

Never Again

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Submitted: October 6, 2004

Updated: October 6, 2004

A military commander James Sinclair, amidst a world slowly spiralling out of control. PG-13.

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Never Again

Prologue

Personal Log, James Sinclair ... this may be my final entry.

As I look around, all I see is darkness. The sun no longer shines down upon us. Flakes of dust continue to fall from the clouds in the sky. It falls not like snow, but like the sands of an hourglass with us at the bottom. We are slowly being buried alive.

I look towards Adryn, an unlikely but proven true friend, our last in this world; all he can do is shake his head in response. Somehow I feel that he will outlive us and try to rebuild what has been lost. He wonders about it as much as I do; how could this have happened? How could our people have been so dumb, so blind, wandering down our path without realizing to what it led? Where did they go wrong?

Perhaps it all started during the Sharii War; that must be thirty-five years ago by now. When archeologists uncovered remains of Sharii ruins along our borders, the Sharii demanded to have that territory handed back. We refused, they insisted, and somewhere along the line a bullet was placed through the wrong head, and they rallied together to wage war. Who would think that the Sharii, the least advanced society in our world, would become such a force to reckon with? Theirs will definitely be the hand that shapes the world to come.

Perhaps it was the Raiders who got us into our present mess. We believe they were the ones who provoked the Sharii into war. Pirates they are, striking under cover of stealth and camoflauge, stealing our technology, and then disappearing. We always thought they had shared some connections to Sharii sympathizers and fringe. I think we were right about them all along.

Perhaps it was the Allen & Reed projects that got us here. Reed for creating the ultimate roboticist's dream, and Allen for opening the doors to hell and throwing us in. Without them, my men wouldn't have been betrayed and we wouldn't have become wanted by our own people, forced to seek protection among the Sharii, once again made possible only by our unique ally, Adryn. Yet without them, we would never have met him, either.

I keep wishing Adrius were here. A brilliant commander -- a legend, even -- assuredly he'd know what we could do. It was Adrius who was chosen to attend Sharii negotiations at the end of the War. He traded our best weapon, his own plasma cutter, in return for a Sharii shield as a symbol of peace. But we lost Adrius several months ago, and we'll probably never see him again.

There is no changing the past. But no catastrophe of this scale could happen without a long chain of unfortunate events preceding it. I keep wondering, how might it have turned out if even one of those precursors failed to happen? If we could have thrown a wrench into the cogs of fate and changed our course, where would we be now?

Perhaps our people, our world, would be given a better fate than this . . . the snow of ashes sifting down from the sky, the days as dark as night, fire and lightning that rage across the sky, and the radiation that devours our land.

Or perhaps it's better not to ask.

Chapter One: Thresholds

(Revision 6.0 (really), 10-5-2004)

The electronic chime on James's door sounded. "Commander?"

James blinked a few times, looking up at the dark ceiling of his personal quarters as rays of sunshine shone through the southern window. Was it really that bright today? His mind was swimming.

"Lights," James tried ordering, but his room's computer system only beeped in complaint.

The chime at the door sounded again, followed by a clear voice from the other side. "Jim, are you up yet?"

James's mind snapped into focus, if only for a moment, at the sound of his nickname. Only three people on base were permitted to call him by that name, and judging by the voice, he could rule out his sister as a possibility.

James forced himself up and out of bed, then walked clumsily to the door. He pushed a button on a nearby keypad and said, a little sleepily, "I'm up -- just give me a minute."

That seemed to satisfy the person on the other side of the door, and James walked over to his closet to proceed getting dressed. He pulled out his uniform; navy jeans, matching shirt, belt, shoes, and vest, each cleaned and pressed by yesterday's laundry crew. He proceeded getting dressed, jeans first, then shirt and shoes. After threading and fastening his belt, he slung the vest over his two shoulders and then walked back to the door. "Alright, you can enter," James said, pressing two buttons on the door. The electronic deadbolts released quickly from the door, then James opened the door to allow the fellow officer in.

