

Ruthless

An EVE Online Novella

By

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CHAPTER ONE
IN THE DEPTH OF SPACE



C8 – CHY VII: “Drenali Seven”

Fade Region

Kaurikou Junction

Counting the blue pills and exile packs for the third time, Vilamo reflected on how much he hated himself for what he was doing. He sealed each of the plastic bags and placed them inside his jacket pocket, pausing to take a long look at the Rist-11 on the counter. He despised guns, and had never handled one before getting involved in this ugly business. But it no longer mattered what his personal distastes were. Those needed to be set aside in order to survive. He tucked the weapon into his belt, making sure the heavy jacket concealed it. Opting for warmth instead of weapon accessibility, Vilamo buttoned the coat right up to his neck. As dangerous as this line of work was, he had yet to find himself in a situation that required him to even draw the sidearm. Besides that, it was -10 degrees Celsius outside. The odds of trouble were slim on a bitter day like this.

Walking outside of the decrepit tenement building that he called home, Vilamo passed by a homeless couple huddled over a small fire in the street. Their faces were expressionless, as if beyond despair and far past the point of feeling sorry for themselves. It was a reminder to Vilamo that the sale of the drugs in his jacket pocket was imperative. The rent was due in just a few hours, and currently there wasn't enough money in his account to cover it. He knew that if he missed that payment, Ishukone Watch agents would evict him immediately, and electronically seal the door to his own apartment before giving him or his son a chance to gather their belongings.

As always, the contact was anonymous, and the location was in one of the most dangerous sections of Kaurikou Junction. Vilamo had done this enough times already to know that the client was a corporate-type from the wealthy section, where all the city officials and Ishukone reps lived. They always seemed to pick the darkest parts of town to meet in, presumably to minimize the chances of being discovered by their own peers. Vilamo felt the bitter cold pierce through his layers of clothing as he walked past another group of shivering homeless people. No one had any business being outdoors on a day like this, unless you couldn't afford to be indoors. *Or, Vilamo thought, if you happen to have a nasty drug habit.*

One of the planet's 200 atmosphere scrubbers loomed beyond the city's skyline, a solitary mountain of metal surrounded by a vast expanse of snow and ice. *It took almost one hundred years to terraform this icicle,* Vilamo thought, *and look at all the good it's done.* Vilamo shook his head while crossing the street, avoiding a Snow Cat rumbling by from the opposite direction. Ishukone had bet that the vast deposits of heavy metals beneath Drenali Seven's thick shell of ice were the only source of such commodities in the Fade Region. When the planet's atmosphere had finally become breathable and industrial-scale mining operations took hold on the surface, Kaurikou Junction became the premier economic hub for Ishukone operations in the region.

Miners, entrepreneurs, bio-engineers, and construction specialists flocked to Kaurikou by the thousands, shuttling back and forth to various planet-side project sites and orbital stations. Ishukone's massive investment soon began yielding huge returns, and the business opportunities for new arrivals seemed limitless. But the bubble had burst much sooner than anyone anticipated, and the consequences were disastrous. Astrogeologists employed by Ishukone's competitors discovered equally abundant sources of heavy metals in adjacent constellations. The reality uncovered by science was that the entire region was, in ancient times, the site of a dense nebula where supernova explosions and the heavy elements they fused were commonplace. As more deposits were discovered, the price of the commodities plummeted, and the costs of maintaining operations on Kaurikou quickly outpaced revenues.

Ishukone responded by scaling everything back, stopping just short of abandoning the system completely. Now, the only ships that landed in Kaurikou were police vessels and the occasional supply ship. The Fade Region's immense distance from Empire space accelerated the economic collapse of the Drenali System. With the prospectors and venture capitalists gone, all planet-side projects were placed

on standby or cancelled outright. Soon afterwards, people could no longer afford to hire transports to get them off the planet, let alone out of the system.

As was typical with Caldari society, Ishukone's decisions for Drenali Seven were based purely on numbers, not conscience. The corporate philosophy was applied equally to both the pursuit of risk, and the retreat from it. Thus, Ishukone offered neither aid nor comfort to the contractors affected by the radical turn of events. The risk of failure while pursuing success was an accepted reality of Caldari culture, and so Ishukone was neither obliged nor compelled to adhere with the welfare principles of Empire space.

Vilamo Gariushi, an expert geologist and engineer by background, was one of the hundreds of thousands of people who were now faced with a struggle for existence. His story was no more or less tragic than all of the others living in Kaurikou Junction. When asked by an Ishukone senior officer for an estimate regarding an excavation project with an impossible deadline, Vilamo had made the mistake of responding with an honest answer. An executive mandate so obtuse could only have come from someone who knew very little about the realities of mining through several kilometers of ice. But the officer could not be bothered with such mundane "academic" concerns, and quickly replaced Vilamo with someone who would tell him exactly what he wanted to hear.

Reputation is everything in Caldari society, and the major corporations that exist within its rigid cultural framework have zero tolerance for pessimism in the workplace. Vilamo now had an official reputation as someone who couldn't think large enough to suit corporate ambitions, and was effectively ostracized from Ishukone and every other corporation operating in the Drenali system. His great gamble for success had failed miserably and became his complete undoing, culminating with the tragic death of his wife in an industrial accident and the bitter estrangement of his daughter as a result. All that remained of the family that he brought to Kaurikou Junction was his son Otro, who looked to his father to help him make sense of the cruel world around them ever since.

Walking around the corner of a building, an icy breeze made Vilamo wince. *Otro still has a chance*, he thought, tilting his head downwards as he walked into the wind. His son was now 16 years old, intellectually gifted and ambitious. Otro aspired to join the Caldari Navy, and had a fighting chance of being accepted into the School of Applied Science. The tuition was enormous, but Vilamo always allayed Otro's concerns and encouraged him to pursue whatever he desired. Failing his son was not an option. Vilamo was prepared to do whatever was necessary to provide Otro with everything he needed

to succeed. That meant taking extra care to ensure that Otro avoided making the mistakes that he did, the greatest of which was placing his complete faith in the Caldari State.

Someday I'll tell him, when he's old enough to understand, Vilamo thought as he turned left towards an enclosed courtyard. He couldn't bear the thought of disappointing his son the way he had disappointed his wife and daughter. The irony was that Vilamo now depended on that which the Caldari State wanted him to hate—the Guristas Cartel—for his salvation. It was the Guristas who took him in as a dealer and saw his academic credentials as an asset, using Vilamo as a contact for wealthier clients because of his refined manners and intellect. The Guristas hated the Caldari State for all the same reasons that Vilamo now did, and he found the shared resentment comforting. But he could not, *would* not, tell his son that he planned to finance the boy's dream of becoming a starship captain through the sale of illegal drugs. Vilamo's handler, a Guristas member known only as "Gavriel", swore very sincerely to uphold that request. It still amazed him that these men—these "criminals"—had become the only people in his life that he could trust. *Are we really villains,* Vilamo thought as he jumped up and down to stay warm, *or just honorable men who respect each other's right to exist?*

The hovercar passed by twice, as it always did, before stopping to let out a small passenger covered head to toe in winter clothing. A much larger figure emerged from the other door and stood by the car, keeping Vilamo in a clear line of sight. A light snow started to fall, with the occasional gust kicking up powder that stung Vilamo's face. The shorter figure walked deliberately forward and stopped about five meters in front of him, shifting weight from foot to foot.

"Blue stars...red...stars..." The client was female, and she was trying to remember the phrase that Gavriel had instructed her to speak. Vilamo could tell from her accent that she was corporate, that she was new at this, and that she was already drugged out of her mind.

"I think you mean 'Blue stars burn the hottest, and red stars grow the largest,'" said Vilamo. "Then I'm supposed to say 'The blue will die young, but the red have grown old.'" He focused his eyes on her, but kept her companion in his peripheral vision.

"Yeah! B-l-l-l-lue stars, they're my fa-a-a-vorite," she answered, looking straight up and trying to catch snowflakes with her tongue. Vilamo wanted to end this nonsense as quickly as possible.

“Who’s your friend over there?” he asked.

“That’s C-r-r-o-w-la, my m-m-b-o-d-yguard,” she slurred. “He likes the b-l-l-l-u-e stars, too.” She took one step forward. The bodyguard did the same.

“Do you know why you’re here?” Vilamo asked, squinting through another icy gust of wind.

She shifted dreamily back and forth, with a vacant smile on her face. “You...have a-a-a-all the stars!” swinging her arms out for expression.

“Yes, thirty blue pills and six exile packs, as ordered.” Raising one hand over his head to get the attention of the bodyguard, Vilamo slowly reached with the other hand inside his jacket and gently pulled out the plastic bag. The bodyguard had his own coat unbuttoned now.

The client’s eyes opened wide when she saw the “stars”. “Yum! Gimme, gimme, gimme!” she clumsily lunged forward for them, catching her balance just in time as Vilamo stepped backwards.

“Ah, ah, ah, you have to pay for these,” Vilamo said. His heartbeat accelerated as another hovercar drove past the courtyard, but then calmed down after it continued by without stopping.

“I-s-s-s-k...I’ll give you lots o’ i-s-s-k for the stars...” she reached into her coat pocket. Vilamo’s eyes involuntarily widened. She caught his expression and pulled the wallet out quickly, pointing it at him as if it were a gun. Vilamo’s face went pale and his heart stopped for a moment.

“Bang bang!” she exclaimed, then began laughing. Vilamo was not amused.

“That’s 25,000 isk,” he said through clenched teeth. “If you’ll please wire the funds.” Following the same routine as before with the bodyguard, Vilamo reached into his jacket for his wallet. The device was set to ‘proximity’ and could already detect the client’s wallet online.

“Two-o-o....F-i-v-e...Z-e-e-e-r-o...” she fumbled with the tiny keypad . Vilamo was about to lose his patience, but regained his composure as the wallet display confirmed receipt of payment to the Guristas corporate account, followed by an automatic transfer of 2,500 isk to his own personal account. He smiled. The rent would be paid on time, and the next sale would complete the first tuition installment for the School. Vilamo reached out with the package, and she seized it.

“M-m-m-mine!” she said, clasping it to her chest and tearing open the plastic.

“It certainly is now,” he answered, pocketing the wallet. “Good day.” And with that comment, he walked past her towards the street, away from the courtyard.

“Hey mister!” she called after him. Vilamo was reluctant to acknowledge her, but decided to anyway. It was snowing harder now, and the wind was making it more difficult to see.

“Yes?”

“What kind of stars do y-o-o-u like?” An empty exile pack fell from her hand into the snow. *Damn*, he thought. *That’s an awful big hit for a girl her size.* The bodyguard started walking briskly towards her.

“What kind of stars do I like?” he repeated again.

“Yeah! What kind of s-t-a-a-r-z-z...” Her head was tilted downward, but she was looking up at him with a strange smile on her face. One hand was in the same coat pocket she had drawn her wallet from.

Vilamo answered without thinking, just wanting to go home. The bodyguard suddenly broke into an all-out sprint.

“Red,” he said.

“Wrong answer!” she exclaimed, raising her hand suddenly. Vilamo thought she had pulled her wallet out again, but something didn’t look quite right. The bodyguard shouted a warning just as Vilamo saw a bright flash and heard a sharp *crack*. He never felt the 10-millimeter slug slam into his chest and explode through his back. Instead, he thought it was strange how the girl suddenly dropped from his view, and how warm it had just become despite the snow that was now falling directly onto his face.. In his final moment, he remembered how much he missed his wife and thought of her beautiful smile, and focused on that gentle image as the light outside faded to blackness.

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“*What the fuck just happened?*” screamed Gavriel, as he watched the snow and ice around Vilamo Gariushi’s corpse turn crimson.

“Gavriel, what’s your status,” came a terse response through the earpiece. Unzooming the scope for a wider view, he saw the bodyguard quickly disarm the woman and begin hurrying her towards the idling hovercar. He trained the crosshairs on the her, trying very hard not to shake.

“Nest, this is Gavriel, flash morgue, repeat, flash morgue, permission to return fire,” he responded. “Flash morgue” told the dispatcher that one of their own was just fired upon and was presumed dead. The bodyguard had lifted the woman up onto his shoulder and was now running towards the car, and had maybe 15 meters of open courtyard to cross before reaching it. Gavriel moved the crosshairs to the vehicle’s rear, where the fuel cells were.

A different voice spoke through the earpiece. “The woman fired the shot?” The Nest was looking at the exact same view that Gavriel was through the riflescope.

“Affirmative, Nest,” he breathed, wishing so badly to hear the words that would allow him to squeeze the trigger just a little bit harder.

“Permission denied, Gavriel. Stand down.”

He couldn’t believe what he had just heard. “Say again?” The bodyguard practically threw the girl into the back of the car and slammed the door shut.

“She walks, Gavriel. Stand down.” He kept the crosshairs trained on the car until the view was obscured by a building. Then, he lost his temper.

“God *damn*it, Nest! She just blew him away and you’re going to let her walk?”

A third voice now came through the earpiece, and it was one that he knew well. “The order stands. Pack up your gear and report back to base. We have another assignment for you, and your other pushers will be covered by different handlers.”

Gavriel was incredulous. “Bane, I don’t understand.”

“I know about Vilamo’s son, ” the voice said. Some people were starting to gather around the bloody corpse. In just a few more moments, Ishukone Watch officers would arrive at the scene, and they would know that a handler was nearby. He quickly began to dismantle the rifle.

Bane’s voice continued. “We’re going to make this right, Gavriel. You have to trust me.”

He took one last look at Vilamo Gariushi’s corpse before leaving the apartment. *That dead man lying in the snow down there trusted me.*

Trust had always been a risky venture in Fade.

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As tumultuous as their relationship was at times, Otro Gariushi viewed his father as the rock upon which his own comprehension of the world was built.. Otro had already seen plenty of hardship for his young years, so much so that he considered himself well conditioned for the worst possible outcome of any situation. His father had taught him to be resilient in the face of adversity, which was the key to survival under the harshest of circumstances. As the vague memories of his mother and sister melted away over the years, the two gradually formed a strong bond that included a reliance on each other for predictability.. Each knew the other’s schedules and routines as well as his own. Otro had his prep classes to attend, and his father had his erratic work schedule with Ishukone. Any kind of deviation from plans by either of them was noted well in advance, which Otro understood as necessary because of the dangers that lurked in the part of Kaurikou Junction they lived in.

So when two men that Otro had never seen before appeared at the door of their apartment at the precise time when he expected his father to return home, the darkest cloud that he had ever known descended upon him. Trying his best not to be distracted by the fear and dread that was now on the verge of engulfing him, Otro silently made his way to where his father kept a gun for home defense.

The door chime buzzed a second time. “Otro, I know you are there,” the taller, older looking one said. Keeping his eyes on the view screen in the kitchen, he fumbled with the ammunition clip of the weapon before finally slamming it into place. “We mean you no harm, Otro. But I’m afraid that we have bad news, and we don’t have very much time to discuss it.”

Otro didn't say a word, but crouched behind the kitchen counter, keeping the gun pointed straight at the door. He watched the two men nod to each other, and then the shorter one pulled a small card from his coat and inserted it into the keypad lock. To Otro's brief amazement, the taller one plugged a small device into a socket implanted at the base of his skull.

"Otro, you have to trust me," said the taller one, whose deep, raspy voice continued to resonate throughout the apartment as before, only now his lips were not moving. Otro realized that the visitor was a starship captain.

"What I have to tell you would best be told face to face," the pilot said. The shorter man held a device to the door, and then nodded again to the taller one. "Man to man, as your father *would have* wanted." Tears began to flood down Otro's face. The realization of what the stranger was about to say was just too overwhelming, and he struggled to keep the gun steady.

"It is as you fear, Otro. Your father was murdered today, and we came here to protect you from his killers."

Otro turned away from the entrance and sat with his back against counter, sobbing heavily.. He heard the door to the apartment slide open, but he did not care. The shorter man entered first, very cautiously, with his weapon drawn and pointed at the counter behind which Otro sat grieving. The elder pilot followed, and spoke again using his voice.

"I know the pain well, and the anger that will soon follow it. But now, in this very instant, you have a decision to make. You can either come with us, and we will give you a new life and a chance to continue pursuing your dreams, or you can take your chances here, alone."

Otro looked through his tears at the gun still in his hand. There was really only one thing he wanted to know. "How...how do I know it wasn't you?" he stammered.

"I can show you proof, but now is not the time. You can either trust me, or I can leave. I know this is not fair to you, but fairness is not something that you or your father have been accustomed to. You now have exactly 30 seconds to make up your mind, after which you're on your own."

Otro turned the gun around and placed the barrel against his own forehead. It seemed a sensible choice, given the hopelessness of his life. He placed his thumb on the front of the trigger and began to push ever so slightly.

“When I was expelled from the Caldari Navy, I thought about doing that,” the elder man said. Otro’s thumb froze where it was. “Had I made that choice, I would have denied myself the privilege of being able to lead a meaningful life by helping good men like your father, and now, yourself as well.”

Otro’s actions were involuntary, and his survival instincts took control. With a sudden gasp, he released his thumb and dropped the gun onto his lap.

“Five more seconds,” the elder said.

Otro tossed the gun away from him, along the tiled floor and beyond the counter’s edge. As he watched it slide, a boot came down and stopped its momentum. Looking up, he saw the shorter man lowering a weapon of his own. His expression betrayed a kind of resigned sorrow that Otro’s young instincts sensed was genuine. Then the stranger reached out towards Otro with his hand.

“Get up,” he said.

Otro reached out, and with a solid grip and a strong jolt was hoisted to his feet.

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CHAPTER TWO

HIDDEN MEMENTOS

10 years later

Mara System

Lonetrek Region

Ishukone Watch Vessel IWV-35G15 “Trevani”

Ever so gently, she pushed aside the silk sheets and lifted her toned legs over the side of the bed. Her client was snoring loudly, and did not stir as she quietly slipped a loose-fitting robe over her shoulders and tied it just below the navel. Careful not to knock over the empty spirits bottle on the desk, she sat down at the console and placed her thumb on the ID pad. She smiled as the screen displayed the balance information for both her own personal and corporate account. Recent deposits from the other madams under her employ were apparent, and the man still snoring on the bed had dutifully transferred the correct fee for the services rendered last evening.

She had wondered for her entire life what it would be like to possess such wealth and financial independence. *Ironic—but hardly surprising*, she thought to herself, *that it was gained by practicing the oldest profession known to mankind*. “Mankind” indeed. It was such a ridiculous word, and doubly insulting that it was used to describe humankind inclusively. Men were so predictable, so *needy*, and so pathetically vulnerable to exploitation. She looked down at her breasts, still firm and irresistible after all these years. So many secrets were betrayed to her as men rested upon them. The



stuff of treason, greed, ambition and guilt, all told to her either directly or otherwise as they used her to fulfill a need that all their power failed to satisfy.

