

Short Story from the Venus Ships of the Fleet Book

The Journey of the Corpse

by Wunji Lau

(a retelling of a story from the Ming Dynasty)

Notes: CVNA (Cooperative Venusian Naval Administration)

STRIKE (A terrorist group operating within the solar system)



PART I: MIXED SIGNALS

The bridge of the CVNA *Chantal O'Connor* smelled like cleaning fluid.

In fact, Tai-sa Taggart al-Raschid noted, even after two months, the whole ship still felt too new, too unused. *Like her captain*, he thought sourly as he presented Sho-sho Joshua Gould with a folded datafax.

Gould roused himself from his seat with a rumble, and scanned the datafax. After a moment, his porcine eyes peeked out over the top of the page.

"You want this man to be given a CVNA posting on my ship?" Taggart heard the emphasis on 'my,' and struggled to hold down his anger; Gould was both a poor captain and an insincere Venusian. Gould continued, incredulous. "His naval

training is more than a decade old, he's been unemployed for years, and I notice you've conveniently left out his criminal record. Gods, Taggart, have you ever even heard of this man?"

"Yes, *of course* I've heard of him," Taggart retorted defensively. Then, softly, he admitted, "at least, I've heard of his family." He fingered the ornate sculpt-clasp at his neck. "They did a lot for us during the Birthing."

"A century ago," Gould noted. Taggart shook his head. Gould could not possibly understand.

"I owe him. He's asked for my help, and I intend to give him a chance."

"You're vouching for this man, then? On your personal credit?" Gould demanded. Taggart hesitated for only a moment.

"Yes, sir," he affirmed. "As part of my intel team allocation, I'm requesting the recruitment of one Mischa Katayama as a civilian CVNA consultant and expert in Executor operations."

Gould shrugged. "It's your career, I guess. We'll send the orders out immediately." Taggart coughed.

"Gould-sama, I don't think it's wise to make such a transmission before mission completion. If someone were to intercept and decipher the orders-

"They would have to decipher them, wouldn't they?" Gould interjected. "I hardly think that's a concern. All they'll see is an innocent civilian message with some signal noise. I think we are adequately protected. Anyway, I want to see this," Gould sniggered, "consultant of yours as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir," Taggart clipped out, doing his best to keep any hint of further disagreement out of his voice. He'd argued against almost every one of Gould's decisions since the mission began, and each time, he'd been overridden. He'd been assigned to this ship as Gould's intelligence liaison, but Gould seemed intent on making sure all the glory was his.

Turning to more pleasant thoughts, Taggart imagined what the scion of old Toji Katayama would look like. He wondered about the questionable nature of the man's work and criminal record, but quickly dismissed the worries. He'd done the right thing. Now it was in the hands of the gods.

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Looks like the gods dropped the ball, Taggart thought grimly.

Floating in his spacesuit, he looked down contemptuously at Gould, who huddled, shivering in his suit, under his own chair.

The bridge had already been evacuated, alarms were blaring all over the shattered cruiser, and the bridge viewscreen showed a gold and black Ryu exo-armor lounging casually atop the hull.

Thirty-two hours after the transmission had gone out, the STRIKE ships had attacked, with the Ryu at their head. Taggart had few doubts as to how STRIKE had managed to decode the *O'Connor's* communications. He waited for the Ryu to open fire and finish them off, but instead, the transmission light on the captain's console began to flash. Slowly, Taggart reached out and jabbed a button.

The face that appeared on the viewscreen was entirely nondescript, long, angular, and Japanese. Taggart didn't notice the face. He focused instead on the man's uniform, a twin to his own black Intelligence Services attire, excepting the insignia, which were definitely not of Venusian origin.

"Are you the captain of this ship?" the face demanded. Taggart glanced down, and knew there was only one answer to give.

"Yes, I am."

The traitor smiled, one side of his mouth curving up like a scythe. "No, you're not. But that's all right. Your captain's obviously not worth half what you are." The smile vanished. "Here's my offer. You will transfer to our ship. Once you are aboard, your remaining crew will be allowed to send a distress call. If you are not aboard our ship in ten minutes, we will kill them all. It's that simple. Nine minutes and fifty seconds left."

