

A SECOND CHANCE AT LIFE



<http://sandciderandspacehips.blogspot.com>

Foreword

I'm Drackarn and I'm an Eve Online geek! I run the fansite at <http://sandciderandspacehips.blogspot.co.uk/> where I regularly write fiction set in CCP's Eve Online universe. Someone posted a comment on one of my short stories to the effect of, "You should write a novel in your spare time." I really appreciated the compliment; a novel just seemed too much of an undertaking. However I really enjoy writing Eve fiction and over a few weeks I thought, maybe not a novel, but maybe something longer than one of my short stories. Hence the idea for this was born. The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America would classify this as a 'novella'; Longer than a novelette (up to 17,500 words), but shorter than a novel (40,000 and over). I really hope you enjoy reading it as much as I did writing it!

Acknowledgements

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I'd like to thank Mark726 of Eve Travel (<http://evetravel.wordpress.com/>) for giving the lore and techno-babble the once over. I asked the author of the well-known lore

guide for his help as we all know from Sci-Fi movies and TV shows how easy it is to contradict lore, technology and existing back story.

I'd like to thank the following players who volunteered to proof read the story to make sure the ingrish was up to scratch - Lexx Jonlan and Ennor Odunen.

I also need to give a massive acknowledgement to two authors. The first is Tony Gonzales who wrote the Eve Online novels of *Templar One* and *The Empyrean Age*. Both novels served as source material when I was needing to flesh out existing characters in the Eve Online universe. The other author is Clive Cussler. One of my all-time favourite authors. Anyone who has read any of his novels from the Oregon Files will see the connection. This piece of fan fiction is really a mash-up of Eve Online and Clive Cussler! If you like this, go read some real authors who do it so much better than me!

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Tony-Gonzales/e/B0034ND6OM/>

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Clive-Cussler/e/B000APJ4L6/>

Finally I'd like to give a shout out to Rash and Eelis for sucking me so deep into this game all those years ago and especially to Eelis who got me into blogging and fiction. Yes Kaz, you started this right here ...

<http://wtfims.blogspot.co.uk/2011/05/goodbye.html>

Prologue

The large black limo hovered along at speed weaving in and out of the heavy rush hour traffic. The man sitting in the back was reading the day's news on his datapad. He was wishing they could get there faster, he wanted his morning coffee. He started to ponder why there was a rush hour on a space station in orbit some 300km above the planet below. There were no natural days and nights here; the station remained in this same orbit so always saw the same amount of sun no matter what the time. The artificial dimming and brightening of the lights made no sense to him; it wasn't day, it wasn't night. It was some technician flicking a switch.

The skinny man opposite cleared his throat.

"Sir. I've had a message. The intercept was successful, we have the goods, but there is a problem." he said nervously.

The man opposite put his datapad down and looked at his lieutenant.

"What is it?"

"The shipment is secure but there was only one missile in the cargo ship. Capital sized, Citadel class."

The other man looked first puzzled before looking very angry.

"You tellin' me the State went to all that trouble, all that secrecy and all that security for one freakin' cap missile. Bullshit! Either this is some massive set up, or..." he trailed off in thought.

"Or what sir?"

The man ignored him. It made no sense that they would transport a lone citadel missile with all that secrecy and protection. You could buy hundreds of thousands of them on the open market in the system of Jita if you had the right license or were a capsuleer. There was a beep and he picked up his datapad, a message had arrived. It was encrypted so he had to wait a few seconds before it decoded. There were no senders addressed and it was marked urgent.

You've hit the motherlode. It's chaos here, the shit has really hit the fan. That missile is like nothing in existence. We've been given the specs to help us find it, after seeing the yield I know that I have to get out. I request a million credits to be dropped at the usual place. That is peanuts compared to what you can sell that thing for. However, the Navy will rip this place apart to find the leak and then they'll rip the region apart to find that missile. I'm as good as dead if I stay here. I've made the usual arrangements in case I have an 'accident', I hope you understand, that is not a threat, simply a precaution. Make sure the cash is at the drop, I'll then give you a copy of the specs I just received. Trust me, an extra million for me won't dent in the profit you'll make on the sale price of that thing.

Mr A Friend.

He mulled it over. A million was a decent amount of cash, but his source in the Navy had confirmed what he'd started to suspect. That missile was not what it initially appeared to be.

It took an hour to get to the hotel in the heavy traffic, by that time he'd arranged the million credits to be dropped by a couple of his goons. The limo

door was opened for him and he stepped out. His two bodyguards stood covering his exit from the vehicle. He knew he had many, many enemies and needed to be careful. These were two of the best bodyguards in the business outside of presidential protection. They walked through the reception of the plush hotel to the posh cafe at the rear. A smarmy maître d' greeted him by name and took his jacket before escorting him to a private room at the back. His two bodyguards ensured he was covered at all time during this short walk.

He took a seat in the comfy sofa and stared out of the massive window into deep space. A steaming pot of his favourite coffee was already on the table. He poured himself a cup and leaned back. This was one of the best views on the station and he paid a lot to reserve the private dining room for his morning coffee every day. Then again, as the head of the largest crime syndicate in the system, he could afford it. One of his body guards placed his hand to his ear and listened to something before discreetly whispering something into a throat mic. The boss knew his visitors were nearly here. His datapad beeped and he picked it up. His lieutenant had confirmed they'd dropped off the cash and collected the specs. He skimmed straight down to the yield and nearly spat his coffee. The contact had been right, they had got the motherlode. Every dictator and cash-rich nut-job with a cause, or a grudge, would be clamouring to get hold of this weapon. And so would the Navy. It dawned on him that they would stop at nothing to get that missile back.

"DADDY!"

The shrill voice made him jump. His three daughters ran into the room and jumped on him. He embraced each one laughing. His wife was in the doorway smiling.

"Sorry, the car was late." his young wife said.

"I'm just glad you're all here now." he replied. "I miss you when you take the kids to see your mother."

"You could always come with us. I know...."

A sharp crack rang out stopping the conversation. His wife looked puzzled at the strange sound but the man's two bodyguards were already moving with weapons drawn. They knew exactly what the sound was and could even tell the make of the gun that had made it. Suddenly there was report after report; to the bodyguards it sounded like someone was emptying an entire clip. They hadn't paused from the moment they heard the first shot and within 90 seconds had bundled the family out of the hotel and were screaming into their throat mics for the armoured limos to meet them at the side entrance to the hotel.

Before the crime boss knew what was going on he was shoved into the back of his limo with his sobbing wife and three screaming children. The limo roared onto the main street and took off at high velocity.

"Surely", he thought, "the Navy couldn't have found out who'd taken the missile that fast".

Once the limo was clear the partition between the driver and the passenger compartment rolled down.

"You OK boss?" asked the driver looking in the rear-view mirror.

The boss just nodded.

"The boys just called. Apparently nothing to worry about. Some nut-job went crazy in the coffee shop and shot the place up. He was a real bad shot too, didn't hit anything but cups! Guess he didn't like the bill." He chuckled at his own joke. "They are getting the second car and will meet us back at your place."

The screen rolled up and the crime boss started to relax a bit now that he knew he wasn't the target. However the incident had made him think that whilst he had that missile in his possession he was in more danger than he ever had been in. He needed to find a buyer and get rid of it fast.

Chapter 1

The bright blue laser slowly cut through the rock in front of him. A glowing line of molten magma dripped viscously from the burnt rock. Down this deep in the mine the only sounds were from the mining lasers and the falling rock. The air was hot and thick with smoke, the extractor fans were struggling to keep up with the mining operation. He had stripped off his shirt and wore it around his face to filter the worst of the smoke and particles. The two-handed laser cutter was getting warm now from continued use and he was at the stage where he needed to decide whether to wrap his shirt around the hot front handle or leave it protecting his face.

It had not always been like this for Riku. He had a life, a job that meant something. Then one day it had all been taken from him. The siren signalling the end of the shift sounded and the workers lay down their tools and started to head for the lift shaft. He joined the throng of people slowly making their way towards the exit. Nobody said anything, they were all too tired. After a shower and something to eat they all returned to their cells exhausted. Riku didn't know what time it was, not that it mattered. On a high-security military stockade built into an asteroid in deep space there was no night or day. The cell doors automatically closed with a resonating clang and he heard the sharp click as the locks engaged. Seconds later he was plunged into darkness as all the lights in the wing were extinguished.

He was abruptly awoken with a kick to his feet. His eyes slowly opened to see if it was the start of another fight. Above him towered the immense form of Guard Kenzo. A hulking Matari Brutor that looked like he could snap a man in two like a twig. A small number of lights were on, he could see them out of the barred door. That meant it was early, but not shift time yet.

"Up Riku! You're on transport unload duty!"

Riku looked up at the guard half asleep and puzzled.

"Can't be. I'm not a trustee, I'm too new to be let anywhere near a ship. You've got the wrong man, now let me sleep!"

"Up!" the guard said more forcefully.

"Check your orders again. No way I'm allowed that cushy number. Give me another couple of hours of sleep and is breakfast in bed too much to ask here?" he said.

Riku turned over in his bunk and pulled the blanket up over his shoulder. Guard Kenzo grabbed the back of the neck of his shirt and hauled him to his feet.

"I aint askin' again." he growled. "And enough with the sass!"

Riku shook free and grabbed his boots. He knew he'd probably get into trouble for this. The monthly supply ship was supposed to be unloaded only by trustees; inmates who have proved they are not trying to escape or are so near to their end of their sentence that there would be no point in escape. He was just four months into a 35 year sentence. There is no way the Warden or the Governor would let him be on the same side of the asteroid as a transport ship, never mind get on board to unload its cargo of supplies for the outpost. The problem was that this guard was green. He only arrived last month on the

previous transport and had been breaking his balls from day one. He finished dressing and was roughly pushed out of the cell.

"We're both going to catch shit for this you know." he told the guard.

His reply was simply another hard push in the back.

-oOo-

The Caldari State had many other problems to worry about, all much more pressing than a small military prison in the middle of nowhere. The transfer of power from the recently ousted leader Tibus Heth and the on-going war with the Gallente Federation meant naval support was stretched. Therefore the ship docked in the penitentiary's main hanger bay was not a Caldari Navy Transport ship, but some old rusting Matari bulk hauler. Supplying the Navy's prisons and distant outposts was now done by private contractors, and with low rates of pay, the on-going war and hazardous low-security space runs, only the Minmatar tribes had really rushed to pick the contracts up.

The Empyrean War had been raging for over five years between the four empires that inhabited the cluster of around 5,000 stars known as New Eden. The Caldari State, made up from a number of mega-corporations were at war with the Gallente Federation, the only true free democracy in New Eden. At the same time the deeply religious Amarr were at war with the tribalistic Minmatar.

Riku stared up at the Matari ship. The truth be told, he had started thinking about escape opportunities, but now he had second thoughts. In thirty five years he would be an old man, three and a half decades was a long time to rot

in prison. But this ship didn't look like it would be able to limp out of the hanger, never mind survive for long in deep space. Its hull was covered in rust and thick steel plates had been haphazardly welded here and there. Riku assumed they were to patch hull damage from macro-meteorites or worse, pirate fire. The outer hull appeared as though it hadn't been properly repaired in a generation. As he entered the rear hold his guard peeled off to talk with another guard who was standing by the ramp. Riku noted that the unloading was almost done. They were late. A few trustees eyed him suspiciously as they loaded the last of the goods and crates onto hover-beds and pushed them down the cargo ramp. The inside of the ship was no better than the outside. It stank of oil, burnt out electrics and sweat. There once had been paint on the walls but the majority of it had peeled away to be replaced by rust. Botched repairs were everywhere he looked as the lighting flickered badly high above on the ceiling. He walked further into the small rear cargo bay. His keen senses told him there was something wrong with the design of the ship. This rear hold was too small. He visually swept the walls looking for potential hiding places but the access hatches looked to be welded shut. A sensible precaution for a ship docking at a prison facility and being unloaded by inmates. Bits of broken machinery and rotting oil drums were scattered everywhere, just dumped there and left in place for years by the look of it. However none of it was large enough to provide a hiding location.

"Looking for a ride eh?"

Riku span round. An older man was stood leaning against the railing of a stairwell just behind him. He was Caldari, looked Deteis. probably late-40's with greying short hair. He wore cargo pants and a black leather jacket. Riku's training taught him to look beyond that. The man looked fit, really fit and probably could handle himself in a fight. He looked tough, but there was

something more about him, something off. This man didn't belong on a rusting tramp hauler, he had an air of authority, of command.

"Just admiring your beautiful ship and wondering if you'll actually make it back to the stargate before it disintegrates." he replied deadpan, buying time.

The man laughed. A second laugh made Riku spin around. Guard Kenzo was leaning with his back against the bulkhead behind him. This seriously worried Riku. How did that hulk of a man sneak there without him noticing? Something was very wrong with both of these two men. He noted the cargo bay was now empty other than the three of them and that there was nobody in sight on the loading dock or back in the hanger. This smelt like a setup. The older man picked up on this almost immediately.

"I'm not a mind-reader but I'm guessing right about now you think you've been set up. As someone who apparently knows where the bodies are buried, both metaphorically and literally, you suspect we're Navy contractors, here to make sure those bodies are never dug up. How am I doing?"