The man on the bed mumbled something in his sleep that she had heard elsewhere before. “Raven”, he said, turning onto his side and resuming snoring. This one was an Ishukone VIP, part of their secretive Research and Development Division. *Scientists are so easy*, she thought, browsing through the directory that he had carelessly left open from the night before, when he was seduced as he worked. *Ah, a project named “Raven”*. It was a presentation of some sort, and her photographic memory began absorbing the data scrolling past her blue eyes. Phrases she did not understand, such as “long range standoff and suppression platform” and “hyper advanced gravimetric tracking and guidance systems”, she would commit to memory for research later on. Another abrupt snort from the scientist distracted her concentration, prompting her to carefully shut down the console. She was at the capacity of what she could accurately remember, and there was no reason to push her luck.

Adjusting the robe so that a healthy portion of her breasts were exposed, she exited the scientist’s cabin and walked into the hallway. The galley would be an ideal place to record her thoughts to datapad over a drink, and perhaps a long-limbed roe. Even bad sex made her hungry, and besides, the bill was on the scientist’s expense account. As she walked barefoot down the hall, she paused along a stretch of large windows to admire the view of space, ignoring a pair of jaw-dropped crewmembers gawking at her. Setting her gaze on a star-studded nebula outside, she suddenly felt very proud of what she had accomplished with her life. The madams who reported to her all had three things in common: Stunning natural beauty, undeniable sensuality, a sharp memory, and origins in repressive poverty. Today, each of them was wealthier than they ever thought possible, and had accomplished this solely by targeting men’s egos and infiltrating their minds. They understood that since the beginning of time, men too easily mistook offers of flesh for admiration, and intimacy for trust. She smiled broadly again, running her finger along the bright edges of the nebula. *Appease a man’s ego*, she thought, *and his soul belongs to you*.

Flashing a dismissive “caught you looking” glance at the crewmembers, she resumed her stroll towards the galley. Suddenly, the hallway was illuminated with a bright, bluish light, and she was violently knocked off her feet. Landing hard on the arm that she extended to break her backward fall, she could feel the bones in her wrist snap from the impact. Just as she opened her mouth to scream in pain, a simultaneous blinding flash and deafening noise sent her cowering to the floor in agony. She was stunned, and temporarily unable to see clearly or hear. Eyes wide with fear and confusion, and for the

time being not feeling the scorching pain in her forearm, she felt her way along the floor towards a bulkhead wall and tried to get back to her feet. She could feel a pair of hands assist her, and then spin her around. Her vision was slowly coming back, albeit with floating green spots partially obscuring her sight, and she could barely make out the panicked face of one of the crewmembers she noticed before. He was shouting something, and gradually his voice became audible enough to hear what he was trying to tell her.

“...is under attack! Do you understand? You have to get to the cargo area as fast as you can! Move!” She became vaguely aware of other people rushing past her down the hallway, which was now tinted a hazy red from the emergency lighting and smoke. The crewman noticed the bewildered look on her face and shouted at her to follow the rest of the crowd down the hall. The ringing in her ears was disorienting, but she suddenly understood the extreme danger that she was in and staggered past him.

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Otro willed the comm channel with the crippled ship open again just as the shockwave from the last explosion dissipated.

“Ishukone Watch vessel, this is your final warning. You have exactly 10 seconds to jettison your cargo. If you fail to comply, I’m going to kill you and every other living thing on that ship.”

“If it’s money that you want, we can negotiate this,” replied the Ishukone captain. Otro could hear the trembling in his voice. “I can offer—“

“The only thing that you can offer me that I don’t already have is your cargo,” Otro answered, taking the time to have his ship’s missile launchers reloaded. “And the only chance that you have to survive is by jettisoning it.”

“H-H-How do I know that you’ll keep your—“

“You don’t. Ten seconds.” Otro saw Gavriel’s Scorpion-class battleship move closer to the crippled Ishukone ship, still maintaining its onslaught of electronic and propulsion jamming systems.

“50 million,” cried the desperate Ishukone captain. “Or even 100 million! Please!”

“Five seconds,” said Otro.

“Wait! Wait! Alright, here, standby for jettison...”

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The ringing in her ears had subsided just enough so that she could hear intermittent whimpering and sobs from the other terrified passengers. They had been standing within the pressurized confines of a cargo container for a few moments now, and there was just enough lightning inside to make out the contour of its sloped walls. With her left arm shattered and in grievous pain, she was completely incapable of keeping her robe tied. The scientist that she had slept with earlier was standing by the container entrance, wearing nothing but his boxer shorts.

“You see, Mila?” he shouted, catching her confused glare. He appeared crazed, and was shaking uncontrollably. “It’s just a matter of how quickly you want to die!”

“What do you mean?” Other passengers started looking at him.

“You can either die a slow death as their prisoner,” he said, gesturing towards the back of the container. “Or you can die instantly when they destroy the ship!” He backed through the entrance so that he was on the ship’s side of the door.

“What the hell are you talking about?” she demanded, taking a painful step towards the entrance. “Who’s ‘they?’”

“Guristas pirates!” he answered. Amber-colored warning lights began flashing around the door. “You see, I knew there was a good chance this would happen! They’ve been hitting this constellation like crazy lately! Why do you think I spent practically everything I had to hire you for one night?” he asked, just as the door began to close. “Ishukone sent me on a death mission, and I didn’t want to die a virgin!”

“Pirates?” she nearly yelled as the door sealed. Mila had experienced such acute dread just one other time in her life. The other passengers began to panic, and some even started banging on the sealed

container entrance. An ominously loud, metallic-mechanical noise reverberated throughout the container. Momentary weightlessness followed by an abrupt switchover to artificial gravity left most of the passengers on their backsides. Some of them became violently sick, throwing up all over themselves. Mila found herself unable to stop staring at the single porthole in the container. The image of the ship she was just aboard rotated diagonally across the window twice.

It would not appear a third time.

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“That was for making me repeat myself,” said Otro, steering his ship towards the debris field where the Ishukone captain’s pod was a moment earlier. There would be a corpse floating in its midst that he wanted to keep as a trophy. “Gavriel, are our guests on board?”

“Affirmative,” came the reply.

“Then I’ll see you at Forward-Six.”

“Roger that. Out.”

~

Three hours later

Forward-Six

Guristas Deep Space Observation Platform

Tribute Region

Mila vaguely became aware of the fact that she was no longer unconscious. She remembered the flash and cacophony of metallic pings and thuds as the cargo container was peppered with debris from the ship’s explosion. She could remember the panic, the pain in her arm, and the warning that someone had shouted to cover their nose and mouth, and of seeing the wisps of gas enter the container through the vents. The confusing part, she realized, was that although her eyes were open, she could not see.

Most people count on their eyes to provide their primary sense, and Mila was no exception. The human mind instinctively runs through a checklist of available senses whenever primary sensory input is denied. For Mila, hearing was next on that list, but she could hear nothing. The same results were produced again with her smelling, and then with touch: Nothing. It was as if she had been completely detached from herself. The excruciating pain that she *should* have felt in her arm was no longer there. In fact, she could not even feel her arms, or any of her other extremities.

She could, however, taste the saliva in her mouth. And, she could sense—barely—that she was swallowing it, and that she was also somehow able to breathe. But it was just enough sensory information to make her realize two things: That she was still alive, and that she was completely helpless.

“State your name,” a voice said, as if it came from directly inside her mind. The sound terrified her, and her brain reflexively sent instructions to limbs that were either no longer there, or had become unresponsive to her commands.

“Where am I?” she responded. She could feel her mouth moving, but couldn’t hear her own words.

“Far away from anyone that can help you,” came the response. It was a machine’s voice. “It is just you and I, isolated here in our own universe, completely detached from anyone or anything that you’ve ever known.”

“Who are you?” she thought, stricken with panic.

“Your only companion, your only friend, and your only chance of ever returning to the reality you call home,” came the response. “Now, kindly tell me your name.”

“Mila Strevanos,” she answered.

“You are the owner and CEO of Satelles Enterprises?”

“Yes,” she answered. There was a long period of silence. “Hello?” she asked.

“Madam Strevanos, we see that you incorporated Satelles and properly registered with the House of Records approximately eight years ago. While officially designated as an escort service for corporate executives, Satelles is actually a prostitution ring that you and several other madams have presided over for years. Although acting in an executive capacity, we see that you often apply your own physical talents—and those of your other madams— whenever your clientele possess information that could potentially be sold to someone else. When the accumulated wealth of Satelles passed the requisite amount, you promptly filed your corporation with Modern Finances under the name that you currently claim. Yet we can find no retina scan, DNA record, or fingerprint of a ‘Mila Strevanos’ registering anywhere in the universe before you originally registered with the House of Records.”

Mila dreaded where this was going. The voice continued, but in a tone that was a decibel or two higher than before.

“You are not the first one we have seen with a forged identity, Madam Strevanos. Please state your real name.”

“You have no right to do this to people,” she said, suddenly overwhelmed with anger. “What difference does it make what my real name is?”

Suddenly there were other voices present. It started as whispers, gradually becoming the audible buzz of a room full of people speaking in a language she did not understand. The voices surrounded her, and occasional shouts and screams hurled from random directions made her heart stop. It became a rising crescendo of laughter, of the most sinister sounding voices she had ever heard, taunting and insulting her. She could not escape them, and she could do nothing to make them stop. She screamed as loud as she could, and then heard the silence once again.

“You can either cooperate,” the mechanical voice resumed. “Or I can leave you with them. They are eager to torment you, Madam Strevanos, and will do so for eternity if I allow it. Now, for the third time, please tell me your real name.”

“Gariushi,” she sobbed, completely desperate to be dead now. “Mila Auvuane Gariushi.”

There was silence again, suddenly followed by raging insults of the evil ones. “No!” Mila screamed. “Mila Auvuane Gariushi! That’s my real name, I swear!”

More silence followed. Mila could feel herself sobbing harder than she ever had before.

“What...” the mechanical voice started, then stopped. “State your home world.”

“Isinokka Eight, then Drenali Seven when I was 15 years old.” Again, there was a long pause, and she feared the voices would return. “Go to hell, whoever you are!” she screamed hysterically. “You sadistic, sick bastard!” She was so upset that she was having difficulty breathing.

“Kaurikou Junction...?”

“Yes!”

Another pause followed. “Your father was Vilamo Gariushi...” The voice stopped, and suddenly Mila could feel her arms and legs again. She realized that she was submerged in some kind of viscous liquid, and that a mask had been placed over her face. Her left forearm was encased in a nanosplint, and could feel dozens of tubes and wires extruding from a collar that encircled her neck and covered the base of her skull.

Still unable to see, Mila could feel herself being extracted from the liquid, and felt slight pain along her spine as the collar was removed. Too weak to put up any kind of resistance, she could feel a pair of strong hands carefully lifting and placing her limp body onto a bed and then covering her with a blanket. The same hands gently touched the sides of her neck and head as if probing for something, and then the mask was lifted off. A clean-cut man she had never seen before was standing over her with an astonished look on his face.

“What do you want from me?” Mila breathed, exhausted from the entire ordeal and still resigned to whatever fate awaited her. The man took a moment before answering.

“There’s someone I’d like for you to meet,” he said. Another man with much harsher, uglier features appeared. His head was shaved, and his jaw looked like it had been broken once but never allowed to heal correctly. A skull and crossbones tattoo was on his right cheek, and she could see several scars crisscross his face. There was something familiar about him that she couldn’t place. He looked confused, perhaps even somewhat frightened.

She was not prepared for what the other man said next.

“Mila, this is your younger brother, Otro.”

Mila was overwhelmed with a rush of recognition that thrust distant memories to the forefront of her consciousness with remarkable clarity. She superimposed the last image she had of her younger brother, then just five years old when she left, with the hideous man standing above her. As much as parts of her both embraced and rejected this moment, there was no question that this was the little boy she left behind when she ran away more than 20 years ago. It was just too much information to absorb.

The last thing Mila saw before blacking out again was her brother look away and say something urgent to the other man, who suddenly appeared frantic.

~

Malkalen V – Moon 1

Lonetrek Region

Ishukone Corporate Headquarters

Ralirashi tried his best to appear impressed as the CEO of Ishukone howled in delight at the flaming wreckage of a defeated Splinterz combatant.

“Ha! Another million isk in the bank!” the man said, slapping Ralirashi on the back. “You’d be a fool to bet against me. Right, Rali?” The entourage of rented women from Satelles Enterprises giggled around him.

“A fool indeed, sir,” he answered, wishing he could return the slap with a steel club. “You sure know how to pick winners.” *I’d actually be extremely happy if you could just drop dead*, he thought.

“Hey, and he’s observant also!” he answered, draining the rest of his cocktail in a single gulp. The women laughed. “Guess I don’t pay you the big bucks for nothing,” he said, handing Rali the empty glass. “Now go take care of that for me, will you? They’re starting the next round and I have another million to make, right ladies?” On cue, the women—all of them drop dead gorgeous and acting as if

they were completely devoid of any brains—cheered in agreement, following him to the holovid link where his bookie was waiting on the other line.

Rali looked down at the empty glass in one hand, and the disk with the Ishukone financials that he'd spent more than 24 hours preparing in the other. *Why did I even bother*, he asked himself. The Board meeting was in just two days. As the Chief Financial Officer of Ishukone, it was his job to know the numbers cold and prepare the CEO for that meeting, and to strategize how best to present the firm's financial state to the Board. If the news was anything less than perfect, then they would demand to know exactly what was being done to fix it. There had been a selloff in Ishukone stock recently due to rumors that the pace of its double-digit earnings growth was slowing down. This was completely unacceptable to the Board. For the last two meetings, Les had assured the Board members that "his CFO was on top of things and getting earnings growth back on track". *And yet he hasn't followed any of my advice, not even once*. Rali knew that his boss—Les Akkilen, CEO of Ishukone Corporation—would pin the blame squarely on him this time around and suggest a replacement.

Rali watched the Splinterz robots take their starting positions through the holoscreen in Les's luxury suite. *So foolish of me to think he'd actually called me up here to talk about business*. The Akkilen Family had more money than was imaginable, and their long history of generosity to the Caldari State had even earned them the privilege of having an Empire solar system officially named after the family. Les's appointment as the CEO of Ishukone was purely political, and clearly the result of having a wealthy family with connections in all the right places. Rali silently fumed. *Les Akkilen is nothing more than a stupid, spoiled-rotten kid who never had to work for anything in his life, and doesn't know a goddamn thing about running a corporation*.

Les also had a son who was now old enough to claim his own place within the elite corporate class of Caldari society. That was reason enough for Rali to believe that he was being set up to fail, and that failure in such a visible position at Ishukone would destroy his own reputation and leave him a ruined disgrace. Les Akkilen would find a way to distance himself from the failure and hail his own son as the fix that the corporation needed to correct its own image, which was Board's primary concern.

The robot gladiators opened up on each other in a gruesome display of raw firepower and violence. Les hooted in excitement for the combatant that he'd bet on while the women rubbed him and cheered. *That disgusting picture right there pretty much sums it up*, thought Rali. The widely held view of Ishukone in recent years was plainly that if not for starship pod technology—which the Jovians had

invented and for some reason granted to Ishukone many years earlier—then the corporation would be practically non-existent. In Rali’s view, the critics were right. Despite its uncontested wealth, Ishukone had failed to establish a flagship product that uniquely established their industrial might within the Caldari State. Pod sales were the only viable source of income for the corporation, albeit an enormous one. They were known among competitors as the “Pod Company”, nothing more than the lucky beneficiary of technology that civilization could no longer live without. The rest of Ishukone, with the hundreds of thousands of employees on its payroll, was widely viewed as dead weight that participated in the corporation’s success without actually contributing anything to it.

While Les threw his wild parties and shrugged off his colossal blunders, which included the multi-trillion isk uranium debacle in Fade, Rali was meeting with some of the brightest people he could find within Ishukone. If it was a flagship product that Ishukone lacked, then he would literally create the grandest flagship of them all: A space superiority battleship capable of projecting power the likes of which no one had ever seen before. Lai Dai had its Scorpion, long the backbone of the Caldari Navy and symbol of Caldari might in space. Ishukone would have to do better than them to establish real credibility. A secret project was born deep in the R&D department of Ishukone, unknown even to Les and the other executive crony “Yes-men” that he surrounded himself with. Its codename: “Raven”.

Out of ammunition, the robots that survived the initial barrage of fire attacked each other with giant buzz saws, axes, and maces. The gory scene played itself out in Les’s cavernous office as it was broadcast live from the arena on Malkalen Five. Rali watched, and allowed himself a smile. *Wait until I tell them that we not only have a prototype Raven built, but that it passed every one of its space trials already.* The look on Les’s face would be priceless. He’d have to acknowledge his CFO’s superior work to the Board in person just to save face, *and then I’ll finally get the respect I deserve*, thought Rali. He was expecting to hear from a Navy representative at any time. If he was lucky, the presentation that his team was scheduled to pitch later today would go so well that the Navy would award Ishukone with a nice sized order, perhaps for a few dozen ships and a blueprint or two.

Another robot fell as its torso was cleaved by an axe and ripped apart by the ensuing explosion. It was down to two gladiators now, and as they tore into each other, Les and his women started screaming for their bet to win. Rali’s messenger buzzed suddenly. *At last*, he thought, *the news I’ve been waiting my whole life for.* He set the disk down to pull the messenger out of his pocket. His face went pale when he read the device’s tiny screen:

** EYES ONLY **

IWV-35G15 TREVANI FAILED TO REPORT CHECKPOINT AT NAV THETA-FIVE. RECON TEAM DISPATCHED TO SITE REPORTS DEBRIS FIELD WITH TREVANI MARKINGS AND SIGNS OF AN AMBUSH. NO SURVIVORS WERE FOUND. CREW AND CARGO ARE MISSING AND PRESUMED LOST. ELINT REPORTS TRACE GURISTAS COMMS TRAFFIC IN AREA. WILL UPDATE AS MORE DATA BECOMES AVAILABLE.

IWCMD

“No!” Rali screamed, just as the victorious robot delivered the coup-de-grace. Les and the women celebrated lustily.

“I win again!” shouted Les. “Ha! Who’s better than me?” he asked his audience of hired admirers. As they all said “No one, Les” in unison, the empty cocktail glass in Rali’s hand shattered. Several drops of blood fell to the floor.

Les started laughing. “Bet against me again, eh Rali? Observant maybe, but definitely not too bright! Ha!” More uproarious laughter followed from the drunken crowd.

Rali was shaking, barely aware of the glass shards puncturing his hand. “Ex...If you’ll please excuse me,” he said, turning towards the door.

“Don’t worry Rali, I’ll have the Watch keep the loansharks away!” Rali turned for just a moment to seethe at the man he despised. All of the women, save for one, were laughing at him. When she caught Rali’s glance, she quickly began laughing along with the others. Thinking nothing of it, he left the room consumed with hatred, looking for something to stop the bleeding in his hand.

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CHAPTER THREE

DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOU ARE?



