

Relics of the Past

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Revelations

Caldari Navy Assembly Plant Otsasai, Mito Constellation, Lonetrek Region -59 Hours

“Entering Otsasai, Captain.” The ensign conning The Commorant-class Destroyer *Tanto* shifted in his seat as the stargate cloaking field disgorged the ship into realspace.

“Very well. Proceed to the rendezvous coordinates and dock.” He turned and faced his Executive Officer. “XO, you have the bridge, I’ll notify our guest of our pending arrival.”

Commander Uema looked up over his reading glasses from his book at the fresh-faced Lieutenant in an immaculate uniform rapping at his hatch. Uema returned the Lieutenant’s salute, and beckoned him to enter.

“We’ve arrived, sir. We will be docking in a few minutes, if you would care to join me on the bridge.” Uema nodded, swinging his legs down from his Spartan bunk as he retrieved his uniform jacket.

“Captain, a moment.” The Lieutenant stood a little straighter as Uema referred to him as the traditional rank of Captain, which was bestowed upon the commander of a vessel regardless of the actual rank they maintained. “Remember, I was never here.” Uema said. “You are simply joining the combined task force for a standard rapid-response exercise. After I disembark, forget I was ever on board.”

“Yes Sir.” He nodded. “Oh, and Captain, You’ve got a fine crew. Keep them on their toes out here.” The Lieutenant smiled and spun on his heel, heading to the bridge using the spinal corridor running the length of the Destroyer. Uema buttoned his jacket as he walked, returning salutes as too-young appearing ratings stepped against the walls of the corridor to allow him to pass.

“Coming up on the station now, sir.” Lieutenant Cole nodded as Uema entered. “Commander on the bridge”. Uema motioned for the bridge crew to carry on with their duties as he began counting the different ships registered on his forward view screen hanging in space around the station. At a guess there were nearly seventy ships. *So many*. Uema thought, tapping his leg inside his trouser pocket. *Not so many in one place since the Great War*.

“CNS Tanto, this is Station Control. Hands off, acknowledge autodock in Bay 16. Welcome to Otsasai.” *Bay 16?* Uema pondered the quirk as the Tanto glided into the docking bay, the repulsor fields regulating the movement of the Destroyer with their characteristic precision. From his vantage point Uema watched the large gantry affixed to the robotic docking collar swing down and maglock in place over the access hatch on the Starboard fuselage.

Commander Uema walked with the Captain to the docking collar, after stopping by his quarters for his travel bag.

“You know sir; they still speak about you at the academy.” Lieutenant Cole gestured Uema to the docking ring.

”Really.” Uema gave a half smile.

“Ever heard of the Frigate Skoshi?” The color drained out of the Lieutenant’s face.

“Nobody’s perfect.” Uema turned and saluted, a grin forming on his face. “Permission to disembark, Captain.”

Lieutenant Cole returned his smile. “Granted. Oh, and sir?” he paused. “If I should remember ever meeting you, I’d like to share a drink and talk about it sometime.”

Commander Uema pulled himself down the weightless boarding tube using the heavily worn gunmetal drag rail. The smell of solvents and oil mixed with the heavily recycled air brought back memories of himself as a young ensign, assigned to rumpeldump stations just like this one in the borderlands.

The massive painted emblem of the Caldari Navy on the access hatch split into four sections, as the pressure door irised open to show the interior of the station. Two Marines in Slate gray battle armor stood at the breach of the boarding tub, the dark metal of their railcarbines gleaming in the artificial lights from the overheads. As Uema entered the gravity field of the station, a light, warm buzz enveloped him, as if a thousand electronic ants were swarming his body.

“ID please...” The sentry produced a hand-held veriscanner from his belt pouch, and inserted Commander Uema’s NFID card when he produced it. “Commander Yoshi Uema, please follow me.” After returning the Marine’s crisp rifle salute, Uema was led from passageway to maglift to passageway, traveling deeper with each measured step into the bowels of the station.

About the same time that Uema began imagining they were going to end up at the other side of the station, the Sergeant led him to an unmarked security door, ringed by two additional Marines.

“Identify.” The Sergeant spoke apparently to no-one, but Uema understood and removed his NFID card from his blouse pocket as a flat paneled touch screen slid out of a previously unseen recessed housing adjacent the door. “Sir, insert your ID in the top right slot, and then rub the inside of your cheek with your right index finger. Then place your hand palm down on the hand outline.” Uema frowned, having done the same task a few hundred times over the course of his Naval Career, but only when entering secure areas. His hand dropped as the three previously red bars in the upper right corner of the panel flashed green.

The biometric panel dropped away back into the wall with a green hue backlit on its face, leaving a ghostly aura in the hallway as the security door snapped open with a hiss. The large room was much darker than the hallway, lit only by a large holoscreen mounted on the far wall. The occupants ringing the large Sailwood conference table in the center appeared dark, almost foreboding in their stillness as Uema entered.

“Come in, Commander.” The man centered on the far edge of the table beckoned him to sit. “Sergeant, step out in the hallway with your detail and magseal the door

behind you.” Uema darted looks left and right, unable to see with any clarity who was addressing him.

“Commander Yoshi Uema, reporting for duty.” Uema shifted in his chair, his hand absentmindedly tapping the commpad in his pocket holding his priority summons to maintain communications silence and make best speed to Otsasai.

“I know you must have questions Commander, but the circumstances surrounding your summons are a closely guarded state secret. Other than the six people in this room, only three others are aware of why you’re here.”

“I assumed as much, sir.” Uema assumed he was speaking to a senior officer at this point.

“Indeed? And what made you think that, Commander?”

“Well, really four things, Sir. For one, seldom does the Caldari Navy reactivate retirees in times of Peace.”

“And the others?” The man leaned forward, the platinum piping of a flag officer ringing his neck and wrists.

“The Fleet Carrier Shogun, leading what appears at a cursory glance to be two constellations worth of Caldari Naval Forces in a combined fleet parked in orbit around this station.”

Uema’s eyes wandered the table, settling on the bald headed man to his far left. “And if memory serves me, Admiral Iella, you command the Shogun, do you not?”

The smell of burning tobacco wafted past his nostrils, as the perfect dark gray and blue of Admiral Iella’s dress uniform was bathed in light from the large wall-mounted vidscreen to his right. Iella didn’t speak, but the grim visage on his face spoke volumes. “What else?” The Admiral began jotting notes down on his datapad.

“The Tanto was cleared to dock in bay 16, and unless there has been a change in Caldari Naval Regulations in the last year, bay 16 at a station is always reserved for impounded ships. Nobody goes in or out except for Security Personnel and Customs Officers.” “And the last?” Iella finally spoke. He appeared tired, small bags bunkering the wrinkles under his eyes.