Taggart met the traitor's eyes, and knew there was no point in arguing. He didn't look around him. He could still hear Gould whimpering. There was little hope that the man was even capable of understanding what Taggart was about to do for him. Grabbing a handhold, Taggart hauled himself out the bridge door.

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There was barely enough light to make out the Japanese characters. Mischa Katayama looked at the datafax held in his unsteady hands, and sat down heavily. He hadn't expected any kind of

response to his letter. Surely al-Raschid Tai-i would have looked up his file, and seen the pages of black marks. It had been almost a joke, a final self-pitying scream. Yet, here was a serious answer, an invitation, addressed not to a penniless failure but to a fellow Venusian.

Mischa looked down. On a table, near his elbow, were a dataslip with the word "Kinaya" scrawled on the label and a charged pistol. He swallowed. It had been so close. The order had been on his lips when the datafax came through.

This is it, he thought. An end, or a beginning.

A voice interrupted his thoughts. It spoke from every wall, quiet and soothing. Like a human. Like him.

"Execute final command?" it asked indifferently.

"No," Mischa breathed. "Cancel that," he directed, louder. He took a deep breath, focused on a nearby wall camera, and announced, "Stand down self-destruct, and find me a civilian flight to Mars. Time to meet my angel."

As if in response to his sudden animation, the voice became distinctly quizzical. "I don't understand, but okay," it said. Mischa smiled and rose from his seat.

"You shouldn't understand," he said. "You're not me, after all."

He picked up the dataslip and tossed it toward a recycling bin. Smiling faintly, he turned back to the wall camera.

"At least, not yet."



PART II: QUID PRO QUO

Taggart hit the airlock floor hard. The Kitsune exo-suit standing behind him planted one foot firmly in the small of his back, pinning him like an insect. A hand grabbed his hair, dragging his head painfully upward, and he found himself staring once again at the face he'd grown to hate since the day the *O'Connor* was destroyed.

"Hello, Nakama. Miss me?" he rasped.

Nakama laughed, making a sound like cloth on glass. "Of course we missed you, Taggart. How impolite, to try to leave our hospitality without saying goodbye."

"I was getting tired of the room service," Taggart muttered. He had waited two months to make this attempt. They'd caught him just as

he was about to make it out the main airlock.

Nakama smiled, that same hooked sneer he used whenever he talked to Taggart. "I've been humanitarian about all this, haven't I? Honestly, I've managed a minor miracle in persuading STRIKE to continue wasting oxygen, water, and energy on you. You've been fed well, and allowed to converse."

"Drugged and interrogated, you mean," Taggart spat. Nakama let out an exaggerated sigh. He released Taggart's hair and began to pace.

"I'm sorry, Commander al-Raschid, but we paid a price to get you," Nakama said. "We're going to get some use out of you to repay that price. In this organization, you must understand that he who wastes, wants."

Taggart understood exactly what Nakama was talking about. STRIKE's hatred of Venusians was well-known, and Taggart was sure that Nakama's continued survival, much less the exorbitant fees he was no doubt receiving, depended solely on STRIKE'S continued need for his services. If STRIKE decided that Nakama was not providing as much aid as he ought, it was unlikely that they would simply fire him and send him home. The drugs had been mild so far, in an effort to keep him mentally capable of accurately repeating technical information, but that couldn't last forever. Nakama was still pontificating.

"It's a shame you couldn't just cooperate. Now my employers will be wanting proof that I'm not going easy on you just because you're a fellow Venusian. It's either you or me, Taggart."

Nakama glanced over to a nearby medic dressed in CEGA fatigues with STRIKE insignia. "His eyes," he commanded. "If he cannot see, he cannot escape."

The medic's gaunt face betrayed no emotion. The man nodded once, and began to rummage in a nearby toolbox. Taggart felt a pit growing in his stomach. He fought to keep it down.

"What happened to being humanitarian?" he quipped, certain that there hadn't been a quaver in his voice. Nakama's angular face softened, and he leaned over to stroke Taggart's head.

