

# VIOTRO

A short story prelude to Against A Rock

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The characters twisted and blurred on the datapad as Simiul fought against the wrenching to focus on the address. Was he getting closer?

Left was up, he reminded himself... but he wanted to go down. He staggered past the doors, peering painfully to read the numbers above them.

A couple walked past and simiul straightened, avoiding eye contact, straining to put one foot in front of the other and appear natural. The sweat on his brow, redness of his face and trembling in his step betrayed his true state. The couple stared, but walked past.

His stomach threatened to lurch as he came to what he hoped would be the final block, and he stopped to hold himself. But his state didn't improve.

He pushed onward, finally finding his destination. He rang the bell.

Please, Lord, let someone be here... let this be the right place.

He rested one hand on the door latch and the other on his head. He buzzed again.

A second later the door swung open.

An Amarrian.

"What's up?" asked the man. "You don't look so good, Buddy."

"You Viotro?"

A nod.

"I need Vitoc."

Empty shrug. "Can't help you... but come in. I'll call DED and they can get you a synthetic." He took Simiul by the shoulder and pulled him inside.

"I can't take police issued synthetic. It only kills the serious symptoms. I can't lead a normal life." He staggered inside and Viotro caught him and helped him to the couch.

"I don't know what to tell you..." Viotro said. But he did not head for a comm panel and instead went to another room and returned with a personal weapons scanner and an automated syringe.

Simiul gazed at the syringe as Viotro slowly ran the scanner across Simiul's body. He felt his muscles relaxing in anticipation.

Sweet Vitoc, once again. The pure kind... straight from Amarria... it had to be.

Viotro confirmed his scan. "No bugs. You check out there."

Simiul turned his head, exposing his neck as though pleading for the injection.

Viotro leaned forward and placed the syringe to his neck. "I need to run a blood test..." And the syringe snapped...

But Simiul felt no relief.

"No..."

"I'm sorry, I've never seen you before. I need to be sure you're not with the authorities." And Viotro turned away and walked toward the other room.

Simiul screamed as he watched the Amarrian's back, but his voice cut off as his stomach lurched. He leaned forward and wretched, and what miniscule fluid was left in his system was forced upward in painful spasms.

"Let me get the test started," Viotro said. "Then I'll get you a bucket."

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"Helllllooooo, Viotro, Baby..." A woman's voice... from the distance.

Simiul looked up at his Amarrian caretaker as he dabbed a cold cloth on his forehead.

"You home?" came the voice.

"Yeah, I'm here!" Viotro shouted. Simiul cringed and pressed his head into the cushions as though it could block out the piercing sound. His stomach tightened, as it would on a steady rhythm. He curled and leaned forward and Viotro held out the bucket for him as they had many times before.

"More water." An order rather than a question. Viotro handed him a glass and Simiul drank.

"You won't believe the day I had today..." The woman's voice again from the other room. "I think I found something... I talked to my professor and he wouldn't take me seriously, but I still think it's something... a security hole, Baby... I think I found a security hole in the system..."

Viotro's head popped up momentarily, as though forgetting Simiul in her announcement. Then he rolled his eyes and turned back to his patient.

"You probably think I'm crazy..." her voice was in the room now, from the other side of the sofa.

"You found a security breach in what... in capsule integration?"

"I think so... maybe... in the connection with the capsule to the human... it uses a randomized ID, but sometimes that ID needs to change for various reasons, but if you can catch it at the moment the ID changes and insert--" Her head popped over the top of the sofa. A lovely Amarrian girl. "Oh... Hi," she said, her dark hair hanging above him as he watched her face suddenly change to a look of fear and concern. "You didn't tell me you had a guest..."

"Yeah, you might wanna check who's here before you start yelling about security loopholes..." Viotro took the empty glass from Simiul.

"You're not looking so great there Buddy," the woman said. "Vitoc?"

Simiul forced himself to nod.

She looked up. "Are you out right now, Honey?"

"Out of what?" Viotro asked. He cocked his head dramatically.

"Vitoc."

He sighed and rolled his eyes. "Please don't talk about that in front of people we don't know..."

"Oh, sorry... I didn't realize..."

"Fortunately I'm pretty certain this guy's legit."

She walked slowly around the couch. "I'm sorry, Babe. I'm still getting used to this life of crime." She walked toward him and held out her arms.

Viotro chuckled and shook his head as he dropped the glass on the floor. "Dear... your lips are going to get me in a lot of trouble some day..."

She knelt to bring her face to his level, wrapped her arm around his shoulder and kissed him. "Love you, Baby," she said.

Viotro grinned and shook his head as he put his arms around her. "I love you too, Floreina."

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Simiul gazed at the syringe in Viotro's hand. "I'm sorry I made you go through all that, Buddy... but your tests checked out..." He knelt in front of the couch. "So how do you intend to pay for this?"