"Pretty close." Riku replied whilst discreetly looking around for something to use as a weapon. It would be pointless he knew, the older man was more than likely armed. There was twenty feet between them and the other guy was in an elevated position. The older man wouldn't even have to rush to draw a gun and put a bullet in his head before he'd had even covered half the distance. The guard behind had his stun baton which could incapacitate a man in one hit. On a normal man Riku would be confident of a one-on-one even unarmed, but that huge Brutor had too much strength. If he tried to fight his way out he'd certainly die, but he'd go down fighting.

"Well I'm afraid you are wrong. The assassins are indeed coming to kill you, but not until the transport after next. So you have at least two months left to live. Great news eh?"

Riku's eyes grew narrow, this didn't make any sense. He always assumed there would be an attempted hit, but who was this mysterious man who appeared to know a lot more than he did.

"Yes, apparently your ex-Naval command decided that you being killed in the first six months would be a bit suspicious, so they were going to wait a while. Let you settle in before they punch your ticket. Damn brass eh, will frack you in the field, will frack you in the pen'. Any which way, you are fracked if you are still here in two months' time. Right, now that you know all that, let's get down to business as we've not got long left here. We're offering you an out. The old man, my boss, wants to speak to you. He's got a job offer for you. If you don't like it you can walk. Either way you'll be free."

"You're going to break me out of a high-security stockade for a job interview?" Riku laughed.

"Yes. Otherwise you can stay here and break your back mining for a couple more months before you die in a freak accident, are killed by a rogue 'inmate' in an argument over who dropped the soap or are shot in the back by a panicking green guard whilst you were trying to 'escape'. Your choice."

He knew the old man was right. He'd been expecting a hit every day for the last four months. He simply knew too much. He nodded slightly. A voice behind broke the silence.

"This is Guard Kenzo. All personnel and prisoners are accounted for and the transport is clear. Please seal immediately." the Matari Brutor said into his communicator.

A few seconds later flashing strobes turned the cargo bay orange as the huge doors slowly closed sealing the three of them inside the ship.

-oOo-

The journey took a few hours. Riku was given a cabin which had fresh clothes and food. The cabin itself was in the same state as the rest of the ship and smelled of sweat and burnt lubricants. The clothes however, fitted perfectly which unnerved him, and the food tasted amazing. The transport ship might have been a rust bucket but whoever worked the galley was a magician. As he was finishing the meal there was a knock at the door which opened seconds later and the older man stepped through.

"We're here. Let's go."

The food he'd endured for the last four months in the prison wasn't up to much so he greedily stuffed the last of the delicious meal into his mouth and followed the older man down the corridor. Like the rest of the ship, the corridor was in desperate need of repair. The walls were lined with flaking paint and some suspicious black viscous liquid dripped from the air ventilation system vents. The floor had once had some form of covering. The few patches that stubbornly remained stuck to the hull deck plates were dirty and scratched. Mostly the floor was like the rest of the ship: rusty. They passed several service hatches that were hanging off their hinges and had been stuck to the wall with duct tape or tied in place with a bit of spare wire. The gaps in

the hatches revealed electrical junction boxes and service panels that looked like they'd been burnt out and then repaired dozens of times.

"So what's the job? Interior decorator for this flying scrapheap?"

The other man laughed "Yes the old Katsu Maru doesn't look like much, but trust me, she's got it where it counts."

They reached an airlock and the man pressed a button opening a small personnel side door. Light flooded into the corridor as well as fresh air, which came as a massive relief. They exited the ship down a ramp onto a busy hangar dock with hundreds of people milling about. Riku glanced around and instantly knew they were on a Mordu's Legion station. The other ships in the hangar were mostly warships bearing the sigil of the infamous mercenary organization. A dozen Drake class battlecruisers lined one docking pylon, their heavy assault missile launchers glinting menacingly in the harsh hangar lighting. Riku jogged to catch the old man up through the throng of people.

"So you're Legion? Should have guessed."

"Yes we all are, and we're hoping you will be too. But that all depends..." he said as they stepped into the lift and the doors slid closed. "...on what the old man thinks of you."

Two minutes later they strode into a plush office. The man behind the desk was wearing the most peculiar of clothes. He had an Amarrian bishop's robe on but also a woollen beanie hat on his head with the phrase "Have you been hugged today?" knitted on the front in bright yellow thread.

"Captain Sosa! Welcome home. And I see you have our guest." he rose from his chair like he was greeting long lost family. He embraced the older man and asked about the crew. They exchanged pleasantries for a short while before the man approached Riku.

Riku knew that he was facing Muryia Mordu himself, the eccentric leader of the largest mercenary faction in the cluster. He'd heard tales of the man's wild dress sense. He took the outstretched hand offered from the ex-Caldari Navy Brigadier General and shook it firmly. Mordu gestured for them to sit on a large sofa whilst he wandered over to a drinks cabinet and poured three glasses. Riku knew his naval history. Mordu was apparently a brilliant young commander in the Caldari Navy who rose up to the highest levels. After the Waschi Uprising he became disenchanted with the Navy and formed the Legion. Whilst they started out only recruiting Caldari State members, particularly the Intaki, and mostly working with the State Navy, recently they had become more open. Now members of all four Empires swelled their ranks and they accepted contracts from outside the State as well. As the Empyrean war raged and Tibus Heth became more xenophobic and dictator-like, Mordu had finally put a bounty on his head. The Caldari Navy obviously broke-off all existing contracts with the Legion due to this. Now Heth was deposed and the Caldari were desperate for support, the contracts had restarted again. Truth be told, during Heth's reign there were a number of contracts still issued without his knowledge by Navy commanders who still appreciated the work of the Legion. Even the Gallente Federation, whom Mordu had blacklisted after the rather public execution of Grand Admiral Anvent Eturrer, was starting to become a potential client again. Although Mordu still hated the Federation for the execution of the Admiral, President Roden had superseded President Foiritan, and the Pikes Landing incident had smoothed relations between the Legion and the Federation somewhat. The recent events on Caldari Prime

where the Legion agreed to police and protect the planet during the troubles was proof of a return to pre-Empyrean war levels of trust and cooperation.

The office itself was as much a contradiction as the man himself. His desk looked official and very formal, yet just off to one side was a small bar with a figurine of a dancing girl in a grass skirt next to a glowing neon bar sign. The two didn't go together, exactly like the formal Caldari Brigadier General pouring drinks in an Amarrian bishop's robe. What Riku couldn't see was that it was one of the most secure offices in the cluster more fitting for a head of state. The office was filled with state-of-the-art surveillance systems and a link to the station's mainframe that was connected to the implants in Mordu's head. In just a thought he could call for guards, drones or deploy the twin 20mm railgun that was hidden in a hatch just above their heads.

Mordu returned with the drinks and handed them out.

"Gallente vodka I'm afraid. I hope it doesn't hurt your Caldari pride." Mordu joked, being Caldari himself.

Riku downed the drink in one.

"The best vodka is the best vodka." he said matter-of-factly, the clear liquid bringing warmth to his throat. "Now, do you mind telling me why you broke me out of prison?"

Mordu smiled and downed his drink and nodded. He reached under his robes and pulled out a paper file and slid it across the desk. Riku immediately knew the significance. The only reason to have a paper file rather than an electronic one was if the contents were so secret they had to be kept off the grid to ensure

no hacker could ever access them. He picked up the file and opened it. His face was a visage of shock. It was his original Navy personnel file, un-rescinded. Every black-op and wet-job he'd ever done was there.

"I'm not even sure I want to know how you got that!"

Mordu laughed.

"You have a very specific skill set I could use in the Legion. You also have a conscience I could use in the Legion. Very few men in your line of work have both together. You may be surprised to hear that you still have a friend in the State Navy. He sent that file to me and suggested I might be interested in you. He was right, I am, very interested. He also pointed out that time was of the essence, what with your State sanctioned murder and everything in the very near future. So I thought I'd send Captain Sosa here to pick you up and see if you'd like to join us."

Riku thought of the implications of this.

"Two questions. What's the job and what if I say no?"

"Ah those are too easy! Why didn't you ask me something difficult like where is Heth hiding?" Mordu bellowed with laughter at his own joke. Riku wondered for a second if he did indeed know the hiding location of the fallen head of the Caldari State. "The job is similar to what you did for the Caldari Navy with the slight difference that we won't throw you to the wolves if you feel killing innocents and small children isn't right. You'd be operating with my best team out of our best ship and will have a say on the contracts you accept. If you turn me down? Well we'll have one more glass of that fine

vodka and I'll shake your hand and wish you luck. Captain Sosa here will drop you at a nearby neutral station and then you are on your own. Just for coming to see me we'll make sure you leave with a few credit chips and a gun, to make sure you have a fighting chance."

Riku considered the two options and the implications of a life on the run with every black-op operative of the Caldari Navy having orders to hunt him down and kill him. That was going to happen anyway, whichever option he chose, but having the largest mercenary faction in the cluster backing you up was a welcome thought. It would be a bold move by the Caldari to move against him if he was part of the Legion especially as they relied on them so often these days. Without that backup he'd not have much of what Mordu had called a 'fighting chance'. He might be able to get across the border to the Federation, find some backwater planet and settle down. But he'd forever be looking over his shoulder. Eventually they'd find him he was certain.

"I'm in." he said.

Chapter 2

Back on the asteroid stockade, Governor Tanak was at his desk flicking through a paper file. It was depressing him. He had been Governor of the stockade and mining facility for 20 years and was nearing retirement. He had served justice to some of the navy's most infamous criminals. In that time there had been many escape attempts, none of them successful. Until now.

He looked up as there was a quiet knock at the door and Warden Nissho entered. The warden was responsible for the wing where the escapee had been incarcerated. He looked like he'd aged 10 years in the last 10 hours.

"Sir?"

The Governor looked up with weary eyes.

"Any news on the transport?" he asked hopefully.

"No sir." replied the warden "It has vanished. No trace at all. We suspect it was a professional job and that the transport and her crew were in on it. The ships IDENT was fake and they think our records were hacked to make our docking crew think all was in order. We've scanned all surrounding systems and found nothing."

"And Guard Kenzo?"

"No sign either sir. He's either dead, captured or was part of their team sir. After all he only arrived a few weeks ago, he may have been a plant and the orders from command faked, like that ships orders. Sir, is that his file? Is there

anything in there that might help us find him before the brass show up?" the warden asked hopefully.

The Governor sighed and slid the folder across his desk. The warden picked it up and opened it. He opened it and looked at the first page, he looked puzzled and then quickly flicked through page after page of large black blocks. There was hardly a single word to read.

"There is nothing here sir. Just a name. No personal details, no history, nothing, it's all blanked out. Everything."

"Yes warden. And that is why I doubt we'll ever hear of our mystery man again. The normal military thugs don't have a file where 99% of it is classified." he said with a heavy heart. "However, looking at the state of that file, I really need to ask if we really want to see that man again!"

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Sosa and Riku exited the lift and re-entered the main hanger bay of the Mordu's Legion HQ station. The ships docked there were impressive. From small interceptor class frigates to massive dreadnoughts needing thousands of crew, there was a ship type for every contract the Legion might accept. Riku's heart sank as they turned and started towards the tramp hauler they arrived in.

"I hope we're using that flying scrap yard to rendezvous with 'the best ship in the fleet' somewhere in space." Riku said in trepidation.

Sosa stopped and looked up at the rusting hulk and smiled.

"You are looking at the best ship in the fleet." he replied with pride in his voice. "The Katsu Maru, the secret pride of the Legion's Fleet."

Riku just groaned and followed him inside thinking the man was either blind or mad, or perhaps a bit of both.

"I admit as a cover it is great, but I was hoping my home away from home would be a bit more comfortable and, perhaps have some teeth in case things go tits up."

Sosa just smiled. They entered the ship via the ramp and the captain entered a lift opposite. Riku hesitated for a second wondering if he stepped in, the extra weight may snap a cable and send them both plunging to their deaths. He gingerly stepped into the rusting lift box, which rocked slightly under his added weight, much to the older man's amusement. The Captain pressed his finger against a button and held it there. After a few seconds the button flashed. Rather than going up to deck 1 as he had pressed, the lift went down.

"So you need to hold the button for several seconds before it acknowledges the command and then the lift goes in the opposite direction? The electronics on this flying junkyard look as if they are in as good a state as the structure."

"No. You need to hold the deck 1 button for three-seconds to activate the built in DNA scanner. If you have access the lift then takes you down to the real bridge." the old man replied.

Riku was about to query this when the doors slid open and he was confronted by the most hi-tech command and control centre he'd ever seen. He stepped out of the lift in awe. It looked like the bridge from a brand new Golem class

Marauder Battleship, only it was located in the bottom of a rust-bucket Matari industrial. The air was different too. It was clean and fresh not the stale air tinged with a smell of burnt electronics and oil that was above.

"Captain on Deck!" one of the crew announced as the older man stepped out of the lift. A woman left the captain's seat and the older man took his place in the elevated chair in the centre of the bridge.

The newest member of the crew continued to look around. It appeared to be as slick as any top-of-the-line Navy ship that he had ever been on, and more. Some of the equipment appeared state-of-the-art. Everything was clean, maintained and shining. The crew were all seated at their consoles and appeared to be as professional as they come. He assumed they must be ex-navy. This was not the discipline-less crew of a normal Matari tramp hauler. He had been right that the ship was brilliant cover, he just hadn't realized he had not seen the 'real' ship.

"Helm, initiate undock and take us out. I want us in position at O fourteen hundred." The captain ordered.

