

*“So uncivilized.”*

The thought occurred instinctively upon seeing the multispectral reading on her scanners, spiking as segments of the distant IGV-55 detonated in succession. This route should have been clear of such hazards, but apparently she'd been mistaken. Though risk-averse by nature, she was intrigued by a slender spike on the spectroscopes indicating the presence of trace amounts of stygium. The element was rare, so much so that to even find miniscule amounts of it in the wake of an explosion was reason enough to investigate. After all, anything carrying stygium was bound to be expensive, even as a mostly burnt-out wreck.

Elongated, slender fingers danced on dashboards, calculating a vector burn towards the scuttled remnants before a gentle tilt of the control column sent the *Esperanza* veering to port across the vast emptiness of space. A glittering nebula cast its pale purple glow across the cockpit as light from a distant star excited the cloud of hydrogen and helium, the flashes of secondary detonations around the surveillance vessel's hull adding their own slight distortions to the stellar spectacle. Had it not been for the needless loss of life and finely crafted property, it would have been a rather beautiful sight to behold.

Yumni Ha reached for a glass beside her cockpit controls, its gyro-stabilized beverage holder having proved its worth during some tighter maneuvering in the past, and took a sip of the filtered water. Space travel, despite her disposition towards it, did have some less than desirable side-effects and dehydration in the arid atmosphere of recycled air was among the worst offenders. That and catastrophic loss of cabin pressure due to malicious intent, however she found those incidents mercifully few and far between.

The soft humming of the freighter's power core and robust engine block remained her constant companion as the ancient vessel slid through the intervening nebula, her sensors blinded momentarily as ionized radiation overloaded their electronic vision. As the distance to her target melted away at near relativistic speeds, Yumni fixed her gaze upon the burning wreck that still continued to glow and sputter as small sections finally relented to the void and spilled their contents, men and materiel alike, into the gaping abyss. Bodies floated amidst clouds of crystallizing oxygen like dolls frozen in twisted poses, their deaths played out in slow motion.

The vessel appeared like a charred wreck, its hull gouged out by the fires of near-nuclear explosions and spine broken so the front and aft were slowly spinning away from each other like torn lovers. As the nebula began to part, she picked up several signatures on her comms, knowing full well what to expect before she allowed them through.

*“– day mayday! Calling any available rescue craft. We are venting oxygen and without power. Please respond!”*

The message had no IFF marking, no commercial identifier, nothing. Had she been after salvage, she would have stayed well away from this place. No sane person would fall for what looked like an obvious trap. Or perhaps some would, but only the greediest of them.

She cut the feed and focused on identifying who this mystery ship belonged to. It was unlikely that anyone aboard would make it to tell the tale of her visit anyway, but just in case, she diverted a modicum of power to cycle up the laser turrets.

As the *Esperanza's* boxy prow finally parted the thinning nebula and her sensors returned readings that weren't incoherent white noise, she realized that she was not alone. Not alone at all.

Typical raiders would have departed by now, but it seemed these were not typical raiders. Indeed, the returns she received were of a type and class of ships she would most definitely have ascribed as *atypical* to be found within deep space.

"Tugs?" The realization was startling enough to warrant a vocal response though there was no-one aboard the freighter to hear it. Had her brow been capable of such a powerful expression, it would have been furrowed most deeply as she read a trio of signatures hovering around the wreckage.

A swift cross-reference to the usual suspects revealed no known pirate outfit that utilized such ships in their operations and the insignia on their hulls matched no major salvage detail on this side of the Niepr belt. That left only one, albeit dangerous, option.

She'd never fought in the war that had ravaged Arcona and the other Clans, but she'd gleaned enough information about this Collective to recognize them as potential culprits. If her assumption was valid, however, that meant those tugs were not meant for maneuvering duties, but for a far more explosive and short-lived job description.

The Kaminoan's slender hands swept across the consoles, opening up contextual menus with practiced motions and pulling open a digital folder of stored insignia. She had no firm knowledge of the Collective's allegiance, so she chose the one most inoffensive and likely to fly past their radar; Bothan Debris Inc.

On the freighter's outer hull, symbols morphed away from the brisk and clean colors of the Arconan Logistics And Shipping Company, only to be replaced by the tribal worm paths of the Bothan Debris Inc. The digital paint on the *Esperanza's* markings had barely dried in the solar winds when the closest of the three tugs pivoted around to face her, emerging as she was from a relative blind spot behind the aft wreckage.