“I’m sitting in a hastily converted maintenance bay, with most of the department heads of the Caldari Navy. Otsasai is located about as far as you can get from the Caldari seat of Government, and yet most of the senior staff of the Caldari Navy are here, in a nondescript room below the fusion plant of a station in the middle of nowhere.” For several minutes the room remained dead silent, bar the low hum of the Fusion plant powering the station a few levels above them.

Iella broke the silence, a quizzical look drifting across his face. “A maintenance bay?”

“Sir?” Uema didn’t understand the statement.

“How did you know it was a maintenance bay?” Uema permitted himself a wry grin. “The walls are discolored from where the shelves once ringed the room, there are

fresh welds in small circular patterns on the ceiling where the diagnostic tools were suspended, and even with a fresh coat of paint I can see the oil stains coming through on the floor.” *Sharp as ever.* Iella was genuinely glad to see Yoshi Uema. They had come up together through the State War Academy, and had served together for years in the same war zones. Each had seen their share of combat and lived to clone again.

“It’s been a while, Yoshi. I’m sorry to interrupt your sitting on a beach somewhere, but we have a.....*situation*...that requires your expert eye.”

Sure. Uema thought. *As if all I have to do is evaluate some Intel.* Commander Uema felt a little better knowing ‘lova was involved, but the presence of the other Division Heads of the Caldari Navy and their aides made him uneasy.

A hazy image from a long range reconnaissance probe flashed up on the vidscreen as Admiral Iella extinguished his cigarette. “Two weeks ago, the Covert Operations Frigate *Ritoru Sakai* was on a standard sweep of the Venal region, when their gravimetric sensors picked up an odd anomaly in the system.”

Iella tabbed forward a screen. “The captain of the ‘Sakai was on his way back to Caldari Space with a sizeable Guristas task force on his tail, several critically injured crewmembers and a nearly full inventory of scan probes, so he launched probes, logged the telemetry of the anomaly, and ran like hell back to Caldari space without investigating further.”

“When she docked here in Otsasai, repair crews gave her a once over and determined that the structural integrity of the hull was so totally compromised that she’d probably shake herself to pieces the next time she entered warp, so it was better to scrap her for component parts than try and patch her up.”

“Two days ago, the S-2 made a routine review of her sensor logs. Those findings were hand delivered to Admiral Fukashi there, on your right. He decided they were important enough to bring to me, and after I viewed them I sent for you.”

The screen tabbed forward again, showing a hazy thirty second recording of the inside of a dark nebulae, bluish white electrical discharges rippling across its expanse.

“Now, watch this.” Iella zoomed in on a section of the expanse, revealing a titanic ghostly greenish-tinted brown and gray ship surrounded by a massive asteroid and debris field several thousand kilometers across. Uema’s eyes became saucers. *Jovian.* He thought. *No doubt about it. But what? Why build something that huge? How could you even go about building something that big? Why is it in Venal?* Uema’s mouth opened with a barely audible pop. It assailed his senses. Nothing made by the hands of man was ever this big. It made no sense. Not rational. The shipyards at Kisogo were but dust bunnies under the bed compared to this thing. This was something totally new for the Jovians, and totally foreign.

From the three-quarter provided view of the bow of the vessel, it looked like a giant evil crocodilian, minus the limbs and the tail. In the front it carried a blunt nose, with a large center depression which looked disturbingly like the bore of an obscenely large weapon.

At an educated guess it was at least two hundred kilometers long, but relatively thin and flat. Towards the rear of the fuselage, it mounted four massive twin-boomed drive units, extending approximately one-third of the way from the stern to the bow.

“I don’t recognize these components along the mainline.” Uema pointed to the hundreds of massive squat oviform projections forming a line along the port side of the vessel.

“Notice how they are aligned along the axis of the superstructure.” I thought I had seen a fair sampling of Jovian technology, it just doesn’t seem to fit their profile to build something like this.” For twelve years Uema had commanded a small unit with unlimited resources within the Caldari Navy, whose sole purpose was to track and glean information about and from the Jove Empire. Shadows watching shadows.

“Nevertheless, it’s definitely of Jovian origin.” Uema walked to the view screen to get a better look of the image. “It’s hard to give it an exact size or even designation; I’ve never seen anything like it. Nor can I explain what it is doing in Venal. It looks older, nothing like their modern ships.” Uema studied the picture, and came to a startling conclusion. “This debris field...I think I see the front third of an Eidolon-class Battleship, and what appears to be the remains of many other ships.” Uema pointed to several spots on the screen. “You can see what looks like magnetic bottles of a capital jump drive here and here, and this appears to be part of some sort of capital thruster array. And all these around it, there must be thousands of individual derelicts here.” Uema looked at the screen for a long time, and nobody said a word.

“ander...” Admiral Fukashi cleared his throat, and tried again. “Commander....”

“Yes, sorry sir.” Uema focused his thoughts to clear his head.

“I don’t have the experience you have, none of my men really do.” Fukashi continued. “But my staff is of the opinion that we are looking at a test platform of some sort... Hard to tell what, but considering the size of that thing, it must generate a massive amount of power.”

“What are the Jovians saying about it? Do we have any diplomatic contact with them on this?” Fukashi scratched his beard stubble.

“They’ve been tight lipped as ever about it. All they would say is it matches the description of an autonomous research platform they launched several hundred years ago. They’ve requested the coordinates so they can retrieve it.” Commander Iella frowned.

Uema zoomed the view in so the ship was centered in the viewscreen.

“Enhance” Uema waited for the screen’s minicomputer to complete pixelating the massive capital ship, and stared at it intently for several minutes while zooming the view back and forth. And then it dawned on him. Uema took on a strange gray shade to his skin, and felt sick.

“Commander?” Iella stood and strode aside Uema at the screen. “What’s the matter? There’s no sign the Guristas know anything about it yet, and soon enough we’ll have it under our control.”

“I think I just figured out what we’re looking at.” Uema tasted bile rising in his throat. “Imagine for a second that these lumps on the port side are matched up on the

starboard. What type of weapon uses equidistant inline magnetic fields to fire a projectile?”

“A railgun, but what does that have to...” Commander Iella ceased speaking in mid-sentence, eyes widening as the realization hit him.

“A railgun, with a bore that large, supplied with the almost unlimited power a ship of that size can generate. Every shell fired has the potential to be an ELE if fired at a planet.” Uema returned to his chair, and took a swig of hydro from the glass in front of him.

“ELE?” Uema noticed the disembodied voice came from a small conference pod sitting in the center of the table. “I’m not familiar with the acronym.”