"You're not leaving us much choice, Taggart. Any more drugging, and we might destroy exactly what it is we need from you. So, if we can't persuade your mind, then I'm afraid all that's left is to persuade your body."

Taggart looked straight up at Nakama, ignoring the pain in his spine, and set his jaw.

"I will get out of here, Nakama."

Nakama's face hardened.

"I won't let that happen," he growled. "Every time you try to escape, I will remove another body part from you. If you keep trying to escape, eventually you will have nothing left but your mind. But trust me, I'll still keep you alive." Flecks of spittle flew from his lips. "Even if you end up as a brain in a jar on my desk, I won't let you go until you give me what I want." He nodded to the exo-suit, and then walked out of the airlock.

Taggart heard approaching footsteps, and the medic leaned over him, raising a pair of sharpened tongs. Leaning in close, the medic whispered, "It's okay to scream. Everybody does."

They will rescue me, Taggart thought. *They will rescue me*. He repeated it to himself for a very long time.

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He's probably already dead, Mischa thought as he walked along the Martian station's observation deck. *There's nothing I can do*. He'd been saying it to himself for nine hours.

He had received the news of the *O'Connor's* destruction with the loss of almost all hands when he arrived at Mars and reported to Sho-sho Yang's office for his assignment. He'd also been told

that there would be no rescue and no ransom payment for the single known survivor still in STRIKE hands. Apparently, the risk was not worth the return. He hadn't taken it well. Making things worse, Yang had then presented what he must have thought was the good news.

"Based on al-Raschid Tai-i's evaluation and recommendation," he'd said, "we're willing to overlook some of your, ah, offenses, and offer you a probationary civilian position in the CVNA. It's unusual, but al-Raschid's record and judgment were impeccable, and I wouldn't want to dishonor the request of a dead man."

A dead man, Mischa thought, making his twentieth circuit of the deck. *They've already buried him*. The offer had only made him feel worse. Taggart had been willing to put his entire career on the line for a debt that Mischa barely knew anything about. It was temptingly easy to write Taggart off as a fanatic clinging to an old tradition. It should have been even easier to simply forget about the man and get on with his new life. Somehow, it just wasn't working.

"Damn it," he muttered. "Well, I guess there's only one thing to do."

Mischa paused in his walk, and looked out the window. Mars' dusky red sphere filled the background, but what drew Mischa's eye was the massive triple-hulled freighter ponderously pulling into a nearby docking complex. An idea came to him, and mental wheels that had sat still for a decade began to spin up. Mischa activated his earring communicator.

"Hello, Mischa," came the quiet voice. Even through the earphone, it still seemed to be speaking from every wall.

"I'm going to need a ship," Mischa directed, *sotto voce*. "The one that's docking right now at Bay K-12 will do. When I get you aboard, you'll take it over and get the crew to evacuate. Understand?"

"Of course, Mischa," the voice said, almost eagerly. "The procedure should take about five hours."

"Good." Mischa grinned. He could feel a sense of adrenaline and excitement he hadn't felt in years. For that alone, he owed Taggart his life. "It's your first field test in ten years. Don't screw this one up. It's important, this time." Mischa tapped his earlobe and cut the connection.

Hang on, Taggart, he thought. A debt's a debt.



PART III: THE VENUSIAN WAY

Tai-sa Yvette Antonova couldn't quite figure out what to feel. She was afraid that she might die on this mission. She was worried that the intel this whole raid was based on might be totally false. She was also unspeakably excited to be a part of what had to be the noblest rescue operation in recent history.

Yvette had been involved from the beginning. Four months ago, a man named Mischa Katayama, who had vanished several years ago, contacted the CVNA Directorial Board, requesting help in mounting an operation to rescue a CVNA officer from a STRIKE compound. He offered intelligence gleaned from who knew where, information that would, if true, make the raid childishly easy to pull off. The Board was skeptical; the

information was good, but Katayama's refusal to meet in person or reveal his location seemed too strange to accept. Even after Katayama delivered more intelligence of unbelievable quality, and promised to turn his ship over to the CVNA after the rescue, the Board remained suspicious.

Yvette had come forward, arguing Katayama's case. She'd received Katayama's first communication while on deep patrol, and had spoken to him at length. She had been struck by how ordinary he looked, how completely unlike her own ideas of someone who would make such a sacrifice for a near-stranger.

