Cynder Drone in Space: Equalizing the Station

Asquith's icy blue feathers raise, her claws dancing across the holographic screens, her eyes fluttering about shifting from one screen to the next, "Celina, give me eyes on what is going on. The station has been under a lock down for over eighteen hours and we have yet to override it. *What* is going on? We should be the ones in control of the station."

Celina's mind is running a mile a minute. The implants help her keep track of half a dozen drones that are moving through the main station. Alarms going off, the hallways clear, "I can't see what is causing the alarm and lock down. It appears most people have gone to their living quarters," she reports.

"We don't go from all clear to level five lock down in just a few minutes without reason, and our system is completely separate from our own, yet we are currently having the same problem… I'll be working to lift the restrictions on our section of the station. Those of my pack here we'll assist you."

Celina's feathers rise, "Ah, good. I'll do what I can. I haven't been able to contact the station security," she chirps, her big black eyes shift as she changes within her mind focus from one drone to the next, moving with a mixture of her direct control and the drone-based AI.

"Come on, come on," Celina thinks, claws dancing across the holographic screens before her, *"How did it happen so fast?"* she ponders, remarking, "I'm going to check the local security. They might be in their living quarters, waiting for gear as per biohazard protocol thirty-six."

Asquith grumbles, "I should have thought of that. Good work. Check it out."

"Already two drones are on the way to check it out," says Celina, the first drone finds the doors to the security forces' homes are open, "The doors are open."

"What?!" exclaims Asquith feathers raised. The two Avalis communicate halfway across the avali section of the station, their implants providing the connection required for quick thought transmitted communique.

"Exploring it now, drone twelve is two minutes out till it reaches the next set of homes," she chirps, looking through the first home, "It looks like there was some struggling. Scanning, no one's here… who or what took them?"

Asquith grumps, "The alarm was used to get people in a location to be abducted. This is a damn invasion!" she squawks, "Start using your drones to warn people that this is a false biohazard alarm and that this is a foreign invasion. Taking control of all audio transmissions of drones within the station."

"Transmitting control."

Asquith sees the dozens of dozens of Avali drones within the station appear in the station, "Attention everyone. This is commander Asquith speaking. The biohazard alarm is a ruse. We are currently being invaded by a hostile foreign entity. Please refer to foreign invasion protocol eighty-eight. I repeat please refer to foreign invasion protocol eighty-eight."

Celina chirps happily, "I hear something, now we'll get to see what's causing this," she states, the drone rushing forward only to have it smacked from the air, hitting the ground with a clutter, the camera sizzling out, only manage to get a few moments of video of the security office inside being overtaken by sleek smooth featureless black and magenta feral dragon drones.

Celina's feathers rise sharply, "Cynder? Multiple Cynders? How? Their civilization can't transverse the stars. We would have caught them boarding the station."

Asquith clenches her black scaly claws, "Unless those aren't from the planet but from here. I knew something was wrong, but I just didn't know what."

"People from the station? How is that possible? How could they transform people into feral dragons?"

"I don't know, but something about my research was telling me… I'm going to try to break the lock down on our station. All doors to our section will remain sealed. Under no circumstances will they be allowed to be open, got it?"

"Got it, but what about the people at the rest of the station?"

"They're gone. I'm purging the computers of all strategic information. Once I undo the lock downs, we're leaving, all of us."

Celina's eyes widened, "You can't just abandon people to whatever fate this is. That's cold even for an Avali."

"Triage is necessary, and an infected limb at times must be removed. I have the entire body to think about, not just how attached I am to any specific limb."

"Would you do it if it was one of your packmates?" she states with a huff, feathers becoming ruffled.

Asquith tenses, feathers rising but only just so much, "Don't take these decisions lightly. Would you risk all your packmates to save just one?"

Celina's claws twitch, tail stiffening, taking a deep breath, slowly releasing it, "I understand," she replies, feeling a sinking in her stomach, looking at the images captured by her now destroyed drone of three smooth faced dragon drones, moving to drag the person away, subduing them with strength, *"I feel bad for him, but they looks so…"* her feathers rise, a shiver run down her spine.

Moments before this happens, Captain Raymond the anthropomorphic stingray, with his blue body, white belly, his emerald eyes locked on the door before him, the station's biohazard alarms blaring, "After all that was done, a sudden biohazard lockdown? I'm going to give those avali's a piece of my mind, in person," he mutters, typing into the holographic screen, getting an error code.

He rubs his brown hair, "I hate to pull rank, but if you are all being this stubborn… I'm not going to be put into lock down. I've done everything according to the book," he huffs, putting in a captain override. The door beeps and licks open, revealing a white room with signs

that read "All non-ammonia-based life forms MUST be in avali approved suits. Or have a proven biology to endure 240K/-33C or face a freezing death."