“Forgive me, Commander. Sitting in with us today via pod is Oeto Belkin, Aide-de-camp to President Kossinen. He’s monitoring this meeting via a secure channel, and will brief the President when this session concludes.”

“Extinction Level Event.” Uema looked defeated.

“I’m afraid I still don’t follow.” The disembodied voice sounded confused.

Uema paused for a moment, still feeling somewhat overwhelmed by the burden of information that now rested on his shoulders.

“Most of the time, when a stray interplanetary body or derelict object drifts too close to a planet, orbital watch satellites and planetary defense systems will render them into small enough fragments where they cannot endanger anything larger than a few dozen meters upon reentry. And that’s if the object is formed from rock, geodesic crystal or is a man-made hollow metal object such as a satellite or ship. If it has a metal or high-density core, there’s nothing to be done except try and intercept it with a heavy mass tug and tractor it away, or pray it lands in a non-populated area.” Uema continued.

“A meteoroid or projectile the size of a medium sized planetary vehicle has the ability to crater a city, from kinetic and heat damage, seismic shock, general concussive force and the ejecta that is thrown up on impact.” Uema leaned forward for emphasis. “Now imagine what a solid metal object over a kilometer across can do.”

“I see. What about shooting it down with planetary defense systems again? Why won’t that work?”

“Missiles and railguns don’t have the speed or mass to knock down an object that large or fast before it slams into the ground, especially if fired from high orbit at a steep angle as this is undoubtedly designed to do.” Uema tried to remain patient.

“So what about lasers? You can’t tell me that those projectiles are faster than light?”

“In actuality, you’d probably only get one shot from a battery, and you’d have to have the processing power of a planetary AI system to compute the intercept point. Even if it was possible to determine the trajectory of a projectile fired at relativistic speeds through an atmosphere, that projectile is tentatively a kilometer across. As it breaches the atmosphere, it’s going to plow through the various levels of gases at relativistic speed. The front is going to liquefy and stream to the rear, and it’s going to take on an almost teardrop shape. It’s going to lose very little speed coming through the atmosphere. Hitting it with lasers will only strike the superheated surface of the projectile, and carry the heat energy to the rear of the projectile as the rest of it plows forward. A regular

meteoroid will break up in the atmosphere, but this thing is probably using a molecular-condensed metal sabot.”

“Hell, we’re talking about the Jovians here. For all we know the projectiles carry onboard shielding.” Admiral Fukashi added.

“Regardless, it’s all moot. We don’t have any planetary lasers remotely bearing the joules you would need to kill a projectile from that behemoth.” Uema added.

“What about deploying the fleet to take it out before it could reach a colonized system? That could be done, correct?” The disembodied voice on the conference table was becoming irritating.

“We really don’t know, sir. The size of that thing defies conventional force depletion analysis. I don’t think we could take it in a stand-up fight, if we brought every ship in the arsenal, including the reserves and every volunteer we could find.” Commander Iella looked across to Uema.

“Sir, suffice to say that there isn’t a defense against this thing. There is no countermeasure, shield or armor anywhere that can stop a projectile from this ship before it hits its target.” Uema continued. “I did coursework on ELE-classified weaponry and why it was banned at the Youil Conference while I was at the State War College.”

“Everything depends on the actual mass of the projectile, its composition, and speed you are able to put into it. Generally speaking, with a projectile of three or four kilometers in size, they could literally put a hole in the crust of a planet. Maybe even pierce the upper mantle. Massive earthquakes would be felt across the planet. A fireball five hundred miles across would instantly ignite every plant, tree and building. Water would evaporate. The air blast alone could change the climate. Winds of six thousand miles per hour. The ejecta from the crater would be thrown up into the atmosphere, temporarily blocking out the sun and quite possibly creating an artificial planetary ice age. If not, then a layer of debris a foot or more thick covering most if not all of the planet. No photosynthesis occurs, all the plant life dies. Two months, everything else dies.”

"Lo let the night be solitary, let no joyful cry be heard in it. Let them curse it who curse the day who are ready to awake the Leviathan." Admiral Napas looked disheveled.

“God in Heaven. It’s a nightmare.” Admiral Iella looked about the room at a gallery of grizzled war veterans bearing shocked faces.

“No, it’s a planet killer. And it’s real. If the Guristas get their hands on that thing, nothing in space will be able to stop them.”

Subterfuge

Caldari Navy Assembly Plant Otsasai, Mito Constellation, Lonetrek Region -52 Hours

“If there are no more questions Commander, you’ll be briefed on your ship and meet with your crew in about an hour.” Uema recalled the last words Admiral Iella had spoken to him in the hastily cobbled together briefing room. He had departed the room feeling as if he were carrying an eight hundred pound gorilla. Uema had spent more than a decade commanding a reconnaissance squadron of the Caldari Navy studying the enigmatic Jovians.

Before the fall of the great Eve gate, the Jove had secreted themselves in a small series of systems in the Heaven constellation, and had disabled key stargates behind them. While the worlds of hundreds of colonists struggled for survival and devolved into a pale comparison of their technological advancement, the Jove had instead chosen to advance their technology and thrive. Only when the Jove began tinkering with the fundamental structures of their humanity using bio-engineering, had their downfall begun. Dying the Jovians were. While most enjoyed preternatural lifespans and resistance to most forms of disease, a genetic anomaly had taken root far too late for them to save themselves as distinct branch of the Homo Sapiens Phylum.

So now with their mortality laid bare, that they decided to slowly reintroduce the remnants of the Eve galaxy to technologies they had so jealously hoarded after the fall. The four dominant empires had made many attempts to speed up the exchange of information, including an ill-fated attempt by the Amarrian Empire to invade Jovian space. After the utter decimation of the Amarr fleet by a much smaller Jovian force, none of the other empires had dared move against them.

It was even rumored at that point that the Jovians had built a massive weapon, codenamed the “Jovian Armageddon Project.” But details were sketchy.

It was then decided by a vote of the Chief Executive Panel, to commit a small force to clandestinely gain a base understanding of the Jove. Uema had functioned in this capacity flawlessly, classifying dozens of Jovian ship types and learning the greater majority of intelligence the Caldari Navy possessed on the Jovians. Inhabited systems, force structure, patrol routes and even some coded transmissions had been intercepted by his hand-trained squadron.

A day came that Commander Uema wondered if all he had gleaned had been leaked to him by the Jovians, as on his last day of patrol prior to his retirement he had received a tight beam transmission from an unknown source in Jovian space. The transmission had contained only ten words. “We have enjoyed our game, Commander. Perhaps we meet again.”

Uema blinked his eyes and yawned, dismissing old memories that were flooding into his head. Dim overhead lights continued to wink past as the small open-topped transporter slid along the gleaming silver rails of the gravlink.

