

## **Through the looking glass**

### **Deep Space Y-W1Q3, Venal Region -19 Hours**

Thus far the plan had worked rather well, although Metcalf's idea to explosively decompress the airlock thus flinging them out of the ship to reduce thruster use hadn't worked as well as they had hoped. They had ended up upside down and backwards to their target, moving towards the target at nearly a hundred meters per second. Reiko found going through the cloak had been an enlightening experience, having felt as if she had been hit with a stunner at full power. Her limbs tingled, she felt nauseous and her head pounded like a bad hangover. Lieutenant Okuma had told her she'd thrown up a little in her mouth, but was okay.

Reiko was glad Okuma had rigged the suits with one hundred meters of comline on a roller. It had helped a lot in calming the inexperienced spacer down after they passed through the cloak. It had been a good idea in that they could talk to each other and there wouldn't be the possibility of stray radio traffic being intercepted by the Guristas, but it could make navigating the wreck trickier.

"Four hundred meters." Reiko said calmly as she watched the digital readout on her armpad scroll down in range from the Wreath. Okuma shuddered as they neared the ship, making Reiko wonder if she had been the right choice for the mission after all.

"Don't worry, that was the hard part." Reiko checked the fuel gage on her armpad. "We've got just over half a tank in the primary thruster, I'll only need about half that to get into position and decelerate. When we leave, we really don't need as much thrust, Commander Uema can just pick us up after we clear the mark outbound." Reiko smiled, then stopped when she remembered there wasn't much of a point as Okuma couldn't see her face through the back of her helmet.

"Two hundred meters, thrusting back." Reiko fired several short bursts on the thrusters, curbing their velocity to a fraction of its earlier speed.

"Remember, when we touch down on the hull, just toggle your magnetics on. When we're both clamped on the hull, I'm going to undo the clamps and we walk to the airlock on the surface. We've got over twenty hours of air in the tanks, and we're likely to find more inside the ship somewhere. This will only take us an hour or so if everything is perfect, and maybe four or five if everything that can go wrong, does. The hard part is over once we land." Reiko jettied the thrusters a half dozen more times, touching down on the pitted surface of the Wreath with a small puff of swirling dust.

"Magnetics." Reiko deftly unclipped herself from Okuma, slowly standing to survey the damage at close range. The port side had been raked with fire, presumably with heavy-caliber railgun slugs by the hellish gaping wounds left in her metal skin. A thin cloud of ice crystals from the vented atmosphere in the ship hung in space, sparkling in the system's sun.

“Ok, we’re good. Take some deep breaths. Remember, we’ve got plenty of onboard air. I should have told you earlier, but there are some things you should expect when we get inside the hull.” Reiko said.

“I know. Frozen bodies and all that. I’ve seen a lot of pictures from classes at the academy, I know what they look like. I’ll be fine. Bodies don’t freak me out, I just like having something solid under my feet is all.” Okuma replied quietly.

Reiko and Lieutenant Okuma slowly trekked along the port hull of the ship, magnetics thumping along as they circumnavigated the ugly holes in the skin of the derelict freighter.

“Where are they at?” Uema leaned over the sensor display as Captain Metcalf zoomed the front view down to its maximum resolution of a hundred meters. The view scrolled past the ruined engines, past the dozens of shell holes and stopped when Uema noticed two tiny dots on the side of the freighter that were a different color than the surrounding brownish metal.

“There they are. They’ve made contact, looks like they are moving up the fuselage to the bow airlock. They should reach it in ten to fifteen minutes, tops. Another few minutes to crank open the airlock, and they’re in.”

Reiko trudged forward, turning around every few seconds to ensure Okuma hadn’t fallen off the ship. She wondered why she was bothering to check, since the electromagnets in the soles of her Vacc suit kept her from floating away. Okuma was stopped, tightening the antimatter limpets strapped to her legs designed to scuttle the derelict when they were finished. Reiko checked her own charges and saw they were still tightly fastened to her legs. Okuma continued after a few moments.

“There it is. It’s intact.” Reiko said as they reached the airlock. She produced the small universal crank from her tool pouch, and opened the emergency access panel. “Remember, we’re probably going to find some desiccated bodies. There won’t be any decomposition, but it’ll still be ugly. Just follow me when we get inside, and be careful.

“Yes, maam.” Okuma still sounded strange, but there wasn’t time to worry about her emotions, there was work to do. The door cranked open easily, revealing the darkened airlock. Reiko lowered herself inside, and waited for Okuma to lower her body into the depressurized space. Reiko cranked the airlock hatches closed, and shined her work light through the porthole into the interior of the ship.

“It actually looks mostly intact, by the spinal corridor. Ship is long dead, several years at least, but if the rest of the ship is in the same condition, we should find the comm array and bridge in one piece.” Reiko paused, placing the crank into the socket to open the interior airlock hatch. “Get on your hands and knees on the side of the airlock there, and put your feet against the wall. Switch on your feet, knees and hands and hang on, there’s a small chance there might be some residual atmosphere in there.”

“Just check the gage on the wal...” Okuma didn’t get a chance to finish the sentence, as the first crank Reiko made sent an overwhelming blast of stale air rushing into the airlock as it equalized itself. Reiko heard laughter over the comline, and snickered herself as she peeled herself off the wall. She imagined Okuma had been laughing about the bug-eyed look which must have been etched on her face.