Forward-Six

Tribute Region

Deck 30, North Tower

The three of them sat quietly in the darkened lounge, alone and unsure how to begin a conversation that should have started more than twenty years earlier. The tower they sat in overlooked the rest of the base, with one of the hangar bays just a few decks below them. Mila sat back in a chair, fully clothed for the first time since boarding the Trevani more than a day earlier. Otro was seated off to her side, leaning forward with his forearms resting on his knees. Gavriel stood against the window with his arms crossed, staring into space. Everyone was avoiding eye contact with each other.

“Why does he have to be here,” Mila finally asked, breaking the silence.

“Two reasons,” Otro answered. “One, I asked him to, and he agreed.” Gavriel moved away from the window and sat in a chair facing the both of them, looking down at the floor. “Second, he’s the only family that I’ve known for over a decade.”

“Family?” Mila glared at Gavriel. “How long have you been in the business of torturing people?”

“He was carrying out my instructions and ceased as soon as he realized that you were my sister,” Otro answered. Gavriel’s face remained expressionless.

“That was so noble of you,” said Mila. “And what of the others? How many more do you plan to torture or kill for your... whatever it is you call this savagery?”

Otro looked up at Mila. “As many as it takes for us to accomplish our goals.”

“Goals?” Mila asked, exasperated. She leaned forward. “What goal could you possibly pursue that justifies the wanton, indiscriminate abduction and torture of—“

“Not indiscriminate. Only Ishukone personnel, and their business associates,” Otro said, leaning back as he continued. “Those are my sole targets. The indiscriminate killing is up to the rest of the organization.”

“Oh yes, the Guristas. Mother would be so proud,” Mila sneered, getting up from her chair and pacing a few steps before continuing. “What the hell happened to you, Otro?”

“Mila, you left before—“

“Don’t you dare imply that my decision to leave is the source of this depravity,” she said, raising her voice. “You give no quarter to those raised from broken families, and I would think that you hold yourself to the same standard! You chose this path on your own accord, not because a troubled past compelled you to!”

“Don’t flatter yourself, *sister*,” said Otro, looking deadpan into Mila’s eyes. “We may share the same blood, but you’re just as much a stranger to me right now as the captain of your last ship was. He didn’t know me very well, did he?”

“How could you say such a thing? Listen to yourself! I watched you cripple and then destroy a ship with dozens, if not hundreds of people on it! Most of them are dead now because of *you!*”

Otro kept staring at her and nodded his head. “That’s right.”

“My *God*,” said an incredulous Mila, shaking her head. “When did you become a murderer?”

“When did you become a whore?” Otro replied.

Gavriel flinched slightly, and Mila’s face turned ashen red. Just when she opened her mouth to speak, Otro cut her off.

“Are you, of all people, going to cast yourself among the self-righteous, stand on a pedestal and lecture me about choices?”

“How *dare* you—“

“You think I don’t know about you and Satelles Enterprises? About all the ‘madams’ that work for you, flashing their skin to the rich and powerful and then selling the gossip you call ‘intelligence’ like some it’s some kind of tabloid? Are you really going to stand there and preach to me about morality when you earn your keep in life as glorified prostitute?”

“My *keep* in life? The choice I made doesn’t deprive anyone of their life, you imbecile,” she shouted. “What I do doesn’t hurt anyone, least of all me.”

“Mother would be so proud’,” he shot back. “Don’t look at me that way and pretend that you actually respect yourself. So you’ve made a few isk letting strangers pay you for sex—what is it exactly that you think you’ve accomplished?”

Mila was quivering. “I don’t kill.”

Otro stood up and walked to the window, watching as a Guristas warship started its approach to the hangar below them. “You have no idea how dad died, do you.”

“Oh, here we go. You’re going to try and pin this on—“

“You mean your little intelligence network never revealed the circumstances surrounding your own father’s death? How he died selling drugs to an Ishukone executive? How that same executive shot him dead in plain view of several witnesses, and how Ishukone Watch made sure there would never be an investigation? Or, any *surviving* witnesses, for that matter?”

Mila was caught off guard by that comment. She had looked up the name “Vilamo Gariuishi” once, maybe five years earlier, and saw only his name and the caption “deceased” with a date next to it. Although she had the means to look into the details of his death, the fact was that she chose not to. Otro had just implied that her decision not to dig any deeper—while inherently cold—might have saved her life. Still, Mila remained inexorable.

“He died a drug dealer, did he?” she asked. “Oh, that’s *perfect*. We should have been saying *father* would have been so proud all this time. I can’t say I’m the least bit surprised, seeing how you turned out.” Mila pointed at Otro as she spoke. “You were too young to understand what was going on, Otro. You have no idea about the things that mother said to me in private, how she absolutely dreaded the move to Fade and didn’t understand why it was so important to your father that he succeeded there. It was completely ego-driven, selfish, and unnecessary, and my mother is *dead* as a result. That, dear brother, was the worst kind of tragedy, the one that didn’t have to happen, the one that could have been avoided if only he’d taken one moment to consider the risk to others besides his own, selfish, bastard self.”

It was Otro’s turn to be caught off guard. “He told me that she supported his decision...”

“He didn’t even ask for her opinion, Otro! His desire to appease Ishukone was more important to him than the wishes of his own family! That’s why I left after mom died, because he couldn’t handle providing for anyone anymore, and that by staying I effectively increased the chances of something horrible happening to you as well.”

Otro looked very distant as he spoke. “Dad was a good man, he was just trying to take care of his family...”

“I’m not saying that he didn’t care for you deeply, and that he didn’t do his best trying to see you rise above the misfortune that ultimately cost him his own life. But I know in my heart that whatever his imperfections and whatever his plans for you were, they did not include turning you into a murderer! I

have my own issues with his selfishness and I will always hold him directly responsible for mother's death, but *god damnit*, there is nothing about any of this that justifies the path that you've taken for yourself!"

The room was illuminating softly as the Guristas warship outside approached the hangar. The silence hung momentarily in the room, and Mila caught Gavriel glance towards Otro, waiting for his response. It took another few moments for Otro to speak, which he did very softly at first.

"I've been doing this long enough now to understand something about killing. You don't have to shoot a man to take away his life, Mila. You can kill without ever striking your victim or firing a weapon. All you have to do is take away his hope. Take away a man's sense of purpose in life—the rock that his ego rests upon—and that man becomes the living dead. Ishukone killed hundreds of thousands of people by doing exactly that, and they're still doing it as we speak: By drawing them out to the deep, where they don't have to answer to the State or anyone else, luring them there with promises of prosperity and success and then snatching it all away." He raised his voice nearly to a shout. "Dad was one of them, Mila. Ishukone killed him *twice*, once by cutting him off from the work he depended on, and the second time with a 10-millimeter slug. But *you* were an accomplice the first time around. When you left after mom died, that was pushing the knife right out through his chest, you selfish *bitch*."

Mila glared at him, flush red once again. "Selfish bitch? I'm the selfish one? He dragged us out there for the same reasons as Ishukone—greed! Only you people call it 'opportunity'! He was doing just fine, *we* were doing just fine in Isinokka, but he *had* to push it, he just *had* to get that bigger paycheck and pat on the back from the mighty corporation! All of this pain over his stupid, egotistical pursuit of wealth and fame! You call me a whore? Look at you, following in your father's footsteps! You're nothing more than a Guristas bitch, just like your father was an Ishukone bitch!"

Furious, Otro took a large stride towards her and stopped just inches from her face. "You better watch your mouth, sis."

Mila held her ground, sticking her chin out. "Or what? You're going to throw a temper tantrum and murder me? Go ahead! You haven't got the balls! Actually..." And with a powerful upward thrust of her knee, backed up with plenty of muscle in her quadriceps, Mila delivered a thunderous kick to

Otro's groin. The air in Otro's lungs was forcefully expelled in a wet sounding garble, and his eyes bulged from their sockets as the intense pain left him hunched over and temporarily paralyzed.

"That was for calling me a whore," she said, seething. "And this—" Mila followed up with a well-placed roundhouse punch to the side of Otro's jaw, sending him to the floor in a mangled heap. "—is for calling me a bitch!"

Gavriel exhaled a deep sigh and rose slowly from his chair. "Mila, won't you please have a seat."

The adrenaline subsiding somewhat, Mila's right hand was now in extreme pain. She also realized that her left forearm was still encased in a nanosplint. But she still remained defiant. "I love the irony," she said, shifting her weight and settling into a defensive stance. "A polite practitioner of torture. No, I think I'd much rather stand."

The room was flashing with much more intensity than before as the warship filled the bottom third of the window. Gavriel turned so that his muscular shoulders were square with Mila's, and spoke softly once again. "Madam Gariushi, I implore you. Please, be seated. *Now.*"

She could see that the man she was facing was more than capable of handling himself. His short, compact, densely muscular frame gave him a low center of gravity, which not only made him difficult to strike, but next to impossible to strike hard enough to render incapacitation. Mila was certainly adept at defending herself, but she knew her limitations, and taking this "Gavriel" person was well beyond her own capabilities. As angry as she was, the sharply contrasting elements of his persona and actions made him strangely desirable. *He is a monster*, she thought, *but a very attractive one. Powerful, yet humble.* For that reason alone, she slowly complied with his command to be seated.

"Thank you, Mila," he said, bowing slightly and then squatting next to Otro to lift him back onto the chair. Otro moaned, still in terrific pain and unable to speak. Gently setting him down, Gavriel walked towards the lounge galley. "I must apologize for our lack of hospitality and manners," he said.

"I did not expect any," she replied. "After all, I am in the company of thieves and murderers."

Gavriel returned with an icepack, handing it to Mila. “For those sore knuckles. On behalf of everyone who works with Otro on a regular basis, I’d like to personally thank you for trying to straighten out his crooked jaw.”

Mila suppressed an urge to smile, and accepted the icepack. “He deserved it,” she muttered.

“Yes, he did. And I’m sure that underneath the previous facade of hostility and the present bout of agony which keeps him from speaking, he’s actually quite happy to see you.” Otro looked at Gavriel with a strange look.

“He’ll live,” she said. “To kill again someday, I’m sure. Which reminds me, why am I speaking so cordially with you? I believe that I should be crediting you for the transformation of my younger brother into the abomination that he’s become, so why am I not tearing at your throat?”

“You already have your choice of perfectly legitimate reasons to take my life, Mila,” he said, sitting across from her. “The foremost being that your father’s untimely death was my direct responsibility, and my greatest failure to date.”

Mila’s eyes narrowed. “What are you talking about...”

Gavriel told the story about Vilamo’s violent end, exactly as he had relived it in his dreams a thousand times over. “And so you see, our rules of engagement prevented me from taking the action that might have saved your father’s life, or at the very least, avenged it quickly.

“I don’t understand,” said Mila. “Since when do pirates and criminals have ‘rules of engagement?’”

“Because as clients, Ishukone personnel are *important* to the Guristas, almost sacred. You of all people should know that every organization has its procedures and, ah, recognizes the value of customer satisfaction.” Mila’s eyes narrowed again, but she let the comment slide. “Neither Otro nor I knew it at the time, but Ishukone’s relationship with the Guristas went far beyond the drug trade.”

“Why do you keep referring to the Guristas as ‘them’? Aren’t the two of you miscreants one and the same with the cartel?”

“Mila, you cannot imagine just how interesting these times are with the Guristas and, from what we can gather, Ishukone as well.” Gavriel nodded towards Otro, who was now sitting up straighter but still breathing with difficulty. “Your brother has become the supreme vexation of both organizations. And yes, you could say that he and I have had a kind of falling out with our alma mater. But as far as I’m concerned, he’s well on his way to becoming a legend out here.”

Mila’s mind began racing through information that she had committed to memory. A pattern of data emerged that finally made sense, at least insofar as circumstantial evidence to corroborate the story that Gavriel was implying. Over the years, Ishukone shipping traffic had a remarkable success rate in Fade, as opposed to the dismal 20 percent survival rate of its competitors. And of the competitor vessels failing to make port, the overwhelming majority were shot down while hauling construction materials and heavy equipment for both planetside and space operations—everything that a corporation would need to establish a presence this far away from Empire space. The attacks on those vessels had been ruthlessly precise, as opposed to the poorly organized attacks reported by other convoys. But recently those figures had changed drastically, with Ishukone casualties across all of its shipping operations—both inside and outside of Empire space—suddenly skyrocketing. She thought about the final words of the scientist on the Trevani, and cursed herself for not seeing the pattern sooner. *I see what baby Otro has been up to lately*, she thought. *But not why*. Noticing the thoughtful frown on Mila’s brow, Gavriel continued.

“Yes, Mila, something very sinister is happening out here in the deep, far from civilization and the watchful eyes of Concord and Empire law. I’m almost certain that once you understand that evil, you will view your brother in an entirely different light.”

“Wait, why should I care about any of this? I was nearly a victim of all this madness.” Mila got up and began to pace, still holding the ice bag to her knuckles. “Why should I have anything but contempt for you? You claim to have tried to help my father, but you did so by converting him into a drug dealer?”

“Hope,” Otro squeaked, with tremendous difficulty.

“As damnable as this is going to sound to you Mila, your brother is absolutely correct. *Hope* made your father a criminal,” Gavriel continued. “Think about that for a moment. A perfectly legal megacorporation forged in the civilized systems of Empire space reveals its true, corrupt nature far beyond the prying eyes of the institutions tasked with regulating it and protecting *us*. A man caught in those

circumstances can only resort to lesser evils, one crime at a time, trading off little bits and pieces of his soul in order to retain some semblance of hope, of life, and if he's fortunate, redemption." Otro grunted while trying to shift in the chair. Mila suddenly began to feel remorseful.

Gavriel continued. "Mila, there was literally nothing left for your father. Ishukone promised everything; gave him nothing; and meanwhile he had sacrificed everything. Contrary to what you may believe, Vilamo adored his wife, and loved you and your brother unconditionally. Your mother's tragic death, followed so quickly with your own disappearance, nearly destroyed him. It was *hope* that kept him alive; *hope* that brought him to us; *hope* of a better life for his son that turned him against Ishukone, and *hope* that those selfish corporate executives drugged themselves to death with the products he sold to them."

Mila suddenly remembered parts of her past, of her own beginnings in the profession that she chose, and how sickeningly familiar it was all beginning to sound. For the briefest instant, the memory of her first "client", of how her desperation for food outweighed her burning reluctance to give herself to him, took hold in her mind. But she refused to succumb to the pain, and as she had done so many times before, shut the memory out again. "This doesn't change anything or justify what you two are doing—"

Gavriel cut her off. "You're right, Mila. In the deep, nothing *ever* changes so long as those in power are never held accountable for being indifferent to people's hope. Out here, they answer to no one, and there are no checks or balances to curb their ambitions."

"No, that can't be true, it's completely unacceptable—"

"Is it really so difficult to believe? Look out that window, Mila. Do you see that starship out there? Are we not gods when we immerse ourselves inside of one, manipulating them as though they were a natural extension of our own limbs? Billions and billions of people scattered across hundreds of worlds, and only the tiniest fraction of them can lay claim to such awesome power. Those ships are the wings of mankind, Mila. And we are at the mercy of those who control them. Don't you see how that kind of power can be ruthlessly abused?"

Mila thought about how completely helpless she felt when the Trevani came under attack. Gavriel recognized her look immediately.

“Imagine inflicting that kind of pain on *millions* of people, Mila. Just to make the value of company stock rise a few points.”

Grunting again, Otro pulled himself up, nearly stumbling as he did so. Gavriel rose from his chair to support him, but Mila got to him first. She took his right arm around her shoulder and assisted him to the window. He accepted the help, but kept his gaze on the view outside.

“You, your brother, your father and mother, and countless others have paid a terrible price for not acting soon enough. And it is time, far past time, to make those responsible for this excruciating pain to pay for what they’ve done.” Gavriel took a step towards the both of them. “There are hundreds who have joined our fight against Ishukone, Mila. We would be honored to have you with us as well.”

Mila looked at the side of her brother’s face, now swollen from the punch she had delivered. Old scars long since healed over were now much more noticeable than when she first saw him. *So much pain*, she thought, as tears welled in her eyes. When she felt him pull her closer, the dam of emotions that she fought to contain finally let go. It was as though she was grieving for lost time, past sins, and the loss of her parents all at once. Gavriel moved towards the door, pausing just before exiting.

“The memory of your parents gives us strength, Mila,” he said, stepping outside. “And my conscience will never accept that they died in vain.” And with those last words, Gavriel quietly shut the door, leaving the two orphans to grieve alone.

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CHAPTER FOUR
I SAW YOUR SHIP

6NJ8-V VII, Moon 2

Venal Region

Guristas Logistic Support

Three times, Bane thought as his hoverchair locked into position inside his personal quarters. *Three times I've asked the both of them, as a father would to his own children, to cease this madness.* The guards escorting him silently left the room as mechanical arms extended over his ancient, cybernetic body and inserted nuerolinks into the sockets implanted within his skull. *I raised them as my own, taught them as my own, empowered them as my own, and now look at the disgrace they have become.* The mental view of his surroundings, as seen through the cameras attached to the hoverchair, was replaced with a virtual, three-dimensional image of the Guristas data network.



Never in my old age did I expect betrayal such as this, least of all from Otro, he thought. His natural vision long since departed, Bane grunted as his mind located and read the decrypted report intercepted from Ishukone Watch. Another one of Ishukone's convoys was lost to an ambush within the borders of Empire space, and there was no question who was responsible for the attack. *All I asked of them was to let the Ishukone ships be. The rest of the universe was theirs for the taking, but no, they insisted on carrying through with this absurd ideological vendetta.* Bane was not the sort to hesitate making harsh decisions when it came to disciplining military personnel. He was rumored to have destroyed ships in his own fleet whenever captains questioned his orders during combat. The fact he

gave Otro three warnings was symbolically identical to being granted life three times. Bane would not extend that privilege a fourth time.

With another thought, the report was replaced with a map of the systems surrounding Mara. Again, the debris field was located within 15 jumps of the Forward listening posts near the three Empire crossings. The predictability disgusted him. *Patterns are a death wish*, he thought, *and those two fools will know the consequences of their own stupidity soon enough.*

Despite the reoccurrence, there was something different about this attack. Bane quickly scanned through the latest Ishukone shipping itinerary that Les Akkilen had provided to him as part of their longstanding agreement. The discrepancy was obvious: The Trevani was destroyed while traveling someplace it shouldn't have been. *There is absolutely no reason why an Ishukone convoy should have been in the Mara System*, Bane thought, *unless they were trying to go around something.* In fact, the log listed her as “dry-docked for maintenance and refitting”, with the next scheduled escort mission one week from today. Ever since the attacks started, Akkilen would call within minutes of every lost convoy to share his pointed opinions about “Guristas incompetence”. But not this time, and the report was almost 48 hours old. That was very uncharacteristic of a control-crazed tyrant like Akkilen. Bane could think of several possible reasons for the lack of outrage this time around, but as always, the simplest explanation seemed most plausible: Akkilen just didn't know about the Trevani. That possibility begged all kinds of questions that Bane decided he needed the answers to, very quickly.