The sensation was familiar, having spent the greater portion of his life within the gunmetal gray hangars ringing the interiors of similarly massive Caldari Naval Stations.

The four Marines clad in the same gray-hued battle armor riding with him did not speak, but Uema didn't mind, he already had too much to think about. Uema wondered which hangar was their destination, as the docking bays at the massive yawning mouth of the station reserved for Caldari Naval vessels had been passed several minutes ago.

After several long minutes they reached the rear bays, which by their general lack of repair, illumination and absence of space worthy craft must have been closed for some time. The transporter slid to a stop at the rear wall of the last bay, its gravity field lightly humming in the near total silence of the darkened hangar. *Odd. This bulkhead looks new.* Uema thought to himself as the steersman produced a small metallic keycard from his belt and inserted it into a small reader panel arching over the side of the gravlink.

Uema smirked. *And so it is.* A man-sized portion of the bulkhead adjacent the link recessed into the wall, approximating a door.

"Through there, sir." The Marine stiffened, saluting the commander as he stepped from the link, bag in hand. As Uema stepped through the camouflaged door, he heard the whine of the gravlink recede as it sped back along the track.

As the door closed, Uema was standing at the threshold of another security checkpoint. As the two black-armored sentries looked on, Uema was approached by a thin, gaunt orderly holding a gray polycarbonate box with the words "Uema, Yoshi. CDR" stenciled on the sides.

"Step behind that partition, remove your uniform, and change into the one sitting on the table next to the bench. All personal belongings go in the box. No timepieces, identification, rings or tags."

As Uema stepped behind the partition, he sensed something was wrong immediately, but couldn't quite put his finger on it. Uema felt a sense of revulsion as he realized what it was. The uniform, neatly folded on the table before him, was that of a Guristas Commander.

"Has he arrived?" The woman asked quietly, an air of concern fleeting across her face as she completed inventorying the ships stores.

"Aye. He's just getting into wardrobe. You sure this isn't going to be a problem?" Her crewmate eyed her cautiously as he directed a loader to stack more supplies below the freight arm of the ship.

"Well, he's not armed, is he?" She dared a slight smile as she found herself absent-mindedly looking across to the bay entry door.

Uema entered the hangar, feeling... He didn't quite know what he felt. *Dirty*. He thought. *This uniform makes me feel dirty*. His thoughts on the topic collapsed as he stood in awe of the ship centered in the hangar before him.

At first glance it appeared to be a Moa-Class cruiser, but the hue of the hull metal was wrong, and it displaced more tonnage. Not much, but to Uema's trained eyes, he picked it up immediately. *Gila?* He appraised the ship with a critical eye. The Guristas Pirates were the only entity who constructed monstrosities like the Gila. Uema was torn between what it represented, and what a feat of engineering it was. It had the same hull profile as a Caldari Moa, but packed a great deal more firepower.

It was a perfect meshing of fit and form, its short boxy hull combined with its crooked "L" shaped bridge concealing the power to hull just about anything in space, given enough time.

"I don't know whether to love her or hate her, to be honest." Uema shook the outstretched hand of the man that approached from behind, finding him familiar but being unable to place his face. "Captain Metcalf, I'm your Operations Officer and Navigator. And I've always thought Moa-class cruisers looked like some sort of retarded flightless bird."

"So tell me about her." Uema smirked as he continued to critique the ship's lines.

"Records show she was called the *Black Death*, a Mortifier variant of a Gila class cruiser. She was found adrift near planet four in the Obe system, all hands deceased. Best the investigative team could piece together was some sort of catastrophic life support failure." Uema winced. Caldari Naval ships had triple-redundant backups built into their systems, along with sectional life support, vacc suits, and enough rations and compressed oxygen in the lifepods for the crew to survive for weeks.

The Guristas didn't care so much for the welfare of their crews as they cared for the larger cargo space for holding their ill-gotten gains.

"Over the last two years we've completely gutted her and rebuilt her into a stealth platform, albeit a heavily upgunned one". Metcalf smiled.

"We've installed the shield and targeting package from an Eagle, the stealth and sensor suite from a Falcon and a prototype microframe computer to tie it all in." Metcalf Beamed. "She's nearly autonomous, but we've kept the bridge crew in complete operational control. With the current ordnance fitting you should be able to hull anything below a cruiser-class ship in less than a minute, but I doubt if you'll be able to sink anything bigger without substantial risk or before they can fire off a distress call." Uema nodded, looking over the ordnance listing on the datapad Captain Metcalf had handed him.

"The system has several flaws, however..." Metcalf frowned. "One, while the crew component is reduced to a skeleton bridge crew, she's still pretty tight on living space. We had to literally cram components into every nook and cranny on her. That being said, there's a backup for each system, but anything other than routine maintenance

will take dock time, as you will probably have to pull out one system to get at another, if that makes sense.” *So jury rigging repairs could be a problem. Gotcha.* Uema nodded.

“What else?” Uema dropped his bags on the corrugated decking.

“There was no way to install everything without completely restructuring the interior of the ship, which means should you be boarded for whatever reason anybody with engineering experience on a Gila will know this ship isn’t what it’s making out to be.”

“Last but certainly not least, cloaked movement aboard her isn’t perfect. Recon-class ships have their hulls designed around slipping through ambient space while they move, while this ship uses the hull from a Gila. We’ve dampened the interior hull surfaces, but we wanted to keep the exterior appearances up should you need that advantage. I doubt it will be to a level where it will make a difference, but I thought you should know.”

“We’ve met, haven’t we?” Uema’s eyes bored into him, trying to place his familiarity.

Captain Metcalf paused a half second before responding.

“Yes sir, but we’ve only spoken once or twice. I was the deckmaster at the logistics base in Torrinos before I rotated here, and when you were stationed there you told me I was...well, good at scrounging up stuff.”

Uema chuckled at the way the junior officer had phrased it. To Uema, scrounging was in itself an art form. It involved begging, borrowing and stealing parts and supplies when things were scarce. *There’s only one thief in the Caldari Navy, everyone else is trying to get their stuff back.* Uema grinned, slapping the young captain on the shoulder. Most line officers at best frowned on the art of scrounging, but Uema looked upon it as being resourceful.

“Sir, there’s one thing...” The captain trailed off, as he realized Uema was no longer smiling. In fact, Uema’s face had morphed into a mask of utter contempt and hate. He reached for his sidearm that wasn’t there, and tried to push past the captain to get his hands on the new focus of his attention.