It was Mark, the commander of their base's infantry unit, and also a close friend. James walked back to his bed and sat down, then proceeded to put on his shoes. "It's almost 1100 hours, Jim; you're late. Might I ask what you were doing last night?"

"So sue me," James joked. "I was composing a message for Dad."

"Ah," Mark commented, as he took a few steps over to the window. "It could have waited, you know. Might've even got sent this time...."

"What?" James objected. "Don't tell me --"

"Yeah," Mark sighed. "Top of the recycled folder, with a big 'C.M.I.N.D.A Denied' tag stamped across it,"

Mark gestured, pointing towards James's computer terminal.

"Damn," James shook his head. "Third one in a row.... Dad's a vet; you'd *think* they'd at least give him higher clearance than a civilian...."

"You'd think," Mark said back, looking out the window and scanning the base to see which crews were working on what. "You'd think Cmind would have more than one filter for civilian recipients. Even the old mail crews were smarter than this. Besides, if you were going to leak something --"

James stared at Mark.

"--Which, obviously you *weren't* -- " Mark adjusted, "but hypothetically -- then you should just go right out and say it. Beating around the bush only makes people more suspicious of it."

Mark pointed to some sort of ornament of James's placed on his window side desk. "By the way, what's this?"

"It's nothing," James answered.

"Oh," Mark commented. "At any rate, you'd better finish prepping and get down to mess. They say the chef's serving *pancakes* today! You don't want to miss it...."

"No way!?" James exclaimed.

"He spent the whole month trying to requisition the necessary supplies. You'd better get down there while there are still a batch or two left."

"You don't need to say that again....," James stated, as he finished tying up his shoes, then buttoning his vest. He was about to rush out the door when --

"--Oh, and don't forget this thing, *again*," Mark said as he tossed James's rank and identification badge to him. James caught it and then pinned it to its place on his vest.

"Thanks," James answered as Mark walked to the door. "What's the order of the day?"

"None yet," Mark said as he became the first one out the door. "But you want to know a trick I learned a long time ago for getting mail past the Cmind filters?"

"Sure," James said, following Mark out. James shut the door and pressed a button marked 'LOCK' on the outside keypad, and the door's deadbolts snapped into place.

"It's like this," Mark began as they began heading down the corridor, taking the quickest route from the officer's residence to the mess hall. "Don't send it as a *letter*. When you're recording your logs for the day"

It was a good breakfast, James said to himself as he left the mess hall after about an hour of talking with various Ops staff while downing nearly half a dozen pancakes. They could easily have accused him of

overeating, but with two months since the last time they had any real, on-site food prepared for them, instead of the usual processed, prepackaged rations shipped to them weekly, maybe they didn't care, either. Perhaps that's why they didn't mention anything when James spilled a bit of syrup on his sleeve.

Now to check up on the daily training. James took the shortest route he knew of between the mess hall and the recreational/training area, a route that led shortly outside across the base's open field, around the research lab complex and storage hangars, and into the northernmost building. James arrived in the training room just in time to see Mark and a soldier engaged in some fencing exercises. Swing. Dodge. Counter. Evade. Thrust, parry. The other soldier rolled aside as Mark swung downwards, and tried to counter with a low sweep kick. Mark saw it coming and jumped backwards as his opponent regained his footing. They clashed blades again; right side, left side, overhead, thrust, deflect, parry, and swing. Mark backed off, allowing his opponent to draw near, and when he did, Mark felled him with a low swing. The soldier landed with a *whump* on the floor mat, bruised perhaps but not injured. The man found the blunted tip of Mark's blade on top of him. "I win," announced Mark.

James applauded. "As always...."

Mark removed the safety mask from his face, and walked over. "You finished breakfast in a hurry. It's not even 1300 hours yet -- what brings you here one hour early?"

"What about you? You missed out on breakfast entirely...." James countered.

Mark chuckled and sat down on a bench nearby. "Actually, no... I had a few before I went to wake you up."

James sighed. "May I see that?" He asked, pointing to the training sword.

Mark handed it to James and James held it, examining it closely. He made a practice swing with the blade, then sighed and handed it back.