He willed the map to display all of the systems around the checkpoint that the Trevani failed to reach. “Nav-Theta” was along a shipping route that ended in Nonni, and only Ishukone competitors had stations in the systems along the most direct—and most secure—route from Malkahen. The only non-competitors were the Caldari Navy and Home Guard, and both were in the Nonni system. No starship pod deliveries were scheduled at either facility for at least one month. Bane's wrinkled brow furled into a full-blown scowl. *It had to be Navy*, he thought. *But why avoid taking the most direct route to get there?*

As senior as Bane was within the Guristas Cartel, even he lacked the authority to initiate contact with an agent inside the Caldari Navy. His request would have to be approved by Fatal, who personally maintained a formidable spy network within the Caldari State. But regardless of the answer, Bane would order his scouts to concentrate their search for Otro and Gavriel around the Forward bases near the Empire border. In the meantime, he would prepare his own strike fleet. Fatal wanted the two

renegades eliminated for threatening the extremely profitable relationship that the Guristas shared with Ishukone. Bane wanted them both dead for much more personal reasons.

~

Forward-Nine

ROIR-V

Pure Blind Region

The base setup was identical to all of the others: Sparsely furnished, but heavily stocked with all manner of supplies for both ships and crew. Hidden along the border with the Caldari State, the “Forwards” were small, unmanned stations built quickly and established as replenishment bases to support Guristas incursions into Empire space. Crammed with sophisticated electronic eavesdropping equipment, the bases also served as listening posts to intercept cross-border communications traffic. Terabytes of data were intercepted each day and relayed to processing stations for storage, and if possible, decryption.

The Guristas had lured some of the best cryptologists in Empire space to their underworld to decipher the mountain of information channeled through stargates, and both Gavriel and Otro recognized early on that their success would lean heavily on having cryptologists of their own. Paying ten times the rate that the Guristas offered, Otro hired them to sift through intercepted data and catalog anything that had to do with the Ishukone Corporation. In the six hours since Otro’s fleet had arrived from Forward-Six, Mila had been devouring the information revealed by their efforts with insatiable fascination.

Mila was able to reconstruct the financial history of Ishukone—both the publicly released version and reality—with astonishing detail. Everything from warehouse inventory records to employee payrolls; corporate debt structuring to shipping invoices; executive meeting notes to general account ledgers; and every component of Ishukone’s strategic plans for the upcoming fiscal year was revealed to her. A very dark picture began to emerge as she reconciled these findings with the data compiled through Satelles, confirming everything that Gavriel had warned her about and more. Typing furiously, she was constructing an analysis as fast as her brain could absorb and process the information.

Peering through the lab window, Otro watched as his sister manipulated the three screens in front of her. “How long has she been in there?” he asked.

Gavriel was beaming. “From the moment we arrived. She has your father’s intelligence, and her ability to process information is remarkable,” he added.

“She gets that from my mother,” Otro answered. “Dad mentioned that she was always a real fast learner. It just comes naturally to her.”

Gavriel nodded, admiring the way Mila’s hair fell over the top of her shoulders as she shifted her attention from one screen to the next. “It is a miracle that we found her,” he said.

“It’s unbelievable,” Otro answered truthfully. “But we’re going to need many more miracles to keep this up.”

“You underestimate the strategic value that Mila brings to the table,” Gavriel said. “For the first time ever, we can accurately gauge the financial impact of our efforts against Ishukone. In fact, I don’t believe that we’re fighting a guerilla war any longer. From now on, each of our strikes will be surgical, with anticipated, quantifiable long-term consequences instead of random hit and runs.”

“It’s Bane that concerns me, not Ishukone,” said Otro. “We’re being hunted by the very man who gave the both of us a new life, not to mention that he taught us everything we know about naval combat.”

“Bane’s interest in us was purely investment value,” Gavriel scoffed. “Just two more recruits to help turn the Guristas greed machine. You shouldn’t view it any other way.”

“True, but it doesn’t change the fact that he’s trying to kill us, and rightfully so. He has the power to bring as many resources as he thinks he needs to get the job done. We don’t have sanctuary here, or in Empire space. And I’m responsible for all the men and women who joined us.” Otro took a deep breath. “One way or the other, we have a big fight coming our way, and the odds are stacked against us.” He nodded towards his sister. “Let her know that she’s got about an hour before we have to leave again. I’m going to start making my rounds with the troops.”

Gavriel opened his mouth to speak, but Otro was already out the door. Without even realizing it, he shifted his weight nervously. It felt strangely intimidating to be alone in Mila's presence.

~

Malkalen V – Moon 1

Lonetrek Region

Ishukone Corporate Headquarters

Between his prowess with financial investments and his enormous compensation from Ishukone, the corporate life had made Ralirashi Okimo wealthier than he could have ever imagined. Earlier in the day, he put his vast fortune to use by secretly replacing the Ishukone property that was lost in the ambush that killed his personal envoy to the Caldari Navy. Most Caldari citizens would have to work for a lifetime to save enough money to purchase a single ship. Rali had just bought five. Among his dealings was the acquisition of a Caracal-class cruiser that he promptly renamed “Trevani”, which was now sitting in the dry dock where the Ishukone shipping itinerary said it should be.

As usual, Rali returned late at night to his luxury station home to find it empty. His wife had long since stopped bothering to leave notes indicating where she was going with the kids, or for how long they'd be gone. As far as she was concerned, such an effort would be a waste of time. It was obvious to her that Ishukone responsibilities were far more important to Rali than family matters, and that was that. She had long since given up trying to persuade him otherwise.

Rali took a long look at the bed that he was supposed to share with his wife and decided that he would never be able to fall asleep. The Board meeting was in less than six hours, and there was nothing more that he could do to prepare for it. He couldn't tell them about the Raven, not without an inked deal to justify the costs. All he could do was hope to survive the meeting without losing his job. Not wanting to be alone with his anxieties to torment him, he left and wearily made his way down the concourse towards one of the station's lounges.

Rali was fairly certain that he was once genuinely happy, madly in love, and determined to work as hard as he could to support his family. On that last point, he had succeeded. But he had failed miserably as a husband and father in the process of advancing his career, and the relationship with his family deteriorated accordingly. His marriage was typical of the Caldari corporate elite. Both husband

and wife felt unappreciated in their perceived roles as providers; both viewed each other as incapable of understanding the responsibilities which accompany their roles; and both became accustomed to assuming that the lack of understanding was, in fact, pure indifference that betrayed just how fragile their relationship was. If Rali and his wife of ten years were not officially separated, then it was just a legal technicality that would put a title on the true state of affairs with their marriage. The emotional separation had already taken place long ago.

On the eve of the most important—and perhaps final—Board meeting of his career, the contempt that Rali held towards Les Akkilen had become an intense and dangerous distraction. Thinking about his family made it even worse. He had to try and unwind as much as he could, lest the anger become too obvious to the Board members tomorrow. There were only a few patrons in the lounge, and no one noticed him walk in. Choosing one of the many barstools with a good view of the space outside the station, Rali took a seat. Although he was never much of a drinker, Rali decided against his better judgment to order something that would get him intoxicated as quickly as possible.

“I’d like a Minmatar Chest Wound, please.”

The bartender looked at him as if he was crazy, then shrugged and started preparing the drink. While Rali waited, he startled at the sound of a yelp followed by a crash. When he turned around, he saw a young woman dressed in a business suit laying face down on the floor, with a mess of datapads and research papers scattered everywhere. Rali jumped out of his chair to assist her.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Damnit,” she said angrily, pushing herself up to her knees. The first thing Rali’s eyes found was the immense cleavage that sat between the lapels of the woman’s business suit. She never looked up at him, but instead started to gather together all of the datapads around her. “I’m such an idiot,” she muttered.

“Here, let me help,” Rali said. Now his eyes moved upwards of her chest, and he saw that she was positively gorgeous, almost shockingly so. As he reached down to pick up some of the papers on the floor, she reached out quickly and slapped him on the hand.

“Don’t touch those!” she scolded, looking up at him for the first time. “I’ll get them myself—“ She stopped in mid-sentence, and her angry expression suddenly changed to recognition, then shock. Her jaw dropped, and she covered her mouth with her hand.

“Oh my, I’m so very sorry, sir,” she stammered. “This is so embarrassing, I really do apologize.”

Rali was confused. “It’s okay, really.” He had no idea why she had the sudden change in attitude. “Do you mind if I give you a hand?”

She placed her hands on her temples. “This is so typical. I can’t believe how stupid I am,” she muttered, clearly flustered. She started scurrying about to collect the datapads. “I mean, of course you can help. Or, you don’t have to. That’s...very gracious of you, sir” she stammered, then shook her head as if she was disgusted with herself.

Rali laughed a little. “Why are you calling me ‘sir’?” he asked as he gathered papers.

She stood up slowly, placing the datapads on a chair. The pin stripes on her suit accented the curves on her voluptuous figure. “Aren’t you Ralirashi Okimo, the Chief Financial Officer of Ishukone?”

Rali was shocked that anyone could be so humbled in his presence. “Yes, I am.”

She took a clumsy step forward and extended her hand. “It’s an honor to meet you, sir.”

Rali took her hand and shook it. “Nice to meet you, Miss—?”

She smiled, completely awestruck. “Henjska. Capri Henjska. I just started here at Ishukone a few days ago.”

He couldn’t remember the last time he felt this good. “That’s fantastic! Judging from all the papers, I’d say you’re in R&D.” He placed the stack of papers onto the same chair as the datapads.

“Yes, sir,” she blushed, looking away. “I’m an analyst there. My job is to look at declassified military technology and find markets for it within the commercial and retail sectors.” She gazed at him with the

most adoring look he'd ever seen. "I've always wanted to meet you, sir. I even wrote a paper about you while I was at the Science and Trade Institute."

Her stunning looks aside, Rali decided that enjoying every moment of this young woman's company was exactly what he needed. "Please, call me Rali," he said, motioning towards the bar. "Can I get you something to drink?"

She smiled. "I'll have whatever you're having," she answered.

~

Gavriel sat staring in stunned disbelief at the three screens. Mila was beside him, resting her hands against her forehead and appearing exhausted. After hours of pouring through the data, her initial analysis was finally complete. Gavriel had been speechless since the moment she finished presenting him with a summary of her findings. Stifling a deep yawn, Mila waited patiently for him to absorb the shock of everything he had just learned.

Les Akkilen's tenure at Ishukone was tumultuous right from the start. Appointed CEO during the height of the Fade mining boom, the move caught corporate insiders by surprise since Ishukone was excelling financially under the previous leadership. Needless to say, shareholders were not impressed with Les Akkilen's credentials. Aside from the celebrity status associated with his immensely wealthy family and powerful political allies, it was also widely known that Les wasn't especially bright, and had no business experience to speak of. Investors openly questioned Akkilen's ability to continue Ishukone's surge of growth into industries other than starship pod manufacturing, and the stock began to plummet.

The investor's concerns proved valid. Akkilen's first mandate as CEO was to take advantage of the firm's monopoly on heavy elements in Fade. He initially doubled, and then quadrupled the price of all commodity exports produced from the Drenali System. The move created a huge spike in profits for Ishukone, but also infuriated corporate and private buyers from all over Caldari space. The prices for the commodities were so outrageous that it prompted the creation of a coalition made up exclusively of Ishukone competitors. Each member corporation agreed to share the costs of funding research and exploration into the regions adjacent to Fade in search of alternative sources of heavy elements.

When vast uranium and plutonium deposits were discovered in Pure Blind—which sits right on the border with the Caldari State—the coalition wisely decided against attempting to recover their exploration costs quickly. Instead, they opted to exert their newfound market influence gradually by charging the same prices for the commodities as they were before Akkilen came to power. The effects were immediate: Contracts with Ishukone were voided, and the money flowed away from Fade and into Pure Blind’s systems by the billions. Akkilen responded by filing breach of contract lawsuits against every coalition member with the Caldari Business Tribunal, but suffered humiliating defeats in each one of them. To make matters worse, wholesalers and small-cap corporations were collectively filing an antitrust suit against Ishukone for excessive price fixing, citing that the unreasonable hike in commodity expenses caused unfair financial hardship to their own respective businesses. Ishukone was now left with a defunct deep space mining operation that would cost a fortune to maintain, plus enormous legal problems that would further cripple its ability to compete in any markets besides pod manufacturing.

In a maligned effort to compensate for his mistakes, Akkilen sought ways to cut costs as quickly as possible. To start, he reneged on Ishukone obligations to consultants and industry contractors, especially those operating beyond Empire space. Hardest hit were the contractors that had settled on Drenali Seven, which of course included Vilamo Gariushi. If you included the settling family members that the contractors had brought with them, the people directly affected by Akkilen’s treachery numbered in the millions. The hardships suffered in the outer regions went largely unnoticed, mainly because of the worker protests and legal issues that were drawing all the attention of regulators in Empire space.

Still unsatisfied with the adjusted results of his bottom line, Les Akkilen contacted the Guristas. While millions of people starved on Drenali Seven, Les plotted even more sinister actions to appease his ego at the expense of countless others: By planning direct retribution against his competitors for their combined efforts to undermine him. Industrial espionage always was—and continues to be, according to Mila—an unspoken reality within the Caldari corporate domain, but Akkilen shattered the delicate rules of that game as well. In exchange for the unrestricted passage of Ishukone vessels throughout Guristas-controlled space, Akkilen would provide the pirate cartel with the shipping itineraries of as many rival corporations that his spies could get. Bane quickly agreed, and the slaughter began. Mila even discovered evidence which proved that Akkilen had requested attacks against specific Ishukone ships. Records indicated that those doomed vessels carried various “undesirables” affiliated with Ishukone whose deaths, while tragic, were conveniently beneficial to him.

The open exchange of information between Akkilen and the Guristas lead Ishukone down even darker paths. Les refined the amnesty arrangement by negotiating a deal with Bane to purchase the cargo stolen from ships that the Guristas ransomed or salvaged at *cost*. The deal broke Akkilen's profit margin wide open because it reduced his own operating expenses to almost nothing, while escalating his competitor's expenses to a level that was impossible to sustain. Completing the domination of Pure Blind's economics was the establishment of Ishukone Watch as a legendary protective force. While competitors struggled to find industrial freight captains willing to run the perilous shipping routes into deep space, Ishukone's survival rate was close to 95 percent, and thus drew the greatest number of shipping contracts. Naturally, Les started leapfrogging the costs upwards for those services as well.

By the time she was finished, Mila had produced a staggering list of illegal activities committed by the Ishukone Corporation. And these were hardly the paper-pusher misdemeanors typically associated with white-collar crimes. There was enough information to secure indictments for a range of hard-core felonies that would result in the permanent takedown of Ishukone and death sentences for all of its senior-level executives. Each potential indictment was backed up with a mountain of damning evidence. She found employee layoff records from factories that coincided with unusually high spurts in productivity from the same facility, with no evidence of assembly line upgrades or anything else that could account for the increased output. She noticed that Ishukone construction projects across all of its developing deep-space territories were suddenly being completed ahead of schedule and under budget, despite having projected delays just weeks before. And of course, there were the actual transmissions containing the competitor shipping itinerary schedules, all relayed through and captured by the Forward Guristas bases.

All told, Mila estimated that Les Akkilen was responsible for direct competitor losses of more than three trillion isk in ships, equipment, and cargo, to say nothing of the immense loss of life resulting from the vicious ambush of convoys in unregulated space. Most, if not all of those losses translated directly into profits for Ishukone in the same period of time. As large as that number was, it still did not include the abstract consequences of losses to competitors, such as in cost overruns, project delays, and consumer confidence. Ishukone stock was finally back to where it was before Akkilen was appointed. Only no one, save for his inner circle of advisors, knew exactly how Ishukone had recovered. The financial analysts reviewing the quarterly and yearly numbers all pointed to "effective cost cutting measures, superior management, and precise resource allocation" as the sole factors behind the newfound stability of the corporation under Akkilen's leadership. And the Board of

Directors, obsessed with image and industry reputation, was too eager to see the stock's continued climb to bother questioning the numbers or the methods that made them possible in the first place. The rough start by Akkilen years earlier was conveniently attributed to "first time CEO jitters", and that Ishukone's climbing revenues was proof of his "coming of age" in the corporate world.

Gavriel continued staring blankly at the figures on the three screens. Displayed across them were the names of some of the largest, most powerful corporations in the Caldari State. Each was assigned an enormous figure specifying the amount of money that Mila figured Les Akkilen had stolen from them. Some of the names included Lai Dai, CBD, Prompt Delivery, Sukuuvestaa, and Caldari Constructions.

"So, what do you think?" Mila finally asked. Gavriel just started shaking his head.

"What do I think...let's see," he answered, sitting back in his chair. "I think that there's enough evidence here to start a ferocious war within the Caldari State—at least."

"That was my thinking as well," she said, also leaning back in her chair. "I haven't even tried to figure out the economic costs of all this, such as how Ishukone's interactions with corporations from other sovereignties weigh into the equation. The repercussions of Akkilen's actions throughout the Eve economy must be staggering, and we should probably figure out how far they go."

"I don't believe that will be necessary, Mila," he answered, suddenly shifting his gaze and appearing more focused. "Tell me, have you uncovered anything about the officers that report directly to him?"

"All of them were appointed by Akkilen and have direct knowledge of what he's doing except for one, who was assigned by the Board of Directors." she answered.

"And who might this officer be?"

"It's funny that you should ask..."

~

Rali downed his third Chest Wound in a single gulp, ignoring the scorching sensation in his throat and stomach. Capri started giggling as he nearly fell off the stool while setting the glass back down onto the bar.

“So you see, Capri, that’s pre-e-e-tty much how I became the Chief Financial Officer of Ish-h-h-ukone,” he stammered. Then his eyes opened wide in astonishment as Capri also downed her third Chest Wound in a single gulp. “Whoa”, he said. “That was m-m-most impressive.”

She flashed a coy smile, getting close enough to him so that the tips of her breasts were just barely skimming against his shoulder. Rali was no longer capable of trying to be discreet about staring directly at them. She lifted his chin with two fingers, and got close enough so that he could smell the alcohol on her breath. “A woman can do anything that a man can, Rali. Only better.”

Rali just stared back into her green eyes while the rest of the room spun around them. His marriage suddenly seemed very, very distant. “What...are your career aspirations here at Ishukone,” he breathed.

“Hmmm, let’s see,” she said, rolling her eyes thoughtfully before answering. “Well, to be honest, just getting here was such a challenge that I haven’t had time to think about what’s next.” She motioned to the bartender for another round. “I suppose that I’m not all that thrilled about working for my boss. I wouldn’t mind being in charge of my department, and giving other recruits the big piles of work to do!” she joked. The expression on Rali’s face changed immediately.

Capri caught his look and knew that she had succeeded in setting him up perfectly to get the information that Mila had instructed her to fish for. Feigning a slight cough, she activated the tiny voice recorder sewn into the lapel of her suit.

“So, how do you like working for Les Akkilen?” she asked.