And reality mutated into an ugly mess as Simiul thought about payment... not that he couldn't pay... but in his current condition, just the thought of trying to remember access codes and monetary transfer procedures made him want to sink into a pit of nothingness. "Please..." was all he could say.

Viotro grinned. "I'm just kidding." He leaned forward and Simiul had just enough time to turn his head and expose his neck before the syringe plunged into his skin, the prick barely noticeable against the backdrop of agony.

And almost immediately the world began to clear. Simiul sank backwards into the couch and breathed deeply as the weights seemed to detach from his stomach, allowing him to be human again. The pain ebbed slowly and Simiul followed the sensations and watched the pain disappear, as though the agony had been a part of his soul, an evil that could only be cleansed with the purity of home-grown Amarrian Vitoc. And for a moment he imagined that it were all true... what his master had told him... that evil resides in the souls of Minmatar and should be cleansed... that it *must* be cleansed...  
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"Alright, Pal," Viotro started. "Who are you? Where'd you come from? Who told you about me?"

Simiul sat up and took a deep breath, feeling the air traveling pain-free through his lungs as though it were not an oxygen-nitrogen mix but the embodiment of his desires. Normal people always felt like this... to take a breath and feel just the air rather than a burning intensity that up until a few minutes ago had felt like his entire life.

Now he could think again.

"I want to thank you, Viotro," Simiul started. "...for saving my life."

Viotro shrugged. "It's just business... what I'm really curious about is where you came from and what your story is... I normally don't take on new customers without solid references... Are slave traders on the lookout for you? Were you released or did you escape?"

"I escaped..."

And from across the room Viotro's girlfriend caught his attention as she cocked her head and a quick glare seemed to pass through her eyes, as though passing judgment. Then it was gone, replaced with a warm smile.

Viotro nodded. "Well, congratulations on your new freedom... however, escapees present an added risk for myself... because someone might come looking for you."

"I can do whatever you need..." Simiul replied. "Whatever precautions you want..."

"I need information about your previous owner, his organization, and an account of how you escaped, as well as the names of the people you used to find me."

"You need all that just to sell me some Vitoc?"

"I don't just trust random people off the street. It's hard being an emancipation supporter in the heart of Amarr territory. By selling you Vitoc, I'm an accomplice to your escape... that involves serious penalties in this part of space..."

"Okay, if you get me a computer interface I can show you my owner's information portal... and I still have access to the code and plans I used for my escape."

"Code?" Floreina asked, moving forward in her seat. "You a hacker?"

He nodded. "I spent three years learning to program my master's systems just so I could be here today."

"Well, we've all got something in common then..." A wicked smile crossed Floreina's lips. "I'd love to pick your brain."

Viotro was already getting up to fetch a datapad. "Something else you should know, Simiul... that Vitoc I gave you... it wasn't actually mine."

"You stole it?" asked Simiul.

"It was already promised to another customer. Now his supply's a little short... he'll understand... I couldn't send you to DED... but his was going to be my last sale for a while. All my regular customers are stocked up and I was planning to take a hiatus for a few months... and focus on school."

Simiul's heart sank... at least as much as was possible in the midst of his Vitoc euphoria. "Does that mean there's nothing you can do for me after this dose... I'm back to square one?"

Viotro leaned against the corner at the end of the hall. "I might be able to figure something out."

"Are we still going out dancing, Babe?" Floreina asked. "Or do you have business you need to deal with?"

"We're still going... it looks like this guy's all fixed up for now..."

Floreina looked at Simiul with a sudden gleam in her eye and pointed a finger. "You wanna come along? Drinks? Dancing?"

Simiul smiled. These two Amarrians were different than the Amarrians he had known... as though they hadn't noticed he was Minmatar. But still, he shook his head. "I'd love to, but I need to lay low right now, before I can make my way out of Amarrian space. I need to figure out a backstory before I can go out like that."

"Bah!" Floreina replied with a shrug. "Your owner released you because you and your family served many faithful years. That's your backstory."

"People will believe that?"

"Of course. It happens all the time. Just pretend like you're faithful to the Amarrian Lord and nobody will question it, especially if you're with us."

Simiul looked up at Viotro, who was not frowning as Simiul expected, but instead simply shrugged his approval.

"Okay, if you don't think we're in danger..."

Floreina smiled widely and met Simiul's eyes. "No, no. Everything's going to be fine."

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Floreina's cackling laughter flooded the hallway as the service drone let Simiul through Viotro's front door. "This guy thinks he's gonna get away with that?"

"Yeah, he'll probably get away with it... he'll get caught eventually." Viotro's voice.

"Where do you find these people?"

"They're everywhere, Babe," Viotro replied with a chuckle. "Every station, every planet, every culture and every organization. You've just gotta remember what comm networks they like."

