

# EVE<sup>®</sup>

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## Lonetrek Region - Minnen Constellation The Piak System, Planet III Sovereignty of the Caldari State

Currents of black water were starting to run down the gulleys on both sides of the street, washing away the accumulated soot deposited there by the factory looming in the distance. The mist-like rain, partly produced by terraformers half a continent away, was scheduled to last for weeks to come. A layer of heavy smog hung just over the heads of the people marching through the muck, beside the tracks of a decrepit transportation system that was falling into ruin.

They emerged from a vast area filled with metallic housing structures that provided shelter, warmth, and little else. There were rows upon rows of these spartan living spaces filling a rock basin dozens of kilometers across, surrounding the Caldari Constructions Armor Forge at its heart. One of several industrial mega-complexes owned and operated by the corporation, the factory manufactured the composite alloys used to build everything from hand-held tools to a capital ship's heavy armor plating, often forcing its workers to operate their equipment under perilous conditions.

On a clear day the corporation's space elevator complex was visible, perched high atop the ridge encircling the basin. Giant cargo containers descended gently from the clouds, supported by carbon nanotube cables which stretched all the way up into space and ended at an orbital dockyard where starships offloaded raw ore mined from asteroids and loaded finished products. There were ten cables in all, each transporting heavy materials up and down from the sky all day, every day, with the meticulous timing of

a corporation striving to meet demanding production schedules.

Opposite the elevators, on the far side of the basin, were the corporate overseers of this vast machine. Luxurious domed housing structures filled with exotic plants and stocked with every conceivable amenity associated with comfort and pleasure lined the basin ridge, and contrasted sharply with the dirty shanties far below. This was where the corporate executives made their residences, the managers and foremen of the mechanical symphony playing below. They traveled to work in hovercars, their boots never once touching the filthy ground during their quick journeys to the Armor Forge. Drawing the occasional glance from a weary worker, they sped past the crowds of people trudging on to another day's toil for another meager paycheck.

The streets filled quickly as the morning shift shuffled past the returning night crews. Most of the men and women walked with their shoulders hunched against the cold, the rain, and their bone-numbing fatigue. But today there was something different about the crowd. Here and there, some of these plebeians marched with straight backs and deadpan resolve, as if they knew that this day would stand apart from all the others.

One man walked among them with a heavy limp, and his name was Tibus Heth.

The hovercar slipped around boulders and ravines with effortless grace, zipping down the steep rock face of the basin and leveling off over the harsh terrain below.

*What a grim day*, Altug thought to himself, slowing the vehicle down. The rain was steady now, leaving dark streaks on the windshield as droplets rolled down the glass. Sensors probing ahead of the vehicle found the western edge of the "Shallows", the

nickname of the vast housing complex the corporation provided for its Armor Forge workers. The long avenues carved through it led to the western gate, about five kilometers ahead. The vehicle gently came to a hover about a meter above the ground and started down the road, traveling slowly due to the reduced visibility.

Altug could see some of the workers returning to the tiny shelters, some of which were right next to a derelict rail station. *Poor bastards*, he thought. *It's a shame we had to cut funding for the rail system, but the margins just aren't as healthy as they used to be.* As the hovercar approached the gate, the smog cleared enough to catch sight of the two sentry towers facing the west. *Those will be the next cuts*, he thought, momentarily distracted by the pronounced limp of a worker as the car passed by. *No need to pay people just to sit up there all day doing nothing when—*A loud *thud* startled him as the windshield's view was suddenly obscured with a worker lying horizontally across it. Panicking, he squeezed the brakes, forcing the hovercar to a sudden stop; the victim was thrown, rolling twice in the mud before coming to rest. Altug was shocked, and instinctively glanced up towards the towers. Both were obscured from view by the smog again. Cursing to himself, he unlocked the doors to step outside. But as they slid open he felt several sets of hands force him back into the vehicle. Then the hovercar's doors were forced shut.

"Good morning," a voice said, startling him again. The worker with the limp was sitting right beside him. "Altug Borascus, yes?" "What the hell are you doing in my—"

The man jabbed something into his side, sending a wave of excruciating, paralyzing pain through his limbs. As soon as he removed it, the pain stopped.

"I don't like repeating myself," the intruder said, politely. "Are you Altug?"

"Yes!" he said. "What do you want?"