“Well, that was fun.” Reiko finished cranking the hatch open, and proceeded into the corridor. “We’re about two levels below the bridge. Come on. Leave your helmet on,

the sampler says the air is breathable, but who knows if the next compartment is vented to space or not. ”

“Commander, why would the Guristas bother to leave the vessel with any atmosphere at all? I don’t get it.” Okuma asked over the comline.

“I don’t know, there’s a ton of possibilities. If the computer core and logs are intact, we’ll find out. But first priority is getting our little message planted and running.”

Reiko and Okuma clomped down the corridor, and up the access ladder two levels to the bridge. Upon reaching the bridge hatch, Reiko checked at the atmospheric gage to the right of the door, and saw the compartment was pressurized to the same levels as the corridor below. Reiko’s work light illuminated the inside of the bridge, and she didn’t like what she saw.

“Lieutenant, there’s some bodies in there. They look pretty decayed, but just be ready for it. When I open this hatch, there should be a small equalization when the bridge normalizes to the corridor and access ladders, but not much. Probably won’t even notice it.” Okuma nodded. As Reiko cranked open the hatch, most of what was left of the bodies fell apart into a wisping swirl of dust and bones.

“Find the universal power dock and plug the generator in, it should be somewhere under or near the engineering station.” Okuma disconnected the small portable power generator from her thigh clamps, and carried it over the dull grey metal deck plating to the panel underneath the engineer’s chair. Okuma opened the panel and plugged the gunmetal gray box into the recessed socket, and stood as the emergency lights flickered and came online.

“Use your portable light if you start hitting buttons, the red from the lights will make one color look like another.” Reiko said, sitting in the communications couch and pulling the console into reach.

“I don’t understand.” Okuma shook her head and frowned.

“The red lighting will make the colors on the keys...” Okuma cut her off mid-sentence.

“No, I get that. I don’t get why all these people died on the bridge like this. There’s atmosphere, no signs they were actually boarded.” Okuma frowned.

“Lieutenant, we can’t worry about that now. These people died out here knowing that it’s dangerous out here beyond the borders. Whatever happened to these people happened a long time ago, probably when I was a kid, and you were just a twinkle in your mother’s eye. First priority is getting the signal ready to send. When we get the uplink established we can worry about other things. The least we can do is download the crew and cargo manifest; command will have to decide if they are going to release the information to the Minmitar government, considering we aren’t supposed to out here in the first place.” Reiko continued to enter information into the communications array on the bridge.

“How long have they been over there now?” Uema asked, watching the faint red glow coming from the bridge of the derelict transport.

“About five minutes later than the last time you asked, sir.” Metcalf’s smile dissolved as he realized his feeble attempt at humor had resulted in a frown from the Commander.

“Sorry, sir. Two hours and thirty-three minutes. Commander Watanabe stated it would take at least an hour, but there’s no way of knowing how badly the systems are

damaged over there. They left with over seventeen hours of air in their tanks, and unless the communications array is damaged beyond repair they should be done in the next few hours.” Uema nodded and went back to pretending to read his status reports.

After completing the uplink to the hauler’s communication array, Reiko and Okuma had made a startling discovery. The logs of the ‘Lucky were nondescript as to her fate, but the ship’s computer had reported an engagement with a hostile vessel, and the captain’s orders to self power the escape bay. Upon checking the bay, they had found the walls of the hardened chamber contained twenty antique cryotubes hidden behind false wall plating. Most of the tubes were offline; the inhabitant’s rendered into long desiccated corpses. Most, but not all. Two if the tubes were still drawing power from their internal generators, albeit weakly.

In the years that followed the cataclysm that hulled the ‘Lucky, most of the tubes had experienced generator failure, most likely attributable to their rattlecan Minmitar design, and to the various stages of decay to their inhabitants.

“They never woke up; they would have died in their sleep.” Reiko said, trying to curb Okuma’s obvious anxiety. She didn’t mention the scratches on the inside of one of the cryotubes on the side she was checking, obviously from someone trying to claw their way out of the sealed slumber tube.

“So why the cryotubes? I mean, what’s the point? With jumpgates you can get anywhere in settled space in a manner of weeks.” Okuma rolled out a little more commwire to look at the furthest tubes from the main hatch.

“From their dress and implant scarring, they look to be freed Minmitar slaves. Back when cryotubes were in use, ship scanners weren’t as refined as they are now. Since they’re hidden behind these false bulkheads, I’m guessing they were running escaped slaves out of Amarrian space. Ship scanners of that era probably wouldn’t pick up life signs at the metabolic rate which cryotubes keep the inhabitants. They were probably going to resettle them out here at one of the colonies out here on the rim, but that’s just a guess.”

“So what do we do with them, maam? We can’t just leave them here.” Okuma’s soulful eyes bored into her. Reiko fought with the different scenarios of how it could play out. She could leave them, and they would die in the explosion when the proximity sensor detected the incoming Guristas Battleship, if they took the bait at all. It was a situation she wasn’t prepared for. If they hadn’t boarded the Wreathe, they would have died out here in the blackness of space. Nobody to mourn them, nobody to miss them. They were long considered dead by their government, if they were registered citizens at all.

If they attempted to take them along, they would have to open the escape bay airlock, drag them to the other side of the ship, and waste a significant amount of thruster power to try and get them back to the ship, and then she would have to explain to the captain why she had brought baggage back. How would they deal with it? Reiko frowned, entering data on her armpad.