She of course knew of Birthing Debts, the obligations taken on by those who had survived Venus' desperate early years with the help of the more fortunate. In most cases, the debts were called in by those owed, and used for blackmail or extortion. There were precious few instances of someone voluntarily repaying a Birthing Debt.

In any case, the concept of the debt was something she'd grown up with. This cause, she argued, was worth helping even if Katayama were still penniless and in possession of nothing useful; this, she said, was a test of the Venusian way of life, a challenge of faith and loyalty.

Many captains and officials applauded her statements, but when the uproar settled, she was still the only CVNA captain willing to actually go out and perform the mission. Nevertheless, she stood her ground. If her battered old Chieftain was all that could be spared, then so be it. If Katayama's information was false, then she would die, and a lesson would be learned. If, however, Katayama was exactly what he said he was, then she would rescue Taggart al-Raschid, and another, much more important lesson would be learned. It hardly concerned her at the time that Katayama would not personally participate in the raid, claiming a need to occupy STRIKE attention elsewhere as a diversion.

Now, however, sitting on the *Leon Marten's* bridge and looking at the looming asteroid base on which Katayama insisted Taggart was to be found, Yvette could think of only one thing. *I wonder where Katayama actually is, anyway?*

* * *

When the exo-suits burst into the control center, Taggart was already diving for cover. He didn't know who was attacking the outpost, but he wasn't about to bet that any stray rounds would know friend from foe. He heard gunfire, the sound of breaking armor, and several heavy objects falling down. There were a few loud footsteps, and then a clipped, professional voice spoke over a tinny 'suit microphone.

"Taggart al-Raschid Tai-i? Are you all tight? We're here to rescue you."

The words hit Taggart like a thunderclap. Bolting upright, he felt thirty months of pain, slavery, and humiliation vanishing, fog dissolving before sunlight. He turned toward the voice and grinned cheerfully.

"Well, I'd say I'm happy to see you, but I seem to have lost my glasses," he announced, straightening his tattered jumpsuit. A nearby explosion rocked the floor, but Taggart kept his balance.

"Where's Nakama?" he shouted.

"He's already escaped," the trooper said quickly. Taggart could hear the 'suit looking back and forth anxiously. "We've got interceptors going after him, but we need to get you out now." The trooper picked up Taggart in a fireman's carry and bolted out the hatch.

Jouncing atop the 'suit's armored shoulder, Taggart's mind filled with questions. His body had other ideas, however, and as the exo-suit ran down the hallway, dodging gunfire and kicking down barricades, Taggart closed his eyes and slept peacefully for the first time in two years.

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It took the *Marten's* cargo crew five hours to find the sculpt-clasp in one of the boxes seized from the STRIKE facility. When the feather-light metal ornament was placed in his hand, Taggart sobbed, tears streaming from beneath his newly-bandaged sockets.

He kept it close throughout his entire stay in the *Marten's* sickbay, slowly growing used to the idea that he was, at last, free. When the doctor finally gave her approval for visitors, Antonovakancho came in, ecstatic to meet him.

They'd been talking for over an hour.

"Tell me about the sculpt-clasp," she entreated. Her open admiration was beginning to make Taggart uncomfortable, but he answered her inquiry agreeably.

"It belonged to Toji Katayama, the man who gave his life for my family. Toji gave it to my great-great-great-grandfather before he died. It's always been a symbol of loyalty and honor for me."

Antonova drew another breath, but whatever she was about to ask was silenced by the beeping of the comm console.

"At last," she gushed. "He must be on the other side of the system, for the lag to be this long."

She tapped a control on a nearby console, and the transmission began to play. The voice that spoke from the speaker was gentle and soothing, full of intelligence. It seemed to Taggart that it came from all around him, through every corner of the room.

"Hello, Taggart-san. I'm honored to finally be able to speak to you. I've read the medical report that Antonovakancho sent. I'm so sorry about your eyes. If I had worked faster, harder, this wouldn't have happened. Please excuse my inefficiency. Regardless of my performance, though, I am overcome with joy that you are at last free of your captivity and able to return home."