"Yes sir!" came the formal reply.

Riku watched the main screen which showed the ship leaving the hangar. The camera drones, similar to the ones used on capsuleer ships, spun around the rust-bucket industrial. It started to dawn on him why Mordu had called this his best ship. Looking at the readouts from the screens around that he could see him this ship was not what it appeared. It appeared to be more of a black-ops ship than a hauler. But to anyone looking from outside, all they'd see is a Matari industrial ship on its last legs. Those boarding the ship for inspection

would be confronted by the façade he himself had fallen for. It was better than a cloaking device, an entire ship that people would dismiss out of hand as not being a threat to anyone.

The screen showed the warp tunnel opening up in front of the ship. The crew worked like a well-oiled machine, it was impressive to watch.

Captain Sosa hopped down from his elevated chair and indicated for Riku to follow. Glancing back he saw the woman retake the captain's seat as they left through a side door. The long corridor they entered was utterly different to the dilapidated ones above. Plush Amarrian carpets with thick pile cushioned their footsteps. The tastefully decorated corridor was lined with artworks from all four Empires. One might have been forgiven for thinking they were in a hallway of an elegant palace. The older man entered a side door towards the end of the corridor and he followed. They had entered a cabin as plush as any stateroom onboard a luxury cruise liner.

"This is yours. I like to keep the senior staff berthed close to the ops centre. I'll send the ship's steward up, Claude, and he'll take your order for any decorating or cosmetic changes you want doing. This is now your home so feel free to do what you want to it."

Riku walked around in a daze.

"Seriously? I've been living in an eight by ten stone cell for four months. This is like the presidential suite at the Jita 4-4 Ritz!".

"Well get some shut-eye. I know Mordu said you'd have a say on the contracts but this one was accepted before you arrived. I'm sure you won't have a problem with it! Briefing at eleven hundred hours. I'll come and collect you."

-o0o-

Several hours later Riku was led into a large conference room by Captain Sosa. There were already several people sat around the large wooden table who fell silent as the two entered. The Captain took a seat at the head of the table and Riku found an empty seat to the side. Like the rest of the hidden area of the ship this room was high tech and luxuriously decorated. Top of the line holoprojectors and personal screens were active showing a station somewhere.

"Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. Please allow me to introduce Riku, our new boots on the ground. Now if you could all introduce yourselves we'll then get on with the briefing. XO?"

"Yoshi, XO and second in command." announced the petite woman who had been the one in the captain's chair when they first entered the bridge. She was of Intaki origin, Riku thought, she had a Naval look about her.

"Frey, weapons specialist." The next man was Matari.

"Aki, electronics specialist." The man was a Caldari geek. He looked like a geek, he dressed like a geek, he even spoke like a geek.

"Monique, chief medical officer." The woman was Gallente. Riku nodded at her introduction. He had a feeling they'd be seeing more of each other the way this was shaping up.

"Ingvar, ground ops commander" it was the hulking black Brutor that he had known as Guard Kenzo. "Sorry for busting your chops for the last few weeks. All part of the cover."

"Some cover! I'm just glad you never supervised the showers whilst I was there!" Riku said with a smile and the big Brutor roared with laughter.

"Aariz, chief engineer." The man was Amarrian, the only one around the table.

"Hoshi, Toy Shop manager." the last on the table was a Caldari man. He looked very similar in look and style to the electronics specialist.

"Toy shop? I'm coming to realize this ship is nothing that it appears to be but the toy shop is?"

Sosa cut in. "Hos here creates, maintains and repairs our auxiliary craft and the more custom and specialized equipment. As we have a Yoshi and a Hoshi we call him Hos to make sure we don't mix them up! Our missions usually call for gear that is not off-the-shelf. Hos here is one of the cluster's great tinkers and creates items to suit our needs. Anyway, onto business. Today's mission should be a walk in the park. The Serpentis Cartel are moving a shipment of Mindflood close to the Amarrian border. They are still in low-sec so the authorities cannot do anything. Currently they are docked up at a station, our contract is to ensure that the drug shipment never leaves the system and certainly doesn't get into Amarrian space. All we know is they are on board a Badger class industrial and we have 12 hours before they leave."

A few ideas were thrown around the table by the various crew, Sosa pointing out issues with each one. A direct confrontation in space was out of the question. In the eyes of the law both ships were neutral. Any aggression in space would be met by powerful sentry guns at the station or at the stargates. Being in low-sec they couldn't use warp disruption bubbles to force the target ship out of warp away from the sentry guns. A full frontal assault in the dock on the probably well-guarded ship would be a blood bath. The call was for the drugs to be destroyed with minimum fuss or loss of life. Finally as the ideas dried up he turned to Riku.

"Anything to contribute?"

Riku looked thoughtful. "What firepower you got on this ship? I'm guessing you're packing something as nothing appears to be as it seems on this rust bucket."

"What do you need?"

"Small yield, armour penetrating, one shot. I saw the 'civvie' Gatling gun on top, that isn't going to cut it. We need a scourge precision missile, a titanium sabot or a spike hybrid round. Something like that."

The cluster of stars known as New Eden was a dangerous place. Even in so called 'high-security' space there were roaming pirates and other dangers. Most haulers and industrial ships had some form of weaponry for self-defence. The civilian Gatling railgun was a popular choice. It required little to no maintenance and replenished it's ammo automatically using particles it collected from space. It was also legal issue for all normal ships and required no special permits or licences. However, it was woefully underpowered.

Compared to the military-grade weaponry available only to the navies, licenced corporations and the capsuleers, it was a pea-shooter.

"You can have any of those. We have access to all three. Which do you want? Frey can sort you out." the Captain replied.

"Seriously? Any?" he asked questioningly. A smile from Sosa was his only answer.

-o0o-

A day later the Captain was back on the Mordu's Legion HQ station and back seated in Mordu's office. The same Gallente vodka filled both their glasses.

"So the mission was a success then?" Mordu asked. Today he was wearing a suit identical to the one Tibus Heth used to favour. A dunce cap was firmly fixed to his head.

"Very much so." The Captain took a sip from his drink. "The new boy's plan. We docked up using a fake ident. He spent an hour in the Toy Shop and left on his own. He was back two hours later. We monitored the Serp ship and undocked immediately before them. As they were aligning out Riku sent a signal and blew out the power couplings on both their warp engines and shield generator. We launched a single light missile and warped before the sentry guns could react. The missile was precision guided by a beacon that he'd placed. It holed their hull and vented the small cargo bay the mindflood was stored into space. Intel suggests the drugs were all flushed into space and destroyed, there was no loss of life or injuries sustained and we got away clean. Our new boy has some special talents and has started to scare me a

little. He slipped into a heavily guard Serpents ship, planted two explosive devices and a beacon and got out undetected. You said you'd fill me in on his past after he passed a trial mission. I'm worried why such a useful man was in a military stockade with a 35 year sentence. I need to know if he's a risk to my ship and my crew."

Mordu nodded understandingly and took another drink of the vodka.

"You know that a significant portion of your crew are ex-military even if many chose not to talk about it. Most of them have been pointed my way by high-level Admirals in the various Navies who use our services discreetly on occasion. Riku was a black ops agent for Caldari Navy Intelligence. He did a lot of wet-work for them. His last mission was to eliminate a crime boss that the authorities couldn't touch. He was dealing arms, so Naval Intelligence had him on their radar. He went for coffee every morning at an expensive hotel. He had enough enemies to know he needed a private room, he never dined in the open, making him a difficult target to hit. The night before, posing as station maintenance, Riku had suited up and planted a small thermite charge on the external window. His plan was to blow the boss and his two bodyguards into space and make it look like a micro-meteorite had hit the station. The hotel was on the external face of the station obviously so it had self-sealing breach doors on those rooms which would prevent further decompression. That morning as Riku waited in the main cafe drinking a coffee, news came in. A shipment of experimental arms had been hijacked and the crime boss was right at the top of the list of suspects. It was imperative that he be taken down to throw the organization into chaos to aid in retrieving the stolen weapons. Anyway, as fate would have it, the crime boss decides to bring his wife and three kids along for the first time ever. Our new boy says to his commanding officer he is standing down as non-coms are in the line of

fire. Fleet command is shitting themselves that they will be embarrassed over the theft that morning so he is ordered to proceed regardless. He tells them to go frack themselves and no way is he killing an innocent mother and three children. The order is given for the backup agent to get to the cafe, relieve Riku, take the detonator and detonate the device. Riku simply pulls out his concealed gun and shoots the place up. He doesn't hit anyone, but of course the bodyguards of the target are professionals. They have the crime boss and his family out of there in moments after the first shots were fired. Your new crew member saved the lives of four innocents, but Caldari fleet command didn't see it that way. The stolen weapon was not recovered and they found a scapegoat in Riku. He got 35 to life hard labour from a secret court-martial, but he was never going to serve that as I told you before. He knew too much. One of the Admirals didn't think it was right, so tipped me off."

Sosa sat there taking it all in. After a few minutes he spoke.

"A top military intelligence operative with a conscience? Sounds like our new guy will fit in perfectly around here!" he smiled.

Chapter 3

The Admiral read the report again. There was no real point, he'd read it so many times over the last few months he knew it word for word. It was their worst nightmare, of all the shipments to get hijacked, it had to be that one. For five months since the theft things had been quiet, but now intel suggested a buyer for the weapon had been finally found.

The plan from Naval Intelligence was poor in his opinion. It had a less than 30% chance of success. If they messed it up, the weapon could be revealed to all. If they failed and the weapon got into the hands of a criminal organization sooner or later it would be used. Millions could die and the weapon's origin could still be revealed to the cluster. The fact that criminals had set it off wouldn't matter in the eyes of the Empires. They had built the damn thing, they would get the blame for the consequences. Given that the weapon's entire development was illegal and broke various treaties they had signed it would be the final nail in the coffin. The open comm link patched into the small speaker in his desk crackled into life.

“Strike Command, this is Strike Alpha. We are Requesting Go/No Go confirmation.”

“Strike Alpha, this is Strike Command. You have a go. Locate and secure package, eliminate hostiles.”

“Strike Command acknowledged. Commencing operations.”

The mission was on. They had intel of the weapon's location and their best fire-team in the Caldari Navy was heading in to where they had heard the

missile was located. He'd have preferred a black-ops operative to have gained confirmation first, but his superiors wouldn't risk a delay.

“Strike one and two. Take positions. Strike three and four with me.”

The Admiral checked his black-ops fund, thankfully it was fat from the ongoing war effort. The fund was for him to do as he saw fit. No official oversight, no receipts, no paper trail. Of course he had to explain expenditure to the Admiralty, but he didn't think for a minute anyone of them would see a problem with paying large sums of money to ensure this particular problem went away. This was his back up.

“Engage!”

The sound from the small speaker on his desk erupted with the sound of gunfire and explosions. Orders were barked and commands given. It sounded like a small war was being waged. They had expected the criminal gang who had stolen the weapon would protect it, but again by rushing in they had no time to reconnoitre the opposition. Eventually the gunfire died down after several minutes.

“Strike Command. Location secure. Send in the medics, we've got men down.

“Strike Alpha, acknowledged. Trauma team en route. Have you secured the package?”

“Strike Command, negative. The package appears to have been here but is long gone. There is a missile sling and a stand that would take a citadel

torpedo. There is also a winch system to aid loading but the missile is gone. I repeat, the intel was too late, the package is no longer here. We're too late."

The Admiral had heard enough and terminated his personal audio link to the operations centre. He engaged the security protocols on his communicator and punched in a number from memory. They now needed some special help to prevent disaster.

-o0o-

Many light years away from where the firefight had just taken place an Amarrian ran his hand along the massive tube as he walked its length. His thin wrist extended from the sleeve of his dark robes which were in stark contrast to the brilliant white of the missile's body. The missile hung in the air suspended by chains in the small hanger bay.

"Ah yes, a thing of beauty." The man commented.

He was followed closely by two more men in similar robes. The three Amarrians walked the substantial length of the missile until they were at the nose-cone. A set of winches and chains hung either side of the weapon's 'business end'. On the adjacent tables lay a range of tools and equipment. A number of travel cases were piled on the floor next to the tables.

"Soon brothers we will deliver our message. Soon the Empires of Man will know they are trespassing where no mortal should tread. Soon we will start on a path that will lead to the cleansing of this holy place."

He finally reached the tip of the nose cone and reached up placing his palm on the end of the missile. He muttered a quiet prayer. He turned to the other two monks who had followed his every step at a respectable distance.

"How are we doing with the other acquisition that we need to complete our mission?" he asked one of his advisors.

"An opportunity has been identified. In three days we will have everything we need."

The leader nodded and smiled.

-oOo-

The senior officers of the Katsu Maru were all seated around the briefing table when the Captain entered. He took his seat at the head of the table and cleared his throat.

"I know everyone was looking forward to the Quafe executive baby-sitting mission, however that's been reassigned to another ship."

There was a collective groan around the table except from Riku who didn't know what the disappointment was. The others were upset as typically these corporate protection missions were very lucrative and very easy. The large mega-corps paid huge sums of money to protect their executives at certain events. For the crew of the Katsu Maru these were a walk in the park and normally resulted in a relaxing time and a healthy bonus. Plus the majority of the crew would get some shore-leave on a decent station for once. Whilst the Legion headquarters was a massive station, it didn't have the same

entertainment venues as others, especially the Gallente and Matari stations. Being reassigned was a major disappointment.