“You bloody traitor!” Uema’s eyes screwed shut to slits as he felt redness overtaking his vision. There she was, standing not ten feet from him. *Reiko. Reiko Watanabe.* Uema had murder in his heart. Reiko had been the captain of the Cerberus-class Heavy Assault Cruiser *Shiruken*, and had amassed a legendary tonnage rating versus the Guristas in the borderlands surrounding Venal. They had met in a mission briefing, and had hit it off immediately. They had kept their relationship discreet, but everyone knew anyway.

After all, it’s not as if a hero of the state can keep secrets with so many eyes upon you. Uema had fallen for her, and badly. When Uema had learned about her defection to the Guristas, he had felt as if his life was unraveling. Commander Iella had kept him busy, but it had taken him a very long time to get past the hole in his life.

“Viktor, can you give us a minute?” Reiko paused, casting her eyes downward.

“You kidding?” Metcalf bore a half-shocked, half-quizzical look on his face.

“I’ll be fine.” Metcalf eyed them for a moment, wondering if Reiko had gone plumb nuts, before going back to directing the loading of the ship.

Reiko removed her sidearm, and offered it to him butt-first. “Two options. Either take this gun and put a bullet in my head, or take five minutes and listen to what I have to say. It’s up to you.” Yoshi looked at her downturned face, dozens of emotions battling within for dominance. After staring into her eyes for a long time, Uema removed the pistol from her hand and placed it in his beltline.

“So talk. No guarantees I won’t shoot you anyways when you’re done.”

Complications

Guristas Logistic Support Station 6NJ8-V, UTZ-7B Constellation, Venal Region -51 Hours

Perplexed, he set his Jotu tea on the obsidian colored armrest on his right as he read on to the next passage scrolling on his datapad. *Interesting choice of nouns.* He thought, reclining slightly in his favorite chair in his private study. He had read the words hundreds of times, but he found new meanings of the ancient words penned by Horai whenever he took the time to read them.

The volume of the string quintet playing softly in the background lowered briefly as the door chime sounded, diverting his attention from his book.

After taking a few moments to finish the paragraph, Korako took another swig of tea and responded. "Enter."

"Good morning, Admiral." His aide carried an odd smile on his face. "The expeditionary fleet is assembled and standing by for your orders. Additional orders recalling all available forces home have been received by all theatre commanders; The Grand Fleet is estimated to rendezvous here in two days."

"Very well." After a few moments he rose from his chair and strode across the room to the wall-mounted holomap, and selected a point near Otsasai with his lightpen.

"Move the secondary fleet here to intercept the Navy task force if they weigh anchor from Otsasai. Spin up the jump drives on the Dominator and the Warhawk, and move them by bounds along with the rest of the fleet. Their only mission is to delay the Navy's task force long enough for us to move the Grand Fleet in-system. Cousin or not, tell Choji he has to delay them for at least two more days. If he cannot buy reinforcements more time, he may as well not come home." Lieutenant Harken nodded. Korako paused and looked over the map as his aide turned to leave.

"Oh, and Lieutenant, is there any indication as to the reason for the buildup?"

Lieutenant Harken turned and looked upon the Admiral, whose back was still turned studying the map.

"Not as of yet, Admiral. Could have something to do with the impact we've been having on shipping in the area." Lieutenant Harken grinned.

"Smiles are for courting women and your friends. I am neither." Harken could see the edges of a scowl on the Admiral's face.

"Dismissed." Aide-de-camp Harken breathed a heavy sigh of relief as the doors slid shut behind him. *How could he see I was smiling?* Lieutenant Harken hurried to the operations center to relay his instructions.

"Captain, we've received orders." Ensign Wallert relayed over his shoulder.

"Really? And all this time I thought we were freebooters." Captain Vandegall smirked. "Well, go on. Or am I supposed to read your mind?"

"Yes sir. I mean...No sir." Ensign Wallert's mouth turned into a marble jar.

"We're to proceed to Y-W1Q3 and blockade it."

“Ensign, I expect complete reports from my bridge crew. What have you left out?” Captain Vandegall questioned.

“Nothing sir, it’s very brief.” Ensign Wallert felt sweat fall from his armpit onto his side.

“Read it to me verbatim.” A hint of irritation had entered his voice.

“Void Stalker proceed system Y-W1Q3 best speed blockade pending reinforcements. Sent, Admiral K. Kosakami, Commanding.” Ensign Wallert read flatly.

“Communications, hail the salvage team, they have ten minutes to abandon equipment and reboard. Navigation, plot me a course for Y-W1Q3, execute in ten minutes and one second.”

The ship’s executive officer leaned over Ensign Wallert’s shoulder, who looked up at him with confused, pleading eyes.

“If you value air, you’d better get it together. That deployment order came from Admiral Kosakami himself. Something big is happening.”

The experienced members of the salvage team abandoned their torches and tethers and made for the Void Stalker, while the greedy or new hands tried to eek a little more work with the few minutes they had left.

Ensign Wallert felt a pang of regret as they made they accelerated to warp speed, imagining what must be going through the minds of the thirty or so men left behind on the wreckage of the mining barge they had caught earlier.

Wallert had sent a flash message to the loadmaster down in the cargo hold, to drop some oxygen tanks and a beacon before they went to warp, but he wasn’t sure if the chief had actually done it. *Not on board, get left behind*. Wallert wondered if he would ever get used to living under the Guristas flag. Riches beyond your wildest dreams, they said. They didn’t mention the part about leaving ships adrift or killing them outright or murdering entire crews. Wallert had decided weeks ago he had to get out, get off this ship. Next time they docked at a station, he’s sneak off and book passage on an independent freighter. Maybe even buy his own ship; he had enough isk saved for a shuttle now. He’d get out, and never look back.

Exit Wounds

Caldari Navy Assembly Plant Otsasai, Mito Constellation, Lonetrek Region -50 Hours

An emotion such as hate tends to manifest in a persistent state, even as the uniquely logical explanation of the treachery of Reiko Watanabe was laid before Commander Uema.

“I’m so sorry, Yosh.” Reiko said while tapping the backs of her heels to the cargo container she was perched upon. “Command decided that it was best for the security of the operation, that nobody in field command be notified. It was simply too important to risk.”

“I know. I even agree with their decision. I shouldn’t be mad about it, I just am. After all I’ve done for the bloody Navy; you’d think they would have the faith to let me know about it.” Uema scowled.

“You know they couldn’t.” Reiko continued. “God forbid you were ever captured and interrogated...” Reiko trailed off, seeing her argument wasn’t affecting his hostile visage.

“Maybe when we get back we’ll sit down and talk about it over a drink, but we really should focus on the next few days.” Reiko dismounted from the gray carbon fiber container, accepting the final manifest from a deckhand.