“Ok. If we leave them here, we’re basically murdering them. They’ll die in the explosion. If we had never come along, they would have died anyway after their tubes eventually lost the power from these generators. If we bring them along, we could all die. We can’t roll them down the spinal corridor, there’s no way to get them down the access ladder, they’re just too big. We don’t have time to try and get them down the cargo

elevators, either. If the hatch on any level of the elevator is compromised, we'll be bounced around and maybe even sucked up into the shaft like what happened in the airlock earlier, and I don't want to try and deal with that again. We'll have to bring them out the escape bay airlock, and float them to the port side of the ship on the surface. When we push off, we'll have to use more thruster power than I'm comfortable with to get us to an exit velocity to carry us beyond the magnetic envelope of the ship." Reiko's face saddened.

"Maam, we should still try. The oath says..."

"Don't flout regulations at me; I know them far better than you do. The oath only requires us to help *citizens* in danger unless military circumstances render it impossible to do so and still complete the military mission. We're not in Caldari Territory, nor are they Caldari citizens. Militarily, it's a bad idea to try and save them." Reiko watched Okuma's face slacken, as she realized that Reiko was going to leave them here to die.

"All that being said, I'm not going to let them die now that I know they're here. Start unbolting the one from your side from the wall, I'm going to go look for some extra thruster packs and place these charges. "

Reiko set off down the spinal corridor of the Wreath towards the cargo hold, arriving at the inline airlock at the end of the long corridor.

"Lieutenant, I'm unplugging the comline for a few minutes, I'm going into the cargo bay to set these charges and I'll have to use the airlock since we know the bay is depressurized."

"Copy that, maam." Okuma said.

Reiko unplugged the comline, and checked the internal atmosphere level of the inline airlock. It was slightly below the ambient pressure in the rest of the ship, but not enough for concern. Reiko checked her air supply on her suit, and cranked open the airlock door. She entered the airlock, cranking the pressure door closed behind her and dogged it tight. Thankfully, the Minmitars weren't completely lost in the art of building space-faring craft, and had built an equalization valve into the wall adjacent the supplemental pressure door. A few quick turns later, Reiko felt her suit grow tighter against her skin as the air bled out of the airlock.

Reiko struggled to get the door cranked open, it must have been bowed a micrometer from the explosive decompression of the cargo bay. After a few minutes and a lot of swearing, she managed to open the horizontal hatches just wide enough to wiggle through. The cargo bay was a complete disaster, a single cavernous bay with gaping jagged holes lancing through the bulkheads on the port side. Luckily the same holes streamed in sun from the system's star, which made oddly peaceful rays of light that splashed whitish-yellow color over the surfaces of the bare metal plating they shone upon. Everywhere else in the bay was coated with a thin coating of ice crystals, which Reiko could feel crunching underfoot as she began checking the cargo both floating around the bay and still palletized on the decking.

Okuma found the false bulkheads were sectional, and came away from the wall easily after removing a few bolts with her handspanner. Though weighing several thousand pounds each, Okuma was able to gingerly move and stack them against the far wall of the escape bay in the zero gravity conditions of the dead ship. *Hello, what are these?* Okuma wondered as she found a small datachip clasped to the side of each

cryotube. Okuma solemnly began collecting the chips from the eighteen offline tubes, assuming they were related to the identification of the inhabitants.

As Reiko reached the far end of the bay, she found a trio of fat Minmitar liquid storage tanks, rigged to the decking with heavy tri-steel beams. Her knowledge of the Minmitar written word was sparse, but she recognized what appeared to be a universal “Danger, flammable” placard affixed to each. The tanks were blackened and large gouges appeared in the metal from the spinning shrapnel and fireball which consumed the cargo bay so many years ago. Reiko affixed one of her limpets to the surface of each of the three tanks, hopefully whatever the substance was it would provide their controlled explosion with a better accelerant than the fuel bunker she would survey next.

Reiko exited the cargo bay moving towards the stern of the ship, moving floating chunks of debris from her path as she entered the ruined airlock leading to the stern. The damage to the rear quarter of the ship was far more severe than the bow, the heavy gage steel decking and bulkheads warped and distorted like cooking foil.

The engine room was utterly impassible, debris and collapsed bulkheads folding across the entry corridors. Upon checking the lower decks, she found the backup fuel bunkers had both ruptured, filling the corridor surfaces with a thick sheet of frozen deuterium slush. As Reiko peered down the access ladder, small spheres of frozen slush which hadn’t settled floated in the corridor below her, the last sentinels of the doomed cargo hauler. She smiled and gently placed the remaining limpets on the decking, careful not to disturb the bluish fuel crystals.

The next two hours went uneventfully as Reiko and Okuma unbolted the two tubes from the bulkhead and moved them into the escape bay airlock. Unfortunately, Reiko hadn’t been able to locate any additional thrusters on board, a pity. They’d have to make due. At least the antimatter limpets were in place, and would pack a massive wallop when they detonated. Might even have enough force to kill the Guristas ship if she warped in close enough.

“Ok, are we set?” Reiko reeled in her comline as Okuma trudged to the airlock, magnetic boots thudding across the metal deck plating.

“Yes maam. As soon as the Commander paints the port side of the ship, the receiver we dropped on the side will emit a short range pulse that will activate the recording and beacon. If for some reason that fails, the internal chronometer will begin the signal two hours from now, time enough for us to be retrieved and have time to eat dinner.” Okuma smiled, proud of her handiwork.