"I'm afraid we've got one hell of a mission in its place. We've been contracted by one of the Navies to get back some of their tech that has been stolen. We need to get it back before some nutter uses it to blow something big up. As you can probably guess by the fact we are involved we're not talking about a crate of Scourge Rage Rockets."

"What are we talking about?" asked the XO.

The Captain turned to Aki and Frey who were sat next to each other. "I don't know exactly myself. Information on the target is minimal, but if I ask these two what the significance of an Isogen-5 citadel torpedo is..."

Frey blew a low whistle through his teeth.

"Isogen-5 is a rare isotope of that common mineral favoured by your average high-sec mining carebear. When I say rare I mean REALLY rare. In fact it was thought it was all destroyed in the Apocrypha event a few years ago."

The Apocrypha event was well known throughout the cluster. Several stars went supernova at the same time. Millions perished, mostly on Seyllin I which was a habited planet in one of the star systems that was destroyed. The event also tore through subspace causing the creation of wormholes.

"It is believed that a massive detonation of a stockpile of this stuff occurred somewhere in the cluster. Somehow, we don't exactly know how or why, but

this isotope is sensitive to certain fluctuations in sub-space. When some goes off, it causes a chain-reaction with more of the mineral isotope being triggered to explode. Distance appears to be no object with some form of blast-wave travelling in subspace, even distant systems are not untouched when this stuff goes up. A good sized explosion of this stuff will set off any other Isogen-5 that is present in the surrounding star systems. Anyway the detonation of a stockpile four years ago was so massive it was thought to have caused a chain-reaction that detonated and destroyed all Isogen-5 in the cluster."

"Well it didn't." stated the Captain "Some survived and right now some criminal gang has a citadel class torpedo loaded with the stuff. This is an off-the-books job, the blackest of the black. We don't have much to go on as we don't have any official orders. What we need to know is what could this weapon do and therefore who are the likely prospective purchasers?"

"What it could do is vaporise an entire station in one hit. A titan or super-carrier would be the same. If you can modify the missile for atmospheric re-entry, it would take out a planet." Aki replied. The Captain raised a questioning eyebrow at him.

"When I say take out a planet I don't mean blow it up. A missile like that could probably vaporised a small continent on a temperate planet. But the shockwave, heat blast and subsequent detonation effects would create a nuclear winter lasting hundreds of years. However, before we start thinking about targets there is another matter to consider..."

"How they are going to launch it?" asked the Captain.

"Exactly. These missiles are designed not to be jerry-rigged or detonated without the proper launch codes. They needed to be fired from a citadel torpedo launcher which you only get on..."

"Caldari Titans, Dreadnoughts and starbase defences." Riku cut in.

"Yes. So there is the only bit of good news. The missile is useless unless you have a Caldari capital. I don't see the capsuleers touching this tech."

"Why not? Sounds something they would love, to one-shot a titan or enemy station."

"They wouldn't survive. The blast radius will be much bigger than the flight range of the missile. You fire it at something in space, you'll destroy your own ship in the subsequent blast. It would also disrupt subspace for a few seconds. Most capsuleers don't generally care about death, if their escape pod is hit or destroyed their brain-scan is sent to their medical station and they wake up in a new clone. However, in this case the capsule brain-scan transmission would be lost in the sub-space noise from the isogen-5 detonation. The signal just wouldn't get through and would be lost. No immortal is going to kill themselves permanently for a one shot weapon."

"OK people. So we're looking for an organisation that has a stack of cash, access to Caldari capitals and wants to kill something big. We find the buyer, we find the missile. Get to it."

-oOo-

The board members faced the holographic projection of the Admiral. The room was dark giving it an eerie feel.

"So you are saying this was not the idea of the Admiralty?" one of the board asked.

"No Ma'am. This was a secret project with directives issued direct from Executor He... sorry, I mean Tibus Heth. The Admiralty only heard about it after the theft. Heth's men, the Templis Dragonaurs had full authority here."

"What in Divinities Edge did he want this abomination for? From the report it appears to be a suicide weapon. You fire it, you'll die." Asked another of the board.

The Admiral nodded and a second projection started to form by his side, the projection showed a scene in space. An outline of a Phoenix class dreadnought appeared next to a swirling mass.

"As I understand it, Heth was worried that the Gallente would attack the heart of our space using the unstable wormholes. Intel suggested that the Gallente Navy was constantly surveying wormholes hoping to find one that led deep into our space. The plan was to use our last stocks of Isogen-5 that survived the Apocrypha event in their shielded containers to create a 'wormhole bomb'. This could be launched from a Phoenix class dreadnought into a wormhole and it would destroy the opposing fleet on the other side. The plan was that using Isogen-5, the warhead would also destabilize all wormholes in the system. It was a good plan tactically, if it had worked then those ships in the enemy fleet not destroyed by the detonation would be trapped and the link between our spaces removed. The main problem is that the development of

weapons of mass destruction was outlawed and we signed up to that treaty. Something that Heth apparently ignored. The missile warhead itself was complete but it needed modifying to be able to enter the wormhole and navigate itself to the other side. That is apparently when it was hijacked, en route to the facility that would fit the tech for it open the wormhole when fired."

The board sat in silence for a few minutes as the scene projected next to the Admiral played out. It showed the Phoenix launching the missile and it disappearing into a wormhole. It then morphed into the scene on the other side where a Gallente capital ship fleet was represented. The missile appeared from the wormhole and lit the entire room with a bright light. When the light finished nothing remained.

"What are the potential risks to the State here Admiral?"

"Well sir. The weapon itself could be used as a WMD. Super-capitals, stations, infrastructure hubs, even cities are at risk. Millions could die if they find a way to fire or detonate it."

"I was referring to the political risks, Admiral." the man replied.

"You mean what CONCORD and the other three empires will say or do when they find out we've been developing illegal weapons that we signed up not to develop? I say we are at a huge risk. If that weapon is used against the Gallente, then I can see the Amarrians breaking off the treaty and CONCORD stepping in and siding with the Gallente. The war would be lost in days."

The board went quiet again.

Chapter 4

"Right you've all had half a day to come up with ideas, let's hear them" the Captain said to the assembled senior officers. Various theories of who might want such a weapon and their potential plans were thrown around until they came to Aki.

"Aki. Any ideas here?"

"Well Captain. I'm not really up on organisations who would love a planet busting missile for their birthday. So I've been concentrating on ways we might be able to find the missile. Isogen-5 has a very unique energy profile, we should be able to scan it down with a system-wide sensor sweep. That will really cut the time down if we can instantly know if the weapon is in the solar system with us or not. The problem being, Isogen-5 is so heavily controlled and specific data about it is classified I cannot calibrate the sensors as I don't have the data. If the Client can give us..."

The Captain held up a hand.

"Let me just stop you there. Our Client has destroyed the labs and all data relating to the project and direct contact is out of the question. As you can imagine, officially this weapon does not exist. Our job is not to judge or enforce treaties, well unless someone pays us to, so let's not start any conversations in that respect. The weapon is illegal and now it's out of their control they have destroyed as much evidence as they can. So we're on our own. Now how do we get the data you need without getting it from the Client who probably no longer has it."

Aki sat there thinking. Suddenly Riku said "Dr Yvette Beaumont!"

All heads turned to the newest member who hadn't said a lot so far. He started rummaging through a pile of datapads in front of him.

"Dr who?" the Captain asked.

"I was reading up on some background on this Isotope, ah here it is." he slid a datapad across the table "Dr Yvette is a scientist in the Gallente Federation. She's supposed to be one of the leading experts on Isogen-5. Well, in the public eye anyway. Something about clean power generation for the masses."

The Captain slid the datapad across to Aki who skimmed through the profile. He smiled and nodded.

"She would be able to help me recalibrate the sensors." he confirmed working on the datapad. "And even better, it says here on her info-net site she's attending a scientific fund-raiser tomorrow night. We know exactly where she'll be."

-oOo-

The ballroom was gently lit by a dozen crystal chandeliers. Around the edges of the room tables were stacked with food and drinks. A four-piece orchestra was playing classical Gallente music. In the centre of the room men in dinner jackets danced with ladies in elegant ball gowns.

"So who is going to take me for my first dance?" Riku discreetly whispered into his concealed throat mic.

"I can but if your hand gets lower than the small of my back, expect a slap."
the Captain dead-panned.

"You two can get a room, after we've found the Doctor." XO Yoshi was in the ops centre on board the Katsu Maru monitoring the comms.

Riku took a glass from a passing waiter and continued to case the room looking for the target.

"Captain. Side door by the band."

"I don't see her."

"No, I mean the Amarrian. He's been stood there since we arrived, and he's packing, left side. Same as the two on the balcony above the main door. I checked the guest list and there are no Amarrian VIPs here tonight, in fact there are very few Amarrians on the list. So what's with the armed muscle?"

The Captain casually scanned around the room. Riku was right, they had a serious problem. Amarrians weren't popular in the security business, it was mostly dominated by Matari when you needed muscle and Caldari when you need subtlety.

"Centre of the dance floor. Silver dress."

The Captain turned to see the doctor dancing with a man. Riku was already approaching her.

Riku scanned around subtly but none of the suspicious men were near. He looked at the Doctor as he approached. She looked in her early 40's and was stunning. Dark hair cascaded over her shoulders and framed her sharp Gallente features perfectly.

"May I cut in?" he enquired. The man she was dancing with looked at the Caldari man in distaste.

"Of course." his dance partner replied which immediately deflated the Gallente man and took away all chance of resistance. He nodded at her and sloped off to the wings dejected.

Riku stepped in and took the Doctor in both hands and started to dance.

"You don't look like a scientist." she laughed.

"I'm not, I'm not even supposed to be here. I've crashed the party." Riku replied honestly. The Doctor laughed.

"Good for you! And thank you for saving me from that boring little man. If I hear another wild scientific theory tonight that these idiots want me to support I think I'll scream."

"Don't worry, I'm not a scientist. But I would like to hear your views on how we can find a stolen citadel torpedo with an Isogen-5 warhead that is on the black-market."

Riku felt her tense.

"You cannot be serious! No one would create such a weapon." she whispered and tried to break free by pushing him away. He held her tight.

"No, keep dancing, we are being watched. You are in danger." He pulled her tight against his body and she stopped trying to escape his grasp. They continued dancing and looking like they were having a good time.

"Who are you?" she whispered.

"Someone who is going to find that weapon and destroy it before it is used against innocents. But we need your help to find it and disarm it, permanently. There are other gate-crashers here and we think they are armed. We assume they are here for the same reason we are, you are one of the few people who might be able to locate the weapon." he spoke softly into her ear as if he was whispering something. Suddenly he heard the Captain in his hidden earpiece.

"Riku, they've spotted you. Two tangos moving in on your six and four. The goons on the balcony are heading to the main door, side door by the band is still covered. They've got us penned in. Go for the side door."

Riku casually spun his dance partner and himself around and took in everything he needed in a fraction of a second.

"Kick off those heels and get ready to follow my lead." he whispered in her ear.

There was a scream behind him, he knew one of the approaching Amarrians must have drawn his gun. He spun round and knelt in one motion, bringing the Doctor down with him as he drew his own gun. He placed a single shot in the

forehead of the first approaching Amarrian. The second died with his hand still inside his jacket going for his gun. Riku taking him down with a single shot. He pulled the doctor to her feet and ran for the side door. He glanced to the main door where people were leaving en mass in a panic from the gunfire. The two Amarrians were still covering that exit and were shouting into throat mics trying to get through. The one by the side door had his gun out and was watching Riku and the Doctor approach through the crowd that was trying to get out of the room. He was lining up a shot as the Captain stepped beside him and brought the butt of his pistol on the back of the Amarrian's neck. He fell to the ground unconscious.

"This party is a bit boring? Want to split?" he said to the Captain as they reached the door.

"I was just thinking it was a bit of a sausage-fest and we should leave." he replied, shouldering through the side door dragging the Doctor with him.

The plans of the mansion had already been studied carefully by both men and committed to memory. They knew exactly where to turn and which door to take in the maze of corridors and rooms. They finally burst through a locked door after shooting the lock out into the cool night air. A light in the distance showed their ride approaching.

"Well that was easy." commented Riku just before the ground in front of them was raked by gun fire. They dived for cover dragging the Doctor with them. From under the bush they had taken cover in Riku grabbed a black bag concealed in the undergrowth. Whilst they were not expecting trouble, Riku was always prepared. He opened the bag that he'd placed there earlier in the day and withdrew an Ishukone Assault Submachine Gun. He rolled from the

cover of the bush and lined up where the incoming fire had come from. Two Amarrrians were running towards them. The targets were overconfident, thinking that Riku and the captain only had pistols and the range was too great for them to be effective. They tried to dive for cover as Riku fired two controlled bursts from the Caldari-made weapon. Both men were dead before they hit the ground.

"Captain, this is Hos! I'm under heavy fire. A swarm of drones has appeared from nowhere. Shields down to 20%. This shuttle has no tank, I'm not going to be able to reach you."

The Captain looked towards the light high in the sky and saw the flare of laser fire around the approaching shuttle.