"You should join in sometime," Mark suggested. "You watch us practice almost every day. You need to keep your own self in some fighting shape... the desk job doesn't suit you. You know that."

James sighed again. "No, it's just ... well...."

Mark nodded. "I know, only cyborg pilots need this sort of training. One wrong move and they could carve their own Suit open with a real plasma blade. But just because you never wanted to be a cyborg pilot, doesn't mean you can't train with us."

James shook his head. "It's not that...."

"I know how much you liked the ol' *Leogryph*. I lost my tank too when it happened. Looking back though I guess we're lucky we made it out of there. Many of our comrades were killed in the ambush."

"Damned Raiders...," James huffed. "If it weren't for them...."

"If it weren't for them, your old tank wouldn't be in mothballs, right? C'mon, Jim, you have to keep it from

getting to you like this. We couldn't have known they'd have tried using stolen technology against us at that time. Sure, it's not much of a surprise, but they don't usually just steal something and try it out right away. Usually they send it to their black labs for research and a few months' study...."

"Thinking about old times again?" Announced a familiar, aged voice from across the room. Both James and Mark looked up to see the retired general, Sir Adrius, standing by the near door. A stout old man of perhaps sixty, but with the energy and youth befitting a soldier of forty. A veteran from the Sharii Wars of the previous decade, who rose to the rank of general through his experience; now officially retired from the service -- but, unofficially, still employed as a combat advisor.

"Yes. ...sir," James answered.

"No need for those formalities," Adrius said as he walked over. As he neared, he picked up the training blade Mark had set down next to himself.

"Y'know, Adrius sir...," Mark asked. "I've always wanted to know. With all the cannons, rockets, lasers, mortars in our arsenal, why do you want us to keep training with toy swords?"

Adrius armed the training blade and took a few practice swings, an old combo that had become his favorite over the years. "It's because you never encountered a Sharii Shadow Elite back during the war. Forget about all your ranged weaponry, all your... *technology*. Shadow Elite know how to deal with it. By the time you get a missile lock on them, it's too late. Ranged weapons will fail you. If that happens, you need a plasma cutter, and you need to know how to use it. You take them on, and you cut them down at close range."

"But, with all due respect, Adrius...," Mark intoned, "the Shadow Elite are just a myth."

"Then is *that* just a myth, too?" Adrius said, pointing to the room's computer terminal, above which hung a piece of shining, but singed scrap metal. It was a trophy, supposedly a fragment of armor that Adrius had sheared off of a Shadow Elite soldier during the war. "Our scientists still haven't figured out how to synthesize that alloy, but the Sharii have employed that armor compound for over a hundred years. I've seen a Shadow Elite take a minirocket to the chest armor, and live to walk away. Granted, he didn't walk away very *fast*, but he did. That's no mere rumor. They're out there. I've seen it...."

"Whatever," Mark shrugged. "I just think we could put our training systems to better use without these old toys."

"Do you mean to say that you've mastered the blade, then?" Adrius inquired.

Mark shook his head. "What? No, I wasn't saying that --"

"Sure you were," Adrius smiled. "If it's true, then you should be able to defeat me in a duel. Right...?"

Mark looked at Adrius in surprise. "You're kidding...!"

"Or would you rather keep fighting the lieutenant there?", Adrius inquired, pointing to the soldier Mark defeated in training, who was now sparring with another soldier.

"No, that's fine -- sure, I'll try fighting you. Just give a chance to warm up."

"Good, then," Adrius smiled. He walked over to one of the lockers and suited up with a safety vest. He withdrew his favorite type of weapon -- a black staff of about four feet length with painted edges on each end to represent its cutting edges. The real versions of these weapons are called "plasma cutters" because they emit plasma energy from their cutting edge(s). The plasma blade of the real plasma cutters enables them to slice through steel and titanium armor in mere seconds, and they were the only weapons to prove themselves truly reliable against the Sharii. Obviously, the dummy versions of the plasma cutters are just mockups made from high-tensile polymers, but they serve as effective training tools and some were impressive facsimiles of the real thing.