~

6NJ8-V VII Moon 2

Venal Region

Guristas Logistic Support

Bane narrowed the possibilities down to one of three Forward bases: Nine, One, or Two. Otro would be in that general vicinity, preparing for another series of raids against Ishukone convoys. After selecting a staging area that was approximately equidistant from each base, Bane gave the order for the fleet to move out. The location he chose would give him a response time of ten minutes or less from the time his scouts made contact. The attack plan depended on speed—the faster it was over with, the better. Firepower wasn't the problem—he was certain that he had Otro outnumbered at least 8 to 1. But he would also be asking his crew to open fire on other Guristas ships, and possibly to even engage them in a gunfight onboard one of the bases. The longer the fight drew itself out, the more difficult it would be to maintain morale.

Too bad that it will be over for them quickly, Bane thought as he watched his battleship clear the hangar. *Otro and Gavriel should be made to suffer for as long as possible.*

~

Malkalen V – Moon 1

Lonetrek Region

Ishukone Corporate Headquarters

40 minutes later

Rali was now flat on his stomach in bed, fully asleep and drooling steadily all over his pillow. Capri gently removed the man's shoes and pulled the covers up to his neck. She practically had to carry him for most of the walk back to his quarters, and they made a few stops along the way for him to vomit. He was barely coherent when they finally arrived, and unconscious the moment he collapsed into bed. After setting a glass of water on the nightstand, she hurried out of the room and made for the door leading back out to the concourse. Making a note of her surroundings as she walked, the home reminded her more of a museum than a place where a family lived. Everything was spotless; every item and ornament was in perfect alignment with everything else. Yet there was an undeniable emptiness

that stood out more than the priceless statues and works of art that adorned the walls. The home was a mirror image of Rali himself: Materially plentiful, but utterly devoid of any soul.

The next shuttle off the station was heading to the Caldari Funds Unlimited Investment Bank at Malkalen Four, and she would have to hurry to catch it. Thankfully, it would barely be a five-minute trip. The information she had to pass along to Mila was of epic importance.

~

Forward-Nine

ROIR-V

Pure Blind Region

25 minutes later

Otro stood with his arms folded, listening intently to Mila and Gavriel as they explained the facts to him. When they finished, he took a moment to think before speaking.

“This ‘Raven’, is it as powerful as Rali says it is?” Otro asked.

Gavriel nodded. “And then some. It’s the ultimate standoff weapon. Nothing else in the Caldari arsenal can put that much firepower on a single target in such a short period of time.”

“Can it be defended against?”

Gavriel shook his head. “That many launchers would overwhelm any point-defense system. And no matter what kind of shields the target is using, a smart Raven captain still has the valid options of either using brute force against a specific protection type, or switching to a completely different warhead. No one out there is prepared for anything like this. Even if you could jam its targeting systems—and you might need several ships to do it—she could still use friend-or-foe missiles to force you to shut your jammers down and run. This ship is the real deal.”

“So what you’re saying is that the Raven is a map drawer,” Otro stated.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Build a few of them and you can redraw the map,” Otro explained. “The Raven tilts the balance of power in favor of whoever owns it. And even if you have less ambitious goals, just selling the technology would bring you a different kind of power, the kind that only money can buy. You say Navy is the only client that Rali was trying to pitch this to?”

“To the best of my knowledge, that is correct,” answered Mila. “And from the looks of it, the Trevani was carrying Rali’s reps to meet with them.” Her thoughts flashed back to her brief time aboard that ship, and how drastically her life had changed since then.

“And you’re certain that Akkilen doesn’t know anything about it?”

“We know a great deal about Mr. Akkilen and his inner circle, and I can assure you, he doesn’t have a clue,” answered Mila. “If he did, Rali would probably be dead.”

“How was he able to pull this off?”

“Ralirashi Okimo is extremely intelligent, and very resourceful,” Mila answered. “It also helps that he’s extraordinarily wealthy. Technically, the members of the Raven team are not Ishukone employees. They report directly to Rali and perform all of their work in a fully stocked ship hangar facility that he’s kept rented for almost three years. We don’t know which station is the host, but it’s definitely not on Ishukone property, and we know that it exists within Empire space.”

“He funded all that himself just to spite Akkilen?” Gavriel asked.

“You don’t become the CFO of Ishukone Corporation without knowing how to disguise a few expenses on a balance sheet,” Mila replied. “I’m sure that he passed along as much of the cost as he felt he could get away with.”

I’m really starting to like this guy, thought Otro. “Why is Akkilen so tough on him?”

“Because the Board of Directors appointed him to the position. Akkilen has always treated him as an outsider, and warned his advisors to stay away from him. He felt directly threatened by Rali’s intelligence, and often times humiliated him in front of others by giving him tasks typically assigned to drones, such as cleaning restrooms, picking up after him, et cetera.”

“So he *really* hates him,” Otro mused. Gavriel could see that he was really thinking hard about something.

“The word ‘hate’ doesn’t fully describe it,” Mila answered, recounting some of the choice words that Rali had used to describe him on Capri’s voice recorder. “From what we’ve learned, every one of us in the room would have killed Akkilen by now. My agent made it perfectly clear that if nothing else, Rali is extremely vulnerable. The Board meeting is just hours from now, and his intent was to surprise them with the Raven and a multi-billion isk Navy contract.”

“Just to prove his competence to them...” Otro said.

“Correct. Now—and I don’t mean to be vindictive here—but because of *you*, that scenario is no longer possible, and Rali is convinced that this is the meeting when he will be ousted and replaced.”

“Who’s up next to replace him?” Gavriel asked.

“If the Board decides to allow Akkilen to fill the position himself, which is likely considering the turnaround in Ishukone’s revenues, then he will almost certainly nominate his son Jussal.”

“Is your agent still in Malkalen?” Otro asked. The question caught both Gavriel and Mila off guard.

“Yes, she should be,” Mila answered.

“Is she reliable?”

Mila frowned. “She’s one of my best, but what are you—“

“Tell her not to leave the system,” Otro said. “I think it’s time that we had a chat with—“

The radios attached to the shoulders of both Otro and Gavriel began squawking simultaneously. A panicked voice came through the static.

“Sanctuary, this is Recon-Six, tripwire, repeat, tripwire, four heavies, eight mediums, many lights...God damn, they just shot my wingman down! I’m locked up and jammed, there’s no room out here...Mayday, mayday, mayday! Recon-Six going down! Mayday, mayday...”

Both radios went silent. Gavriel jumped out of his chair.

Mila suddenly looked panicked. “What does that mean?” she asked.

“It means our adversary is within ten jumps of here, and that two of our reconnaissance pilots are now dead,” replied Gavriel.

“What it means is that the old man is coming to collect,” Otro said. “And that it’s time to leave. Gavriel, don’t let her out your sight.”

“Understood. Mila, if you’ll please follow me...” She quickly followed him outside, leaving Otro staring at the Ishukone data still sprawled across the three screens.

I’m sick and tired of running, Otro thought. Enough is enough.

~

CHAPTER FIVE

WAR RELICS



Sigma Point

Admiral Bane's Fleet Staging Area

Pure Blind Region

Betrayal, Bane thought, *invokes the vilest of human emotions.*

He watched patiently as camera feeds from the sentry guns of Forward bases Nine, One, and Two projected images directly into his mind. Surrounding the powerful Scorpion-class battleship slaved to his frail, physical self was an armada of Guristas warships whose commanders waited in angered silence for his orders. Bane told each of his officers that their prey was a man who conspired to betray the Guristas brotherhood, and that by doing so had betrayed each of them and their families personally. *Otro Gariushi and all of his deranged followers are to be put down*, Bane explained. *Like facing a cornered animal, you cannot afford to make any mistakes*, he had warned them. *Kill as soon as the opportunity presents itself, without remorse.*

A voice disrupted Bane's concentration: "Target's reconnaissance elements have been destroyed according to your instructions, sir."

And so it begins. “You’re certain they had time to assess the size of the fleet?”

“Yes, sir. Without question.”

“Excellent. Hold there and await my command.”

“Acknowledged.”

Bane focused his attention on the hangar bays. Any moment now the first ships of Otro’s pathetic fleet would undock, revealing which of the bases he was using to hide. And then the massacre would begin.

Show yourself, Bane thought. Meet the destiny you’ve so foolishly chosen for yourself.

~

Forward-Nine

ROIR-V System

Pure Blind Region

“It’s done,” Mila said as she switched the comm terminal down. “You two had better know what you’re doing.”

Gavriel looked excited. “She has your entire analysis?”

“Copies will arrive at each of the destinations you specified within the hour, and my agent is on her way back to Ishukone Corporate Headquarters on Malkalen Five as we speak.”

“Outstanding!” exclaimed Gavriel, unable to contain his excitement. “Do you have any idea what that means!” He jumped from his chair and prepared to enter the mobile gantry unit (MGU). The Scorpion-class battleship awaiting his arrival loomed in the hangar beyond the thick glass like a floating city.

Mila looked worried. “Just leave my name out of this,” she replied, also getting up and hoisting a duffle bag over her shoulder. The boarding area for passengers was one deck below them. “That information

might as well be antimatter. There will be dire consequences for many people, to say nothing of ourselves if we're not careful. I admire your courage and determination, Gavriel. I sincerely mean that. But you're in over your head with this."

"I've been told that before," he answered with a wink. "Hurry aboard. There isn't much time."

~

Otro was now looking at the world through the lens of a camera drone. His Moa-class cruiser floated in the hangar, fully crewed, armed, and ready for departure. The fleet commanders had all checked in, indicating their readiness to undock.

"Gavriel, you ready?" he asked.

"Roger that, Otro. Mila is safely aboard. Your call," came the response.

Otro switched comm channels to address the fleet. "Tackler's Squadron, go."

The frigate squadron commander answered immediately. "Tackler's undocking, aye."

~

There you are, thought Bane as he watched a progression of Merlin and Kestrel-class frigates emerge from the hangar of Forward Nine. After a giving a terse command to his officers, the warships surrounding him disappeared. They would be within firing range of Otro's fleet in less than five minutes. Of the three bases Bane had selected as possibilities, Forward Nine was the most accessible from Sigma Point. Bane was hardly surprised. His ambush plans were always perfect.

While his own Scorpion accelerated to warp speed, Bane instructed the sentry guns of Forward Nine to acquire passive targeting locks on the ships that he selected. He would not commence blotting Otro's frigate squadron out of existence just yet.

Patience, he thought, is a lesson too easily lost on the young.

~

“Tackler’s are out, perimeter is clear,” voiced the frigate squadron commander.

“Specters, go,” said Otro.

“Wilco, Specters outbound,” answered the Specter cruiser squadron commander. Otro switched channels again. “Gavriel, what do you think? The abandoned mining outpost in A-DDGY?”

“Sounds good to me, Otro,” he replied. “Course is set, whenever you’re ready.”

“Standby,” said Otro. “One more Spectre is ahead of me.”

~

Bane counted ten Blackbird-class cruisers in all, flying a lazy orbit around the station with their frigate escorts following close behind. Then, a Moa-class cruiser emerged from the hangar.

Hello, Otro.

“Admiral, all ships in position, awaiting your mark,” announced Bane’s attack squadron commander.

“Standby,” he said, smiling from somewhere underneath the layers of ship weaponry, electronics, and armor surrounding him. With a single thought, all four of Forward Nine’s sentry guns fired twin 425-millimeter antimatter rounds at Otro’s frigate squadron commander.

~

The flash of light caught Otro by surprise, seeming too bright to be a navigation beacon from the station or any ships. Instinctively rotating the camera view towards the source, he saw an expanding shockwave and debris field in the midst of the frigate group. At the same time, four flashing threat indicators appeared on his tactical display. Just as the horror of what was happening began to set in,

Otro saw four bright streaks of light converge on the Specter commander's Blackbird. The warcomm channel erupted immediately with confusion.

"Commander! Tackler One is down!" warned a frigate captain.

"What the hell is happen—" The Specter commander never finished his sentence as a second volley from the sentry guns vaporized his cruiser in a sickening flash of blue and white. Otro's stomach turned to ice. Frantic, he switched channels.

"Gavriel! Don't undock! That's an order!" Otro winced as another explosion illuminated the space around his ship.

"Otro, what's going on— "

"The goddamn sentry guns! Bane has control of them!"

"Impossible! How do you—"

Otro's tactical display suddenly jumped from four threats to more than thirty.

~

Bane surveyed the battle unfolding below him with sadistic ecstasy. With the sentry guns doing most of the work, his own frigates and cruisers pounced on the disorganized force with relentless precision, systematically destroying ship after ship. Otro's fleet scattered in different directions, with no discernable coherence among them. Explosions illuminated the outer hull of Forward Nine, while Otro's Moa twisted and squirmed, jammed into obsolescence, helpless to do anything but watch as his followers were killed in front of him. *Leave his ship incapacitated and unable to flee*, Bane had told his commanders, *so that he will know humiliation and regret before he dies.*

But the mayhem did not unravel precisely according to Bane's prediction. *Why has the other traitor Gavriel not emerged to assist his dying comrades*, he thought to himself. *Perhaps he is more of a coward than I thought*. It was a possibility that Bane had hoped to avoid, but was amply prepared for nevertheless.

~

"Warp out! Anywhere you can!" Otro screamed, reeling in mental agony as he watched the carnage before him. Everywhere he looked, his ships and crews were being mercilessly slaughtered in a cataclysmic battle as hybrid charges and missiles slammed into ship hulls. Otro's head began to spin as the anguished cries of his ship captains pierced his soul. Somewhere in the confusion he could hear Gavriel shouting orders in vain to bring order to the chaos outside. Otro knew the battle was hopeless, and shuddered at the thought of his sister being aboard a ship that couldn't escape from the station.

Right at the brink of complete panic, he remembered his bitter hatred of Bane, Ishukone, and all the pain of his life that had led to this moment. The frenzied rage surrounding him was drowned out by a swirling vortex of nightmares and dread, taking him deeper and deeper towards complete breakdown, when suddenly, from out of the abyss, a ray of hope revealed itself with absolute clarity. Infinitesimal as that ray was, Otro embraced it in the darkness with desperate ferocity. *There is always a way out*, he thought as the solution unfolded before him. *There is always hope!*

Snapping back from the psychological chasm, Otro suddenly found himself imbued with supreme situational awareness. Quickly scanning the battlefield, he instinctively sought out the greatest threat posed by the enemy fleet: a Guristas troop transport moving into docking position with Forward Nine. Otro keyed the commlink.

"Gavriel, be advised that you have one enemy troop transport on final approach to Forward Nine. Gather whatever people that can fight together and prepare to defend yourself. You'll have to hold them off for a maximum of sixty minutes."

"An hour? We don't even know that we'll last five minutes!"

"Gavriel, old friend...you've been like a brother to me all these years. I have more faith in you than anyone I have ever known. *Protect my sister*. I will return with help within the hour."

“Wait! What do you plan—”

Otro terminated the link and started the self-destruct sequence for his ship.

~

Bane saw it a half-second too late. A second Blackbird from Otro’s fleet had escaped into warp, and he was in the midst of delivering a scathing reprimand to his EW commander when the Moa suddenly exploded. His frigates were unable to lock down the fleeing pod in time, and it vanished.

When the last of Otro’s cruisers exploded a moment later, Bane furiously ordered his frigates to seek and destroy the pod. His rage compelled him to openly broadcast a system-wide message to Otro: *I did not teach you to be a coward, boy*. A few seconds later, a response came:

You did not teach me to be a fool, either.

~

The MGU opened with a metallic sounding click, followed by a hiss of escaping air. Gavriel emerged, still soaked from the ectoplasm inside the Scorpion’s pod. Mila was nervously waiting for him, oblivious to the events happening outside the station.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “Why aren’t we leaving?” Gavriel’s dead serious appearance made her uneasy. He strode purposefully towards her, and with a firm but gentle grip, took her by the arm.

“Come with me, quickly. I’ll explain along the way.”

Six seconds later, they were standing inside a station elevator shuttle, plummeting downwards and away from the hangar. Mila became anxious.

“So? You going to tell me what’s happening?”

Gavriel’s eyes met hers like laser beams. The boyish demeanor that he revealed during the presentation of her Ishukone analysis was completely gone.

“When it comes to numbers, you’ve proven yourself to be an exceptional learner,” he said.

“Okay...?” she asked, puzzled. The elevator stopped, and Mila gasped when the doors opened. Before her stood two dozen rugged-looking men and women, armed with rifles and other heavy weaponry slung casually over their shoulders. Gavriel turned away from Mila to face the group of mercenary warriors. Without saying a word, one of them tossed him a rifle and helmet.

Gavriel shoved the weapon into Mila’s hands. “Well, then learning how to use this should be simple for you,” he said.

~

Malkalen V – Moon 1
Lonetrek Region
Ishukone Corporate Headquarters

“Rali...”

He thought he heard someone, but the sensation of his skull being drilled open by a mining laser was so overwhelming that he opted to ignore the voice and continue focusing on his misery.

“Wake up, Rali.”

Annoyed, he reluctantly accepted the fact that someone was talking to him who refused to go away. It was a familiar sounding voice. He guessed it was his wife and rolled over to his other side, pulling a pillow as close to his ear as possible.

“Now, Rali.”

The pillow was forcefully ripped away from his arm. In nearly the same instant that he became incensed, he felt a cold metallic object thrust against his forehead. A very sobering shiver trickled down his spine.

“Turn over onto your back, slowly.”

Rali opened his eyes and found himself staring at the business end of a Rist-11 pistol. He did exactly as he was instructed to.

“There’s a glass of water on your nightstand, plus a few supplements that will sober you up.” The gun backed away from him, and Rali moved his eyes past the 11-millimeter wide barrel pointed at him and focused on the intruder’s face. His jaw dropped. Capri’s expression bore no resemblance to the playful flirt that she was the last time they met.

“Quickly, please,” she said. “You’re going to be late for your meeting, and you’re not ready to face the Board just yet.”

Rali glanced over towards the nightstand. The water and pills were right where she said they would be.

“What’s your reason for being here,” he said, his voice dry and scratchy. “Can’t you just be gone with whatever it is you plan on stealing—“

Capri pulled the slide of the weapon back and lunged forward, jamming the barrel in between his eyes.

“It should be perfectly clear to you by now that if it was your life or possessions that I wanted, they would both be mine by now. What I am here to discuss requires your undivided attention, and this weapon ensures that I have it.”

Rali took a moment to consider just how surreal the situation was. *A gorgeous woman pointing a cannon at my face in my own home. How ridiculous.*

“You can’t escape from here,” he said. “What do you intend to do? You have damned yourself and your future by bringing that weapon into—“

“Some things are worth dying for, Rali.” She pulled away from him and produced a silencer from the back of her belt, screwing it onto the Rist’s barrel. “And I don’t plan on leaving until you see what it is that I’ve come here to show you. Now, swallow those pills and come with me to your study.”

“I really don’t have time for—“

The glass of water next to Rali shattered as the Rist spit a fiery round through it. The bullet continued on into the nightstand, spraying a burst of splinters across the room.