In the small craft Hos was doing his best to avoid the incoming fire. The ship itself was custom built to act as a shuttle between the Katsu Maru and wherever they needed to insert a ground team or, as in this case, extract one. It was normally docked in a hidden bay within the underside of the hauler and could carry five including the pilot. However it was not a combat ship, it was designed purely for personnel transport. He had ferried crew to various stations, planets, asteroids and even one time had to deliver the crew to a derelict floating in the vacuum of space. Another pulse laser volley strafed the rapidly diminishing shields. Hos was regretting not adding at least a small turret on the design of the vessel.

"Abort Hos, get out of there. We'll make our way on foot."

Hos looked at the shields, 16%. Although he didn't like it, the Captain was right. If by some miracle he made it to them, when he landed he would be a

sitting duck, never mind getting back out. He banked the ship steeply and headed back towards the Katsu Maru with the drones still in pursuit.

The Captain turned to Riku.

"Looks like we're walking." he said, just as a grenade landed at their feet and detonated.

-oOo-

The Captain's head felt like he'd gone twelve rounds in the sparring ring with Ingvar. He slowly opened his eyes and was blinded by the harsh white light. Chief Medical Officer Yvette's face appeared above him. He groaned.

"Welcome back captain, good to see you too!" she smiled.

"Well I've read your file and already know that you're no angel, so I'm clearly not dead and in heaven then?"

His chief medical officer swatted his shoulder playfully. "Cheeky! No, you are alive, it was a stun grenade. Thankfully the Gallente security forces arrived just in time. They pushed the attackers away before they could put a bullet in your head. Apparently it was close. We hacked some databases and rerouted some calls to give the security forces the impression you were bodyguards for the Doctor. Hence you are waking up here rather than chained to a hospital bed."

"The Doctor?"

"They got her. And we've got some more bad news." she nodded over to the other side of the infirmary where the team he had sent to extract the Doctor's children were sitting on gurneys looking bruised and defeated.

"Any...?"

"No, just a few holes to patch up but nothing life-threatening. They were outnumbered and out-gunned."

The Captain closed his eyes to think. Something didn't add up. Yes the Doctor could have helped them to find the missile, but why didn't the others just kill her? Going for the family was sensible for them, if they missed grabbing the Doctor they would have still have leverage over her. But going to the trouble of capturing her alive, that was a risk that didn't make sense. All they needed to do was put a bullet in her head and the trail would be cold. He struggled to sit up causing his head to pound even more. Riku was sat on the next gurney holding an ice-pack to his head.

"What were we drinking last night?" he quipped. "Last time I go to a dance with you as my date!"

The Captain didn't answer, he was still trying to understand why the attackers were desperate to capture the Doctor rather than just eliminate her. He grabbed his datapad that was on the side-table and sent a message. He got up and Dr Yvette was about to tell him to stay put, but she saw the look in his eyes, she knew it was pointless.

He walked over to Ingvar who was lying in bed with a bandage over his forehead. A bullet had grazed him but not impacted bone. The combat

specialist recounted how they'd arrived at the Doctor's home to find six masked men dragging her children out with their babysitter. The unknown men had opened fire immediately as they saw the team. The team couldn't return fire for fear of hitting the children or the babysitter which the men had taken hostage. One of the masked men did step out of cover for a second and they'd taken him down. The fire fight had been short. The team's vehicle had been disabled in the fight as they had to use it for cover. All three of them had been hurt and the enemy had escaped with the Doctor's children. The most disturbing piece of information was that they had shot the teenage babysitter in the stomach and left her as they were leaving. Clearly as a tactic to delay the team who they had assumed would seek to administer first aid to the girl and thus slow any pursuit. The wound was too great and the girl had died in their arms. They had searched the attacker that they took down but other than that he was Amarran, they found no other clues to his identity. These guys knew what they were doing and ensured they carried nothing to identify them.

After a few hours of sleep the Captain showered and dressed and headed to the briefing room. When he arrived he saw everyone was there already and appeared to have been there for some time. Datapads and pieces of paper were scattered all over the huge table. He sat in his normal seat.

"OK, I asked you all three hours ago one question. Why would the attackers risk so much to capture the Doctor alive when killing her would have been simpler. Answers?"

All eyes swung around to Aki who had cleared his throat. It was clear they had come up with an idea and that Aki had an answer.

"Well, we can only guess. And our best guess is they need her. We know they are Amarrians from both the attacks, and therefore they are unlikely to have access to a Phoenix class dreadnought. In its current form that missile is useless to them. I looked up some of the Doctor's past work, we know that she was looking into the civilian use of Isogen-5 for power generation. But in the initial sweep we missed a paper she wrote eight years ago. It looked into the potential use of Isogen-5 as a bomb. She theorized that when combined with enriched uranium it could be made into a freedom-fighter's wet-dream. A device that fitted inside a suitcase and could vaporise the largest cities in the cluster. We are talking a suit-case nuke times fifty."

It hit the Captain like a sledgehammer. "That is why they were desperate to take her alive and to capture her family. They needed her to create weapons they could use, from the one they couldn't."

"How the hell did we miss that?" the Captain growled.

"It wasn't public. It was confidential and sealed as they didn't want any nutter with a cause getting any ideas about suitcase sized mega-bombs. After last night I thought there must be more to her so I hacked the firewall at the university where she works. They have their confidential papers pretty well protected for a university, but I got them. There were a number of pretty controversial papers in there including that one."

"Good. So now we need to know where their facility is. They are taking apart a citadel torpedo loaded with a highly-dangerous isotope. I assume they'll not be doing it in a Matari chop-shop. How do we find them... wait. Aki, I've got another hacking job for you!"

Chapter 5

The transport shuddered as the docking arm grabbed hold. This old station didn't have the modern berths with heavy tractor beams and relied on brute strength to secure the ships. Also with no hi-tech scanning systems, things were done the old-fashioned way. As the passenger door opened the Captain was greeted by three very stern men in uniform. They entered the ship with a look of disdain as they saw the interior was in no better condition than the exterior.

"We are from Station Customs. Please take us to the bridge."

The Captain just nodded and spat a glob of phlegm on the floor. He'd changed from his usual smart attire to ripped pants and an oil-stained T-shirt with a faded cap. He motioned for them to follow. They carefully made their way down the poorly maintained corridor. A sparking light fitting made them jump. The air was stale and a mix of unpleasant aromas. All of this was a front. Down in the Ops Centre Yoshi giggled as she set off another sparking light fitting from her console making one of the customs inspectors jump. From that console she could set off any of a number of parlour tricks from various smells in the ventilation system to sparking electrics.

Riku leaned over. "I love to see someone enjoying their work" he laughed.

The four men entered the lift. It headed up to the top deck and opened onto the bridge with a grinding of metal on metal. The customs inspectors hurried out fearing for their safety in the poorly maintained lift. Whilst the ship could be controlled from that bridge, the ops centre below could over-ride it at any time. As the transport was frequently boarded by customs officials in space, it

had to have the appearance of a fully working bridge. There were also very rare occasions with older stations that insisted on a harbour pilot be sent over to dock ships manually. On these occasions the ops centre in the belly of the ship did the fine tuning to the pilots navigation.

Ingvar was in the bridge, snoring loudly in one of the chairs with his feet on a console. He wore oil-stained overalls and holed boots. The look of disgust on the customs officials was plain to see. They quickly went through the cargo manifest and crew database before asking to see the holds. During the lift ride down Yoshi dropped the lift half a deck in free-fall, extracting a shrill scream from one of the customs inspectors. A small crowd had gathered around the XO's console in the C&C centre and were laughing hard. The captain discreetly looked up at the hidden camera in the lift's roof and gave a 'don't push it too far' look into the lens.

Air with an artificial sulphur smell had already been pumped into hold number 1 which was reported to be carrying dangerous chemical waste. The barrels looked in worse condition than the ship with several leaking a bright green goo. The gel was completely harmless and had been cooked up by the Toy Shop. One thing that customs inspectors didn't like and that was leaking barrels of toxic waste. That indeed was the last straw for these officials who were not paid enough to risk their lives on what appeared to be a flying death trap. They made their excuses saying everything appeared to be in order and left.

As soon as they were clear the Captain retrieved his communicator from a deep pocket.

"OK you lot, fun's over. Riku, Ingvar get changed and armed. We're off to chat to some rather unpleasant people!"

One hour later the Captain and Ingvar sat in a bar on the station. The bar itself was like many of the null-sec outposts in this region, run down and full of unsavoury characters. A fight had already broken out and they'd seen a man get stabbed. They had half finished their drinks when Riku entered and sat down.

"Done?" asked the Captain.

"Ready to rock and roll. Aki was spot on with that hack job" Riku replied. "He got the location exact."

The three men stood and walked slowly towards an unmarked door in the back of the bar. The Captain gave three hard raps on the door. A small metal screen slid back. The Captain just nodded at the unseen person behind the steel and the door opened. The three men entered and were faced with four men pointing guns at them.

"It's OK boys." the Captain said reassuringly and carefully extracted his gun slowly with two fingers. The others followed and the men took the weapons before frisking them. Finally they opened a door opposite. All three entered a room that was reminiscent of an ancient Amarrian desert tent. Rugs and pillows littered the floor and in the centre, smoking a water pipe, was a huge Gallente male. A number of petite young girls surrounded him dressed in gem studded outfits of flowing see-through chiffon and little else.

"Captain Sosa!" he bellowed as they entered. "Come! Come! Please sit. Wine for the captain and his friends."

Two of the girls sprang up and brought over some empty glasses and jugs of Amarrian red wine.

"I've not seen you in years! How're those autocannons working out for you."

The Gallente was an arms dealer the Captain had used in the past. Military grade weapons were strictly controlled and unless you had the right licences, or were a capsuleer, getting the goods was difficult. The Katsu Maru was heavily armed although you could never tell from looking at her. Behind the thick steel plates that looked like repairs were in fact a selection of top-of-the-line armaments. The plates were not in fact hull patches, they were doors hidden in plain sight. Four 220mm Vulcan Autocannons were amongst the armaments the Captain had bought from this black-market dealer. They could shred armour or shoot down incoming missiles depending on the situation.

"Good Devereau. I'm here on business again. Only this time it's not hardware I need. Its information."

The fat man clapped his hands together. "Ah my favourite sale. Costs me nothing and makes me profit! Tell me what do you want to know?"

"Where can I get some enriched uranium from?" asked the captain.

The fat man's face soured instantly.

"The Capsuleer market. I hear the Jita star system is your best bet for fuelling your starbase control tower." he said deadpan, his demeanour had changed heavily.

"Look Devereau. Don't give me that shit. I know the people you deal with. You certainly know who deals in this and I'm not talking about POS fuel. I need to find the main supplier around here and I need to now. So give me some names."

"You know I don't like your tone Captain and I certainly don't know what you are talking about. I think you'd better leave."

The Captain nodded at Riku. He removed his watch and depressed a button on the side and held it. The watch started bleeping. The fat man started to look worried.

"If my man here takes his finger off that button, you'll regret it. Now, where do I find the supplier?"

"Dare I ask what happens then?" asked the fat man.

"5000 Republic Fleet Phased Plasma shells, 2500 Caldari Navy inferno light missiles, 5000 Javelin hybrid charges. 1000 scorch crystals, 1100..."

The fat man raised a hand to stop him. He knew the inventory of his secret armoury and this Caldari man with the watch was listing it perfectly. There was no need to state that the watch was linked to some form of explosive buried in his expensive stockpile.

"Nisuwa station in Black Rise. Tomorrow at noon local station time. A man there deals in that shit and is apparently doing a big deal at that time or so I've heard. I'm assuming whoever he is meeting and dealing with is reason you're threatening my livelihood?"

"Devereau you are a scholar and a gentleman. Thank you and don't try anything stupid. The device will deactivate once we are clear of the station. Hell you can even sell that one on. One small thermal bomb, remote detonator, one owner, never used!" the Captain grinned.

The fat arms dealer just glowered as the three left.

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The next day the Katsu Maru was cloaked off the station. It's active sensor array sweeping each ship that undocked for signs of radiation. The ops centre was deadly quiet as they watched the view screen. Hoshi was at the weapons console but rather than controlling the impressive armaments of the ship, he was remote controlling a tiny drone in space. Unlike the regular combat and utility versions popular with capsuleers and miners, this was a fraction of the size. No larger than a thick datapad. He used both hands on the small joysticks to zip between the numerous ships in space around the station. The tension in the command centre was palpable.

"I've got a radiation hit." Yoshi the XO announced. "That Bestower undocking now. It's the one! From the scanner reading they have a shipment of uranium on there."

Hoshi spun the drone around and headed straight for the industrial that was leaving the station's hangar entrance. He took it in close, slowly reducing the distance between the massive industrial and the tiny drone. The drone was so small that regular ships sensors would never pick it up.

"She's aligning. She'll be in warp in five seconds."

Hoshi's face was a mask of concentration. Beads of sweat formed on his furrowed brow. He fired the micro-thrusters and the drone lightly touched the ship's hull at the same time he activated powerful electro-magnets. The tiny 20cm drone was almost invisible on the side of a ship that displaced over a quarter of a million cubic meters.

"Fixed!" he announced as the Bestower slipped into warp. "Signal is good. We've tagged them."

The crew watched the industrial ship slip into warp towards a distant stargate.

"Helm, set a pursuit course. Do not warp until you have seen them disappear from the local network, we don't want to spook them." The captain ordered.