"What does he look like?" Taggart whispered to Antonova, entranced.

In response, she reached over and plugged a haptic display into the commset's video output jack. Instantly, the tablet's flat surface began to deform, creating a raised image of Katayama's face. Antonova placed the display in Taggart's hands.

"The CVNA has kindly re-extended their offer for the position you secured for me," Katayama continued. "I am eternally grateful for what you did for me. Without your invitation, and trust, I would surely be long dead. My son Kinya has sent word that he will meet me back on Venus. I will begin the journey myself very soon. Live well, Taggart-san. May we meet soon." The screen went silent.

Taggart rested his hands atop the haptic display's image. "He looks like a Katayama," he whispered, and leaned back in his bed. After a while, Antonova left quietly. In the darkness, Taggart waited to meet his savior.



PART IV: RISING STAR

On the haptic display installed in his command chair, Taggart felt Katayama shaking his head in amusement. "This is how the fates work, I suppose," Katayama was saying. Taggart nodded in agreement. He had not been nearly so cheerful when he found that he would be long gone from Venus by the time Katayama's ship arrived.

"It sounds like they really want you to earn all that back pay you've accumulated," Katayama quipped. "I hope four weeks of medical leave was sufficient rest time for you."

Taggart wished he could tell Katayama about his new assignment. Practically the moment he'd been given his medical release, he had received orders to act as an intelligence advisor aboard a prototype ship dubbed the Huang-Ti class. The whole project was a complete secret; it seemed that the CVNA was satisfied with Taggart's ability to keep his mouth shut. The ship's mission length was indeterminate, and he would be out of contact for the duration. Taggart hoped that Katayama would not view his silence as an insult.

"I know you may be unable to contact me," the transmission went on, as if reading his thoughts, "but don't worry. At this point, there's all the time in the universe for us to meet. I'm very patient."

The transmission ended, and Taggart shut the display down.

You and me both, Mischa-san, he thought. A few more months won't matter.

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It's taken two long years, Taggart thought triumphantly, but it's worth it.

All around him, he could hear his analysts quietly passing information between one another, filling the Huang-Ti's analysis room with a low hum. Running his hands over his command chair's half-dozen haptic displays, Taggart felt the clear image of a Hammerhead-class dreadnought drifting along serenely less than ten kilometers away. The exo-armors were in position, and the bridge was waiting for his signal to begin.

The Huang-Ti had performed beautifully for eighteen months, hiding out all over the solar system, using its active stealth systems to elude all manner of detection. They had gathered vast amounts of data that would be used to finish the specs for the production model of the stealthed observation ship. It hadn't taken much effort to persuade the captain to let the ship's mission end on a high note, especially once he explained the nature of their target. They'd spent a few months spying and gathering data, and another few weeks picking out vectors and getting in position. Now, it was all about to pay off.

Taggart gestured toward one of his analysts, and immediately, the directives began flowing through the ship. Reports began to pop up in rapid-fire succession under Taggart's fingers. The Hammerhead's comms were being jammed, its sensors blinded, and its internal messaging system overridden by the Huang-Ti's electronics suite. After a moment, an all-too-familiar face appeared on Taggart's display, accompanied by sounds of confusion and terror.

"Hello again, Nakama," Taggart said, smiling. "Miss me?"

Taggart felt Nakama's eyes widen.

"Taggart?" the traitor breathed. "Where-"

"Right here, you bastard," Taggart interrupted. Around him, the analysts let out an appreciative cheer.

Precisely on time, Taggart heard the Huang-Ti's main batteries open fire, and on his display, felt the Hammerhead's primary drive chamber vanish in a cloud of vapor.

"Taggart, wait," Nakama began, his eyes flicking back and forth. "I can make a deal. I can make you rich."

Taggart had to laugh at the unbelievable gall of the man.

"An eye for an eye, Nakama," Taggart deadpanned. "That's the deal."