"Now to bring up my kind's suit," he remarks, typing into the holographic screen, pulling up different species, eventually picking his own, a hum of machinery, and rumble within the room as the system shifts through the stations various species, "It takes a while but at least they have my species now," he mutters, tapping his foot when he feels a ringing thud that's felt through the room. The sound reverberates through the room, "What the heck was that?" he wonders when his suit comes into view.

Waving off a sensation in his gut he slips into the suit. The soft interior running across his skin. The suit feels nice, cool against his body, his wings slipping into each compartment. The weight of the self-contained atmosphere control unit weighed on his back, squeezing his wings a little bit. The white suit seals up around him, leaving just the helmet to put into place. A large see-through dome that gives a clear vision all around him. With a click and a his he taps his arm, bringing up the holographic display, booting up the system's air flow, connecting himself to the station network. His fingers only slightly fattened by the suit, are able to retain most of their dexterity, "Time to give that bird brain a stern talking to," he says, his voice echoing in the helmet.

He turns to the airlock, typing into the command code, an error pops up, "Dock not engaged." With a deep exasperated sigh he remarks, "They went so far to separate the station sections? Asquith you've gone too far," he makes a request to bring the dock.

Celina is moving her drones through the station, giving all the warning she can, watching the separated station devolve into chaos, "All these drones are people from the station? How? How quickly?" she mutters, a request popping up in her mental HUD, "A docking request?" she chirps, calling up the video feed, "Raymond?"

The stingray looks up at the speaker, "Celina? Glad to hear your voice. Let me in. I want to give Asquith a good tongue lashing for this high-level biohazard alarm. This is unacceptable!" he declares, wings pressing against the restriction of the spacesuit.

Celina shakes her head, feathers rising, "It's not us. There's been a hack in the system that has put the entire system on lock down. It's a foreign invasion. You need to get out of there!"

His perturbed face shifts to concern, and fear, "A foreign invasion? What is it? Who is it?"

"Cynder. She's taken over parts of the station. Most of the security has already fallen. You need to get out of there now."

"Cynder? How?"

"I don't know, just get out of there."

"Redock and let me get over to your side. I'm already suited up."

"Sure give me a moment."

"You will do *no* such thing," states Asquith through their internal communication.

"Asquith?!" exclaims Celina, "Raymond is one of my friends. He's right there, we can let him in and out, easy and simple."

"He could be infected. We can't let anyone across."

"But."

"No one, do you hear me? Drastic times requires drastic measures."

"But he's right there!"

"I said no and that's final!" she screeches.

Celina shrinks, looking to Raymond who is banging against the airlock door, calling out to her.

"Celina? What's taking so long? Re-engage the docking tunnel," he says, feeling a weight press down on his shoulders, "Celina? Are you there? Can you hear me?"

There's a long pause, a sigh, "I want to. I really want to, but I can't?"

"You can't? Or you won't?"

Celina tenses, clenching her claws, "Get to your ship. I'll see if I can get it unlocked. Don't worry about getting your suit off just go, run now while you can. Drone sixteen is going there to help."

He hits the air lock, letting out a long drawn-out sigh, fogging the front of his helmet for only a moment. He takes a deep breath, "Damn it…"

"I-I'm sorry Raymond. I want to, I really do."

He sighs, "I know you are trying, thanks," he says, heading out and the moment he does he sees Cynder approaching him.

"Raymond. There you are. I was so worried, are you alright?" it asks with a smooth monotone voice.

He takes a step back away from her approach, "Why are you doing this Cynder? If that is really you," he states.

The sleek faceless rubber drone approaches, its golden necklace's red gem glows, **"What do you mean?"**

"Who were you really? I know about the false biohazard alarm."

The sleek Cynder drone takes a few more steps closer, **"You've been informed. I wanted this to go smoothly. To help equalize everyone. Come, join me. Realize how wonderful being equal can be."**

"Who are you?!" he exclaims, trying to keep his distance.

"Me? I was a no one you knew, some unequal member on this station," says the Cynder drone.

"But me, you knew the former unequal me," says Brian Cynder Drone, moving quickly up from behind, moving to pounce.

Raymond sees the movement just in the nick of time, dodging out of the way of the attack, sliding over the dragon drone's body then rolling along the floor, back onto his feet, hopping back as the momentum tries to carry him backwards. The two drones move in perfect motion with one another, sleek smooth, faceless, perfect replicas of the other, "Who? Who are

you?!" he exclaims, feeling a shiver run down his spine, somehow getting a sense he knows who it is, looking at the correct drone.