James looked to Mark. "It's been nice knowing you...."

Mark laughed. "Well, if I can clip this old bird's wings, then...."

"Unlikely," Adrius said with a smile as he walked over to a supply locker and looked through its choice of dummy weapons. A rifle mockup here, a fake rocket pod there, a few one-edged practice blades, and then he saw a double-edged practice blade. He drew the weapon from its locker and then walked over. Swinging it a few times to warm up, he then looked at Mark. "You had better be ready."

Mark grabbed his training weapon and lowered his protective face mask. His was merely a single-edged training blade, different from Adrius's chosen weapon. In a practice duel with fake weapons, the difference was merely cosmetic; but in a real combat with live weaponry, the choice of a double-edged weapon over a single-edged one could mean the difference between knocking an opponent unconscious or beheading them.

Adrius walked over to the training room's console and reset its computer systems to record a new match. He then walked out into the center of the arena mat, and the other soldiers training quickly removed themselves to the sidelines. A quick duel between Mark, a mid-aged commander, and Adrius, an old general -- no, a living legend -- would prove most impressive. Mark assumed a ready position with his legs slightly bent, as Adrius simply stood there with blade in hand, watching him. The console computer sounded an electronic bell, and it was on.

Adrius waited for Mark's approach and then, almost without warning, soared into action. Adrius attacked Mark with a simple swipe, all too easily blocked. Yet no sooner had Mark parried the blow than Adrius rebounded his blade from the clash, swung it around and low. Mark tried to evade it but Adrius was too fast. His swing caught Mark in one leg and knocked him down to the mat. One point for Adrius.

Mark huffed to himself and stood back up. Adrius gestured for Mark to approach. Mark approached cautiously, as if waiting for whatever surprise Adrius would pull next. Mark feigned a swing, hoping Adrius would take the bait, but Adrius simply chuckled as he merely took one step back.

Mark seemed confused, or perhaps intrigued. "My turn!" Said Adrius as he approached quickly. He thrust a high swing in Mark's direction, forcing Mark to evade. Next came a right swing, followed by a left so quickly that Mark barely had time to parry them both. Adrius swung high again. Mark ducked under the swing and rushed forwards, tackling Adrius and knocking the both of them to the mat. One point for

Mark.

Mark picked himself up and offered a hand to Adrius. But Adrius waved Mark aside, as he easily regained his own footing. Adrius flew into attack again, a different pattern this time. Low then high, followed by two high swings again. Mark was once again forced into evasive maneuvers, dodging a left chop and trying to counter. But even his counter attacks seemed to fail him, Adrius deflecting them with the ease of brushing a spider's web aside, then striking at Mark and knocking him down. Another point for Adrius.

Mark stood back up, shaking his head. Adrius gestured Mark to come closer. Mark refused, shaking his head no. "Have it your way, then...," Adrius commented, as he approached. Adrius swung in Mark's direction and Mark proceeded to parry it. Yet it was only a feint, as the two blades merely touched lightly before Adrius soared into another attack. Mark took a step back and tried to block it -- but it, too, was merely another feint. A third attack followed quickly, a real attack, and the two combatants' blades clashed loudly. Mark flinched from the impact yet Adrius was unfazed, as he whirled his weapon around and hit Mark in the side. Adrius smiled; Mark shrugged.

"Three points . . . I win," Adrius announced. "You'd be having three funerals if this were real. You have got to work on your defense."

Mark shook his head. "I... see. The old bird still has his fight left in him...."

Adrius returned to the supply locker and put his training weapon away, then proceeded to search for another. "Feel like another go?"

"There's no time," announced another voice -- Dr. Reed Alexander, the head of their research staff, who had presumably walked into the room at some point. "Adrius, we're ready."

"So soon?" Adrius responded, stretching to relax. "Very well." He closed the supply locker and walked over towards Reed.

James stood up. "I'll have to oversee it, of course."

Reed nodded. "Yes, Commander; your presence would be greatly appreciated. After all, you don't see history in the making *just* every day...."