The tug's engines flashed with a burst of acceleration, enough to have startled a lesser spacefarer, but the Kaminoan could tell it had merely altered its course and not locked in on a ramming vector. A few seconds later her comms panel flashed with an incoming hail.

*"Bothan salvage vessel, respond immediately. This is a restricted area. Leave at once or we will be forced to engage."*

Short, courteous and professional. Had they not been at the helm of a space tug filled to the gills with high yield explosives, she might have found it rather admirable. Taking a few moments to collect her thoughts, she gave her reply.

*“Unidentified tug, be advised Bothan Debris Inc owns the salvaging rights to this sector and you are trespassing on our turf. Identify immediately and leave, or we will be forced to file punitive actions in the nearest star-court.”*

She took her freighter in closer, being mindful to keep at least a few struts of the smoldering wreck between her ship and the tug. A brazen intrusion like this was risky, but she'd called the bluff of many a spacer claiming rights to a kill and driven them away if the name she rode seemed daunting enough. Just to drive home her claimed identity, she turned her targeting computer on and began to scan the tug for its ID.

The response was immediate as the tug darted behind the debris and broke contact, hiding its signature as best it could. It seemed her own counter-bluff had worked, at least for now.

Returning her attention to the wreckage before her, Yumni knew she might be working against the clock. Engaging the high-powered floodlights at her prow, she swept the burnt-out husk for any markings or signs of identification while her scanners were on full sweep. The readings were choked with data, fading lifesigns mingling with sensor returns of sizzling power sources and corrupted data banks, but none of it seemed worth her precious time.

Moving in further, pushing the freighter through gaps it had never been designed to slip past, she zeroed in on the source of her initial intrigue and a prize which might fetch a genuine price for her troubles. The spectroscopes were beeping off the charts as she tore a chunk of scorched durasteel off the hulk with the ship's cargo handling tractor beam and unveiled a fractured core leaking a sickly green hue.

Even through the radiation shielded cockpit windows, the Kaminoan could tell the stygium core was unstable, but there were ways of fixing it. It would be of little use to anyone as such, but either as a source of raw material, or with the addition of parts and some know-how, it could be returned to its original function as a cloaking device.

Yumni allowed her thin lips to curl ever so slightly, the faintest of smiles tugging at the edges of her mouth. This might be well worth the expenditure in fuel, she thought to herself as the ethereal fingers of the tractor beam coiled around the object and pulled it free of its damaged housing. A dull hiss and clank announced the object's successful ingress into a containment bay beneath the vessel's port pod and she dialed up the retro-thrusters to ease the wide-afted lady out of her ragged berth within the wreck's confines.

Uncomfortable scraping sounded around the freighter's hull as jagged spars of the devastated vessel scarred her paintjob, each metallic scream adding another painful line item to the repair bill Yumni was keeping in her mind. Finally clearing the narrow space she'd

managed to pilot the freighter inside of, she pivoted the venerable vessel to starboard and froze.

The trio of tugs hung suspended in a tight V-formation, all aimed at her ship with engines idling. They had clearly not decided to vacate the premises as she'd requested and the flashes of targeting lasers racing across her bow gave few illusions about their intent.

*"Bothan salvage vessel, cease and desist. Your company does not own rights in this sector. Prepare to be boarded."*

On long-range scanners, she could see the electronic shadow of a lesser capital ship looming towards them, a void predator searching for easy prey. She had no intention of being a meal today, however, and chose the only logical way out.

**\*BLEW-BLEW\***

The high-pitched scream of the discharging laser capacitors filled the *Esperanza's* cockpit as streaks of green plasma dashed between it and the lead tug. The machines were unarmed, save for the rather obvious ordinance they carried within them, but their defences had been souped up considerably from a line model. The first shot deflected harmlessly off the hardened durasteel frame, but the second struck the cockpit canopy head-on and the pilot vanished in a flash of emerald fire.

Banking heavily to starboard, the tug veered wildly off course, its engines firing in a distressed staccato as the ship went through its death rattles. The wingmen broke formation, realizing their peril and Yumni chose to take their lead. Ramming the control column to the side, she fired every maneuvering thruster on her ship to make it turn away from the violence about to ensue, shunting as much power as the old gal could handle into her rapidly rising aft deflectors.