“Her main armament is four two-hundred fifty millimeter mark two railguns, and we’ve stuffed the cargo hold with a wide variety of ammunition. Antimatter, Tungsten, Thorium, you name it, it’s onboard. There’s even a small cache of prototype Spike ammunition. It’s a superdense plutonium sabot riding on a small graviton boost package, should just about double the range- but up close the way the propellant is configured good luck engaging anything smaller than a Battleship. Once the round reaches failsafe range and activates, if it works the way they say it does, I’d hate to be on the receiving end of a salvo of those.”

“What else?” Uema scrolled down the list on the datapad, a look of disbelief on his face.

“We’ve stripped out one of the missile hardpoints and dropped in a covert operations cloaking device...” Reiko paused as Uema smiled. “A standard scan probe launcher, with a requisite supply of both short range and long range probes.” Reiko continued down the list. “We rounded it off with a Cynosural Field Generator, with enough Liquid Ozone in a magnetic hazard bottle to open a jump portal for about 15 minutes.” Uema pocketed the datapad and folded his arms.

“That’s a pretty short window for a jump field. The jump drives on the capital ships can handle being in standby for an extended period, but they are going to get seriously depleted fuel levels idling the drives for that long.” If we give them the go signal when they are conducting underway refueling, or if they are at low fuel levels, we’re going to have an even worse situation on our hands trying to jump them back into Caldari Territories...”

“It’s been planned for. The Fleet Carrier and Dreadnoughts each have a Bustard-class deep space transport tasked to refuel them on jump-in. Should the Shogun, Daishi and Yakiya have to jump in-system, the Shogun will open a jump portal and transit the rest of the fleet. Upon assembly they will either take control of the objective by force, or attempt to cripple it by massed fire. Either it leaves in our hands, or not at all. And that’s only if we fail to complete our mission. If we are able to secure the objective, the fleet shouldn’t have to jump into Guristas space at all. I’m hoping we can either gain control of it, or sabotage it enough it will be worthless to the Guristas.”

Uema nodded, again eyeing the blocky lines of the Guristas Heavy Cruiser.

“Does she still have a drone bay?” Uema asked, seeing none in the manifest.

“Standard Moa-class drone bay, Metcalf will pull whatever you want from stores.” Reiko said.

“How long until we’re ready to depart?”

“About two hours, give or take. We’re going to have the rest of the mission-essential personnel onboard within the next twenty minutes, and Commander Iella will have the fleet moving to planet three within the hour. Once we’re sure nobody is around to witness our departure, we’ll undock and start our transit to Guristas territory.”

The next two hours passed without incident. A small team of state scientists was clandestinely embarked, consumables loaded, and final orders issued. Commander Uema sat in his Spartan command chair, waiting as the eyes of his bridge crew one by one fell upon him.

“Prepare to undock. Disengage umbilicals, set thrusters back five meters per second. Advise upon clearing the bay.” Uema leaned back, watching his crew complete their tasks in an efficient manner.

“We’ve cleared the bay, scanners show the station’s clear of all traffic.” Lieutenant Okuma said coolly.

“Very well. Engage the cloak, set course for Guristas space. Engage engines when ready.” Commander Uema felt the hairs on his arms prickle slightly as the cloaking field rendered his ship invisible.

“Incoming tight-beam transmission from the Shogun, Commander. It’s Admiral Iella.” Lieutenant Okuma’s hands danced across the communications board.

“Patch him through.” Commander Uema sat up a little straighter.

“Good hunting commander, call us if you get lost.” Commander Iella grinned.

“I am but a pinprick of light in the darkness.” Uema quoted from the Pax Ammaria. “Even so, the likelihood of me getting lost is about the same as you getting back together with your third wife.” Uema grinned.

“Shogun out.” Admiral Iella smirked.

“Captain Metcalf, let’s go find ourselves a ship.” Uema leaned back in his chair, and smiled.

Fox and Hound

Deep Space Y-W1Q3, Venal Region -21 Hours

“What do you have there, ensign?” Captain Vandegall said, not looking up from the bounty manifest his crew had accumulated over the last few weeks.

“Nothing sir, I thought there was a slight gravimetric shift above the stargate, at about seventy-five kilometers. But it just looks like a little background interference.” Sweat began to bead on his brow as he placed both hands on his console. To say the Captain punished mistakes was quite an understatement. Ensign Wallert was paranoid in the extreme, and wouldn’t jeopardize his cut for stupid mistakes.

“Really. Or perhaps we have a visitor.” Vandegall pondered for a moment, tugging on his ear with a free hand.

“Battle stations. Cut forward propulsion and set the forward sensors to a twenty degree cone. Focus on that point in space you thought you picked up that anomaly, maximum power on my mark.” The bridge lights snapped to a hazy shade of red as across the ship his crew dashed to their action stations.

“Sir, she’s cut her engines.” Lieutenant Okuma’s hands danced across her sensor board in the dimly lit battle bridge. “Her main sensor dish is aligning to the point in space where we made the course correction.”

“Dammit Navigation, I told you to take it easy. Even if we’re cloaked they can pick up the eddies in our graviton wake from the drive. Cut power to everything but the cloak.”

“Even the shields and weapons?” Lieutenant Kingsley looked perplexed even as his weapons panel went dark.

“Guristas use pirated Caldari Designs for their ships, that Battleship out there is no different. Most everything on this boat throws Gravitons, and even though they have an incredibly short half-life, they form eddies around and behind the ship, that they can pick up.” Uema rapidly tapped buttons on his command console.

“Only chance we have avoiding them is to cut power while the excess gravitons disperse back into the eddies surrounding the stargate, and make like a big hole in space.” Uema nervously drummed his console with his fingers.

“What about using the maneuvering thrusters to push us into his baffles?” Metcalf leaned forward in his chair, hands hovering over the controls.

“No, the maneuvering jets use supercompressed liquid noble gasses, which will freeze after being expelled into space. If they’re looking, they’ll follow the ice trail right to us.”

“Sensors at maximum, Captain.” Ensign Wallert darted a look over his shoulder at his grizzled captain, momentarily surprised when he realized he was looking over his left shoulder.

“Anything?” Vandegall frowned.

“No Captain, All I see is normal background noise on the scanner.”

“Sir, they’ve powered down their sensors, but they are station keeping at the stargate. There’s no way we’re getting by here with that Raven sitting out there. We’ll have to decloak to activate the Stargate, and they’ll make us for sure. There isn’t any way that we can get around it. If we decloak and use the gate, they’ll forward our position to other ships in the area, and this will be all for nothing. If we warp out, decloak, and warp back in, we could probably try to bluff our way by, but then we risk being boarded. Either way, we lose.” Lieutenant Okuma spun her chair slowly to view the rest of the bridge crew.