"What?"

"Nothing," Reed said with a smile, for the statement was supposed to be a joke. "Just get to the lab as soon as you can. We'll begin once you arrive."

Adrius put his hand on James's shoulder. "Dr. Alexander thinks he's finally figured it out this time. Come on...." Adrius led the way to Reed's development room. Reed left second, and James third.

James met his sister, Sarah, en route to the room. "Sis!"

"Commander...!" Sarah replied. "Jim.... is Dr. Alexander ready to proceed?"

"Almost," James interrupted. "Reed wants me there for the final phase. You should be there too, just in --"

"Jim?" Sarah laughed, hushing her brother. "You forget. Where it involves synaptic links, it involves a trauma team should there be any emergencies. Yes I'll be there; nothing will go wrong on my watch."

"I hope you're right, but I don't think he--"

Sarah repeated herself. "Jim? Don't worry so much. Adrius is my patient as much as he is your war hero and Reed's volunteer. Everything will be *fine*."

By now they had reached the entrance to the lab. A curious construct, integrated with the development systems control panel, filled the central area of the room. A flatbed lay on one side of this construct, tilted upwards to an almost vertical angle. There were a few belts on it, presumably for securing something or someone. It was completely padded except for the obligatory port used to interface with synaptic link implants. The other side had a similar flatbed, only this one lay flat as a table. A robotic frame lay on this other flatbed. This was the prototype robot that Reed was developing; a few of its control systems were hooked in to the development room's systems. According to the status monitors on the control platform, all of its systems were functional but currently in a 'standby' mode, awaiting its programming.

Reed took the opportunity to describe the robotic frame laying on the horizontal flatbed. It was somewhat larger than the size of a human, about seven feet high. Its mass and weight were somewhere in the neighborhood of five or six hundred pounds, about fifty of which were due to the Kevlar-titanium armor plating. Most of the plates were a light blue color, but others bore silver and white stripes and markings. The overall appearance of the torso armor resembled the type of platemail armor that the Sharii were famous for wearing -- poetically fitting considering that Adrius was after all part Sharii, and Adrius had in fact proposed the particular design himself. Two silver-and-white color aerodynamic binders -- their military euphemism for "wings" -- lay folded tightly against the backside of the frame to provide additional rear armor. Whether or not these "wings" would enable the frame to actually fly or not was anyone's guess. In theory, the frame's thrusters had more than enough power to fly with, so it *could* fly, but as no one subjected it to any real wind-tunnel testing, there would undoubtedly be many practical issues left to work out.

A strange framework was clipped around the frame's left arm, which Reed said were capacitor cells for a particle laser weapon. On the other side of the robot's frame, next to its right arm, lay a portable mini-rocket launcher, devoid of ammunition for safety reasons, but with enough capacity for about two dozen high-speed microrockets. These would constitute the frame's inherent weaponry. Additionally, as Reed said, the robotic frame would also be able to utilize a wide variety of standard weapons, including such melee weapons as the two plasma cutters stored in shoulder compartments.

The internal structure of this robotic frame, as Reed phrases it, could to some extent be compared to the structure of a living being. Internal sensor systems inespersed themselves throughout the frame, from limb to limb, with central busses back to the core. Laying heavily shielded in the frame's center was its power generator, a small thermal reactor with high energy output yet low intake requirements, with the majority of the frame's computational systems also stored in the torso.

Of course no humanoid robotic frame would be complete without a discernable 'head', and Reed's frame did not disappoint. Sitting atop the torso lay a headpiece resembling a military helmet, with a mask-like appearance covering up its vocal speaker, aural microphones, and optic sensors. Residing above the optic sensors lay a T-shaped crest which, Reed described, included a covert thermal imaging sensor.

Reed described the armor compound as utilizing a crude nanotechnology, a few steps short of the dream already known in retail science fiction, for underneath its armor plating ran countless conduits of synthetic, liquified armor compound to near-instantly repair any minor breaches of armor. That, combined with several redundant and auto-repair systems, and the frame would be able to sustain even a high degree of damage and still remain somewhat functional for combat or other duties.