Rali flinched. “What the hell are you—“

The bedding in between his spread-eagle legs began exploding in little puffs of foam padding as Capri walked the rounds closer and closer to his crotch. He began to scream.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Alright already!”

“Rali, please get up and walk to your study,” she asked, calmly.

“Right,” he answered, getting out of bed in a hurry.

~

Forward-Nine

ROIR-V System

Pure Blind Region

“Keep running, Mila,” Gavriel said. “We’re almost there.”

Her legs were starting to burn, and the rifle felt like it weighed a ton. Ahead of her were two mercenaries, jogging slower than they would normally just to stay close to her and Gavriel. The rest of the group was far ahead of them.

“Why...can’t we use the elevator shuttles,” she breathed.

Gavriel talked as if he was exerting all the effort of being seated. “Because Bane’s troops are already in the station, and they can control them from any of the commlink terminals on the hangar concourse. To compensate, we sabotaged the most direct routes to our destination. Now the maintenance tunnels are our only way in.”

“Only way into what,” she gasped.

“One of the station’s grid junctions,” he answered. Mila heard voices down the hall. “The energy generated by the core is routed through them to supply power to different parts of the station. We’re going to see to it that some of those parts are shut down.”

“Which parts?”

“The hangar doors, MGU collars, and all the communication relays linking this station to anything outside of it,” he answered. “Including ships, other stations, and most importantly, the sentry guns.”

They emerged from the hallway into a cavernous, hexagon-shaped chamber with a thick, towering pillar that rose from floor to ceiling in the center. The pillar’s base was 15 meters wide on each side and resembled a socket with enormous, gunmetal-gray colored pipes feeding it from the bottom. The pillar’s cross section was also shaped like a hexagon, and from the middle of each side extended a thinner pipe that spanned the open space and ran into the walls directly across from them, similar to the spokes of a wheel. Maintenance trenches ran beneath each spoke and terminated at the pillar’s base. The mercenaries were working quickly inside of them, setting up heavy weapons along the trench ridges and training them towards the entrances into the chamber. One of the mercenaries noticed Gavriel and jogged up to him.

“Cap’n, we’re about done settin’ up a perimeter and’ll wait for your word to cut power,” he said. “We’ll put down traps and claymores when the lights go out.”

“Excellent work, Sergeant,” Gavriel replied. “You may proceed as soon as Miss Gariushi enters the trench.”

“Wait a minute, why are you going to put down explosives with the lights out?” Mila asked.

“Every kind of sensor you can imagine is embedded within those walls,” said Gavriel, motioning with his rifle. “Optical, infrared, heartbeat sensors, you name it. Bane’s men know exactly where we are because the station is telling them. Showing them where we’re laying traps wouldn’t be very smart, would it.”

“I get the point,” Mila sighed, still trying to catch her breath.

“So, you’re Otro Gariushi’s sister...” The Sergeant’s right eyebrow shot upwards. “It’s an honor to meet you,” he said, nodding slightly before hurrying back down into the trench.

~

Elonaya System

Lonetrek Region

Caldari State Territory

Otro broke his concentration just long enough to consider the irony of his predicament: *Hurting through space in a pod manufactured by the corporation that I declared war against.* The routes to and from Empire space were pre-programmed fixtures in the personalized navigation system of every ship he traveled in, with carefully plotted jumps that put him directly on top of the stargates that he needed to travel between systems. The border crossing at Torrinos was uneventful—seeing pods come through there was hardly an unusual event for the locals—but the deeper he traveled into Empire territory, the greater the risks. Any Ishukone vessel that spotted him would attack without warning, and Bane had undoubtedly alerted the Guristas operating here to be on the lookout for him as well.

Deciding that Elonaya was close enough, Otro warped to one of the system’s moons and started to orbit. *Twenty minutes should have been enough time,* he thought, opening up the communications link.

~

Shock, disgust, and anger were all evident on Rali’s face as the information in the report filed past his eyes. *And perhaps just a little bit of guilt as well,* Capri thought. With her primary mission accomplished, it was time to start planning her exit. The shuttle bay was the only way off the station, and she wasn’t sure if Rali would have to be coerced into escorting her there or not. By far, this was the most dangerous assignment that Mila had ever asked of her. It was also the first time she ever fired a gun outside of a firing range. *I have no idea what this is about,* she thought, *but it had better be worth it.*

“Where...” he finally said. “Did you get all of this?”

“It was given to me by my superiors, and I don’t know what it contains. My job was just to make sure that you read it.”

“What firm are you with?” he demanded, crazy eyed. “Lai Dai? Kaalakiota? Tell me who else knows about this!”

Capri waved the gun. “Settle down, Rali. I don’t work for anyone that you’ve heard of. Think of me as a courier.”

“Capri, I know you’re the one with the gun here, but being associated with that information in any way puts your life in unspeakable danger,” he said. “I sincerely thank you and whoever sent you for bringing it here, but you need to know that what you’ve shown me could have disastrous consequences if it gets into the wrong hands!”

That sounded earnest enough, she thought. All the more reason to get the hell out of here. As she opened her mouth to reply, the commlink on Rali’s desk chirped. When he looked to see who it was, his face went completely pale. He turned back towards Capri and glared at her as if she had just committed an atrocity. “I...should have known you were with the Guristas!”

“Excuse me?” Capri asked, genuinely confused. When she glanced past his shoulders and saw the portrait on the screen behind him, she understood exactly what he meant.

~

Otro’s delivery lasted just over five minutes.

“I need an answer,” he said.

Rali was visibly distressed. Capri was speechless.

“You aren’t giving me much choice in the matter,” Rali finally said. “This is unprecedented blackmail, extortion on a scale greater than anything that I could possibly fathom.”

“And the scale of Les Akkilen’s crimes are the greatest in the history of our race, and possibly all of Eve,” Otro replied. “This is an opportunity to set everything right, and *you* stand to gain the most by taking this chance than anyone else.”

“Me?” Rali asked. “What do I gain from this insanity?”

“You’ll get your pride back, and the respect you deserve from Ishukone and the rest of the Caldari State. And most importantly, you’ll get your family back, if that’s what your heart wants. ”

Rali jolted upright in surprise.

“That’s right, Rali. I know about them as well. It must have been frustrating for you, trading away the privilege of watching your own kids grow up just to keep a bastard like Les Akkilen happy. If you agree to cooperate with me, then I promise that you’ll at least get a fighting chance of not having to spend the rest of your life regretting the choices you’ve made, not to mention the damage that those choices have caused to your family. But before that can happen, that ugly truth is that you have to trust me, *starting right now*, or else everything is lost.”

Rali sat back in his chair, closed his bloodshot eyes for a moment, and took a deep breath. *I’ve worked so hard my entire life*, he thought. *And now this! The crossroads where all of that work has led!*

Otro spoke up one more time. “Seize this opportunity, Rali. *Take it*. There will never be another time like this.”

From somewhere deep in Rali’s mind, where his analytical thinking and reasoning had no domain, a voice of conscience spoke out to him:

There is something undeniably inspiring about someone who has the courage to stand up for what he believes in, no matter what the cost. The fallacy of Rali’s hollow life caught up to him in a sudden, brutal wave of self-awareness:

My God, I’ve been such a fool.

Rali began a slow nod, and then his expression turned to one of hardened determination.

“Give me a few moments to make the necessary preparations, Mr. Gariushi.”

~

Piak IV – Moon 22

Ytiri Storage

Lonetrek Region

“...mix of explosive and electromagnetic pulse heavy ordinance, plus as many thermal and kinetic shield hardening modules that you can accommodate.”

The test pilot was scribbling notes down as fast as he could. “Umm, sure, but isn’t that a little—“

Rali cut him off. “One more thing: You won’t be flying her. A replacement test pilot is en route to your location to relieve you.”

The pilot blinked. “I...have I done something—“

“You have performed the tasks that I have assigned to you with a degree of excellence that is unsurpassed, but an emergency situation has arisen, and I need your continued support in a new role that you are eminently qualified to handle. Consider your current rate tripled, plus a quadruple increase in hazard pay.”

What the hell is going on, thought the pilot. “Thank you sir, but I don’t under—“

“Listen closely to these instructions, and fulfill them with haste: Choose four of your most trusted Blackbird-qualified EW specialists and equip their ships with gravimetric jamming systems and tracking links. They will be flying close escort for the Scorpion-class battleship that I just purchased for you. It is being held in escrow under your name in the same station you’re in.”

Just purchased? The test pilot started to sweat. “Now wait a minute, this is crazy—“

“The Blackbirds are under your command, but your mission is to provide support for the Raven test pilot when he arrives. Effective immediately, you and your escorts are to follow his orders for the duration of the mission that he assigns you to.”

“What’s the mis—“

“And captain, you are still bound to the secrecy clause in our contract. You are *strongly* advised not to break that clause. The contract is not all that will be voided if you fail to comply.”

The pilot gulped. “Understood, sir. May I ask one question?”

“Quickly.”

“What’s the test pilot’s name?”

Rali grimaced before answering.

~

Although she was certainly adept at hand-to-hand combat, Mila had no formal training in military tactics. But she was smart enough to understand that Gavriel had selected this chamber to be his last stand. Bane’s troops would not be able to leave the station once the grid junction was shut down. And if they were careless with the choice of weapons they used for the assault, the resulting damage could potentially trap them inside the station for a very long time. That conclusively ruled out grenades or rockets, at least not inside of the chamber. It was a brilliant strategy, Mila reflected, with its sole vulnerability being that it had a strict time limit. Otro would either produce a miracle within the sixty minutes he asked for, or they would all die waiting for it to happen. There was no escape from here without his help.

She silently went over the crash-course lesson on how to use the assault rifle in her hands: *The gunsight is slaved to the optics system mounted to your helmet, Gavriel had said. The helmet system is electronically linked to the rest of us and has a built-in friend-or-foe targeting system. A targeting reticle will superimpose itself on anything that you’re pointing the rifle towards, so long as you keep*

that helmet on. The system displays “friendlies” with their names superimposed over your vision next to them in green. “Foes” will appear in red. “Unknowns” will appear in yellow. Anything that you point the dot at will be peppered with the 8.5 millimeter tack rounds in the clip of your rifle if you squeeze the trigger, so make sure you know what you’re shooting at. Got it?

Mila was too terrified to answer one way or the other at the time.

The mercenaries set the heavy weapons on top of the trenches facing three of the six entrances to the grid junction. These “mini-sentries” could be set to motion-tracking and fire on anything—up to and including smaller objects thrown into the room—that moved inside their cone of vision. The guns were chain-fed and supplied from ammo canisters kept inside the trench. The gunners could view the kill zone through the same weapon-slave optics system used with the rifles, while staying beneath the cover that the maintenance trenches provided. Exactly half of the chamber was a sentry kill zone—nothing could cross the open space without being shredded by computer-guided machine gun fire. The other half was covered by the mercenaries, who were settling into defensive points facing the vulnerable entrances.

The only way to assault their position, Mila realized, was through trial and error. An attacker wouldn’t know which doors were covered by sentry kill zones, and would most likely have to trade his life just to find out. Gavriel had set the terms of this fight, drawing his enemies towards him and trapping them here to prevent Bane from just detonating the station and being done with it. *Or, Mila thought, at least making him think twice about it.*

When the demolitions specialists indicated they were ready to put the traps down, Gavriel inserted an electronic ID card hanging from his neck into a panel at the base of the pillar. His voice thundered on station’s intercom system.

“Attention, Bane’s troops: In just a few moments, I am going to cut the main power supply to this station. You won’t be able to leave, no ships can come to your rescue, and all subspace communications will be taken offline.”

“Before you commence your assault, ask yourself this: Whose will is this that compels you to raise arms against us? If a man is known to have betrayed once, is it wise to heed his call to battle? Otro Gariushi is not the enemy. The man who sits outside of this station, so eager to put you into harm’s way, is.

“The Guristas crusade against corporate subjugation is a lie, my friends. This is about greed, hidden under the pretense of freedom. This is about a thirst for power that no amount of spilled blood can quench—not mine, not Gariushi’s, not your own, and not the millions of Caldari left stranded on Drenali Seven.

“Their suffering is Bane’s betrayal to *you!* The man you take your orders from embraced Ishukone’s treachery and turned it to his benefit. By granting amnesty to Ishukone, he endorsed the abandonment of your brethren and left countless settlers to die, alone and desperate in the bitter cold.

“I am Caldari, and my blood flows through their veins! My fight is for Otro Gariushi and the future of the Caldari race, and the blood that I spill on this night will be in the name of *hope*. It will be spilled for the death of greed and the end of betrayal. *Woe to the man who challenges me on this battlefield.* Like the settlers of Drenali Seven, that man will know what it means to have no hope before death comes for him:

“He will be alone in the shadows, with his conscience on one side, and the barrel of a gun on the other.”

Gavriel yanked the card out, and with a nod of his head, the mercenaries threw a series of switches in the trenches. Blackness engulfed the chamber immediately.

~

Malkalen V – Moon 1

Ishukone Corporate Headquarters

Lonetrek Region

He’s making this too easy for me, Les Akkilen thought to himself as he checked his watch. *Less than one minute to go, and Rali’s still not here.* Fifteen minutes earlier, Les had nearly fired an aide for suggesting to dispatch security guards to locate Rali. *This could not have possibly worked out better,* he thought, allowing himself a quick smile as his watch ticked off the hour. *Bye-bye, Rali. Been great working with you.*

The guards stepped to the side in unison as the twin doors of the executive conference room opened. Les Akkilen and the other members of his executive team stood up and watched as the Board members filed into the room, one by one, without saying a word. The acting Board president, Zainou Biotech CFO Raurvoras Umokka, was the last to enter.

“Please be seated,” she said. “Let’s get started right away, we have a lot of material to cover.”

“Wait,” interrupted Ahtonen Osmon, the CEO of Hyasyoda Corporation. “Where is Ralirashi?”

Raurvoras looked at the empty seat, visibly annoyed. “Les, what is the explanation for his absence?”

Les did his best to appear disappointed. “The truth is that I do not know where Ralirashi is.” *Time to set him up for the kill*, he thought. “He has not been himself lately, and his performance as CFO lately has been abysmal.”

“The Board does not appreciate having its time wasted, Mr. Akkilen,” Raurvoras said. “Are you prepared to present Ishukone’s financial report in his absence?”

Jackpot. “Indeed I am, Director.”

~

Mila was the only one who jumped when she heard the explosion, but a few of the mercenaries swore under their breath. The unmistakable sound of machine gun bursts followed. The Sergeant’s voice boomed over the earpiece.

“Sentries offline and hold your fire, specialists comin’ over the line!” Breathing fast, Mila held the rifle over the trench ridge and toggled the camera sighting on her helmet. The night vision sensors illuminated her surroundings with an artificial greenish-hue. Moving the rifle as steadily as she could, she began to scan the chamber. She saw someone run out from one of the entrances, sprinting across the open space towards her. The name superimposed next to the running figure spelled “DETRIECH”. He jumped into the trench with her, breathing heavily. Gavriel approached him.

“What happened?” he asked.

“They’re real close, Cap’n,” Detriech breathed as two other specialists jumped inside. “Fuckin’ minesweeper caught me rigging a trap, I had to blow him away. I set off a few charges behind me to give myself more time.”

Gavriel nodded. “Good work, Detriech. Take up position with the others on—“

Two more explosions rocked the grid junction. Mila thought she could hear shouts coming from across the room, towards one of the vulnerable doors. Then, a series of loud machine gun bursts coming from the opposite direction made her heart stop.

“Man down, flatline, Door Six!” someone yelled.

“Cap’n, Specialist Dawson is down!” exclaimed the Sergeant.

“Are the rest of the specialists back in yet?” Gavriel screamed. More gunshots made Mila cringe as she spun towards the trench ridge behind her. Trembling, she raised the weapon over top to see what was happening.

“Dawson would have been the last of em” the Sergeant replied.

“Sentries back online, gunners take your position,” Gavriel yelled. “This is it! If anything moves out there, cut it down!”

Mila moved the weapon in the direction of Door Six and saw Specialist Dawson lying face down on the floor about 30 meters in front of her. Various pieces of equipment and a rifle lie scattered around him. The blood pooling around the corpse looked bright green through the helmet’s eyepiece. She was just about to become overwhelmed with horror when the sentry gun next to her blurted out several rounds. The sound was deafening, and she cowered back down inside the trench.

Hell, she thought. This has to be hell.

~

Ibura System

Torrinos Stargate

Lonetrek Region

The excitement is just killing me, thought Lieutenant Menenden Reppola. *Sitting up here babysitting a stargate watching industrials crawl back and forth*. The Caracal-class cruiser at his command was flying a slow orbit around the gate on a routine patrol. It wasn't a very challenging assignment, and certainly didn't seem to require the years of grueling training that the Caldari Navy subjected its recruits to.

"Inbound," his patrol wingman said. Menenden rotated the camera view and saw the plasma contrails of a ship decelerating from warp.

"Another indy," he acknowledged, for the hundredth time since starting his tour. *This is torture*, he thought, watching the Badger Mark II begin a lazy turn towards the Torrinos stargate.

Maintaining law and order during peacetime was mostly agonizing routines and procedures. For a lucky few, there would be the occasional adrenaline rush that resulted from participating in an attack versus outlaws. Those encounters were very infrequent these days, especially for the Navy. *I suppose that's a sign that all is well here in the Caldari State*, Menenden thought.

"Inbound," his patrol wingman said again. "Multiple ships."

Menenden was a little slow to rotate the camera towards the source of the contrails. *Why bother*, he thought. *This rookie keeps giving me the play-by-play on every garbage hauling indy out there*.

"Four Ishukone Blackbirds, a Scorpion, and... *what the hell is that?*"

Menenden was just starting to adjust the camera when his view of space was suddenly obscured completely. For a moment, he thought his ship had somehow vectored on a collision course with the Torrinos stargate. Panicked, he threw his cruiser into an evasive dive, realizing as the nose tipped over that the colossus before him was another ship. The behemoth vessel made no attempt to maneuver and held course, just clearing the rear quadrant of his Caracal. Five more sets of plasma contrails stopped directly above the Torrinos stargate as the Blackbirds and Scorpion decelerated from warp. They settled alongside the enormous capital ship that had nearly run him over.

Menenden barely had time to regain his composure when the captain of the unidentified ship hailed him.

“Attention Navy vessel: Please contact your commanding officer and have him set up a video feed from your camera drones to this ship. In a few minutes we’ll be conducting live-fire exercises for Ishukone’s latest product in cutting edge capital ship technology.”

A very shocked Lieutenant Reppola observed that the captain speaking to him had a 25 million isk bounty set to his head.

“Act quickly, Lieutenant,” the bountied captain said. “I’m about to turn you into a Navy hero.”

~

“I don’t care how dug in they are or how many casualties you have to take,” Bane fumed. “We are not leaving without Gavriel’s corpse, and if I have to destroy that station to get it, I will. Do not fail me, Commander!”

There was a pause before the response came. “Yes, sir.”

Bane terminated the radio communication with his troops aboard Forward-Nine and switched channels. “Scouting team, report.”