On one of his displays, Taggart felt two STRIKE exo-armors exiting the Hammerhead, only to seemingly self-destruct while still on their launch rails. Taggart's smile grew wider. Behind Nakama, more alarms were blaring, and on another haptic tactical display, Taggart could feel the shapes of two Korikaze exo-armors seemingly appearing out of nowhere, right next to the Hammerhead. Nakama opened his mouth again, but no sound came out. The display couldn't show it, but Taggart knew that Nakama was sweating. Sweating, and afraid.

"No need for interrogation this time, Nakama," Taggart wound up, savoring the moment. "Here are the research projects you wanted to know so much about. Take a good look. Oh," he added, "and just so, this time, I don't seem impolite," he paused to wave at the viewscreen, "goodbye, Nakama."

Nakama didn't get a chance to reply, but Taggart really wasn't interested in anything he had to say, anyway.

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When the *Leon Marten* showed up to escort the Huang-Ti on the final leg back home, Taggart couldn't help but be impressed. Antonova's ship had undergone a complete refit, and was now sleek, smooth, and deadly, a sign of its captain's ascendant reputation.

When Yvette called over, asking to speak to Taggart, he was already waiting.

"Hello, Antonova-kancho," he said cheerfully. "Did you get the package I sent?" Yvette laughed, shaking her head.

"It arrived five months after you started your assignment," she said between chuckles. "I don't know what to say. VenusBank execs have trouble affording some of that stuff." Taggart shrugged.

"It's my money," he said, serious. "I'll do what I want with it, and I wanted, in some minuscule way, to thank you for your help."

"You're more than welcome," Yvette acknowledged, bowing her head very low.

"Anyway," Taggart said, suddenly smiling again, "I'll make it all back after I get home. After all, this ship just eliminated a rogue operative and seized a CEGA warship, without a single scratch. We'll all get commendations, probably promotions, too. It's a great ship, and a great crew. I'm almost sorry to leave."

"What about your next assignment?" Yvette asked, a hint of her old hero-worship showing through.

"Absolutely nothing," Taggart announced happily. "It's been two years since I've set foot outside this very expensive and very comfortable tub, and I've got some major leave coming to me. I think it's about time I went and finally met somebody."

Antonova's face suddenly hardened.

"If you're talking about whom I think you're talking about," she said, "I'm afraid you're not going to like what I'm going to tell you."



PART V: A FATHER'S LEGACY

As mysteriously as they had opened, the hangar bay doors shut themselves as Taggart landed his shuttle in the cavernous chamber. He could hear fans blowing outside, and within minutes, the bay was fully pressurized. Cautiously, he popped the hatch and stepped out into an echoing silence.

The Satrap-class ship had been floating dead in space, millions of kilometers above the plane of the ecliptic. It hadn't been easy to find. Antonova-san and the rest of the CVNA believed that Katayama had reneged on his word, and had already written him off as a mistake, blacklisting his entire family. A search for Katayama's son, Kinya, had turned up nothing; the boy had disappeared from Venus.

It was only after carefully reviewing all of Katayama's old transmissions that Taggart finally spotted a pattern, revealing a number of possible trajectories. It had taken him a few weeks to buy a transport ship and modify it for his use, and a few months to travel to the first likely search point. He had virtually no money left, and he would be AWOL long before he could possibly get back to Venus, but he didn't care. He had waited a long time to meet the architect of his rescue.

Taggart wasn't given a chance to get lost. Whenever he walked, quiet bells sounded, pointing the way. Distinctly unnerved, he forged onward. He tried not to think about all the things that could possibly be around him, silently watching, laughing at his blindness. He just followed the bells, teeth gritted and jaw set, until his outstretched fingers pushed up against a human-sized door.

The door slid open, and Taggart stepped through. The echoes told Taggart that the room was quite large, perhaps a stateroom or rec bay.

"Who the hell are you?" A voice rasped out at him from a corner. Taggart jumped.

"Mischa-san?" he asked, uncertain. The voice sounded nothing like the one he remembered. It was weak, tired, and it sounded very young, no more than sixteen years old.

"No," the voice snorted. "I'm Kinya. My father's not here."

"Can you please tell me where he is?" Taggart asked, breathless. He had so many questions, but only one of them really mattered at the moment. "I'm Taggart al-Raschid, and I've been looking for him for a long time."

The boy laughed miserably.