"A ride to work," the man said. He appeared to be in his mid-forties, with prematurely white hair and harsh features. Scars marked both of his cheeks, and his eyes were intense. "Drive to the security checkpoint, let them do the retina scan, and tell them I'm your guest."

Altug noticed that the man's hands were thick and strong, like a steel worker's. One of them held a pistol. "Who are you?"

The man smiled. "My name is Tibus Heth," he said. "An employee of this corporation and fellow Caldari kinsman." Leaning towards Altug, his smile disappeared. "You aren't my enemy, *friend*. If you cooperate, you'll be rewarded."

Something about the way he said '*friend*' sent a chill down Altug's spine. Looking at the road ahead, the victim he'd collided with was nowhere to be seen. Then something jabbed into his side again, delivering a second bolt of searing pain.

"Drive," Tibus ordered. "We have a lot to do."

The guards in the sentry towers, also under the employ of the Caldari Constructions Corporation, never noticed the "accident" between the Altug Borascus's hovercar and the factory worker who intentionally threw himself in its path, nor did they notice the men who stopped him from getting out as a white-haired cripple slipped into the passenger-side seat. In fact, the corporation-issued night-vision equipment needed to see through the inclement weather and choking smog was inoperable, since the funds for replacement batteries were long since depleted.

Not that functional security equipment would have made any difference. On the western and northern gates, the guards posted inside the sentry towers were all disarmed, handcuffed, and gagged long before Altug's hovercar ever reached the security checkpoint. The men carrying out the assaults-also employees of the corporation and ethnic Caldari citizens-were careful not to kill anyone, or cause irreparable physical harm to their victims. They boldly assumed the posts of the fallen guards, some even using their radios to make innocuous-sounding comments about the weather to give an appearance of normalcy, while small groups of men and women made their purposeful way through the oblivious crowd, moving as fast as they could without running to get inside the factory.

"Good morning, Mr. Borascus," the guard asked, before the door opened fully. "Who's your guest?"

Altug emerged slowly from the lift with Tibus close behind him. They were standing on a catwalk overlooking an assembly hangar, a vast indoor structure where molten alloys were poured into the required molds for this production line. Today, the line was casting armor plate sections for Hawk-class assault frigates; men operating robot-like MTAC's (Mechanized Torso-Actuated Chassis) moved about the assembly floor three stories below their feet, lifting the cooling plates from the assembly line and placing them on racks ready for transport to the space elevators.

Altug spoke without a trace of emotion. "Mr. Heth has expressed an interest in factory management," he answered, as deliberately as he could. "We're going to speak in my office about its various...nuances."

The guard eyed Tibus suspiciously, who returned the scrutiny with

a wink.

"Fortune's been good to me for a change, soldier," Tibus said.

"Today's my lucky break."

"What's your regular assignment?"

Tibus chuckled. "Usually I'm marching around in one of those MTAC's down there," he said. "Always wondered what the view was like from up here."

"Alright," the guard said, standing aside to let them pass on the narrow grating. "Have a good day, sir."

Altug said nothing, silently fuming at the man for failing to realize he was being held hostage. He made a mental note of the guard's name, and would have employment termination orders prepared for him the moment this crisis ended. He cringed as the door behind him closed.

"Sit at your terminal," Tibus ordered. He could feel the pain device pressed into the small of his back, and did as he was told.

"Now set off the contamination alarms in the west and north wings," he growled. "Quickly."

Altug twitched involuntarily. "You can't be serious—". A searing jolt of pain made him shriek. Tibus started laughing maniacally, slapping Altug on the back and pointing at the screen. The guard turned to peer into the office.

"Laugh." Tibus growled.

Another quick jolt of pain invoked a second shriek, which Altug contorted into a hoarse, fake laugh. The guard gave them a quizzical look.

"Good," Tibus said, keeping the device pressed against Altug's spine. "Keep your eyes on the screen. Play along, friend. This will be over soon."

Altug was on the verge of tears. *Why is this happening to me? Who*

*is this raving madman, and why aren't the guards in here shooting him dead?*

"Turn your head and look at me," Tibus said. "Nice and easy. Try to look relaxed."

Altug turned, quivering, and stared into the dark eyes of his captor. "I made you a promise," Tibus said, looking thoughtful as he spoke, motioning with his free hand as though trying to explain something. "Do as I say, and you'll be rewarded. Delay me one more time, and—"

Tibus pressed the gun in his other hand, concealed behind the terminal, into Altug's crotch.