"I used to go by Brian. I'm now Cynder Drone Designation 0000630109382. I suspected the one we know as Cynder to be up to something. Admittingly, I did not truly understand the bliss and pleasure adherence to equality is. Now I do, and soon, so will you."

"How about no, as sexy as drones are, I prefer to keep this sexy mug of mine," he says, sprinting down the hallway, thinking in the back of his mind, *"Did I really just admit I found them sexy?"*

His surges ahead, looking behind him to see the two sleek Cynder Drones look at each other with mirror image movements, *"Damn it… it is,"* he thinks in the back of his mind, pushing himself harder when the drones take off after him.

With each passing moment the stingray finds himself gradually pulling ahead of the pair, *"I guess I am faster?"* he thinks, his heart racing, wings fluttering in the suit, deep down in the back of his mind he wonders, *"Could I have used my stinger on them? Would it be worth it? Should I even if I could have an effect?"* the moral conundrum building up, hearing squeaky movements, steps, people's cries called out before they are quickly muffed, "No time, I have to get the fuck out of here," he states, reaching the hanger area, the doors still closed.

"Damn it!" he exclaims, closing the door behind him, grabbing a nearby object and smashing the keypad, "Hopefully that will lock them out for a little while," he states, looking back toward the door, "Now to get through that… thanks Celina…" he sighs.

"I'm doing what I can with my drones," says Celina through her drone that has the number sixteen painted on the side in big orange bold numbers in the Avalian scratch, which looks more of lines with scratch markings with an occasional cross in the center for at least the six.

"Celina? Oh thank you, Brian… he was turned into one of them," he says, looking to the door jumping when he hears a thud.

"Brian? I… he was such a curious human. Rather neat actually," she responds, feeling her throat close up a bit, swallowing down, "I need to help you, I'll work to get the lock bypassed. Just give me a few minutes, but first I'll need to… oh, you broke the keypad."

"Was that a bad thing?" he asks, rubbing the back of his head, only to have his hand remind him of the helmet.

"It might short circuit the system to delay it to work for a little while, maybe? But I'm not sure. I was going to use the Master lock, but not anymore," she says with a downtrodden chirp, "Don't worry, I'll get this done."

"Thanks Celina. Is there anything I can do?" he asks with a heavy pant.

"Take a moment to catch your breath. Last thing I want is you to hyperventilate and pass out or something. Those suits aren't meant for strenuous activity, just visiting our part of the station without utilizing some of our more advanced technology."

He chuckles, "Always the guardianship of the advanced technology, hmm?"

"No, no, no, nothing like that. It's the rules that some technology we don't share. I'm sure you understand."

"I'm just pulling your leg."

"Don't pull my leg, it has sharp claws, and my thighs could end lives."

"Better than touching your tail."

Celina shudders, "Hey, if you so much as touch my tail feathers… my drones will descend upon you like the plague of Elysium in the year twenty-seven."

"Isn't your calendar on the ten thousands of years now?"

"It's an old story, okay?!" she exclaims with a loud chirp, her drone never stopping as it removed the panel to the door, going through the wires, "Right now I'm trying a more analog approach."

"Aren't your systems designed against such a break in?"

"Yes, unless you know how to look."

He shoots the drone a look, "That makes it not well designed against it then, doesn't it?"

"I didn't build it, not my problem right now."

"True," he says, hearing a few thumps on the other side of the door, "I hope that door holds… I have no idea how strong the Cynder drones are… I had no clue they could do something like this."

"Neither did I. I thought Asquith was being paranoid, but I guess I was wrong."

"We all were. There was something strange about that planet, and the whole world, well from what we saw, they were all the same. I thought it was a cloning thing like those lizards do, that are all women."

"Yeah, but not much we can do about it now. Lamenting about the what if's is not going to help anyone. And my other drones have done their part to get what remains of the station rallied to fight against the drones."

"Is it working?"

"Unfortunately… no," she responds, taking a deep breath, "But if I am going to save at least one of my friends…"

"You'd wish it was Ratchet since you two spend so much time talking with each other."

"Yes it would be… wait no, why would you say that!" she screeches in a high pitched tone near-whine.

Raymond smirks, "You know you sound cute when you do that."

"I'm so going to bite you… and hard. Have you seen my teeth? Registered weapons in thirteen sectors."

"Only thirteen?"

"That's how many sectors I have legally been in."

"Ah, got it. Wait legally?"

"Time for that later, right now I need to get you out of here."