The Katsu Maru tailed the Bestower one star system behind for over 10 jumps. As other traffic started to thin they dropped back further, confident that the micro-drone was secure and would keep feeding them telemetry data. It wasn't long before the data showed it had docked in a station three jumps from their current position. The Captain gathered the senior staff to the briefing room after hiding the ship near an asteroid field in case they sent patrols that far out.

"OK what do we know about this station?"

"It's bad news Captain." replied Aki. "I've been through several Empire law-enforcement databases using a faked CONCORD ident. Two of them suspect this is the base of an Equilibrium of Mankind cell. We're in low-sec and it's an old backwater station so no one has stepped up to do anything about it."

The room fell silent. The facts all fell into place. The Equilibrium of Mankind, or EOM for short, was a fanatical organization that formed within the deeply religious Amarrian Empire. They believed that humans reached this cluster of stars from another home far away, and that they were never meant to be here. To them, humans were trespassing in the realm of God. The initial part of their belief was true, humans did reach this cluster of stars from a long-dead wormhole that connected back to near Earth. The collapse of the wormhole thousands of years ago had had a catastrophic effect on the fledging colonies that had only been in place 70 years and less. Over the next 12 millennia the knowledge of Earth, the wormhole, and humanity's origins were lost. Whilst many scholars believed the Empires had a common ancestry nobody really knew the real truth.

Whilst in the beginning the cult was somewhat ignored other than by the Amarrian Empire, once they started indiscriminately killing people the other Empires took note. Now the cult regularly attempted mass-murder in all four empires looking to remove humans from what they called the home of God.

"Frack! It all fits. They were Amarrians who grabbed the Doctor. The EOM would love to be able to convert the missile to smaller multiple weapons. If the EOM get their hands on isogen-5 weapons tens of millions will die." the Captain was angry.

The XO looked up from her datapad. "Captain, that station is still operated by a corporate front. I can create us a route that will pass through that system. If we were to develop a fault in our warp drive we'd need to dock for repairs. They cannot refuse us that otherwise we could lodge an official complaint and that would put the spotlight on them. I'm guessing they'd rather have a tramp hauler dock up for a few hours rather than risk having the authorities pay them a visit."

"Do it. I want us in that station in the next four hours. I want a plan to rescue the Doctor and her family plus recover the Isogen-5 and uranium in three! Dismissed!"

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Several light years away the Doctor wept as she slowly and carefully instructed the men removing the warhead from the body of the massive missile. She was trapped. If it had been just her then it would have been simple. They could beat her, torture her, abuse her. She would not help them make weapons that would kill millions. In fact as a last resort she would have simply built a device and detonated it to ensure that the isotope was all destroyed. She would kill a few thousand on that station in doing so, but better that than millions. But her three children were on the next level down and it had been made very clear to her what would happen if she didn't cooperate. She knew they were probably going to kill them all but she needed to stall them.

Her plan was to make convincing looking weapons that would not detonate. If she took her time maybe she could stall them until help arrived. Those two mysterious men from the ball. Were they still searching for her?

Chapter 6

The small one-man pod left the station hangar and glided through space over to the hauler. The man inside looked at the ship on the scanner and shook his head. The ship appeared on its last legs. No wonder its engines had partially failed. As the harbour pilot it was his job to board incoming ships and fly them into the dock. The station was very old and had neither tractor beams, automated docking arms or computer-guided entry. It was one of a handful of deep-space stations that still relied on the age-old method of 'harbour pilots' who would board and dock approaching ships manually.

The pod attached itself to the edge of the ship at the passenger airlock. The harbour pilot was worried that the docking apron would not get a sufficient seal on the battered rust-tinged hull. A green light showed the seal was good and he waited.

The Captain was stood behind the door having already changed into his 'tramp captain' clothes. He looked in as bad a condition as his ship. He checked his watch and decided to leave it another few minutes. Pilots who were pissed off were better as they would immediately dislike the ship and crew further and be wanting to get off quicker. Finally he hit the door release and the pilot strode in not asking for permission to come aboard as was the tradition.

"Took you long enough!" he huffed and made his way to the lift opposite. The captain just spat on the floor and followed him.

Down in the Command Centre the XO watched the helmsman manoeuvre the ship as the commands came down from the fake bridge many decks above. The viewscreen showed the pilot and the captain from a small hidden camera.

The pilot was clearly not happy. The wait, the condition of the ship and the response of the controls were all angering him. There appeared to be a miniscule delay between moving the joystick and the thrusters responding. He wasn't surprised looking around. The bridge was a mess, the only other crewman present was snoring loudly and it looked like the electronics were in need of an overhaul some twenty years ago.

"There seems to be a small delay on your thruster controls." he said to the captain.

At that moment a light fitting above the helm console blew out in a shower of sparks making the harbour pilot jump. The XO was monitoring the conversation and was getting worried the pilot was getting suspicious. So she'd triggered one of the many fireworks Hos had installed around the public areas of the ship.

"Yeah. The node that is supposed to control it burnt out a couple of months ago." the captain said whilst looking up at the smoking light. "Need to get it fixed at some point, for now we just rerouted it to another node but it takes a bit longer to respond."

The pilot shook his head again as he aligned the hauler up with the dock bay. The ship shuddered as it made contact and the large docking clamps engaged. He blew a sigh of relief. As well as the harbour pilot the man also acted as customs officer and once they were docked he used a terminal to do the standard crew checks. As he expected, the crew was minimal, but none of them had any outstanding warrants or flags, and the cargo was hazardous to health. He had no wish to risk himself further by manually inspecting the

cargo bays and lower decks. In fact he didn't want to delay this ship a second longer than necessary. The sooner they fixed their warp drive fault and got that flying death trap out of his station the better! Whilst at the console he did access the drive systems and was confronted by a list of emergency problems and faults. When they said they were having engine problems they were right. He bid farewell to the captain and took the pod for the short flight across the hangar.

Five minutes later he was back in his office which overlooked the docks. He picked up his datapad and typed a quick message.

"Matari Hauler arrived, warp drive fault needs station services to fix. No threat. As per normal rules with unscheduled docking they are confined to the hangar bay. Certainly not law enforcement or navy. Scan shows ship is clean. Long-range scanners report no other shipping at this time within 14AU. Will report more if anything suspicious occurs."

The harbour pilots' pay here was poor and the extra 500 a week those guys paid him to report on all ships arriving eased his financial situation. So what if he was probably being paid off by black-market traders or smugglers, everyone needed to earn a living he thought. He had no idea that the scan of the ship he'd initiated had been fed false information by a complex passive system on the Katsu Maru. His scanner results showed a junk hauler with skeleton crew and a cargo of chemical waste, not a hi-tech warship ready to let loose the dogs of war.

On the station several decks down a monk picked up his beeping datapad. A number of armed men looked at him concerned. They had heard an unscheduled ship had docked and a strike team had been assembled.

"Stand down. Nothing more than a junk hauler with engine problems. The scan was clean, proceed."

Back on the Katsu Maru the Captain entered the command centre dressed in black combat gear.

"Report."

"After the pilot left he ran a scan of the ship. The scanner was hi-tech sir, certainly not standard fitting for this station. They have some military-grade scanning gear hidden in this hangar somewhere" Aki stated.

"So we're in the right place then. Countermeasures work OK Yoshi?"

"Yes sir. The pilot got our standard skeleton crew, toxic waste and a leaking warp-core results. We also detected a transmission from his office 30 seconds after the scan. Aki is working on it now."

The captain walked over to the communications console where Aki was furiously tapping away at the console.

"It's been several minutes Aki, are you losing your touch?" the Captain joked. Aki snorted in frustration.

"They are using 40kbit encryption. This is military-grade. But you know me... there!"

The Captain looked at the screen and read the message the harbour pilot had just sent. He smiled. They had been correct in suspecting the harbour-pilot-stroke-customs-officer would be on the EOM payroll. If the Captain was running an operation on an outpost like this it would be exactly what he would do. Make sure the man who supervises all the comings and goings keeps you informed.

"You sure about this Yoshi?" he asked as he saw his second in command relinquish the chair to the next most senior officer.

"It was my plan wasn't it?" she smiled.

"Yes, but some might say this is above and beyond the call of duty!" he replied with a disdain look on his face.

"Look I can take one for the team, and let's face it, I don't get many opportunities to get dolled up!" she said with a wink.

-oOo-

The Captain watched on his datapad the view from one of the ship's hidden external camera. Yoshi walked down the walkway and off the ship. Her red high heels matched her shimmering red mini dress. She indeed look hot. When she first suggested the plan the captain had dismissed it. Eventually she won him over and the captain had to admit it was the best way to accomplish what they needed. She strode over to the harbour pilots' office door which was open.

The captain placed his throat mic on and started to head for the door.

"OK, Yoshi is making her move. All teams stand by. Aki are you set?"

"Affirmative Captain. The station surveillance system is the same as their hidden ship scanner. Military-grade. But I'm in and have control. They'll see Tibus Heth making out with Empress Jamyl before they see you and the team." replied the electronics specialist.

Yoshi stepped into the harbour pilot's office and his jaw almost hit the floor. She waited as his gaze slowly moved up from her shoes, up her legs and over her body before stopping at her chest. She knew she'd picked the right dress.

"Ahem, big boy, my eyes are up here!" she purred pointing to her face.

The pilot's concentration was broken and he looked up stunned in silence.

"Captain's given me the night off and I need to party. Where's the clubbing in this place?"

"Sorry. Station policy. You didn't submit the paperwork a week in advance so I cannot let you out of the docking bay. Company rules, if you're here on emergency docking request your movements are restricted."

The XO put on her best pout.

"We've been stuck on that rotting hulk for weeks. We're out of booze! Plus none of the crew are able to float my boat." She complained. "I need to blow off some steam otherwise I'm going to explode!"

The pilot smiled and opened a drawer in his desk and pulled out a three quarters full bottle of amber liquid. The XO smiled widely.

Five minutes later they were on their second drink, Yoshi was sat on a spare desk with her legs crossed sharing a joke with the pilot who had slyly slumped down in his seat to try and see up her dress. With her slender legs on display, his attention couldn't be further from the window behind him where five armed men in combat gear jogged from the docked ship towards the hangar exit. Yoshi glanced at the bank of surveillance monitors which showed the hangar but was missing the five figures. Aki was in control. She drained her glass and gently shook it at the pilot who quickly filled it. She saw the personnel exit door of the hangar slide open in advance allowing the team to jog through without stopping. The door closed behind them without them having to even look at the controls. The station was under the complete control of the Katsu Maru's resident electronics genius.

The team split up with three heading to secure the areas they had detected the most people in. Whilst Aki would be able to lock doors and seal areas, they needed to mop up stragglers and anyone in locations that could try to override Aki's control.

Chapter 7

The Captain and Riku had their backs to the wall either side of the door. The handheld sensor calibrated to the energy signature of enriched uranium was going nuts. Riku nodded at the Captain to indicate this was the place and put the scanner away. He reached across and tried the handle. He looked at the Captain and shook his head to indicate it was locked. He pulled a pack from his pocket and pressed a yellow putty around the lock. A small detonator was pushed in and both men backed away. The small explosion and the door flying open startled the guards. They didn't have time to raise their rifles as Riku strode in and in a single sweeping fluid motion put a bullet into each of their heads. The three bodies fell where they stood. He swept the cavernous room as the Captain entered with his gun raised. The two monks at the back of the room grabbed guns from under their robes and opened fire at Riku. He span behind a support column as the bullets ricocheted off the metal. The Captain went wide to try and flank them but his advance was halted under a hail of bullets. Riku dived for cover and fired off three shots. This refocused the monks' attention back on him allowing the Captain to get closer. The two EOM monks realized they were no match for the approaching mercenaries. They looked at each other and nodded before putting their guns to their own heads and pulling the triggers. Riku met with the Captain at their prone bodies.

"Are we *that* scary?" Riku quipped looking down on the two dead monks.

"I doubt it. Never had anyone shoot themselves in the head during a gun fight." The captain replied. "That was... strange."

The two men turned to the long table. Six cases were lined up and open. Inside each was clearly a bomb. One of the cases in the middle was connected by some wires to a small portable console. The Captain went up to it.

"It's some kind of diagnostic terminal. It checks whether it was a viable device. Clearly they didn't trust the Doctor."

"Is it?" asked Riku.

"Yes. My god, 50 gigatonne equivalent. And there are six of them. We need to find the Doctor to disarm them. She will still be alive."

The Captain was pretty sure they would have kept the Doctor alive until they had tested all the weapons and were sure that they were all viable. Each one of those could vaporise a city containing 50 million souls or more. They would want to make sure they were all active. However he had just seen two men kill themselves for no apparent reason. The bombs were here so if they had captured the two men they would unlikely have any questions for them. They had been caught red handed. Why would they kill themselves to avoid capture, it didn't make sense. The lack of logic made him concerned for the Doctor's safety. He would worry about that later as the two men started down a small flight of stairs at the rear of the room. They heard the cries before they found them.

The Doctor and her three children were chained to a large ring set in the floor in the centre of the room. The Doctor smiled when she saw Riku and the Captain sweep into the room, weapons drawn. Both men moved quickly through the room ensuring there were no more EOM down there. Riku holstered his weapon once he was sure there were no targets present and

jogged over to the doctor. He could see she had been beaten. Her right eye was badly bruised and her lip was swollen and had been split. The children appeared unscathed and unhurt, at least physically.

"Thank god you're here. They... they forced me to..."

"It's OK, the bombs are secure." Riku reassured her whilst removing her chains. The Captain was working on freeing the children.