"And all it takes is the standardized code breakers to find them?"

Simiul entered the living room to see Floreina lying across Viotro's lap with a datapad in her hands. She looked up and smiled. "Viotro's showing me how to hack the underground channels. Who knew there were so many criminals everywhere?"

"You got access to the station's communication relays?" Simiul asked.

"It's surprisingly easy with some of the equipment we get from school."

"Impressive. What are you in school for?"

"Weapons and military technology," Viotro replied.

But Floreina looked up with another of her sly grins. "Capsuleer training." And she winked. "But if you tell anyone, I'll sell you back to your old owner."

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"Amarrian religion lets wrongdoers believe they can simply atone by praying harder; our concept of hell sets a precedent that suffering is normal and acceptable; we establish irrelevant things as moral issues, distracting people from real right and wrong; we tell people our religion will 'draw them toward goodness' so they think they don't have to work at being a good person... or the fantasy of an eternal afterlife that makes human lives in the real world seem irrelevant... I could go on and on... It's all just flawed on a fundamental level."

Simiul stared at Viotro for a long moment as though his speech had just distorted New Eden's entire social dynamic.

"Does that shock you that I'd say all that?"

Simiul nodded. "Even after being a slave to the Amarrian religion, I can't go that far... I still need something to believe in..."

"Not me," said Viotro. "Religion is a disease."

"You don't feel like you're betraying your people by saying that?"

Viotro shook his head. "I'm just trying to believe in what I know is right..."

"Well," Simiul said. "That makes me feel better... even if I won't go nearly that far with my own thoughts."

"Are you nervous about making this Vitoc run to low-sec with me, just because I'm Amarrian?"

"A little..." Simiul replied. "Three weeks seems like a long time."

"Well, you'll learn that people aren't just stereotypes. Some Amarrians really do have the best interest of society in mind."

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Simiul leaned against the door to watch Viotro pulling clothes from his closet to pack his suitcase. Floreina lay on the bed, a datapad on her belly, turned away so that Simiul could not see the screen. "Have you ever been to the zoo?" Floreina asked.

"I've only seen a dozen or so animals in my life," Simiul replied. "Grew up on a mining rig. That's all the company ever let us know. They'd let us watch videos for good behavior... sometimes we'd watch nature shows."

"Ah, that's terrible!" she said. "Well, as soon as you get back, Viotro and I will take you. Our treat. I know

a beautiful zoo in the system. It's just a quick shuttle ride away. How about a choir bar? Ever been to one of those?"

Simiul shook his head and shrugged.

"Pubs where everyone participates in the song. There's a fully automated one here on station where the lyrics scroll across the walls and the floors flash signals so you know exactly what to sing and when. It makes some truly interesting music... with the clapping and stomping... interesting, not necessarily good, but interesting... but after a couple drinks and a bit of practice, it's loads of fun."

"No, I've never heard of anything like that. Everything is new to me out here. Just browsing the local open networks keeps me entertained."

"Well, we've got to take you out to experience these things... I'm free the day after you guys get back. Viotro, are you free that day? Can we take Simiul to the zoo and the choir bar and maybe a play or public holoreel? He needs to experience these things... new found freedom and all..."

Viotro did not immediately answer. "What are you doing Floreina?" he finally asked.

Floreina cocked her head and sat up. "I'm inviting him to go out with us and have some fun... is that a problem?"

Viotro looked up at her for a long moment. "No, it's fine. Make whatever plans you want, Honey."

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"Are you okay, Viotro?" Simiul asked as he watched the Amarrian hovering over the holographic game board. "I hate to tell you, but you're leaving your command station wide open for attack by my third infantry."

Viotro's head popped up. "So I am... my head's not in the game."

"Is this trip too boring for you? Waiting three days in the middle of nowhere for a transport can get old..."

"I've done this trip before," Viotro replied. "But I've got a lot on my mind."

"Floreina?"

"Sort of... I was thinking of changing my major... moving my focus from military tech to business... but I was worried about how that would affect me and Floreina because if I changed school's we wouldn't be able to see each other much." Viotro tapped the table absently and finally made his moves with a shrug, as though he knew he was marching into a trap but just didn't care. "Then Floreina contacted me yesterday and told me..." He stared at the floor. "That she's been kicked out of capsuleer training... now I can't even think about my own choices... this was her dream, and she's more upset than I've ever seen her... she's sleeping at her dad's house until I get back... and I'm out here in low-sec when I should be with her..."

"Do you mind if I ask why they dismissed her?"

Viotro shrugged. "She didn't want to talk about it. I tried to remind her that only a few make it through capsuleer training, that she's got far more career options now, but she wouldn't have it... It's all she's talked about since I've known her... even though only a handful of people even know she was doing it... and now I think she's about to make a life-changing decision before I get back... she's not the type to waste time with anything... she said her dad could get her a gunnery position with the ship he works for... if that happens, I'll never see her again."