“Ok, I’ve set the charges to blow when the graviton sensor we dropped on the hull picks up the disruption from that Battleship dropping out of warp. Let’s go.” Reiko plugged the portable generator into the universal wall socket, and frowned when the green light on the wall indicating power failed to activate.

“Looks like we do this the hard way. After I dog the interior pressure hatch, I’m going to crank open the outer hatch a micrometer and bleed out the atmosphere. We’ll latch the tubes onto our suits when we get outside, there’s not enough room in here. I’ve got the full tank on my back; you’ve got the one with a quarter fuel left. I’ll be at the rear

doing the forward thrust and most of the course corrections, you're the backup." Reiko inserted the hand crank into the receptacle.

"When we thrust away from this wreck, I activate the strobe. Commander Uema will just position the ship where we'll pass through the cloaking field and then it's just maneuvering ourselves into position to the airlock. If we miss by some act of incredible luck, he'll just move and try to catch us again. We've got fifteen hours of air or so to try. If all else fails, he's going to decloak for thirty seconds and hit the running lights at full. But we won't need more than one try; Commander Uema's a legend at handling ships. Hasn't been in space for a while, but it's like riding a quadcycle." Reiko's smile appeared to take a little bit of the edge of the young Lieutenant's worrisome face.

"If this gets screwed up, you're writing the letter to my parents, maam."

"If this gets screwed up, somebody is writing letters for both of us." Reiko deadpanned.

"I see a strobe, sir." Metcalf centered the viewscreen on the intermittently blinking light moving away from the derelict hauler.

"Magnify." Uema leaned forward in his seat, hoping to see two vacc suits.

"They've got baggage, sir. Looks like a couple of cargo pods of some sort. Belay that, I think they're cryogenic freezing capsules."

"You're kidding." Uema squinted at the tiny pair of white suited humans floating out into space. Reiko wouldn't have brought back anything from the derelict unless it was something important. Uema plotted a series of coordinates into the navigation console.

"Bring us to intersect their current vector and have the doctor from the science team get down to the forward airlock." "You've got the bridge, I'm going down to see what they hell it is they've brought back." Uema strode off the bridge, allowing Metcalf to move the ship into recovery position.

Uema peered through the reinforced porthole of the forward airlock as the decontamination cycle completed its work. The swirling jets of supercompressed air blasted any foreign particles off their suits, while the filtered intakes at the bottom of the airlock sucked the atmosphere across them, cleaning the air before it was recycled back into the environmental system. Uema pressed the activation node on the airlock intercom, projecting a tinny voice into the sterile space.

"If those aren't full of Wayfarer stew, you've got some explaining to do." Uema frowned as Reiko keyed up the intercom panel inside the airlock.

"I know, but I just didn't want to leave them over there. We found a total of twenty tubes just like these, but the other eighteen didn't make it. They were hidden inside false bulkheads in the escape bay. I know the regs, but since we weren't leaving the ship to come back for it later or at least mark it for retrieval, I had to bring them with us." Reiko said.

"What if you had found more than two still operational? Were you going to daisy chain them all together and drag them over here?" Uema said.

"I could always go put them back." Reiko smiled as the inner pressure door hissed open with a snap.

"This is Doctor Farber, he's a biologist but he's the best qualified to care for these two, and to see to thawing them out." Uema said.

"No, not so much." Farber said, diverting his eyes from Uema's frown.

"Come again? You're a doctor, right?" Uema quipped.

“Commander, I’ve received the best medical training Zainou can provide. I’ve spent the last thirty-two years looking through a microscanner at single-celled organisms and studying flora and fauna in the field. I’ve written dozens of papers and regularly lecture at the Science and Trade Institute. I’ve received the Marton award for excellence in microbiology, and never in three decades have I ever needed to, nor given a second thought to the field of cryogenics. It’s a dead science from a forgotten time.” Farber strode over to the tubes, and looked over their dated controls for a moment.

“You could always just press the resuscitate buttons, they are clearly marked you know.” Farber smirked and strode back down the hall, leaving a trio of dumbfounded veterans peering at the tube controls. “Call me when they’re done and I’ll give them a physical.”

“I suddenly feel as if I’ve been kicked a rung down the intelligence ladder.” Uema said.

“No kidding.” Reiko said as she opened the clear polycarbonate plates covering the tube control panels and pressed the buttons to begin the revival process.

## Ring and Run

### Deep Space Y-W1Q3, Venal Region -16 Hours

“Captain, I’m receiving a distress beacon, originating in low orbit of the second planet. Audio only.” Ensign Wallert’s fingers danced across his control panel, readying the signal to be placed over the bridge speakers.

“Ignore it.” Vandegall said flatly.

“Aye sir.” The cracking of his voice relayed his feelings on the matter.

“Wait. Put it on speaker.” Captain Vandegall set his digibook on the armrest of his command chair and clasped his hands together.

After a brief pause, a burst of noise and static accentuated a tinny, faint transmission.

“This is Loadmaster third class Sheck of the *Lucky Traveler*, we’ve been holed, best guess is a rogue asteroid. We’ve lost power and I’ve lost contact with the bridge crew and the engine room. We’ve sealed ourselves up in the rescue compartments in the cargo hold, but we need help. There are eleven of us still alive down here, but I don’t know about the rest of the ship.”

Ensign Wallert hid his revulsion at the disgusted look the captain was showing on his face listening to the plea for help.