An impatient voice spoke up. “Sir, we have strike teams in position at Niner India, Echo Charlie, and Papa Three. We’ve covered the entire Empire border with our pattern and are expanding north towards the boundaries of Pure Blind. If he ran south, he hasn’t been sighted by any of our assets on the inside yet.”

“Continue to expand your search grid and report in ten minutes, Captain.”

“Yes—” Bane shut down the comm before the pilot could finish. Then he composed a message to Otro:

Death is upon your traitorous mentor, boy. He will die remembering you as a coward, who abandoned him in his time of need.

Again, the response came within a minute:

Gavriel is my friend. You were always the mentor, Bane. And death is certainly upon you.

~

CHAPTER SIX

OMENS



Malkalen V – Moon 1

Lonetrek Region

Ishukone Corporate Headquarters

Executive Conference Room, Level 25

Les was just about to complete his ad-hoc summary presentation to the Board when the twin doors suddenly flung open, prompting the guards to whirl towards the new arrivals with their weapons drawn. Rali strode right past them, with Capri close on his heels.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen,” Rali said, waltzing by his empty chair and marching directly towards the holoprojector controls at the head of the room. “I have some important announcements to make, and time is short. Joining me in just—”

Raurvoras Umokka’s temper flared. “*Just* who the hell do you think you are, Ralirashi,” she growled. “And what in the Maker’s name is that all over your jacket, why are you twenty minutes late, and who is this person with you?”

Rali looked down and realized that he hadn't changed his Ishukone business uniform from last evening, and that some remnants of his regurgitated dinner were still apparent. He shrugged.

"This is my new personal assistant, Capri Henjska," he answered. Capri waved at the group, looking sheepish. "And these spots on my jacket are something akin to protein delicacies, I believe."

The Board members started muttering among themselves, and both Les and Ahtonen threw their hands in the air in disgust. Les seized the opportunity to go right for the jugular.

"You see what I have to deal with, Director? Personally, I think he should be committed."

"I'm going to put a stop to this right now," she snapped back, her face ashen. "Guards, please escort Mr. Okimo and his 'assistant' out of the room. *Now.*"

The guards began moving forward. "Mr. Okimo, please come with us."

Rali held his ground. "I thought I warned you, Director, that time was short."

Just when she was about to reply, a loud tone emanated from the conference table speaker. "Ms. Umokka, Admiral Iella of the Caldari Navy is on the line. He says it's urgent, and that he needs to speak with Mr. Okimo."

The Board members exchanged puzzled looks, while the guards turned back to Raurvoras for an answer. Before she could give them one, Rali spoke up.

"Thank you very much, Maura. Please put the Admiral through on the view screen in here."

"Yes, sir," the secretary responded. To everyone's surprise, the security commander of the Caldari Navy was now an attendee of their private Board meeting. The guards backed away from Rali. Open jaws around the conference room snapped shut as the Admiral spoke.

"Good morning, Ishukone," the gruff voice said. "What's all the commotion about?"

“Good morning Admiral, and thank you for joining us on such short notice,” Rali said. “Today is going to be a breakthrough day for Ishukone, the Caldari Navy, and in fact the entire Caldari State, and I wanted all of you to witness this glorious occasion firsthand.”

Rali pulled a disk out of his pocket and started waving it in front of the group. Raurvoras looked nauseous.

“The contents of this disk will change your entire perspective of Ishukone, Director. Indeed, it will change all of your views.” He stared directly at Les Akkilen. “Oh, how Ishukone has just *prospered* under your leadership, sir.”

Rali placed the disk on the conference room table. “But we’ll save the best for last. First, I would like to introduce to you Ishukone’s greatest innovation yet: The Raven-class battleship. Lights!” The room automatically dimmed, and the holoprojector began casting a live, three dimensional image of the prototype capital ship as seen from the camera drones orbiting Lieutenant Reppola’s Caracal. The Raven’s majestic image was almost as large as the table itself. Some gasps went around the room. Les appeared confused.

“Incorporating all of the very latest in cutting edge starship engineering and weapons technology, the Raven is the ultimate symbol of Caldari might and Ishukone pride,” Rali said, savoring the astonished looks of the Board members. “When we set out to design her, our goal was to unseat Lai Dai’s Scorpion as the State’s flagship. It is my personal belief that we have achieved that, and my objective today is to make believers out of the rest of you as well.”

The Navy Admiral looked impressed. “That’s some damn fine work there, Ishukone,” he said. “She looks like she was made to project power. What kind of weaponry—“

Rali took great pleasure in waving off one of the highest-ranking members of the Caldari elite. “Admiral, I’ll be pleased to answer any questions *after* our demonstration,” he said. “But for now, I think it would be best to let the Raven’s power speak for itself.”

The image pulled back to reveal the fleet of ships clustered above the EC-P8R stargate in Torrinos. Rali continued.

“As you can see, our test pilot and accompanying research vessels are preparing to cross the border into unregulated space. In order for us to continue broadcasting, you’ll need to authorize Lieutenant Reppola’s transit across the line.”

The Admiral frowned. “Is that absolutely necessary? Can’t a suitable—”

Rali interrupted him again. “The most effective and economical means of conducting live-fire exercises in the name of assessing naval combat prowess is by testing against live *enemy* targets, Admiral. Would you have me destroy some of the Navy’s ships instead?”

It was Ahtonen’s turn to look ill, and Capri cleared her throat. Rali didn’t flinch, and kept up his persistence. “Admiral, the clock is ticking.”

“Fine,” he muttered, turning a little red. “Lieutenant Reppola, you are authorized to transit into Echo-Charlie-Papa-Eight-Romeo. Your primary mission is to maintain your broadcast via this feed. You will be acting independently under the Navy’s jurisdiction for the duration of this assignment, after which time you will immediately return to Torrinos for debriefing. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” a scratchy voice replied over the conference room speakers. The response was quickly followed by a second interruption from Raurvoras’s secretary.

“Mr. Okimo, there’s another urgent incoming message from—”

“Put him right through,” Rali answered, smiling broadly. A new voice was heard on the speakers.

“This is your Raven test pilot speaking. Lieutenant Reppola will be under my direct command once we cross, and he will follow *my* orders once ‘testing’ commences. In the name of both his own safety and that of his crew, there will be no exceptions to that condition. Is that clear?”

Admiral Iella lost his temper. “Who the hell is this? Do you have any idea who I am?”

“Of course, Admiral,” Otro replied. “And I’m certain that you know who *I* am as well.”

Jaws dropped around the table again as the name “Otro Gariushi” appeared on the conference call attendance list. No one could believe that Ishukone’s most wanted criminal was now a participating member of their Board meeting. Admiral Iella’s eyes were bulging out of their sockets.

Otro continued. “Lieutenant Reppola’s safety is now my responsibility. You have my word that I’ll do everything in my power to make sure that he returns in one piece. For now, your job is to decide if the Raven has a place in the Caldari Navy. Do not take that task lightly, Admiral. The future of the Caldari State rests on your decision.”

Otro’s name disappeared from the attendance list, and the Board members squinted as the fleet of ships entered the stargate.

~

Forward Nine Perimeter

ROIR-Y System

Pure Blind Region

“Bane,” the voice said. “You told me this would be over with quickly.”

“I know what I said, Fatal,” snapped Bane. “In just a few moments, I’ll have Gavriel.”

“And the presence of strike fleets at the southern crossings implies that you’ve lost Gariushi,” Fatal growled. “How many more ships will you need to capture one man?”

“*As many as it fucking takes!*” Bane shouted. The comm channel with his Echo-Charlie strike fleet commander began flashing, but he ignored it so he could continue his tirade against Fatal. “I am nearly thrice your years, boy, and I won’t be spoken to like some kind of subordinate piss officer. Now, I promised you two corpses, and you will have them both within the hour!”

Bane shut down the commlink with Fatal and switched to the blinking channel. “What is it this time, Commander?”

The voice was frantic. “We’re under attack! Combined elements from Ishukone, Navy, and rebel Guristas ships! Please advise!”

“Commander, I specifically ordered you *not* to cross into Empire space! Who authorized—”

The Guristas commander cut him off. “We’re still on the Echo-Charlie side, sir! They came to us!”

Impossible, thought Bane. *Ishukone, Guristas, and Navy forces combining and then crossing the border? Clearly this man has lost his mind!*

“*What the hell is that thing?*” the commander shouted. “We are getting *killed* out here! We have to withdraw, Admiral! Advise, goddamnit!”

“What are you talking about,” Bane shouted back. “Get a hold of yourself, man! Report on the situation!”

“It’s Gariushi! He’s the one leading the strike, and I’ve never seen that... oh, my God—”

The Echo-Charlie commander’s line went dead.

~

Raurvoras drew her gaze away from the holographic display to look at the faces in the darkened room. All wore expressions of amazement, even delight, at the destruction unfolding in front of them. The Raven reminded her of stories in ancient mythology, when warriors known as “archers” ignited the tips of their arrows and launched them from range into the thick of advancing armies to spread fire and chaos among their ranks. Another bright flash drew a series of gasps in the room as a procession of torpedoes launched from the Raven converged and detonated on a Guristas Ascriber, destroying it in a single volley. The battle was brutally lopsided. The Guristas were completely unprepared to face a behemoth like the Raven, let alone an attack from such a diverse force.

And this Otro Gariushi! What was he doing, and for how long has he had the trust of Ralirashi Okimo? I was the one who approved the 25 million isk bounty for his corpse, and now here I am watching him lead Ishukone and Navy ships in an attack against the Guristas! His crimes against Ishukone are

notorious, but this display of leadership is remarkable, if not legendary. Regardless of the Raven's power, how else could he unite such opposite forces in combat against such a formidable enemy!

Another flash of light illuminated the room as the detonations from Mjolnir torpedoes shredded the shields and armor of a Guristas Exterminator. A barrage of railfire and heavy missiles from the rest of Otro's fleet pulverized the doomed cruiser moments later, adding another wreck to the graveyard of shattered Guristas warships littering the space around the Torrinos jumpgate. The battle was over, and as far as Raurvoras could tell, Gariushi's fleet did not suffer a single casualty.

The men and women seated around the table were shaking their heads in awe. *All except for Les Akkilen, in whom I sense genuine fear for some reason*, Raurvoras thought. Les was always one to take immediate credit for any accomplishment that shed Ishukone in a positive light, and yet he had mentioned nothing about this remarkable technology to the Board during his briefing. She looked over at Rali's buxom "assistant", who had yet to speak and looked just as nervous as Les did. Rali, on the other hand, looked angry. *Determined*. It was such a sharp contradiction to the Rali that she thought she knew. He had always been so meek, so timid, so subservient to Les and anyone else who managed to intimidate him. *And yet today he had put some of the most respected and feared elites of Caldari society in their place, and had done it several times in the same meeting!*

Her eyes found the disk lying on the table close to where Rali was standing. *What the hell did he mean by "changing my perspective of Ishukone?"*

~

Fatal was so angry that he began to tremble. *The price I pay for dealing with Bane is far exceeding the worth of his contributions here*, he thought. *His age is showing with his decision-making. No matter how many cybernetic implants he uses to slow down the aging process, his mind continues to rot.*

The commlink began flashing. It was Otro Gariushi, and Fatal just watched it blink, unsure if he should answer it. Letting the comm request hang, a message appeared in his inbox after a few moments:

The Raven just passed its first combat trials in EC-P8R at the expense of a Guristas strike fleet. Are you interested in making a deal, or shall I move on to the next strike fleet?

Stunned, Fatal read the message a second time. His spies had told him that a single Raven prototype was constructed, and was so hyper secret that even the Navy was unaware of its existence. *Am I to really believe that Otro simply walked into a hangar somewhere and stole it? Impossible!* Another commlink channel began flashing: It was the EC-P8R strike fleet commander under Bane's command. Fatal answered it immediately.

"What is it, Commander."

The voice was scratchy. "Sir, my fleet has been destroyed, and I am in a webbed and warp-scrambled pod near the Torrinos gate on the Echo-Charlie side. I have been instructed by my captors to contact you directly and feed camera drone footage taken from my ship before its destruction to your location. Standby to receive."

Fatal's hands rolled into tight fists. "Very well, Commander. Awaiting transmission."

After watching thirty seconds of video, Fatal answered the open commlink channel with Otro.

~

"I take it you like what you've seen so far, Fatal," said Otro. "Your commander will be released unharmed for his cooperation."

"What is it that you want," came the response. "In exchange for that ship."

"Its fair market value, with the following caveat," Otro replied. "As you already know, this battleship is the only one of its kind, and I have the only blueprint in existence for it. You will never see either if you violate any part of the agreement I'm about to offer."

"I'm listening," Fatal replied.

Otro explained his conditions and execution plan. "Finally, Bane has sent troops into Forward Nine to capture Gavriel and his close associate Mila. I want their assault called off immediately. Doing so will demonstrate your good faith in pursuing this deal."

“Standby.” There was a one-minute pause before a reply came back: “Impossible.”

Otro’s stomach turned over. “Why not?”

“Because the station comm relays have been disabled from the inside, and the only way to communicate with them directly is by radio.”

Otro controlled his urge to panic. “Well, why don’t you just order Bane—”

“He refused,” Fatal answered. “And I’m on my way there right now to correct that.”

“You’d better come alone—” Otro started.

“Don’t push your luck, Gariushi,” Fatal growled. “You’ve already played your best cards.”

The line went dead. Otro set course for the ROIR-Y system and announced deployment instructions to the rest of his fleet.

~

“Absolutely not!” Admiral Iella yelled. “I will *not* authorize Lieutenant Reppola to go any deeper into unregulated space. This is an outrage! A pirate leading Navy forces into combat—”

“—is hardly unusual considering that the Guristas Cartel is comprised mostly of ex-Navy personnel,” Otro said, continuing for the Admiral in mid-sentence. “I would think that this kind of operation is routine for you by now.”

Admiral Iella shook his head, visibly angry. “You son of a bitch, when I find you—”

“—you’ll shake my hand and thank me for doing the Navy such a great service by field testing its new flagship and collecting the greatest bounty the Caldari Navy has ever issued.”

“What the hell are you talking about now—”

“I’m talking about bringing you the head of Admiral Bane, whose command you once served under.”

Admiral Iella balked. All eyes in the room were focused on him now.

Otro continued. “Besides Fatal himself, I don’t believe that any one man caused more damage to the Navy than Bane did, with his defection to the Guristas, the personnel he took with him, the officers that he betrayed, and the technology that he stole. I think that killing him should be enough to earn your respect. After all, the Navy has been trying to get him for years now, including yourself if I’m not mistaken.”

Rali spoke up for the first time since the battle at EC-P8R began. “And how did the Raven perform in combat, Commander Gariushi?”

“I think the decisive outcome of the battle you just witnessed speaks for itself,” Otro replied. “She has exceeded my highest expectations. You have done remarkable work, Mr. Okimo. The Raven is a brilliant masterpiece of engineering, and it will command a hefty price tag in the open market.”

There were several simultaneous objections in the room. Admiral Iella spoke the loudest. “That ship is classified military technology, you can’t sell—”

“—that which the Caldari Navy does not yet own?” Otro interrupted. “It seems that most of the Navy’s so-called ‘classified’ military technology is already for sale on the open market, Admiral. The Raven will be no different.”

“That ship is the property of the Ishukone Coporation,” Les said. Everyone in the room turned towards him. “The decision of how it is marketed will be determined by this Board, not by—”

“*You have no say in any of this,*” Rali shouted. “I think your supreme incompetence has already done enough to— ”

“Not yet, Mr. Okimo,” Otro cautioned. Both Les and Rali were livid, and the Board members alternated confused stares between the two. “We’ll address Mr. Akkilen’s interesting perspective on the financial status of Ishukone as soon as we conclude the final test for the Raven.”

“Another test?” asked Raurvoras. “I think we’re all thoroughly convinced of this ship’s power.”

“This one will seal a few deals,” Otro replied. “And dispense any remaining doubts among you about my intentions. Trust me, reestablishing Ishukone’s preeminence within the Caldari State is my goal here. But a word of advice to all of you: Keep Mr. Akkilen someplace where you can see him. He might already be having second thoughts about staying for the duration of this meeting.”

Ahtonen leaned forward on the table. “What is it exactly that you are implying, Mr. Gariushi?”

The commlink connection dropped, and the room erupted into a frenzied discussion. Rali and several other Board members glared at Les, who returned the stares and then focused on the disk.

~

C8-CHY System

ROIR-Y Stargate

Fade Region

“Bane,” Fatal said. “Effectively immediately, you are stripped of your command. The remaining strike fleets assembled at the Empire crossings have been recalled, and your scouts have been retasked. This is my last warning: Call off your infantry assault on Forward Nine and report back to Six-November. We can talk about what happened later, but as of right now your hunting op is over.”

“The day that I obey one of your orders,” Bane replied. “Is the day that I decide to end myself. You have no right to interfere in my personal affairs. Those corpses will be mine, Fatal, and nothing you can say or do will prevent me from getting them.”

“So be it, Bane.” *That makes this decision simple*, Fatal thought as he dropped the connection. *Getting the Raven at the expense of the old man is a bargain.*

~

Forward Nine
ROIR-Y System
Pure Blind Region

Another mercenary fell in a mangled heap, this one with half of his skull missing. Even as bullets snapped just above her own head, Mila watched in numbed terror as the dead man's leg twitched in spasms. "OSA" was this mercenary's name, and it confused Mila that he was very much alive and fighting for his life a moment earlier. The bottom of the trench where she crouched was smeared in blood, and she found herself unable to remove her gaze from the growing puddle around the dead man's shattered helmet.

The mercenaries were no longer firing their weapons as often as they were earlier in the fight, and she had not felt the eardrum-crushing blasts of the sentry guns in some time. In the fog of her traumatized mind, she accepted the realization that the end was near.

I did the best I could with the time I had, Mila thought. I wish my little brother well.

She felt a wet hand on her shoulder, turned and saw Gavriel slumped beside her. The brave man was saying something, and appeared calm as he spoke despite the hell surrounding them. He was having trouble breathing, and she noticed that the body armor covering his chest was shattered. Blood flowed from beneath it. She had trouble hearing, but she nevertheless understood the words coming from his mouth:

"I am so sorry for failing you, Mila."

Still wearing a helmet, Mila realized there were dozens of red-colored targets surrounding them. She looked at the rifle lying across her lap, long since rendered useless after a mercenary took away its clip when his own ammunition was depleted. *These angry men, whoever they are, Mila sensed, are capable of great evil.* She saw them drag the Sergeant out in front of where Gavriel and her were seated and drop him onto the trench floor. Both his hands and legs were bound. Lying on his stomach and grievously injured, he managed to turn his head and face Mila. He was bleeding from his mouth, and his expression was one of sadness. One of the red targets stepped onto his back with a heavy boot and pulled out a pistol, taking aim at the back of the Sergeant's head. Once again, she could read the Sergeant's lips and understand his last words:

“Better cover her eyes, Cap’n.”