“Unless we present a third option.” Reiko said quietly.

“Something on your mind, Commander?” Commander Uema raised an eyebrow.

“There’s a few dozen derelicts floating in space out here, we know that from the Ferret probe we deployed when we jumped in-system.”

“So?” Uema looked perplexed.

“Well, we know a few of those were industrial-class ships. If we board one, and...”

“Set its communication relay to deliver a distress call.” Uema finished her sentence. “Ingenious. All we need to do is get this Battleship out of position long enough to slip through undetected. Captain Metcalf, what do you think?”

“We’ll have to take a few precautions, like rigging it to blow when they get in proximity, otherwise they’ll catch on too soon. If the commander of that Raven out there has the salt I think he does, he’ll recognize a derelict if he sees it, and it will be a wasted effort.” Metcalf watched Lieutenant Okuma bringing up the probe logs from the earlier deployment.

“There are three industrial-class ships within one-hundred ninety-two astronomical units of here. One is sheared in two, that one’s out. That leaves two. One is a Wreathe-class Minmitar Industrial, the other looks to be an old Berliss-class ore carrier.”

“So really, we’ve only got one option. Berliss class ships haven’t seen space for a hundred years. They won’t bite on that for a second. Triangulate down that Wreathe, and move us two hundred kilometers off the gate, I don’t want to risk them picking us up when we go to warp.” Uema ignored his crew setting about their duties as he pulled up the schematics of a Wreathe on his Command Console.

Awakenings

Deep Space Undisclosed System, Venal Region -20 Hours

“Query. Unfamiliar ships continue to transit through same system as self. Scans indicate threat insignificant. Instructions?”

”Initiate random jump protocol.” The command link engaged the tactical holodisplay of the space surrounding self.

“Negative. Jump Drives are offline. Fuel supplies exhausted.” A holographic view of the surrounding space ensconced itself in the center of the cavernous bridge.

“Query. Retrieve protocol for failure to jump malfunction.” Millions of lines of code scrolled across the viewscreens at the empty navigation stations.

“Instructions indicate self-repair if mechanical failure. Defensive action if hostile failure. No instructions listed for lack of fuel. Instructions?”

Several minutes passed as the sharded AI ran through hundreds of thousands of possible answers to the question.

“Primary mission unchanged. Prevent capture of platform until recall command received. Secondary mission unchanged. Gather information of jump locality upon arrival. Tertiary mission added. Acquire alternate fuel source to facilitate completion of Primary and Secondary missions.” The command shard routed more processor power to the sensor shard.

“Scan debris field for suitable fuel. Deploy autonomous probes to scan locality for suitable raw fuel sources.” The command shard paused, allowing the different shards of itself to process their new tasks.

“Scan for suitable fuel in debris field positive, however fuel levels in derelict capital-class vessels not sufficient for current needs. Efforts under way to retrieve fuel stores from twelve derelict capital-class vessels in surrounding debris field. Scan for suitable fuel sources in locality pending, but probability of positive results is eighty-eight percent due to large quantity of planetoids, moons and an ice comet in-system on an elliptical orbit.”

The command link paused again, processing the available information to determine course of action.

“Activating Forge shard.” The remote camera links picked up heavy venting of gases from the keel of the craft as the Forge began to disengage itself from the main craft.

“Forge is online.” A distinct, hollow voice added itself to the myriad of voices in the sharded AI.

“Interface with memory core and update ships logs to Forge memory core. Analyze and report.” The command link waited several minutes while the millions of lines of code and queries were downloaded into the Forge ship.

“You’ve certainly made a mess of things, haven’t you?” The Forge shard commented before continuing. “Fuel levels have fallen below minimum levels. The estimated time to replenish stores is twenty-two hours for single medium range jump ability, fourteen days nine hours for full capacity upon full deployment of my resources.” “I’m also showing twenty-three percent of primary systems require extensive maintenance or repair. Estimated time to repair failing systems is twelve days, eighteen hours upon recall of assets from underway refueling efforts.” The Forge continued. “Running out of gas is stupid. A tier-one autonomous waste hauler knows better than that.”

“Narration on current situation is unnecessary. Limit interaction to reporting pertinent information only. Initiate refueling operations and advise upon completion.” The command shard cut communications, leaving the Forge to grumble in silence as it assumed control of the deployed resource scanning probes and set course for the nearby ice belt.

“Get it back online, time is money you nit.” He scoffed. Artikus Smee was the human incarnation of an intergalactic wibblebug. Turn on the lights, and he scampers under the food processor. For a handful of years he had eked out a living mining rare ores and materials here in the Venal region, right under the noses of the Guristas Pirates. Counterfeit identification, bribes and quite a bit of running had resulted in a healthy payoff for himself and his small band of like-minded associates.

“It needs to be overhauled, the diodes in the strip miner are so polarized that if we don’t yank them out and replace them it’s likely to blow a hole in the turret when it eventually goes.” A loud clang and colorful swearing added a period to the disembodied voice came from inside the cupola.

“It’ll hold, it only has to last for a few more hours until we’ve got full loads for all three ships, then it’s payday for all of us.” Smee dipped a length of compressed green algae into his cup of fatty vootik sauce. “Besides, what am I paying you for?”

The chief engineer’s head popped up from the access panel in the cupola with a raised eyebrow. “You ‘aint paid me yet, so don’t think you’ve done me some great justice. And if you consider living in a bunk the size of a coffin for a year and a half, eating recycled food and smelling that crap you stuff your fat face with every five minutes getting paid, you’ve done gone past demented straight into fruityland.”

“CAP’N!” A frantic voice screamed down the corridor from the cockpit. ”BETTER GET UP HERE!” Smee hustled his portly frame along the rusty metal planks of the decrepit Berliss-class ore carrier into the cockpit, arriving partially winded.

“What the hell are you screaming about?” Smee looked down at the lanky kid watching the sensors.

“It’s big.” The kid’s eyes were saucers. “Really big.”

“Slow down. Where’s it at?” The kid pointed to a large blip at the ice belt on the fringe of the decrepit ore carrier’s sensor envelope.

“It’s probably a Guristas freighter; they come through every now and then.” Smee leaned forward looking at the sensor screen, wishing there had been a better crop of volunteers to pick from in Torrinos.

“No, it’s really, really big.” The kid pointed down at his antiquated sensor readout.

Smee followed his finger to the Ice Belt orbiting the fourth planet. It was big all right. Over a kilometer long. Smee had been out in space long enough to see just about everything that floats or warps, but this thing was...massive.

"That's big as an Empire Titan, that is." Smee tossed his cup in the waste bag hanging on the back of his chair.