“We’ve got a consignment of Isogen ingots on board, if that makes a difference. Two hundred bricks. Please help. Repeating...” The emergency broadcast repeated itself, obviously on a recorded loop.

“XO, what’s the market worth on that much Isogen?” The captain began tapping keys on the panel on his arm rest.

“About fifty-thousand for a standard empire-standard brick give or take. About...” The Executive Officer paused for a moment. “About ten million Isk, for the entire load.”

“Well, we might as well make our stay here worthwhile. Conn, set course for that beacon. Get the salvage crew suited up. They’ve got thirty minutes to get that Isogen and whatever else of value they can find in that ship’s cargo hold.”

“Sir, will that be enough time to go through the ship to look for survivors?”

Ensign Wallert shut his mouth and turned back to his station when a baleful glare from the captain focused on him.

“And off they go. Typical.” Reiko said.

“Move us into range of the gate and stand by to jump on my order.” Uema sat up straighter in his seat, knowing that they were about to render themselves detectable to the Guristas in-system when they decloaked to jump.

“Passing twenty-two hundred meters, sir.” Metcalf said.

“Decloak and initiate jump sequence. Let’s just hope they aren’t watching.”

Ensign Wallert quietly studied his sensor returns, as the Captain and Executive Officer laughed about how they were going to spend the new-found lump of free Isk that was just inside their grasp. *A ship.* Wallert has clearly seen a cruiser-sized return on his screens for a fraction of a second, and then it was gone. As he turned to face the captain, he realized he was the only one that had seen it. They were sitting there laughing, joking even at how easy a prize the ship was they were going to take. Wallert knew they would make no attempt to rescue the crew, he would just leave them onboard to die slowly either from oxygen depletion or starvation. *No. Consider yourself lucky, whoever you are. Your blood won't be on my hands today.* Ensign Wallert casually sent out another sensor pulse, overwriting the small blip his scanner was holding on the viewscreen.

“Ten seconds, Captain.” Another ensign called out from down in the navigation well of the bridge.

“This one's off the books, XO. We don't even have to log ammunition expenditure.” Vandegall smiled, sending waves of revulsion and contempt through Wallert's body. *Strange,* Wallert thought as his vision swam and focused. *I'm not in my chair.* Wallert began hearing shouted orders, his vision was still blurry. The smoke on the bridge didn't help either. *Smoke? We're on fire?* The Captain was slowly pulling himself up into his command chair, barking unintelligible orders. Or were they? Everyone around him seemed to be reacting to whatever it was he was yelling. Wallert slowly picked himself up off the deck plating, rivulets of blood streaming down his forehead into his eyes and from his nose and ears.

“Ensign! Get back to your bloody station or I'll blow you out an airlock!” Captain Vandegall was screaming, but Wallert either could not or did not care. In a daze, he stood at his sensor station, looking down at the controls. His chair was on the opposite side of the console, meaning he was looking at his console upside-down. *How funny, the captain's probably going to yell at me some more.*

“XO, get him off my bridge. Man his station until you can get a replacement up here. Give me our status.” The captain wiped the blood off his face with his uniform sleeve, and batted away the attentions of an ensign that had appeared to tend to his wounds.

“Uhh...Shields are down. Armor is degraded to thirty percent nominal. Showing hull breaches on decks three, nine and fourteen. Casualty reports still coming in.” The executive officer began relaying instructions to the damage control parties that were already recovering and deploying throughout the ship

“What hit us?” The captain's face was a mask of rage, spittle mixing with blood as it fell away from his swollen cheek.

“I don't know, Captain. Either we hit a mine, or that hauler's fuel bunkers went up.”

“Are the sensors online?” Captain Vandegall stood and hobbled to the sensor station to stand next to his second-in-command.

“The sensors are just about all that is working right now, but they were whited out for a few minutes after the blast. Communications are down; the blast fried the relays in the array. Shields should be up within fifteen minutes, ablative armor on the starboard quarter and bridge is basically gone until we put into port. Communications will be back up as soon as the techs can pull the boards out and replace them; we've got some spares

in stores. We must have hit a mine; I'm picking up a lot of residual antimatter particles where that hauler used to be."

"Are we in a minefield? Scan the vicinity." The captain looked down at the sensor screen.

"I don't show anything on sensors except debris from that hauler and us. There's nothing to indicate mines. If we were in a minefield, there would be some more of them floating around out there."

"So the ship blew up, and nearly took us with it. Hmph." Vandegall said.

"Sir?" The XO looked up from the sensor screen.

"Just seems a little too damn convenient that hauler happened to explode right when we warped in on it. And with enough force to knock down our full shields and strip most of the ablative armor." Vandegall said.

"You think it was a booby-trap?" The XO wiped the trickle of blood from his nose.

"Until proven otherwise, yes." Captain Vandegall spit, tired of the copper tang of blood assailing his mouth. "Get our shields back up, then move us back to that gate. Jump when within range."

"We're not staying? We're not in much shape to fight anybody right now, sir."

"The Admiral sent me here to blockade this system, and I'm betting someone just slipped by me during all this. I intend to rectify that." Captain Vandegall returned to his chair, yanking the medical kit from the hands of the patiently waiting ensign and heaving it across the bridge.

## Claim Jumpers

### Deep Space Undisclosed System, Venal Region -14 Hours

The entire belt, gone. Smee and his small crew had watched in awe on the scanner as glacier after glacier were rendered into so much steam and their component minerals. After vaporizing the massive belt, the vessel had moved on, and had made short work of most of the mineral belts in the system as well. The megalith in the second belt, the one the kid had recorded to show his friends back in Torrinos had been rendered into pebbles in minutes.