Thump, thump, thump, here's a faint voice coming through the other side, **"Come on Raymond. Join us. Equality is blissful. Equality is wonderful. There's only pleasure in equality. Obey equality and find only nirvana."**

Raymond presses his back against the door, feeling the environmental pack keeping him a bit off the door, "Brian is that you?"

"I am no longer the unequal Brian. I am a fellow Cynder Drone."

He sighs, "I'm sorry Brian. I should have not brought Cynder on board. I feel this is my fault."

"It is not your fault. Cynder is very smart. She planned it from the beginning. Rescuing you was all part of her plan to pull upon your sympathy and Dream's desire to study her. She knows we both have an affinity towards the equality aesthetics. There was little you could have done."

Through Celina's drone she says, while sparks fly from the panel, "Don't listen to them. They're probably trying to trick you."

"How could telling me how I was tricked, try to trick me?"

"Ah… uh… to give you a false sense of trust. I can't hear it well from here. The drones are speaking very close between my ears. It's difficult to hear."

"I can speak into your mind if you wish Raymond if it's making Celina too uncomfortable," says Brian Cynder.

A shiver runs through the stingray, he takes a deep breath, the fog building and fading in his helmet, "Ah, no, no, don't do that… how could you do that? And how do you know what happened?"

With a smooth monotone voice, as clear and steady as the slickness of the Cynder Drone's form, **"All knowledge is shared equally. No one is unequal. No secrets. No lies. No misunderstandings. No one judges. No one is left out. All are welcomed. All are valued equally. Each new addition to the equilibrium enhances all of us. Cynder Drone Designation 0000000000001 is no more important than I am, Cynder Drone 0000630109382,"** he says, the Cynder Drone placing his hands on the door, gently tapping against the metal, **"Don't you understand? Your unequal existence can be perfected, smoothed, made whole."**

Raymond shivers, something about the words is almost *hypnotic*. He closes his eyes, clenching his hands into fists, "But without individuality there is nothing. If you are all the same there's nothing exciting in life."

"That is where you are wrong my friend. I experience everything all other drones experience. We are connected. Each moment is an explosion of pleasure through obedience, through equality. The more that join the better it feels. The differences cause problems. Fighting. Pain. All of that is removed. I misunderstood the bliss of equality but now my mind is open. I know who I was. I wasn't made a blank, just equal."

"How do I know you are even the real Brain? You didn't just take him and now using his knowledge against me?" he asks, looking over to Celina's drone, "How's it going over there

Celina? Brian is telling me they share all the knowledge between each other. It's only a matter of time before someone who knows how to open the door is assimilated."

"I'm working as fast as I can, I just need a few more minutes, I'm getting close," says Celina, her feathers becoming ruffled. A sense of dread washing over her, breaking down her tough exterior, *"I need to succeed. I can't lose people again. I can't just be alone,"* she thinks, her claws twitching, her eyes darting around, trying to find anyone else to help, but her drones are spending more time dodging the ever-growing number of faceless smooth rubber dragon drones than not.

Asquith monitors the situation from her command station, her attention fully focused on breaking down the entanglement within the systems that the hack has caused, "Getting there…" she mutters, thinking to those of her pack, *"Prepare the ships. The moment we can disengage from the station we are leaving. If we can't break the hack, blow the doors, and put our reactor into critical. I can't let these drones spread."*

The other avali of her pack responds with apprehensiveness but understanding, one of the avali inquires, *"What about Celina?"*

"I'll inform her when we are ready to leave. She has her job, we have ours."

Brian Cynder Drone's claws drum against the door, **"It feels so much better to simply volunteer. I volunteered. It was the best decision of my existence,"** he says, the smooth faceless dragon drone looks to the other drones simply waiting outside, **"Don't run from bliss. Pleasure, the wonders of equality. All must be made equal Raymond. You must understand that. I know you like the idea. The look. Whatever you imagine it feels pales in comparison to reality."**

Raymond shakes his head, turning to face the door, "No Brian. You've simply been brainwashed. If that is really you. There's no way to tell if you are who you are someone else. It's the differences between us all that makes us beautiful, not being the same. Forcing equality upon everyone is no way to live. It's like you said, it's just existing."

"Your unequal understanding will be equalized soon enough. And as for how can you know who I am? If I am the Brian, you know? You'll need to trust me, Raymond. Open the door, embrace us. There is no escape. You are not going to leave this station unequalized. As your friend I could never let you do that to yourself. I know you want this; you just need to realize just how much you really do. Stop lying to yourself and accept it."

"I know that's not you talking, but whatever they did to you. I can't… I'll do what I can to come back and save you Brian, Dream, Ratchet, everyone. I'll be back, mark my words," he says, turning back to the drone, "How's it going Celina?" he asks, the door thumping on the other end.