He smiled, as he might when greeting an old friend.

"Set off the fucking contamination alarms in the west and north wings, Mr. Borascus."

*I can't believe I'm doing this*, Altug thought, turning towards the screen and tapping the keys lightly with his weak, trembling, manicured fingers.

The distance across the Armor Forge factory, from the western gate to its eastern counterpart, was approximately eight kilometers. A ten-terawatt reactor sat squarely between them, supplying power to everything in the facility including the space elevators and the housing complexes in the surrounding basin. Short of an orbital bombardment, a containment breach was the direst emergency possible, endangering everyone and everything within a sixty-kilometer radius of ground zero.

As the alarms bellowed throughout the complex, workers and managers alike stopped what they were doing and launched into a mass exodus towards the exits. Hovercars and people running on foot darted out of the facility like an unending swarm of insects

as a countdown sounded, warning that massive lead doors were about to seal off the northern and western sections from the rest of the base. In a few moments it would be impossible for anyone to enter the facility from either entrance, and anyone trapped inside would be stuck there until the emergency subsided, or they succumbed to whatever nuclear catastrophe was imminent.

While many guards abandoned their responsibilities and fled with the rest of the crowd, some chose to stay behind, trying to ensure everyone within their assigned areas got out safely. The guard posted outside Altug Borascus's office was one of these, and dutifully barged inside to escort its occupants out of the facility. He stumbled to a halt, not expecting to see Altug handcuffed to the wall railing, and certainly not expecting the powerful punch thrown from his blind side by Tibus Heth.

Unconscious before he hit the floor, the guard collapsed and was pounced on by the surprisingly agile Tibus, who had him bound and gagged in seconds. The staccato thunder of gunfire and exploding bullets shattered the glass of the office, and Altug screamed as the flash of a plasma rifle illuminated the room with its eerie green strobe. Another guard was trading gunfire with unseen attackers further down the catwalk, entirely unaware of the people inside the office as he tried to close in for a better shot.

The moment his rifle barrel broke the plane of the office door, Tibus swung his hand up beneath it and knocked the guard's aim to vertical. Vulnerable for that split second, Tibus followed up with an elbow to the man's ribs and quickly extended his fist upwards, connecting with the bridge of his nose. Stunned, the guard staggered back and lost his balance, tumbling over the railing. In the blink of an eye, Tibus had dived forward with outstretched arms. His hands found the falling guard's utility belt and gripped it

tightly. The sudden weight transfer dragged Tibus forward across the floor grating and towards the edge, and with an agonizing scream, he kicked out with his good leg, trying to wedge it against a vertical support in the railing.

His leg slammed hard into the pole but held fast, the guard dangling upside down from his grip. Both men were screaming; one out of sheer terror of falling three stories onto the cement, the other from the physical agony of supporting the dead weight of a man with his forearms. Altug, amazed by this athletic feat of heroism, heard footsteps running down the catwalk. A group of workers appeared, seized the guard's flailing legs, pulled him over the railing to safety and immediately restrained him.

Tibus brushed off the supporting hands of the workers trying to help him to his feet. "How much do we control?" he asked.

"Half," one of the larger men said. "The northern and western sections are locked down, and the teams are flushing out the stragglers."

"Hostages?"

"A good mix, lots of different professions. Plenty of managers," he said with a smile. "We can shut down anything you want."

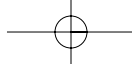
"Casualties?"

"A few broken bones here and there, but no deaths."

"Well done" Tibus said, hobbling towards the guard he had just saved. "Anything you want to say to me?"

The man's nose was shattered. As blood continued to pour freely from both of his nostrils, he stared blankly at the space before him. Tibus patted him on the shoulder. "We'll get you cleaned up. You can thank me later."

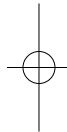
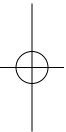
As the workers dragged the guard away, Tibus turned back to Altug. "Mr. Borascus, do you ever watch the news?" he asked, limping



closer.

“Yes,” Altug answered cautiously.

“Good, because we’re about to make some news of our own,” Tibus announced, removing the handcuffs from Altug. “The space elevators. Shut them down. *Now.*”



Extract taken from the novel set in the EVE-Online universe. **Play the game at [EVE-Online.com](http://EVE-Online.com)**