"Thank God. I resisted I did. But they said they were going to... to my babies..." at that she broke down on Riku's shoulder. He looked past her to where several chairs had been bolted to the floor and a nearby table was stacked with implements that looked like they belonged out of a bad horror holo-vid movie.

Soon they had all four free and escorted them up the stairs to the factory floor. Ingvar had arrived with two more of his fire-team.

"Station is secure sir. We've locked down all rooms and corridors, we've got a free route back to the Katsu Maru." he reported.

"OK, have your guys take the Doctor's family back to the ship. We need the Doctor to disarm these weapons to make them safe for transport. You stay here with me and Riku. Once the Doctor has deactivated all six we can take two each and...."

"Wait!" interrupted the Doctor with urgency in her voice. "Did you say six? They forced me to make eight!".

The Captain's face dropped. He activated his communicator.

"Station is secure but we've got two bombs missing. Bridge crew get back and get the ship ready to undock. If anything tries to leave the station, stop it."

The XO had the harbour pilot nibbling her neck with one calloused hand inside the front of her dress. Her face which hung over his shoulder was one of boredom. She was making pleasurable moans and sighs but was actually planning the next week's crew roster in her head. The Captain's voice came over the discreet flesh coloured comms unit inserted into her ear. Upon hearing this she pushed the pilot away. He looked shocked, worried he'd gone too far too quickly. Then he thought about it. The petite bitch had led him on. He had a right now. He'd show the cock-tease what a real man felt like. He stepped forward with a growl on his face as she swung her fist in lightning fast arc. She struck him on the temple and he collapsed on the floor, unconscious before he'd even hit the deck. She kicked off her heels, picked them up and jogged bare foot back to the ship as if nothing had happened.

-oOo-

After relocating the six deactivated bombs to a shielded hold on the Katsu Maru, a system-wide sensor sweep was undertaken. Dr Yvette had worked with Aki and Hos to calibrate the sensors to detect the energy signature of the rare isotope. Most of the work in recalibrating the sensors had been done via a remote terminal in the infirmary where her family was being treated so she could be close to them.

The sensor sweep confirmed the only Isogen-5 in the system was on board the Katsu Maru. The Doctor had told Chief Medic Yvette tearfully that the first

device she built was a dud, not expecting them to have a military-grade AI that could run a diagnostic on the weapon. After they had strapped her children into the chairs next to the racks of wicked implements they had slapped her around her to soften her up. She had fixed the problem and started on the other seven devices when they had told her exactly what they were going to do to her children if she didn't.

With the sensor sweep having confirmed what they had feared, the two missing bombs had already left the system and could be anywhere in the cluster and investigation of the station had been launched. The Captain and Riku were on the station continuing to sweep for any clues of the potential targets. The Captain now knew why the two monks had killed themselves rather than be captured, they knew the target of the two weapons that had already left. Riku and the Captain had just entered a small private hangar rented by the corporate front of the EOM. After a few minutes of checking the main hangar floor they were confident there was nobody there.

The Captain entered the small office and flicked through papers and files. It all appeared to be standard logs and maintenance records of the small frigates that lined the hangar. He emerged from the room and walked alongside Riku who was staring up into space.

"What is it?" the Captain asked.

"How many ships do you see?" Riku asked without turning.

"Six" replied the captain.

"How many powered up, but empty berths do you see?"

"Two" replied the Captain. As soon as he said it he realized the significance. He immediately got onto his comms.

"Aki. Hack into the station's mainframe. Hanger 12, there are two frigates missing and six remaining. We think these were going to be used to carry the bombs."

"One sec Captain" replied Aki. "No details on the missing ships. Appears no flight plan was filed on the mainframe."

"Frack!" exclaimed the captain.

"Wait. I've accessed the ships' onboard computers. The other six, they are all powered and ready to fly."

"So?"

"Their autopilots are pre-set. Their destinations are the main stations at Rens, Dodixie and Amarr for the first three. The planets of Matar, Gallente Prime and Athra are the next three's destinations. That's strange I'm not getting a database entry for the planet Athra but the navicom on that frigate seems to know where it is."

"That's because Athra hasn't been called that for a long, long time. It's now called Amarr Prime. These shuttles are set to go to each of the primary trade-hub stations and the home planets of the Minmatar, Gallente and Amarrian Empires. That means..."

"The missing ships and bombs are en route to the planet of New Caldari and the Jita 4-4 station!" Riku finished for him. "The home planet and primary trade station of the Caldari State."

"Prep the ship for launch. Get engineering ready, we're going to need everything the engines have." The captain ordered as he and Riku ran back towards the ship.

Chapter 8

The command centre was quiet. The Katsu Maru was burning towards Caldari space with everything they had. The Captain was in his elevated seat with his XO sat next to him. She still wore the tiny red dress, but the crew knew better than to make any humorous comments. The Captain had enquired discreetly if she was OK after he got back to the ship. She simply replied that she'd had worse dates and given a cheeky smile. He needed to remember to ensure her bonus for this mission had a little extra in it. The crew were all paid a good wage, however the Captain had the authority to award bonuses. Having that harbour pilot slobber all over her whilst feeling her up certainly qualified for a bonus in his books.

The Captain had sent a message to command as soon as they discovered the targets. In turn the Legion had alerted the Caldari Navy and the stargates into the systems of New Caldari and Jita were heavily guarded. However, the Katsu Maru was the only ship that could track the energy signature of the bombs.

"12 jumps out Captain. ETA to Jita Stargate is 15 minutes away. I'm getting traffic advisory warnings saying the traffic is stacking up on the approach."

This was good news. The systems of New Caldari and Jita were adjacent to each other, connected by stargates. Whilst New Caldari was the home of the Caldari Empire, Jita was better placed and easier to get to. This had cemented its place as the premier trade hub in the cluster. Every day thousands of capsuleers and tens of thousands of ordinary piloted ships visited the station on the 4th moon of the 4th planet. It was basically the economic centre of

known space. Destruction of that station would have a cataclysmic impact on the economies of all the Empires.

Whilst the command centre was quiet, it was busy. At each console station the assigned crew member was running diagnostics and fine tuning. They all expected that this would end in a fight and wanted to ensure their systems were running at peak efficiency.

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11 jumps away in the solar system named Perimeter, the two small frigates were docked in a small outpost. The leader was pacing up and down the office.

"So close! We were so close! Are you sure none of the others got away?"

The other monk lowered his head.

"No sir, all six weapons were captured. Eight of our brothers were killed, 34 more captured as were the six remaining craft. We still have an asset on the station, the harbour pilot. He was knocked unconscious by the intruders. He is still sending us information but the Caldari Navy forces have secured the station."

The leader kicked a chair over. They had taken refuge in a small outpost in the Perimeter system after hearing the stargates were congested. They had assumed correctly their plan had been discovered and security tightened. They were so close to Jita and New Caldari but might as well be 100 light years away.

"Did they rescue the Doctor? If our brothers had dealt with her before the attack there still may be hope." he asked.

"We do not know that sir. She could be dead, she could have been taken by the Matari hauler with the commandos."

This time it was a small plant pot that the leader took his frustration out on. The ceramic vase shattered as it hit the floor spilling soil and foliage. If they had the Doctor there was a possibility that they could scan them down. He weighed the options. Retreating was not an option, that Matari vessel was probably heading their way. Getting into Jita or New Caldari was almost impossible now. The Navy and Customs were screening all ships for traces of Enriched Uranium. A sideways move might be possible, but to where? They had left first as Jita and New Caldari were the primary targets. Targeting anywhere else would be a massive step down and would not achieve the same as hitting the Caldari homeworld and their primary trade station.

Another option was to wait in this hidden outpost. They had support here to defend themselves. How long could the State prevent uranium from entering the system of Jita? It was a primary starbase fuel. Eventually some brass would order a relaxation. Two days? Maybe three before the capsuleers would start making threats. Yes, they would wait and then join the massive rush of people trying to restock a depleted Jita. The capsuleers always profited from situations like this and would pounce on the price increase due to demand outstripping the supply. In a couple of days every privateer and trader would be trying to ship uranium into Jita to restock. They could just slip in with the traders.

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Back on the Katsu Maru the scan of the last system in the route was nearing completion.

"Bingo! Sir, they are here."

Sosa jumped from his chair and moved quickly to Aki's side. The scan result showed there were three sources of isogen-5 in system. They were one, so the other two must be the missing bombs.

"How long until you can pinpoint them?" the Captain asked.

"It's going to take a few hours. It's not like probing down a ship, they are easy in comparison. This stuff interacts with subspace so intricately we get false positives cropping up everywhere. If there are any wormholes in system, that'll make it even more difficult."

The Captain patted him on the shoulder and returned to his chair. He looked around the command centre. Everything was ready. He watched Yoshi demonstrate a slow-motion punch on Riku, probably showing how she took down the harbour pilot. Yoshi had been one of the original crew of the Katsu Maru. She had been a bridge officer on a Caldari State Navy Chimera class carrier. Rumour was the captain had the hots for her but she'd turned him down. This hadn't stopped his constant advances. Things had come to a head and she'd slapped him after he had grabbed her. Unfortunately a junior officer had entered the room at the moment of the slap. She'd been transferred to a sub-capital ship in what had been seen as a major demotion. One of the Navy Brass had informed her that she'd been blacklisted as the Captain of her old

ship had influential friends and that she'd never get the command she desperately craved. The Admiral had introduced her to Mordu and the rest was history. Sosa knew she'd never been married, like him she was a career soldier. The work they did was not conducive to a fulfilling love life. He knew he'd need to keep an eye on those two. Relationships between crew were prohibited. The last thing they needed in combat situations were those emotions clouding people's judgement. However, Sosa took a pragmatic view. He gave tacit approval to brief flings on board, but as soon as he suspected it was getting any more than that he would, and had on occasions, put a stop to it. The two crew were always offered a choice, reassignment in the Legion to positions where their involvement wouldn't affect their work, or to break it off. It was almost always exclusively the second choice that was selected. The men and women aboard his ship were warriors and serving on the Katsu Maru was pretty much the highest posting you could get in the Legion. Once one pair had opted for the transfer once. Three months later Sosa had married them himself and they now had three kids. He would meet them whenever he was in the Legion station in system of 5ZXX-K. It was said you could leave the ship, but you could never leave the Katsu Maru family.

Sosa stared into the viewscreen into deep space and re-focused his mind to the mission. Somewhere out there were a bunch of lunatics with terrifying weapons.

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Two hours later the hauler dropped out of warp alongside the ancient acceleration gate. The massive structure crackled with energy. Throughout New Eden there were areas of natural phenomena that meant locking on a warp-drive was not possible. Whilst a warp drive-powered ship could exit the

area, it couldn't enter under its own power. Many organisations from governments to pirates soon found these areas to be invaluable. An acceleration gate could be used to propel ships at equivalent warp-speed to a specific point in the dead-space zone, usually with an accuracy of 3000 meters from a 100,000km distance. This allowed gates to be locked-down to prevent unauthorised entry or to simply provide an easily defendable choke points at the gate itself or at the landing point. Many a ship had come to a grisly end after activating an acceleration gate only to find the landing zone was surrounded by a hostile fleet.

"Interface with gate complete. Ready to engage." stated the Helmsman.

"Sound the general alarm and activate the gate." replied the Captain.

The ship jolted as the gate's massive electromagnetic field activated and started to pull the ship along. Slowly at first, the acceleration soon increased and they were flung at warp speed down the length of the gate and into the dead-space pocket. The journey only took seconds by using the acceleration gate, but at sub-warp speeds they would have taken a week to reach the centre of the pocket.

As soon as they landed they were confronted by a small outpost built into an asteroid. Two cruisers patrolling the belt immediately started an intercept course.

"Sir, two Moa class cruisers on intercept." reported the tactical officer of the Katsu Maru.

On board the two EOM cruisers the captains looked at the interloper with interest. Why would a hauler enter a dead-space pocket like this? Miners occasionally came looking to find asteroids and were promptly chased away, but a lone industrial ship? They both assumed it was fitted with mining equipment and its captain was looking to make a hasty retreat. After a few seconds they realized it was not running.

"Command. A Matari industrial has entered the pocket. Moving to intercept. What are your orders, this is a non-comm ship." One of the captains transmitted to the outpost.

"Alpha 2. Orders stand. Engage and destroy."

The two cruisers changed their heading slightly in order to approach the industrial ship in a close orbit. Their blasters were fitted with military-grade antimatter charges and had a short effective range but dealt devastating damage. The commanders of the two cruisers did not even sound battle stations. A pair of Moa class cruisers versus an industrial couldn't even be classed as a fight. Simply a slaughter. Normally.

On the Katsu Maru the dim red battle lights in the command centre gave an eerie glow. The Captain was leaning forward in his chair watching the view screen and listening to the tac-officer count down the shrinking range to the lead cruiser.

When he announced 4000 meters he gave the command.

The Captain of the lead Moa, Alpha 2, had the industrial on the main screen and had zoomed in. The only armament on it was a small civilian Gatling gun.

That weapon could fire into his shields all day long and never beat the passive recharge. The fight would be short he was sure. A crew of heretics were about to meet their end and pay the ultimate price for their trespass into the realm of God.

"Target those steel plates welded to the side of the ship, I guess those are weak points around those repairs, that should give us the killing blow before Alpha 1 gets in range."

