The symbiont guided Kevran's body effortlessly through the *Zelda* until the objective was in sight. Then Kevran was jolted into awareness as the symbiont cried out in pain. An unseen barrier blocked his progress, keeping him from his ship.

Kevran allowed the human portion of himself to surface and deal with this problem. He looked around and noticed a shield generator box mounted on the wall, with a glowing red light. He walked over and touched it. The Mask stripped data on its workings from it with contempt and made the necessary adjustments. The light switched to green and the barrier dropped.

The ship waited for him, sleek and elegant. He touched the smooth side and was reassured by the welcome he received. Yes, this was the right thing to do. He no longer belonged with these beings. He opened the entry portal and stepped inside.

The severed lifeline was the first thing he saw. He dropped to his knees and picked it up, cradling it protectively.

"What did they do to you?" He felt the ship's pained response through his Mask. He looked

around the interior—empty, save for the pilot's chair—and spotted the first aid cabinet. He laid the lifeline down carefully and opened the cabinet. Fortunately, he wasn't the first pilot to have such a mishap, and the Masters had provided the means for healing.

He extracted a small sealer unit carefully and applied it to the lifeline. As soon as it touched, the line incandescenced and sealed over. The ship hummed with satisfaction as the lifeline regrew its missing pieces. Kevran, trembling with eagerness, returned the sealer unit to the cabinet and placed the lifeline ends against the temple receivers on the Mask.

A feeling of *rightness* permeated him. He sank into the supportive embrace of the chair and powered up his engines. Ahead of him was the open shuttle bay. It was the work of a moment for the Mask to command the *Zelda's* computer to drop the airshield. Kevran turned his shipself into position and launched, reveling in the freedom of once again streaking through the stars.

* * * *

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