“So what’s it going to be, boss? We going to pull up stakes and cash in what we got now? Or you wanna wait until this thing starts eating the moons?”

“Shaddap, I’m thinking.” Smee was always looking for the angle, the small chance he could capitalize on their current situation. He could always report the ship to the Guristas, they’d probably pay a hefty sum...No, he thought. They’d just kill him for poaching on their space. He could tell the Caldari State...No, they wouldn’t pay him enough. They hadn’t tried hailing them yet...But that could be hazardous to their health, judging from the size of that thing. They had to have a base set up in the Nebulae somewhere, judging by the lighters running freight to and from this massive industry ship.

“Alright. We’re gonna call this little expedition over. Kid, Get all of your garbage over to the Bantam, you’re flying point. Chief, get everyone on the *Avarice* ready to move in ten minutes.

“Wanna run that by me again? I worked my ass off out here for you, I have. If you think I’m going to be your little interstellar canary, you’re dumber than you look. Why am I stuck running point in that paperweight?” The kid crossed his arms, waiting.

“Because I’ll shoot you if you don’t.”

“Ok, fair enough.” The kid left the bridge rather hurriedly.

“Would you really have shot him?” The engineer laughed.

“No, everyone else is too stupid to fly that Frigate for me.” Smee grinned.

“Query. Scans indicate their cargo holds are eighty percent full of semi-rare resources. Instructions?” The sensor shard commented on the three miniscule ships it detected warping to the system’s gate.

“Recommend termination. Collect cargo.” The warfare shard spoke for the first time.

“Let them go.” The Forge chimed in from its new perch above the third moon.

“Explain.” The command link queried.

“I can recover that amount of materials in less than ten minutes. The time and resources you will waste to destroy those vessels and recover their cargos will be less than if we simply continue on with our present activities. I have been monitoring their ship-to-ship communications for several hours, they are obviously non-military, and by

their current state of disrepair of their vessels and their speech patterns they are both poorly led and supplied. If we allow them to leave, we will not likely see them prior to our next jump.”

“Concur. Continue with current mission parameters.” The command link switched off, and the Forge wondered for a brief moment if the one hundred and ten humans on those ships would ever discover how close to death they came.

## Bushwhacked

### Deep Space Y-W1Q3, Venal Region -12 Hours

“Commander, it’s an unregistered Bantam-class frigate. Just jumped in on the far side of the system. Identifying as Sierra-one.” Lieutenant Okuma peered over her sensor display.

“Now what’s a Bantam doing out here? Pilots of those things usually stick to local and interregional travel, not running out here in unsecure space.” Reiko said.

“He’s scouting ahead for someone. Bantams are sturdy little craft, but anybody willing to fly one of those out here is probably getting paid to. Besides, he’s taking too long on the jump in. That means he’s either scanning the system or he’s stupid. Maybe both.” Uema said.

“Warp us to the gate he’s sitting at, standard range. Stay cloaked. I want to talk to talk to him, he’s coming from the direction we’re going.”

“Sir, I’m picking up another ship, just jumped in system. Another frigate class. Bearing three-eight one at twelve astronomical units. Identifying as Sierra-two.”

“How many gates in this system? Uema asked.

“Three, including the one right behind us and the one that Bantam is sitting at.”

“Decloak and make for the Bantam, put us fifteen kilometers off her bow.” Uema said.

Uema quickly pulled up the star charts, tracing his finger along several paths through the region. He frowned, closing the holographic display.

“They came from different directions. Any ID on our Sierra-two? Uema said.

“Correction, it’s not a frigate. She’s a Commorant-class Destroyer, and she’s moving. Her trajectory is for the gate the Bantam is sitting at. Her ID shows her to be the *Renegade*, she’s wanted. Thirty thousand.”

Uema frowned. While a Destroyer was utterly outclassed by his ship, it would make short work of that Bantam.

“Is Sierra-one running?” Uema sat forward in his seat a little. “Bring the gun battery online. Load antimatter, I want this over quickly.”

“Aye captain. Guns online. Loading antimatter.” Kingsley brought up the targeting reticule on his gunchair, and flicked the safeties off his grip controls.

“No sir, Sierra-one is stationary. I don’t think he sees Sierra-two yet.”

“So he’s stupid after all.” Uema frowned.

He had figured it would only take a moment, when he had stepped off the bridge to use the latrine. The kid was now running the twenty feet from the commode to the command couch, holding up his unzipped jumpsuit with one hand as he ran. The tiny ship was nearly upended by the first barrage, and he saw his shields flare white and drop as he reached his controls. Sensors were showing two ships within weapons range, a slightly larger Guristas destroyer, and...a Guristas Cruiser. As his board screamed warnings, he waited for the next volley which would send him into the black.

“Optimal range, standing by.” Kingsley placed the targeting reticule dead center.  
“Staggered salvo. Fire.” Uema said flatly.

The lights in the cabin flickered as the four large-bore railguns sent their antimatter penetrators howling downrange, flaring the shields brightly as the first two sabots crushed the iridescent barrier. The second two sabots hulled the ship, slicing it in two and sending the two halves spinning slowly away before secondary explosions reduced them to small chunks of slag.

“Target destroyed, sir.”

“I can see that, Lieutenant.” Uema replied, frowning. “Hail the Bantam.”