Simiul made his moves with a few quick swipes of his fingers to bring his troops around the back of Viotro's nearest command center to capture ten percent more territory. Viotro simply stared. "Well..." Simiul started. "You strike me as a guy in love."

"I was going to ask her to marry me," Viotro replied. "I think I'm realizing that was a pipe-dream."

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"I'm concerned, Viotro..."

"We'll get there in time."

"I'm already starting to feel the withdrawals..."

"I know, Buddy... I'm sorry... but you've got another week before it starts doing damage... I'll get you a case of Vitoc in half that time... I promise... you'll never have to worry about Vitoc again."

  
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Simiul carefully navigated the cracker to his lips and forced himself to bite into the dry substance. He chewed and chewed and finally forced it down with a gulp of water. "Did you get the stuff?" he asked as he saw Viotro come back into their quarters.

Viotro closed the door and set his pack on the bed. And Simiul's heart jumped as he saw Viotro's smile, registering success. "I'll need payment before I hand it over," Viotro said.

"Of course," Simiul replied and began crawling across the bed toward his data interface, feeling the sweat beading from his forehead as his heart increased its rhythm in anticipation of the injection.

Viotro pulled out a small case and opened it to show a series of identical vials. For a moment, Simiul wondered why they weren't in a single container, since it was all for one person... but it didn't matter. He set the datapad on the bed and it took only a few seconds to transfer one hundred and twenty credits, the majority of Simiul's post-slavery savings, into Viotro's account.

Viotro confirmed the transaction then passed Simiul a syringe.

Simiul wasted no time putting the syringe to his neck and firing the injection. He fell backwards to splay out on the bed and let the sensations and release overcome him.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Viotro snap the Vitoc case shut. He stood and placed it on the desk on the far side of the room. He sat down in a chair and an odd look suddenly crossed his face. "I have something I need you to do," he said.

"What's that?" Simiul asked.

"I need you to put these on." And Viotro reached into his coat pocket and removed a twisted metal object. As he tossed it through the air, two sections of the object separated, and Simiul saw they were connected with a thin cable.

Restraints.

They landed on the bed next to him, and Simiul stared for a long moment.

"I'm returning you to Amarrian custody, Simiul... I'm sorry... I know this life meant a lot to you... but I can't in good conscious allow you to throw away your soul."

"You're joking..." Simiul's head swam, reality twisting into a melting pot of pain, relief, ecstasy and terror.

"No. I'm not." Viotro removed a laser pistol from his jacket pocket and rested it casually in his lap. "I need you to put those on. Behind your back."

"How could you... after everything you said... those were all lies?"

"I memorized certain heathen propaganda," Viotro replied. "I know this is painful for you, and I'm sorry... but I had to do what I know is right. This is your path to salvation, Simiul. You can't find God by running away from your responsibilities."

Simiul stared at the restraints and tried to think of options through the Vitoc haze. Viotro would not have been stupid. He would not have brought him all this way just to put him in a situation that gave him a chance of escape.

Viotro clutched his weapon and began raising it. "I need you to put those on, Buddy."

And Simiul, with a gripping pain rapidly returning to his heart, obeyed. "I thought you were my friend..."

"I'm still your friend..."

"No..." Simiul shook his head. "Friends don't do this."

"I can't let my friend sacrifice his soul. I know this is hard to take right now, but I promise, you will thank me in the long run... I didn't sell you back to your old owner. I think I found someone who will be a better fit for you. You didn't hurt anyone in your escape, so I was still able to find you a good home. And Simiul, you will find God... this is your path, Buddy... and yes, I am still your friend."

Simiul shook his head again. "That heathen propaganda speech you gave me... I think I believe it more and more these days."

"And that is exactly why you need to go back," Viotro replied. He put his gun back in his pocket and leaned forward in his seat. "Do you want me to hang out so we can talk?"

Simiul didn't reply. Despite the misery he knew was on the way, it all felt like a cosmic joke. Just random, disjointed, garbage. No organized, all-powerful being could have set this up. It was all just Godless randomness... a joke.

"No," Simiul replied. "I don't want to see you right now."

Viotro stood. "Okay, that's fair. Your new owner will be here in half an hour to pick you up." He walked

toward the door. "I did want to apologize to you though, about Floreina... about what she said to you... that was cruel and I didn't tell her to do that."

Simiul shrugged.

"About the zoo and stuff..."

Simiul shrugged again and shook his head in amazement. "I don't care about that... what hurts is how your whole culture can do this to people... like you don't care... like you don't even recognize us as humans."

"That's the part you need to understand," Viotro said as he stepped into the hall, the door beginning to slide shut. "We *do* care. That's why we do this."