Reed continued to describe the frame. With the development of semi-organic superconductors, the electrical systems powering the frame would have unprecedented efficiency, the largest maintenance costs being small heat losses and air conditioning. Being partially organic also granted the frame a higher degree of resistance to electromagnetic pulses and fields, so in theory it would be able to remain functional in several environments that would disable or disrupt most standard electronic systems.

The computational systems of the robotic frame's "brain" were also cutting-edge, even experimental. Reed described the systems only as too complex for quick and easy description, but through a combination of AI, neural networking, and a dizzying set of parameters uploaded from a cyborg pilot's brain via synaptic linking, it could in theory simulate the processes of a living, thinking being.

In theory, at least. A project so extensive, so monumental, would be guaranteed to go down in history either as a famous accomplishment, or an infamous flop.

Reed motioned Adrius to step onto the empty flatbed. Adrius nodded and did so, and Reed then strapped him in place. The flatbed rotated from its near-vertical position to a nearly flat position, leaving Adrius on his back, looking at the ceiling. Reed prepared to engage Adrius's synaptic link. "This'll feel weird, so hang on tight."

Adrius nodded and blinked as Reed engaged the synaptic link interface. Various electronic readouts appeared on nearby monitors identifying patterns in Adrius's brain activity. Sure, it seemed straightforward enough. Reed would use the synaptic-link systems to record various patterns or behaviours from Adrius's brain and then program them into the robotic frame. In theory, this could create the ultimate soldier. Impervious to pain or disease, capable of fighting and acting independently, and utterly replaceable if lost.

In theory, at least.

Sarah hooked up her trauma team's bio-energy monitoring systems to measure Adrius's vital signs, which read all within normal parameters, combining to form a total readout of 97 percent. Sarah remained near Adrius to monitor the readouts and give warning should any problems occur.

Reed asked around. "Is everyone ready?"

"You're just going to proceed anyway, why ask?" James said back.

Reed chuckled. "Correct. Are you ready, Adrius?"

Adrius nodded. "Let's just get this done with."

"Famous last words," James muttered under his breath.

Sarah elbowed her brother sharply, and Reed chuckled.

"What?" James objected.

Reed shook his head. "Nothing... we'll begin on my mark. Ten...."

James shook his head and stepped away from Reed. Sarah followed him.

"I have a feeling this is not going to work....," James said quietly to his sister.

"I don't know either," Sarah answered quietly, almost whispering. "But Sir Adrius has faith in him. That's good enough for me. Why not you?"

"Seven...," Reed counted.

James shook his head. "I don't know, it's ... just not right. He's going too far...."

"Four," Reed continued counting.

"Quit worrying like that. I have my trauma team waiting outside. Even if something goes wrong...."

"Beginning the experiment . . . now!" Reed announced as he hit a button on the keyboard. The computer began its measurements and a stream of data scrolled by on a separate monitor.

James glanced at the screen, at Adrius's closed eyes and relaxed posture, then sighed and turned away, staring out the door into an empty hallway outside. Sarah returned to her post to keep an eye on the bio-monitors.

For five interminable minutes, absolutely nothing seemed to happen. Reed's computer terminal continued chewing through the neural data, slowly uploading various bits here and there through the datalink to the robotic frame.

James glanced over to Adrius again; he seemed to be sleeping, or at least resting. It was impossible to tell. How much longer would this take?

Even Reed seemed to be nervous, fidgeting a lab pen and writing illegible scrawl on note paper.

Suddenly the silence was broken by an alarm from Sarah's bio-monitors, snapping her out of tedium. "What the...?" She glanced at the monitor as it recorded a downward trend, a sharp drop in Adrius's vital signs. And it was continuing. "Hell, no! All right, boys, in here NOW!"

The bio-monitors predicted forty seconds at most for them to act. Two medical officers rushed in from just outside the door, carrying emergency trauma equipment with them as they hastily began setting it up.

"Trauma team?? Like hell you will! Zap him even once and you'll fry the link!!"