“On screen.” Okuma said as the profile of a scruffy wide-eyed young human filled the forward viewscreen.

“If you answer my questions to my satisfaction and do exactly as I tell you, you get to live. Unfortunately the captain of the Renegade wasn’t versed in the fine art of parlay. You’ve seen how easily I can destroy your ship. Do you understand?” Uema asked.

“Y..Yes, anything you say.”

“Good. What’s your name?” Uema felt a momentary tinge of guilt, the kid looked as if the veins on his head were going to explode.

“Arden. Arden Weiss.”

“Mister Weiss, I want to talk to whoever you’re scouting ahead for. They answer some questions for me, and I let you all go. I don’t care what you’re doing out here. I’m carrying a full complement of scan probes on board, I could easily track down anybody and everybody in your little operation. Trust me, I have better things to do than waste ammunition on a little rinky-dink operation like yours.” Uema said, leaning forward for effect.

“Captain Smee is standing by on the other side of the gate, waiting for me to signal him, but he’s been having me send him a local scan on every transmission.”

“Mute audio.” Reiko Said. Uema looked over at her, eyebrow raised.

“I know this Smee character, I’ve boarded him more than once. He’s a pretty pathetic excuse for a human being, but he’s no danger.”

“Very well.” Uema said. “Unmute audio”

“When I tell you, do your scan and send a signal to your boss.” Uema said.

“Cloak the ship.” Uema finished.

The bridge lights switched to a dull crimson, and Uema felt the hairs on his arms and legs prickle as the cloaking field went up around the ship.

“Now, Mister Weiss.” Uema said.

A few minutes later, the ship’s onboard sensors picked up the Gravimetric surge of the stargate picking up an incoming wormhole, just before a blinding vortex of white-blue light disgorged two more ships into the system.

“Captain, designating new contacts as Sierra-two and Sierra-three. I don’t recognize Sierra-two, but looks to be a foundry ship of some sort. Sierra-three is a Badger-class Industrial ship.” Okuma said.

“Decloak us, and put me on audio” Uema said.

“Captain Smee, I’m going to ask you a few questions. If you lie to me, about anything, I’ll fire. If I detect either of your ships charging your warp drives I’ll fire. If

you answer my questions to my satisfaction, I'll let you and your crew depart unharmed. Respond." Uema said.

"Captain, as always my crew and I are happy to do whatever we can to support the Guristas movement. If a donation is in order I'd be happy to accommodate you and your fine crew." Smee responded.

"Sniveling pissant" Reiko said under her breath as Uema shot her a sideways look.

"I see you're coming from up-region. See anything *unusual* on your way down?" Uema asked.

A long pause followed, Uema grew impatient.

"Captain Smee, I don't have time to sit around and wait for you to make something up. I'm looking for a rather large ship, have you encountered anything up-region from here?"

"Yeah. Five jumps from here, we were minding our own business, harvesting some minerals to sell in Torrinos. This big-assed industrial ship appears in system, clears out all the asteroid fields. This thing was *huge*, mind you. Over a mile long. After a couple of hours, there wasn't anything left to mine. We headed down-region before it mistook us for a stray asteroid." Smee said.

"You mean over a hundred miles long, correct?" Uema asked.

"Nah, it was big, but not *that* big. About the size of an empire titan, it was. I don't know anything more than that, I swear." Smee appeared nervous.

"Mute audio." Uema said. "Opinions?"

"He's probably telling the truth, he's a sneaky little bastard, but he always came clean when he had guns pointed in his direction. The Bantam is a new addition, but the three or four times I've boarded him, he's had that junker ore carrier. I've hit him with maybe seventy thousand Isk in safety violations over the last several years." Reiko said.

"That means the situation has changed somehow. We've got another unexplained ship out there somewhere."

Uema tapped a few buttons on his command chair armrest.

"Unmute audio. Captain Smee, in the future I advise you to be more careful when transitioning through our space. Not all Guristas are as friendly as I am. There is a Raven-class battleship on station twelve jumps back, in system Y-W1Q3, you would do well to take an alternate route through. I'm assuming after you blow whatever Isk you make on this haul you'll be back, I expect to be compensated in the future for allowing you to live today." Uema said.

"My thanks for the gracious generosity of the Guristas, Commander."

"Oh, and Smee...If you mention you saw this vessel to anyone, ever...I'll hunt you down and kill you myself, wherever that may be. If fear of your own death doesn't motivate you, I know of a derelict Berliss-class ore carrier not unlike yours. It's out here in Guristas territory. If after a month I find no evidence you've talked to anyone, I'll send the coordinates to you. I have a feeling finding spare parts for such an antiquated vessel is costly, yes?"

Smee smiled and nodded. A derelict Berliss would cut a large chunk out of his maintenance costs, as most everything had to be built to order in Empire space.

"We have an accord, Commander. Smee out."

Lieutenant Okuma stared at Uema and grinned. *God, he's a sexy man...*

Her smile vanished and was replaced with her cheeks flushing a deep crimson when she realized that Reiko's fierce glare was focused directly at her.

## Winds of Fate

### Guristas Logistic Support Station 6NJ8-V, UTZ-7B Constellation, Venal Region -11 Hours

“Admiral, I have a message burst for you.” Lieutenant Harken said

“Put it through.” Admiral Kosakami frowned.

“I can’t sir, It’s marked your eyes only, and it’s coded Omega-two.”