"We speak the truth and you'll soon be equalized and know it soon enough."

Celina tenses, "Almost, just a bit longer," she says, sparks flying from the panel, "Twisted tail feathers… almost, just a bit more," she squawks.

He glances back at the door, then toward the drone, "Thank you Celina. I'm sorry for yelling at you earlier. I didn't realize how close the drones were."

"I wanted to let you on the Avali section of the station. I really did, but Asquith wouldn't allow it. But I can't be as cold as she is and not try to do something to help you. You are my friend, and I don't say that lightly."

He nods, "I know. We've only met face to face twice. An amazingly fierce short stack."

"I may be small, but I am not short. I'm average for my species," she says, nodding, the drone doing a little tip.

He chuckles, "Right, right."

"It won't be much longer Raymond. I don't want you to fight. I am your friend. We are your friends. We want what is best for you. Break you out of your unequal existence and bring you toward blissful pleasures not even able to be dreamed about."

The stingray stiffens, wings spreading in the space suit, tail giving a firm swish, the stinger protruding a bit, "I'll do what I can to help you, everyone," he says, looking down in the direction of the door separating him and the Cynder Drones, "But first I need to save myself," he says, turning toward Celian's drone just as the door clicks and slides open revealing the docking station that leads straight toward his ship.

"I got it!" exclaims Celina, her drone twirling in delight, rising up to the point it almost hits the ceiling, "Oh, sorry. I'll work to get the locks to your ship removed. Will you be able to pilot it by yourself?" she asks, turning her drone to him.

With a big goofy smooshy grin on his puffed face Raymond nods, "It won't be optimal but I can do it," he says, taking a few steps forward, suddenly feeling a bit light headed, stumbling forward, catching himself on the door frame.

Celina's drone rushes down, "Raymond are you okay?"

He nods, "Yeah I just feel a bit lightheaded all of a sud…" he falls to the ground with a thud, passed out.

"Raymond? Raymond?!" she exclaims, her drone trying to push his body but to no avail, "What happened? Speak to me Raymond!" she squawks.

"He's fine. We just managed to hack into his suit and give him a nice little nap. We didn't want to hurt him when we brought him to be equalized," says Brian, the door open, the smooth faceless Cynder Drones coming through along with him, the drones moving in and grabbing Raymond, easily tossing his body onto Brian Cynder Drone's back.

Celina shakes her head, her throat closing up, "No, you can't do this. You can't take him, I won't let you!" she exclaims her drone rushing forward but one of the other Cynder Drones easily snatches the door, causing it to shake. The engines whirring loudly, trying her best to break free.

Brian Cynder Drone carries Raymond off, **"Relax Celina. We'll take good care of him. He's our friend too."**

Ratchet Cynder Drone looks at the drone, **"Don't worry Celina. You'll be joining him soon, but we wouldn't want to spoil the surprise. Just wait and we can all be together forever and equal,"** he says.

"Let go of him! Let go of me! You don't need to do this!" screeches Celina, working her drone with the best of her abilities, feeling ever growing helplessness.

Ratchet Cynder shakes his head, **"If you knew the bliss of equality you'd understand. It would be far crueler to let him live a life of inequality. But as your friend I know how much your drones mean to you. I'm sorry one got destroyed, it surprised Cynder Drone Designation 0000630109511. Just wait and sit tight, we'll free you from your inequality soon,"** he explains, holding the drone in place, waiting till all the other drones have left, tossing the drone back into the room before making his way out the door behind him closing.

"No, no, no! You can't do this!" exclaims Celina zooming her drone toward the door hitting it once, twice, thrice, "You can't… don't do this… I don't want to be alone. I can't be alone again," cries Celina, tears forming in her big black void eyes, viewing the unfolding scene in her mind. Her other drones rushing toward the location but by the time they get there, there's no sign of them, "Please no, not again…" her ammonia-based tears streaming down her face, throat closing up, her fists clenching.

Asquith's voice cuts in, tearing through her, "Celina. Progress report. How is the station doing?"

"Ah… there is…"

"Report Celina. We'll be preparing to depart soon."

"Depart? But there are still people on the other half of the station. We can't leave them."

"You warned them, didn't you?"

"Yes but."

"We did all we could. We'll be leaving. Come on our ship or take your own. Burn the connections between our station and theirs. I don't want them to be able to get to this half."

"Why does it matter?"

"Just do it Celina," she commands, feathers rising, her glare felt from across the station, "Do I make myself clear?"

She takes a deep breath, calming herself, "Crystal clear."