"Sir, I cannot get lock, those plates, they are... moving sir!"

The Captain snapped his vision back to the main screen. The weapons officer was right, the massive plates that looked like makeshift repairs had lowered, weld seams and all. Suddenly the hauler started to turn and the sun illuminated the dark holes which the plates had been covering seconds before. He was staring down the spinning barrels of military-grade twin autocannons. The screen suddenly brightened as the autocannon fired and spit a 20 foot jet of flame from its twin barrels. The 220mm Republic Fleet EMP shells tore into the cruisers shields. Alarms sounded as the onslaught of military-grade weapons raked their ship.

"Evasive manoeuvres!" screamed the captain.

"Sir I'm detecting a missile lock!" shouted the weapons officer.

The Captain looked back to the screen for the last time as he saw a flight of Scourge Heavy Assault Missiles launch from another hatch and pass through their now non-existent shields. The cruiser exploded into flames and broke apart.

Back on the bridge of the Katsu Maru a small cheer went up as the first cruiser went down. The second one, seeing the fate of his wing-mate veered away and took up a ranged orbit. After a few seconds a hatch opened on the cruiser and a flight of combat drones left the ship and headed towards the Katsu Maru like angry wasps.

"Aki, anything you can do about them?" the captain asked as the viewscreen zoomed in on the approaching combat drones.

"One second Captain. They are not capsuleer or military grade so I should be able to... come on you sons of bitc... there."

The five drones suddenly stopped their approach. It was a tense few seconds before they turned around and headed back to the ship. Back on the Moa cruiser confusion reigned.

"Tac-Officer. Why are my drones returning? They should be tearing that industrial ship to pieces not heading back towards us!" the captain yelled angrily.

"Sir, I don't know. The drones are confirming the attack order, but they look like they are on a return course. I've resent the attack order and the screen is confirming that they are on attack mode and not return mode. I don't..."

The Tac-Officer was cut short by the tactical lock alarm sounding on the bridge. The captain of the Moa looked at his read out and saw the hauler was not targeting them. It took him a crucial few seconds to work it out. The drones launched from the Moa opened fire on their own mother ship. The

Captain ordered to open fire on them but they were small targets. Within a minute only one drone had been destroyed but the Moa's shields were down. In the confusion they never saw the fatal missiles launched from the Katsu Maru.

"Good shooting. Now approach the outpost. We need to make sure they aren't going anywhere."

The engines of the Katsu Maru roared to life as it aligned to the small outpost. An alarm went off inside the command centre.

"Missile launch! Impact 5 seconds!"

The heavy missile appeared on the view screen. Its green painted warhead indicated it was a kinetic charge.

"Engage the shield hardeners and ready the booster. Tac, lock on to that battery and suggest to them they don't do that again."

The heavy missile impacted with the shields and the ship jarred.

"Shields at 88% sir. Our fish are in the black, three seconds..."

The missile battery mounted on a nearby asteroid exploded as the return missiles fired from the Kasu Maru fire struck. The Captain ordered an active scan of the asteroid field and they found two more powered-down batteries. They didn't take any more risks and took them out before the EOM could power them up and fire. Within another minute the Katsu Maru was stationary

outside the outpost. The Captain was ordering an assault team ready when the scanner officer reported a new contact.

Chapter 10

The command centre crew snapped their attention to the viewscreen which was now focused on the beacon where the acceleration gate deposited ships entering the deadspace pocket. There was a collective gasp as a massive battleship dropped out of warp. It's markings clearly identified it as a EOM.

"Evasive manoeuvres!" the Captain shouted. "Full power to the engines!"

Like most of the ship, the engines on the Katsu Maru didn't match what an external viewer would expect. The casing of the original engines had been retained and still appeared to be running to any observer in the engineering section. However it was all smoke and mirrors. The real engines were a deck below and were rated to drive a battlecruiser. This gave the Katsu Maru amazing sub-warp speeds given the mass difference between a normal battlecruiser and the hauler. Additional stabilizer jets discreetly placed over her hull also gave her amazing manoeuvrability. Normally they ran the engines at 40% power. Anything more would alert nearby ships that there was something strange about the Matari hauler.

"Get us in a tight 10km orbit." the Captain ordered "Keep the transversal velocity up. Activate the afterburner and let it run".

The immense guns of the EOM battleship fired, narrowly missing the ship. At the speed they were travelling the huge battleship class weapons were struggling to track the speedy hauler. The Captain thought of his next move. It would only be a matter of time before the battleship got a lucky hit. Their weapons didn't have the power to break the immense power of the battleship's shields.

"Captain, two frigates are leaving the outpost, we are out of range to stop them."

The Captain fully expected this. The battleship was a diversion to keep them away from the outpost to allow the two frigates to escape. Another massive volley from the battleship lit up the viewscreen.

"Frigates have warped. Looks to be deep safes in system. We'll need to probe them down if we get away from this!"

The Captain looked at the scanner. The frigates indeed had warped away to the edges of the solar system. Deep safes were hard to come by. In order to warp to a specific location you needed to be able to lock onto the gravimetric forces at that point. This is why most ships could only warp to planets, moons, stations, stargates and other such anomalies. To warp to an area of empty space required you had already visited that area to allow the navi-comm to scan the specific gravimetric readings and be able to lock on that position again. Commonly this was done mid-warp between two warpable objects. But there were ways of charting a point in deep space that was hard to scan down.

"Captain." Dr Yvette, who the captain had asked to join them on the bridge, voice sounded worried. "If one of those volleys hits us, it could set off the Isogen-5. If it does..."

"Yes Doctor, but to be honest of one of those volleys does hit us it won't matter as our shields are not enough to... wait... XO, you have the Conn!" and with that he bounded out of the chair.

"Ingvar, Aki, Riku with me! XO keep the speed up and keep in a tight orbit but have an alignment plotted ready to get out of here." he yelled as he sprinted to the exit.

The XO sat in the elevated chair.

"You heard the captain. Max AB, tight orbit and I'll punch-out the first person who tries to look up my dress!" she deadpanned.

The three men ran keeping up with the Captain. They arrived two minutes later at a shielded store area.

"You have a plan Cap?" Ingvar asked.

The Captain opened a hatch on one of the ship's heavily shielded cargo bays.

"Riku I need one of those beacons you used on the first mission. Aki I need you to turn one of our missiles into an auto-targeting Friend-or-Foe. Ingvar, you and me got some hauling to do, it's time to take out the trash."

Back on the bridge the situation was tense. The capacitor reserves were getting low from running the afterburner constantly. The drop in speed when it ran out would mean the battleship had a much higher chance of hitting them with its slow tracking guns. The Captain returned to the bridge with the others. The XO exited the Captain's chair and he smiled as he passed her.

"You know I'm thinking about changing the uniforms for the bridge crew."

"Fine." she replied. "Happy to wear this dress everyday as long as you do too."

The laugh around the command centre eased the tension.

"How's the cap?"

"12% sir. Another four cycles and we're dry."

"Acknowledged. Helm set a course for planet one. Tactical, Aki has a modified missile in the rear tube, get the rear launcher online and open the rear tube doors. Systems Conn, we have a trash crate ready to jettison, standby with that. Defence, on my command I want full power to the rear shield emitters, full hardeners and booster activating. Deactivate the thermal cut-offs, give it everything we've got."

The crew were poised as the Captain carefully watched the viewscreen. It flared as the battleship turrets fired again sending another volley dangerously close to their ship.

"Align now, full power to the engines. Dump the trash can. Shields cycle!"

In one motion the Katsu Maru broke from its orbit and aligned towards the planet nearest to the sun, spitting out a jettisoned canister which span away from the roaring engines as she did. The shields shimmered as everything was pumped to the rear emitter.

"Stand-by to launch the missile. Ready to warp."

Seconds ticked by that seemed like minutes. The Captain knew they needed range, but also knew that the battleship was cycling its guns. If they fired too

soon, they'd be dead, if they left it too long, they'd be dead. The Katsu Maru rocked as the battleship fired and with no transversal velocity, the heavy rounds hit home. The lights flickered in the command center and several people were showered with sparks as conduits blew out.

"Shields down sir! Armour damage detected. Hull breaches reported."

The Captain already knew the next hit would finish them. He checked the range to the trash can they flushed. It would be close.

"Fire the missile. Warp planet 1 now!"

A small single light missile launched from the hidden tube at the rear of the ship a fraction of a second before the ship slipped into warp. The Captain of the battleship watched the ship vanish and was ordering a pursuit course whilst watching the light missile corkscrew towards him. Such a weapon wouldn't even scratch the surface of his immense battleship's shields. Why would they waste a missile on such a pointless attack?

"Sir, that is a scourge light missile. I'm not detecting an active lock, I think it must be F-O-F." the tactical officer on the battleship reported. FOF stood for friend or foe. Most missiles in New Eden required a target to be locked, FOF missiles didn't. They had onboard systems that identified ships that were a threat and attacked without an active lock from the ship that launched them.

Suddenly the missile veered away having detected what it believed was a better target. The Captain watched it race towards the trash can the Katsu Maru had ejected seconds before warping away.

From the viewscreen on the bridge of the Katsu Maru, which was looking behind the ship, it appeared as if suddenly a new sun was born. The explosion was like nothing they had ever seen. Six of the uranium augmented isogen-5 bombs exploded as one as the light missile donated against the trash can in which they were located, obliterating everything within a million kilometres. Thankfully with the dead-space pocket being remote, the only things to be destroyed were the EOM outpost and the battleship which was still aligning.

"Six down, two to go." Riku quipped.

The Captain smiled and shook his head. He held up a finger whilst repositioning the viewscreen to deep space.

The two EOM leaders watched the explosion from their hidden positions at the edge of the solar system. The meddling hauler was no more and whilst they had lost six of their weapons they still had two left. There was hardly time for their brains to process the sudden thought and certainly no time for it to send a signal to the muscles in the face to change the beaming smiles to screams of rage.

The viewscreen on the Katsu Maru lit up again with two more smaller explosions. Riku looked at the Captain confused before the realisation dawned on him.

"The sub-space blast wave, it sets off other Isogen-5 in spacial proximity" he said.

The Captain nodded and rose from his chair. "And I think that is mission complete. Helm, set us a course for home."

"Yes sir. The congestion around the stargates for Jita and New Caldari is pretty bad sir with the gate lockdowns, advise we take the long route home."

"Agreed. Now once we are moving get the relief ops crew in here. Once each of you are relieved get some rest, you've earned it. Report to mess hall at 19 hundred hours." he said as he left, XO immediately taking the chair. "Oh and XO, no need to change." he laughed, ducking out of the door before she could throw anything at him.

"I already told you, only if you wear one too!" she shouted after him.

Epilogue

Riku stood chatting to Ingvar in the lower mess hall. Like most rooms in the ship, there was a dummy room and the real room. The dummy mess hall and kitchen high above them would make a starving man pass on a meal. The rooms were made to look disgusting. The real mess hall located in the lower hidden decks would not look out of place on a Flagship. The ship's steward had done an amazing job of catering a surprise party. The champagne was finest Gallente and Riku had thought for a second where it had come from, but soon realized nothing could surprise him on this ship any more. The food was exquisite and everyone was enjoying themselves.

Before coming down to the party Riku had received a message. It was from the Captain and had been sent to all senior staff. It contained a personal message from Muryia Mordu himself giving a special message of thanks for a job well done. The Client was pleased and a bonus would be paid to them all. Fallout from the engagement was limited. The shockwave from the main blast had knocked out some satellites at a couple of the planets in system and had even taken one of the stargates offline for an hour. A supernova in wormhole space had been the official story with the force of the blast erupting through one of the unstable wormholes that appeared all over New Eden. It appeared that everyone was concentrating so hard at the explosion in the centre of the system that nobody spotted the two smaller ones at the edge. No doubt the same cover story would be used if anyone had spotted them.

Riku felt a tap on his shoulder and turned to find Yoshi wearing a similar dress to the one she had on earlier.

"Wow you look amazing." he stated and she blushed slightly. It was nice to see her like that.

"I wonder if I could have this dance." she asked. Riku looked to the centre of the room to see several couples were already dancing. He took her hand and led her to the makeshift dance floor.

A week ago he was mining in a prison colony awaiting an unofficial execution, now he was dancing with an attractive woman after receiving a pay packet for a few days work that dwarfed what he received in an entire year when he was back in the Navy.

"Can I cut in?"

Riku turned to find the Captain stood there in a bright red mini-dress, his hairy legs on prominent display. The rest of the crew finally burst out laughing after holding it in as the Captain had entered indicating for everyone to stay silent as he sneaked up on the couple.

"Can you dance in those?" Riku nodded at the Captain large combat boots that certainly didn't go with the badly fitting dress he was wearing.

"They didn't have stilettos in my size." he shrugged.

Riku backed away from the XO to allow the Captain to cut in, but to his surprise the Captain grabbed Riku and started to dance with him. The crew was now crying with laughter. The high-tensions of the last few days being swept away.

"What the hell." thought Riku and swung his head back with a cheesy smile and let the Captain lead.

The End

Coming Soon™



Detective Devereux from the Federal Investigation Bureau is sent to investigate a crime on a remote outpost. A murder has been committed in a captain's quarters, a capsuleer's quarters. The detective arrives to find what appears to be an open and shut case with the prime suspect already in custody. But what is her story and why would a bio-chemist with a doctorate kill an exotic dancer in a capsuleer's quarters?