“Route it through to my study.” The Admiral stood and walked off the bridge, sitting in his oversized chair and looking down at his datapad before tapping an acknowledgement key on his desk.

“Well, if it isn’t my wayward son. Do you need me to spring you out of jail again?” Kosakami grinned, taking a swig of tea.

“I bid you greetings, Admiral Korako Kosakami. You must forgive my borrowing one of your personal encryption codes, but I wished to ensure I would be able to speak with you in a...How do you say...Discreet fashion.”

The Admiral looked up at the screen, his momentary confusion switching to intense anger, then morphing to wonder as he realized what he was looking at.

*A Jovian, interesting.*

“You have my attention, Jovian. One day I will have to ask you how you gained access to one of my personal codes. Irregardless, what would the Jovian Directorate need of the Guristas?” Korako set his tea on the table.

“I do not represent the Jovian Directorate, my Admiral. I represent a group of like-minded individuals within the Jovian Empire, and as such we have a proposition we wish to extend to you.”

“I’m listening.” Korako leaned back in his chair, retrieving his cup from the table.

Lieutenant Harken patiently waited at the door to the Admiral’s study, wondering what was keeping the Admiral. During large operations he spent the majority of his waking hours on the command deck. Highly irregular, this was. As the double doors whisked open, the Admiral strode onto the command deck with purpose.

“Lieutenant, priority message traffic.” The Admiral said. Harken pulled his datapad from his sleeve pocket, opened a menu and looked intently at the Admiral.

“All Forces, general deployment order. All combat-capable ships proceed to coordinates to follow. All capital-class vessels move by bounds, field commanders form battlegroups enroute. I will assume overall command from *Adjudicator* when I arrive in system. Admiral Korako Kosakami, Commanding.” The Admiral handed him a datapad, a set of spatial coordinates marked clearly on the display. “Add these coordinates. Send it. Now.”

Lieutenant Harken’s feet rooted in place, eyes wide staring at the Admiral.

“Lieutenant. Send it now.”

## Worst Case Scenario

### Caldari Navy Assembly Plant Otsasai, Mito Constellation, Lonetrek Region -11 Hours

Admiral Iella stood at the three dimensional holomap of the Venal region, watching the small blue dot representing the Uema's *Black Death* make its slow extrapolated voyage towards its objective. Iella knew the map would be highly inaccurate, as it didn't take into consideration any delays Uema may have encountered along his projected course.

"Admiral, Listening post twenty two in the Venal borderlands picked this up" A grizzled captain handed Commander Iella a printout of the recently decoded transmission.

Iella looked down at the brief transmission, and felt dismay. *They know.*

"Captain, route this to New Caldari, highest priority. Add an addendum; Recommend mobilizing all strategic assets, dispatch with all due haste to Otsasai pending redeployment Venal region." Iella said.

"Captain, transfer the battle staff to the *Shogun*, alert wing commanders to top off their tanks, we're moving out within fifteen minutes." Iella removed a datachip from his breast pocket, and handed it to his communications officer. "Orient the communications array upregion and send this at full power. We're going to jump in on the *Black Death* now, and try and hold off the Guristas fleet while it's still fragmented. If we're able to get Commander Uema in position, we'll jump the *Shogun* in-system and move the rest of the fleet in. If we're lucky we'll have some reinforcements by then."

"Do we have an estimated force composition on the Guristas fleet yet, Admiral?"

"If they move everything they have except their ready reserve, we're looking at over fifteen hundred ships. Probably fifteen to twenty capital class vessels, about a third of their overall composition is Battleship-class vessels. All we can do is slow them down, and pray a little." Iella said.

"I'm not all that religious, Admiral."

"Learn." Iella said with a frown.

"It was broadcast in the clear, sir. If the Guristas didn't know the Navy was operating in their space, I'm sure they do now." Okuma said.

"Ok. Admiral Iella wouldn't have sent that unless the Guristas were moving on the objective. The protocol was to wait fifteen minutes, decloak and initiate the Cynosural field."

"Power down propulsion and drop weapons into standby. Seal all bulkheads and route auxiliary power to the hazard bottle." Uema said.

After a few moments of flurried activity on the bridge a series of green lights winked online on Uema's control pad, indicating readiness.

"Remit control of the guide field to the AI and stand by for deployment. Hang on, this will get bumpy."

Uema opened the ‘idiot proofing’ clear cover to the activation switch, and inserted his command key. A quick turn to the right and a press of a button was all it took. After a few long moments Okuma darted a look over at Metcalf.

*“Is that it?”*

“Why are you whispering?” Metcalf said.

“I just figured it would be..like...bumpier.”

“Guide fields are completely stable, you hardly notice they are active. It’s the incoming jump drives that will really knock your ass sidew...” Metcalf didn’t get to finish his sentence, as a swirling white and cyan energy field spiked out of the emitter, skewing the ship sideways and knocking around most of the bridge crew.

Metcalf laughed as Okuma raised her head and looked around.

“Don’t worry, snot bubbles are normal.” Okuma wiped her face and flashed a sheepish smile.

“It’s the *Shogun*, sir. She’s deploying fighters.”

“Bring us onto her dorsal docking hardpoint after the guide field spins down. We should have three or four capships incoming on our beacon, don’t get all comfy yet.” Uema said.

As the *Daishi* and *Yakiya* disgorged into realspace on his beacon, Uema allowed himself a small grin. *You don’t win this one without a fight from us, you assholes.*