For a moment, her field of view was nothing but twisted wreckage as *Esperanza* smashed her way through the guts of the Inquisitorius vessel's remains, the mortally wounded space tug finding itself on a collision course with the same. As open space finally lay before her, Yumni nursed the throttle to full as quickly as she thought the venerable ship could handle.

Super structure rattling as the freighter's durasteel bones protested under the inertia, Yumni ignored the cries of pain and tried to put as many units of distance between herself and the impending fire bloom.

She did not get nearly as far as she'd hoped.

For a brilliantly terrifying moment, space was bathed in the fires of a raging sun as the tug slammed into the jagged wreckage and blew, each canister of high-yield explosives going off in a catastrophic fireball that plumed out through the blackened husk. What little had remained of the aft section disappeared in an instant, torn asunder beneath kilotons of devastation and the *Esperanza's* aft deflectors flickered like rainbows as they struggled to redirect the force of such a discharge.

The screaming coils hissed with an animal cry, overloading from the intensity of the near-miss and catching fire as a cascading failure ruptured coolant pipes and power couplings. Acrid smoke belched inside the ship, an unhealthy dark green that was all too familiar to many a dead spacer, and the recovering pilot had few options beyond flooding the entire shield array with retardant foam.

The flames died out soon enough, but so too did her continued use of the deflectors as the fire suppressant shorted out critical components. Had she had some crew onboard, they might have taken a less drastic measure to combat the fire, but such OPEX to CAPEX evaluations were hardly at the top of her mind in that moment.

The one silver lining of the explosion was the sudden boost of speed she'd received as the energized blast wave had smashed against her aft, shunting the freighter forward and helping her sometimes sluggish acceleration. As the tug's final death knells died down, consuming with it what little had remained of the IGV-55, Yumni steadied her helm and gunned the engines at full speed back into the nebula she'd come from.

She'd not reached the halfway point into the stellar gas cloud when she received a warning for target lock, followed by a second – and a third. Glancing at the tactical display of her immediate surroundings she could see the capital ship was closing within firing range and the two surviving tugs were vectoring in pursuit, both tight in her ion wake and gaining.

A bright warning rune flashed across the sensors as the Lancer frigate opened fire, the initial volley flying wide of the intended mark though still far too close for comfort aboard the unshielded craft. The second and third patterns of shot straddled her ship, landing fore and aft as she tried her best to roll the freighter around its axis to confuse the gunners. It did not appear to be working.

The fourth salvo would definitely prove deadly, but by now the tugs had closed in to an inconvenient degree, the Lancer hesitating as it sought out a better firing solution for its main armaments. It was all the time the Kaminoan needed as she veered suddenly to port, banking sharply to throw off the gunners' aim and position her ship square on in line with both the Lancer and the pursuing tugs.

The frigate held its fire, but the tugs began to disperse to open a firing window. She chose not to let them. Laser cannons aimed rearward, she let out sporadic shots left and right, intentionally firing just 'outside' the tugs preferred vectors and corralling them in. No matter which way they tried to pull off, she made it appear as if they'd have to fly into her fire to do so.

The tugs could have handled a shot or two, but no pilot, not even a suicidal one, would fly willingly into laser bolts. At least that was what Yumni counted on.

The accountant in her did not fail and the gamble paid off. With a sense of relief, the *Esperanza* dived into the nebula while the Lancer let loose one final, desperate volley as it

saw its prey slip from within its closing jaws. The tugs, urged on by similar sentiment, flew right in after the fleeing freighter – and straight into its field of fire.

The stellar nursery illuminated with the premature birth of a small star as nuclear fires raged in a one-two staccato of the tugs' demise. The strobing flash lit up the purple smear of the nebula as a part of the ionized cloud ignited and fanned the atomic flames, the mass of multi-spectral interference far beyond even the Collective warship's ability to sift through as its scanners went haywire.

Somewhere deep within that cloud, riding on a shockwave that was rattling the bones ship and pilot alike, Yumni Ha clutched the control column with a terrified expression etched upon her palid features. Every available warning was chiming at once, *Esperanza* wailing in protest, but holding as the old trade mule was bucked and kicked by the buffeting wave fronts.

When the carnage finally relented and blissful silence returned after the harrowing escape, the Kaminoan peeled her hand off the controls and reached for the glass of water still held impeccably within its gimbaled mount. The navicomputer calculating a return jump to Selen, she vowed never to try something as stupid again. At least not until she'd upped the insurance premiums on her vessel.