"Beam a signal to the buoy at planet four to remotely activate the snooper we left at the ice belt." Smee said. Within a few seconds a view of the ice belt they had visited a few weeks ago to snapped into focus.

"All in Heaven..." The Chief stopped and muttered as he entered the cabin wiping his hands with a dirty rag.

"Shut it." Smee said quietly without looking over his shoulder. It wasn't... normal, whatever it was. It dwarfed the ice belt, a roughly square greenish-tinted brown and gray ship. The light beams from eight massive blue-tinged ice mining lasers churned through and harvested the mineral-heavy ice asteroids and preternatural speed.

"You couldn't do that with twenty Mackinaws!" The chief boggled at the speed which the massive spinning glaciers of ice were harvested.

"Shut it, Chief...I'm serious. Just watch." And watch they did, right up until the Forgeship vaporized and consumed the ice asteroid the snoop was planted on with a flash of steam and light.

Ave Maria

Deep Space Y-W1Q3, Venal Region -19 Hours

“We’re in position, Captain.” Captain Metcalf stated as he pulsed the maneuvering jets, placing the ship into a static position with the derelict Wreathe.

“The bureau ID on her is the *Lucky Traveler*, I guess her luck ran out.” Lieutenant Kingsley frowned. The ship hung in dead in space like a statue, massive gaping holes lanced into the port side cargo hold.

“Here’s our entry point.” Uema pointed on the screen to the nose airlock, just under the bridge of the decrepit industrial hauler. “We’ll have to go in EVA with Vacc suits and thrusters, if we get any closer the magnetics in the hull of that wreathe will destabilize the cloak. That Raven out there is on its toes, so I don’t doubt they have a sensor operator running cyclic scans looking for ships coming in-system.”

“There’s one problem, and that is thruster fuel. The manpad thrusters we have on board are only rated for five hundred meters. That’s more than enough for most basic EVA tasks, but we can’t get within two thousand meters of the wreathe or the cloak will fold. Even if used in short bursts that’s a long way for a thruster pack. Even if we exit the airlock at a perfect angle to intercept the Lucky Traveler, we’ll have to use thruster juice to make small corrections and to slow down before we plow into her.” Lieutenant Okuma entered the bridge, carrying a handful of white fabric covered backpacks.

“We’ve only got three packs, that’s cutting it a little close, don’t you think?” She frowned, dropping the heavy load on the deck plating in front of her. Uema frowned, a look that was lingering on his face recently. He’d heard of EVA trips of longer distances, but most of those were at places like the Kisogo Shipyards. And of those EVA jaunts, they carried extra air tanks, fuel and triple-redundant locator beacons.

“That’s if we used a full EVA team. We’re going to cut it down to two, a primary and a backup. We’ll clamp ourselves together with a few rigging straps. Deploy one there, one on the way back.” Uema made a sweeping motion with his hand. “In and out, that easy. We’ll keep a third here just in case, I’d have to have to do something out on the hull using magnetic boots.”

“You’re talking like you’re going.” Uema shot Reiko an irritated glare. “Come again?” Uema tossed his hastily scribbled checklist on the console in front of him.

“You’re needed here. Lieutenant Okuma’s going, because she’s a bloody genius with Electronics, more so than anybody else in this bunch. She helped configure most of the wiring you *don’t* see right now in this bucket.” Reiko removed the Vacc suit from the number four locker and tossed it to Okuma, who eyed it suspiciously.

“Alright. She’s one, but who’s the oth...” Uema paused as he watched Reiko reaching for the number two locker. “You can’t think that you’re going. You don’t know a damn thing about Minmitar ships. You ever been on one? I have. At the breaking yard in Oipo. I took a little sightseeing tour of one. Treacherous contraptions, they are. They built them to last maybe twenty, thirty years at most. I don’t know of many left in service,

anywhere. You'll get over there and fall down a bloody powered down lift, and then it's game over. I don't care if you've got more experience in free fall than I do. You're not going, so get over it." Uema's face flushed crimson.

"You three go below and see how many oxygen canisters you can scrounge up. Check all the bunks, the cargo hold, everywhere. See if we have a dual tank coupler somewhere, and find all the portable beacon lights. Hurry."

Uema waited until the last of the bridge crew had descended down the before he turned back to face Reiko, expecting her trademark gale of vitriol to bless their conversation. Unexpected. She was sitting with her arms crossed.

"You're the captain. You've got no business going EVA. I can't even believe it's crossing your mind. I've got more time free fall than anyone on the crew put together, including you. And what the hell was that crap about falling down a lift? Have you gone completely nuts? We've had this conversation, remember? Work first. It was your idea, remember?" Uema nodded. "I talked to a room full of senior officers for an hour explaining that there wouldn't be a problem, and there won't. When we get back, you and I are going to get sloppy drunk, have make up sex, beat the crap outta each other... whatever. But right here, right now, we do this job and get our people home."

Uema picked up his checklist and crumpled it into a ball, which he tossed into the open bridge lift.

"Ok. Fine. On one condition. We revisit the sex thing at a later point." Uema said. Reiko stood looking dumbfounded for a few moments before she blurted out laughing.

"Anything?" Captain Vandegall sipped his faux Jotu tea and flipped through sensor printouts of the system.

"Nothing sir. I've initiated a pulse every five minutes for the last two hours, and the sensors haven't twitched. Not even any of our shipping has come through here."

Vandegall stared at the sensor screen for several minutes, before locking his gaze on the dead blackness of the forward viewscreen. He'd risen to the level of captain through tenacity, guile and being lethally smart. His superiors tolerated him, his subordinates feared him. All was well in the world, in his eyes. The Caldari Navy had trained him, and trained him well. If not for an unfortunate incident involving a difference of opinion between he and his captain aboard ship, he might have still been in their ranks. They had stumbled upon a fortune in precious metals during a customs inspection, with the right fence enough isk to make them rich men for the rest of their lives.

Too bad the captain hadn't seen it that way. Bloody primadonna he had been. Vandegall and his select compatriots had been skimming off the top of the seizures their ship had been making for months, allowing them to live extravagant lifestyles while at port, and allowing them to build up some rather substantial bank accounts for their "retirement." When the captain found out, Vandegall staged a mutiny of sorts, he enjoyed his upscale life too much. He took control of the ship in the guise of an emergency, and sealed the majority of the crew in the engine room. By the time they cut themselves out, he and his cohorts had docked with a Guristas operative and had fled, taking everything their new transport could carry.

Vandegall had kept one item from his old ship, the one that he prized above all others. A ship's brass christening plaque, polished to a glowing sheen and hung in his ready room. A plaque bearing the name *Skoshi*.