"Stand down, Reed," James objected. "That's an order."

"This is my project. You can't order me!" Reed objected as Sarah's two comrades hooked up their equipment to the room's power outlets and began charging the electrocardio zappers should they prove necessary.

"Doctor, you'll ruin everything!" Reed objected again. But then his computer beeped several times, attracting his attention, and he ran over to check on it.

"Thirty seconds, team, faster!" Sarah shouted. "We're not losing him today!"

One member of the trauma team quickly ran back out to get the rest of their resuscitation equipment, while the other one attached a biostabilizer to Adrius's wrist. Sarah looked at the biomonitors again, noticing the steady decline in his vital signs. "He's going into arrest...."

"It's finished!" Reed announced happily. He hit a few keystrokes on his terminal, then rushed to Adrius's side and disengaged the synaptic link in a hurry.

Sarah grabbed the zappers and ran over to the general as the biomonitors recorded zero heart activity. "Damn, we're losing him. Stage one burst -- get clear!". She practically tore the general's uniform open, placing the two zapper paddles on his chest. "Now!"

Her medical comrade hit the discharge button on the zapper box, and Adrius's body jerked from the shock. A few blips appeared on the biomonitors, but quickly faded. "Again!" Sarah ordered. "Stage two -- now!"

The medical officer hit the button again and discharged another, stronger burst. Yet the results were the same as the first time.

"Get clear!" Sarah ordered, waving her comrade aside as she moved over to the zapper controls. She quickly turned it up for a stage three burst, the strongest burst they could discharge without actively killing the patient. But at this point it probably wouldn't matter, anyway. Looking at the biomonitors, she hit the discharge button.

The biomonitors blinked, showing slight heart activity, but the overall condition readout continued to plummet.

"Doctor Sarah?" asked the other medical officer as the overall condition readout dropped into a single-digit range, and with it, a solid beep rang out from the biomonitor station.

Sarah froze. For ten seconds only the loud, continuous beep from the biomonitors echoed throughout the room.

Then, Sarah switched off the zapper and shook her head.

James shook his head too and turned back towards the door. James knew; she had never lost a patient before.

Sarah looked at the biomonitors as whatever remaining activity faded from the readouts. She rested her head against the monitor, a few tears of sorrow, or maybe anger, trickling down her face. She waved her arm to dismiss her comrades, and they left even without packing away the trauma equipment. Reed knew it would be most convenient for him to be elsewhere, so he left without a word as well. James, now the only remaining person in the room, tried to console his sister.

Personal log, Commander Sinclair. Let's see... 17-05 hours, Sunday.

Fate can be a cruel thing. Adrius is... dead? No. Not like this. Our nation has spent almost one hundred years, billions of dollars trying to eliminate freak synaptic accidents. We've built so many safeguards, saved so many lives . . . and yet we lose one of our best to the dark specter of synaptic technology.

Sarah has taken Adrius's death pretty hard too. I've relieved her of duty for the rest of today and tomorrow so she can recover. Word of Adrius's death is already starting to spread, and I don't want to know how it'll damage our base morale.

Reed is trying to drown his sorrows down in mess hall. I conferred with him a few minutes ago. His life's work, gone from right in front of him, and what's left won't remain for much longer once HQ finds out what happened. They've been demanding an update for weeks now, and if they find out he's just cost us one of our most valuable assets, they'll cut his funding and ship him back home faster than you can say 'cyborg'.

Reed didn't say it, but I could sense some optimism remaining. He wants a second chance, to prove his method can work. Against my better judgement as it is, I've authorized him for one more attempt. That should keep HQ off of him for at least another week. But he'll have to find a volunteer completely on his own, now that we know the price of failure. I don't know who it may be, if he even finds anyone at all. But it's all I can do for him besides charging him with manslaughter. If it works, then Adrius's death will not have come to naught. And if it doesn't work, at least we'll be able to establish a pattern even as Reed's career crashes to ruin.

And..., perhaps I'm dreaming again, but there is some part of me believing, hoping that Adrius could still be alive.