~

Word that the Echo-Charlie strike fleet had been decimated by Otro Gariushi spread quickly throughout the ranks of the Guristas. Admiral Bane’s plan to apprehend the traitors had gone horribly wrong, and people were dying unnecessarily because of it. Complicating matters even more were ominous rumors that Gariushi controlled an invincible fleet supported by a new super capital ship with devastating firepower.

Fatal’s decision to relieve Bane of his command was welcomed by all the Guristas. Many suspected that he had gone mad, and no one was surprised to hear that the old man refused to abdicate. Fatal gave his officers strict orders to force the issue with Bane once and for all.

At nearly the same instant when the troops aboard Forward Nine restored power, Bane was ambushed by his own escorts. Despite a torrent of vicious threats and a powerful counterattack that claimed the life of a Blackbird captain, the Scorpion’s warp drive and targeting sensors were quickly overwhelmed. Moments later, an armada of Guristas warships arrived and completed the total immobilization of his battleship. Fatal’s commands boomed on the local frequency:

“Attention Guristas infantry aboard Forward Nine: This is Fatal speaking. Admiral Bane has been relieved of his command. Gather your dead and wounded, return to your transport and wait for my instructions. You are to leave the two prisoners behind as they are—walk away from them both right now. Failure to comply will result in the immediate execution of both you and your family. Do not test me as you have with Bane. His days as a commander in our brotherhood are over.”

Unable to withstand this final act of betrayal, Bane’s decaying sanity was at last shattered, and his mind collapsed into a wicked psychosis. Streams of incoherent madness and fiendish laughter were broadcast openly on the local channel. Even as Bane’s former escorts maintained their blistering electronic warfare assault, they became fearful for their lives. The twisting, squirming Scorpion reminded them of a rabid animal held in check by a length of chain that ended just short of their necks.

The arrival of a second fleet drew their attention away. Within moments, the camera drones of every ship in the Guristas armada were focused on a mighty vessel that no one had ever seen before.

~

Lieutenant Reppola nearly choked when his Caracal decelerated to impulse speed. Spread out before him were over one hundred Guristas warships orbiting an uncharted station. All four of its sentry guns were tracking his ship. Several enemy frigates took up assault positions just behind him, but did not actively target. Then he noticed a lone Scorpion, bathed in a bluish web, struggling next to the station. Tuning to the local frequency, he was shocked to see Admiral Bane's name and the madness that he was openly broadcasting. Commander Gariushi's comm channel began flashing.

"Make sure you patch this local channel into your camera drone feed, Lieutenant. Listen, you've done a great service for the Caldari State. If I die in the next few minutes, do not make any attempt to save your ship. You can't win against these odds, and you won't be able to run. Instead, plan an escape route for your pod now, and make sure you're in warp the second your Caracal detonates." Otro paused a moment. "It's been an honor working with you, Menenden. If we both survive this, I promise that you'll be taken care of."

The channel clicked off, and the Lieutenant quickly did as he was told.

~

Fatal dialed into the frequency that Otro provided to him.

"So good to be in the company of my fellow Ishukone and Caldari Navy colleagues," he started, pausing just for a moment to enjoy the shocked expressions of the Board members and Admiral Iella. "Let's get down to business, shall we? The only thing keeping me from disposing of Mr. Gariushi and his assorted mix of deranged comrades is the Raven battleship at his command. That ship is the only one of its kind, correct?"

Rali cleared his throat before answering. "That is correct."

“Ah, Mr. Okimo. I’m very impressed with your work, even more so with your ability to hide the Raven’s existence from Mr. Akkilen. Isn’t that something, Les? Strange that he was able to keep such an epic achievement away from us all this time, don’t you think?”

“There is no ‘us’, and I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Les answered, feeling the stares of the room bore into his flesh.

Fatal laughed. “I wasn’t aware that you failed to mention our partnership to the Board. Well, ladies and gentlemen, the truth is that Ishukone has been working closely with the cartel for some time. Surely none of you believed that your company’s wondrous financial turnaround is due to his alleged business savvy? By far, Les is the most incompetent CEO that Ishukone has ever—”

“I don’t have to listen to this,” Akkilen said, rising from the table and moving towards the room’s exit. Capri stepped into his path to prevent him from passing. Les was flustered nearly to the point of panic. “This is an absolute outrage, and—”

“Guards, restrain Mr. Akkilen and escort him back to his seat,” Raurvoras growled. “And make sure he stays there.”

“I might add that this relationship has been quite generous to the Guristas,” Fatal continued, this time sounding very serious. “However, I believe the time has come to end it. But one final transaction remains: The acquisition of a Raven patent.”

Admiral Iella looked as though he might jump through the screen. “Never! I have the legal authority to put a stop to this—”

“*Reality*,” Fatal shouted, then spoke in a calm voice again. “It is a bitch, isn’t it? In unregulated space, dearest Admiral, you don’t have the ‘authority’ to do a goddamn thing. Now, before you overstep your bounds again, here is my offer: If the Raven can beat Bane’s Scorpion in a straight duel, I will pay the Ishukone Corporation no less than half a trillion isk, cash, payable upon receipt and verification of the Raven patent. And if it can’t...well, then this meeting has been a complete waste of my time. Do we have a deal?”

Ahtonen looked astonished. “Did you say half a *trillion* isk?”

“A paltry amount compared to what I’ve taken from you,” Fatal replied.

Admiral Iella was sweating. “I should think that Ishukone would offer the Navy a more reasonable price.”

“Don’t count on it, Admiral,” Fatal replied.

~

The space surrounding Forward Nine was now an arena, and its two gladiators floated 25 kilometers opposite from each other, basking in the glow of warp scramblers. Fatal had all but ensured that only one ship would survive this fight. Otro’s fleet was positioned about 30 kilometers away from the station, and about 60 kilometers away from Guristas fleet. All those present were about to become spectators to the final combat trial of the Raven prototype.

“Bane,” Otro said on the local. “I’m here.”

“My bastard child protǎgǎ,” the deranged voice answered. “Why have you forsaken me?”

“For lying to me all these years,” Otro replied. “About giving people hope.”

Bane laughed like a madman. “No one told you that I am god? That I granteth and taketh away anything that I choose?”

“You’re a sick man, Bane. And I’ve come to put you out of your misery.”

“Can you hear them screaming, boy? Your mother and father are here with me in hell, burning, burning, *burning*. Their souls belong to me, you know. I can reunite you with them if you wish, for I am a forgiving god. All you need is to repent for your sins.”

“The only thing that I will repent for,” Otro said as he started to lock up Bane’s ship. “Is that I didn’t kill you sooner.”

“Insolent, ungrateful bastard child, you will be made to understand the err of your ways, for a god can only forgive so many times...”

~

“Wait,” Raurvoras said. “Before those two start shooting at each other, what’s so important about that disk?”

“Its contents will show you the real financial state of Ishukone,” Rali said. “And quantify the amount of Caldari blood on all of our hands.”

“What the hell are you talking about, Rali” Ahtonen demanded.

Rali was trembling with rage, and had to make a concerted effort to remain calm as he spoke. “The partnership between *that man* and the Guristas is real. Les gave them stolen competitor shipping itineraries in exchange for operational immunity and free passage of our ships in the northern regions.”

“*What?*” Raurvoras exclaimed. “Don’t even pretend—”

“It’s all documented right there,” Rali said. “The Ishukone name is tied directly to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Caldari State citizens and the theft or destruction of trillions of isk worth of ships and equipment. This is the financial brilliance of the man that Caldari politics assigned to the post of CEO.”

Les’s face and neck were bright red. “You can’t prove any of this, you little—”

“*It’s already proven, you stupid son of a bitch,*” Rali exploded. “*Do you ever listen to a goddamn thing I say?*”

Ahtonen grabbed the disk and slammed it into the bay on the conference room table. The summary findings screen was the first to display. After a just a few seconds of widening eyes and collective gasps, the Board members all looked as if they might faint.

“My *God,*” Raurvoras breathed. “This can’t possibly be true.”

Rali shook his head. “Every single person in this room shares an equal amount of responsibility. And you, Admiral Iella, will have to deal with the inevitable civil war that will tear the Caldari State apart when this information is released.”

“Released? Have you lost your fucking mind?” the Admiral nearly yelled. “That information isn’t going to leave this room! I’m going to assign a Navy secrecy mandate to each and every one of—”

“Spare me the legal rhetoric, Admiral,” Rali interrupted. “There are copies of that information sitting in escrow at the headquarter stations of each and every corporation you see there, not to mention at the Amarr, Minmatar, and Gallente consulates in Yulai. It’s just a matter of notifying any officer in those organizations that the item is waiting for them.”

“How much does Gariushi want for his secrecy,” Raurvoras asked. “Any price that he wants is accept—”

“Raurvoras, *think*. It’s not money that he’s after,” Rali said. “He wants this corporation to fix the damage that it’s caused to the Caldari State, and to establish legitimacy to the Ishukone name. He’s a true Caldari patriot, the kind that knows the steep price that *must* be paid when making the difficult, but *right* decisions for the betterment of not just this corporation, but for our entire race as well.”

“But what he’s doing doesn’t make any sense,” Admiral Iella pleaded. “Releasing that information to the public is going to make things infinitely worse—”

“That’s the plan of last resort, Admiral,” Rali said. “I told you already, his goal is to fix this murderous disgrace of a corporation, and he doesn’t trust anyone except himself to get the job done. And the honest truth is, I agree with him.”

Ahtonen clasped his forehead. “You’re not seriously suggesting what I think you just did.”

Rali looked right at him with a deadpan expression. “We are all up to our necks in rocket fuel, and Otro Gariushi is the only one with any matches. He wants Les Akkilen’s job, and that disk ensures he has it.”

A bright flash startled everyone as the 425-millimeter rails on Bane's Scorpion opened fire on the Raven. The exhaust plumes from half a dozen torpedoes began crossing the table in front of the Board members.

Raurvoras looked a little distant at first, but then began nodding her head. "The Board will now introduce a new measure for vote," she said. "The topic is whether or not to relieve Les Akkilen from the post of Ishukone CEO."

All but Akkilen and his aides answered in unison.

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The angry men had left quickly and without warning just after the lights came back on. Gavriel was unconscious, savagely beaten by the Guristas soldiers right up until the point they were ordered to leave. Mila, covered in blood and pieces of flesh that were not her own, dragged herself to where Gavriel was lying. His face, grotesquely swollen and battered, was no longer recognizable. Ripping her own helmet off, she put her face close to Gavriel's, and felt short, labored wheezes against her skin. Blood continued to ooze steadily from the shattered chest armor, and his pulse was very faint. She knew that the armor shards puncturing his chest were probably keeping him from bleeding much faster, and opted against trying to remove the vest. Death was struggling to take Gavriel away from her, and Mila was desperate to find a way to stop it.

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Come on, already, Otro thought as he waited an eternity for more torpedoes to load into his siege launchers. With the last of his EMP weapons on their way to detonation against Bane's Scorpion, he was down to the conventional ordinance left in his hold. He hoped that it would be enough to finish the job, and winced as the last of his own shields were obliterated by another one of Bane's powerful rail salvos. For the spectators observing, both ships had absorbed an enormous amount of punishment, and it was difficult to tell which one was ahead in the fight.

The voice on the local channel completely caught Otro by surprise: "Hello? Is anybody out there?"

“*Mila!*” Otro exclaimed, distracted from the explosions now rocking his ship from a pair of Bane’s cruise missiles. “Just hang in there—”

“Otro please, send help,” she breathed. “Gavriel is dying, if he doesn’t get help quickly—”

Bane began his sinister laughing again. “Let him die! Rip the beating heart from his chest and bring it to me, I want to devour it—”

“*Shut your goddamn mouth, Bane,*” Otro snarled, firing off six torpedoes. “Fatal, there must be medics aboard the transport that you can—”

“—do what, exactly? Allow you to add more terms to this deal, Gariushi?” Fatal chided. “I don’t think so. I am adhering strictly to what we agreed to—no more, no less.”

Six gigantic explosions blossomed against Bane’s Scorpion, violently tossing the ship different directions and obliterating huge sections of its armor. The battleship’s mighty shields had finally been breached.

“Fatal, please, in the name of humanity, send the man some help—” Otro pleaded, feeling walls of dread close in on him even as he unleashed another round of torpedoes.

“‘Humanity’? As in begging for the life of one man while simultaneously killing another?” Fatal said, his voice as cold as ice. “Very well, Otro. I’ll renegotiate: Eject from your ship, and I will dispatch medics to aid Gavriel. Those are my terms, and they are not negotiable.”

Otro had never known such rage and despair. “You sadistic bastard, Fatal—”

“*An answer, Gariushi,*” Fatal shouted. “*Yes...or no?*”

A maniacal scream overwhelmed the local channel as the next six torpedoes ripped into the Scorpion’s structure. Bane knew that he could not win, and that he would not live to see either of his betrayers perish before himself. Uncontrollable fires swept across his battleship as it pitched and yawed in a futile effort to remain steady. The next volley of torpedoes, harbingers of death already in flight, would be the last. Otro watched their bright contrails arc through the blackness, reluctantly accepting the

ruthless choice that fate had imposed on him. *My soul will agonize over this for as long as I live*, Otro thought before giving his answer to Fatal:

“No...”

The battered Scorpion shuddered for a moment, then disintegrated in an epic explosion as the torpedo warheads found the battleship’s reactor core. A single pod, visible on Otro’s sensors for just a fraction of a second, was caught in the shockwaves of the final detonations and broke apart. Bane’s corpse, part frozen, part carbonized, floated among the mangled debris. The Raven was victorious.

“You are my enemy,” Fatal said. “But you have earned my respect. The terms of our deal stand. I have sent you a station location. Leave the original Raven patent in escrow there for the price that we agreed to.”

Otro was shivering too violently to answer. He saw a Guristas troop transport exit the hangar of Forward Nine. The frigates warp scrambling his ship released their targeting locks and flew towards Fatal’s armada.

“You have one hour to leave this space, after which time my fleet will consider you and all non-Guristas vessels kill-on-sight. You have my word that until then, no Guristas warships will challenge you for the duration of your journey. And once you cross into Empire space, Otro, do not ever return.”

One by one, the ships of the Guristas armada disappeared, leaving Forward Nine behind them. Otro Gariushi, still trembling and feeling much older, set course to dock with the station. The ships of the Ishukone Corporation, Caldari Navy, and ex-Guristas pirate cartel followed in close formation.

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Mila sat in the trench, rocking slowly back and forth with Gavriel’s fractured body lying across her lap. As tears streamed down her face, she quietly sang old songs that she remembered her mother used to sing to her as a child. She hoped they were as comforting to him now as they were to her back then, decades earlier when innocence was all she knew.

She did not hear Otro approach, nor did she recognize the uniformed men who were with him. Otro's mouth was quivering, but he remained speechless. In fact, all of the men appeared overwhelmed with grief, for they had never witnessed a scene of such unspeakable carnage and devastation. Otro knelt beside his sister, trying to determine if the blood all over her was her own. Then he looked down at Gavriel, gently taking his wrist to feel for a pulse.

The labored breaths became much shallower, and Otro felt Gavriel's hand squeeze his own ever so slightly. An odd sound came from his throat. Otro leaned closer to him, horrified at the pain that his good friend was in and unable to control his emotions any longer.

Otro heard Gavriel whisper the word "Hope" just before the pulse in his wrist disappeared.

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EPILOGUE

...BUT STILL WE GO ON

Les Akkilen died less than 48 hours after the Board vote that removed him from power. According to the Ishukone Watch Coroner's Office, the official cause of death was a massive drug overdose. Akkilen's apparent crash addiction was not a surprising revelation to the public, and seemed befitting of a corporate elite known for his raucous celebrations and decadent lifestyle. The news of his demise and its scandalous circumstances caused uproar in the Caldari State, sending financial markets into upheaval. When Jussal Akkilen was passed over by the Board of Directors for the vacant post of CEO, matters became even worse.

Very little was known about Otro Gariushi within Empire Space. The Caldari elite openly condemned the Board of Directors for their unanimous decision to appoint another inexperienced candidate as Ishukone's new CEO. Immediately, rumors of an alleged criminal past and a 25 million-isk bounty for his head surfaced. Renowned bounty hunters interviewed by the press swore that the reward for Gariushi's corpse was real just a short time ago, but had since been rescinded. It was, they said, as if the bounty never existed in the first place. Both Ishukone and the Caldari Navy—who rarely issues public appeals on behalf of corporations—adamantly denied those reports, suggesting they were the work of a “character-smearing campaign launched by one of Ishukone's competitors”.

In a moving inaugural address to Ishukone employees that was broadcast throughout the State, Otro asserted himself as a natural leader and announced a new corporate mission to put the State's needs ahead of Ishukone's. The introduction of the Raven battleship during his speech literally reversed the freefall of Ishukone stock, as investors correctly speculated that patent sales alone would net the company billions—if not trillions—of isk in revenue. In the weeks following that historic day, he quickly earned himself a reputation as a “Caldari First” leader, winning the respect of rival corporations and mending the bitterness caused by his predecessor.

Otro's remarkable work ethic continued to impress the Caldari elite. After stabilizing the political environment with competitors, he announced the immediate shutdown of all mining operations in Fade. In the largest cash settlement in Caldari State history, Ishukone paid in full every outstanding contract for work in the remote region, and issued significant relocation funds for all the affected

settlers on Drenali Seven. Any tenants remaining in Kaurikou Junction were offered free housing and transportation back to Empire space, courtesy of Ishukone Watch. Those same tenants, plus thousands of other former Ishukone employees, were offered jobs in the Raven shipyards and component assembly lines opening throughout Empire Space.

At Otro's personal request, Ralirashi Okimo stepped down as Ishukone's CFO and accepted a position overseeing the Manufacturing Division of the corporation. Replacing him was another newcomer to the corporate world who, despite the investigative efforts of the media, did not appear to have any kind of past at all. Her name was Kinachi Hepimeki, but to a select few she was known only as "Mila".

All of Les Akkilen's former aides and self-appointed senior-level executives were awarded severance packages that afforded them a comfortable, early retirement. They would never issue any public statements about their dismissal, and refused to allow themselves to be interviewed by the press. Today they live reclusive lives, rarely leaving their homes and maintaining a strict code of silence.

Filling in the vacant CEO post at Ishukone Watch was a former Caldari Navy Lieutenant named Menenden Reppola, the youngest executive ever appointed to head the police force. The ties between the ex-Navy officer and Otro Gariushi were unclear, but by this point the Caldari elite were rarely questioning any of Gariushi's decisions. The Ishukone CEO had more than proven himself already, and all were confident that Menenden Reppola would not disappoint.

The picture of a middle-aged soldier with steel-gray eyes hangs from the wall of Otro Gariushi's executive office on Malhaken Five. Above the picture is a plaque that reads "Hope". When asked about it by passing co-workers, Otro only states that the soldier is a close friend from years past, and that it serves as a daily reminder of what his responsibilities as the Ishukone CEO truly are.

A caption below the picture frame reads "So That Caldari May Live".