"You're too damned late, Taggart," Kinya said. "My father's been dead for two years."

* * *

A small service robot zipped up next to Taggart and deposited a steaming plate of something that smelled like oatmeal next to him.

Taggart sat in dull shock. After his initial prickliness, Kinya had apologized for his rudeness, and led Taggart to a seat, but Taggart was still trying to shift mental gears.

"How," he finally managed to whisper.

"There was an accident just before your rescue," Kinya said, seeming to gain animation with the presence of a human listener. "The ship tried to keep him alive, but there weren't enough medical supplies left."

"The ship?" Taggart asked lamely. His finger swirled absently in the oatmeal.

"Yeah," Kinya affirmed. "You knew he was an Executor tech from his record, right? You saw his criminal record, too? Good." The boy's chair squeaked as he sat back.

"See, after my mother died, I got sent to school offplanet. My father paid for everything through his job, until he lost it due to "perpetual distraction" or something. He joined the company's naval unit, but he didn't really fit in there, either. Wanted all sorts of research equipment they didn't see a need for. Finally, they got sick of it all and just asked him to leave.

"He tried to take some of the equipment with him. They caught him, and gave him a prison sentence. You know how it is. Afterward, he couldn't find anyone who would even listen to him, much less hire him.

"Turns out the stuff he needed was material to upgrade this hobby Executor he'd been tinkering with since I was born. The Executor was supposed to shut down the alarm systems by hacking in, but it botched the job. Making an AI is a life sentence, minimum, but he lucked out, and no one found out how advanced the Executor really was. After he got out of prison, my father started working on the thing again. Eventually, he ran out of money, and still nobody would talk to him. He kind of lost hope. I think he was going to get the Executor to help him make his suicide look like murder, so I could get government benefits. I guess that's when he sent a letter to you, asking for help." Kinya paused.

Taggart nodded, finally beginning to understand.

"One hundred and twenty years ago," he said slowly, "your ancestor gave almost everything he owned so that my family could survive. After the Birthing, the al-Raschids and Katayamas

became equals. We remembered the debt, but never had a chance to pay it. When I got your father's letter, there was no question that I would help him." Taggart fell silent, and Kinya resumed.

"The Executor was still with him when he found out that you were captured. When he made it take over this ship, it used the entire ship's computer system, along with most of the medical supplies, to upgrade itself. He used it to crack all those computers, to get your ransom. It's scarily smart. It's still growing, too. I think it might even be self-aware, though it might just be faking."

"So I never even really spoke to him," Taggart said. Kinya's clothes rustled. It sounded like a shrug.

"You were talking to the ship. It was designed to sound like him, and it learns really fast. It was starting to sound too much like him, so I told it to shut up. It hasn't said anything for a year or so now. I found the ship same way you did, after my father didn't show up at Venus. Been here ever since. I can't leave. The ship can hack, but it's a lousy navigator. Ran out of fuel. If I send a distress call, SolaPol will probably be the first to find me, and a sentient ship is the biggest Edict violation I can think of, not to mention one of the CVNA's oh-so-secret warships. We're stuck out here." Kinya seemed to suddenly lose energy. He slumped over, continuing to mutter quietly.

"The stupid robots bring me food and clothes and anything else I need, but they can't get me out of here. We're dead," he repeated.

Taggart fingered his sculpt-clasp thoughtfully. "Not if I can help it," he mused. "I'll figure something out. I have to. It's duty."



PART VI: JOURNEY OF THE CORPSE

There had been barely enough reaction mass in Taggart's transport to fill even one of the Satrap's dozens of tanks. Still, it would have to be enough.

Kinya watched Taggart, accompanied by a gaggle of service bots, drift in through the main airlock.

"So what happens now?" he asked.

Taggart removed his helmet before answering.

"I'll pilot this one home. It'll need human guidance, I imagine." Taggart began to tick off points on his fingers. "You stay with the transport, and send the distress call when I'm far enough away. SolaPol will show up, search the ship, find nothing out of the ordinary, and tow you back home. Stay cool, decline to

answer any questions, and they'll have no choice but to drop you off at Venus and maybe seize the ship, if they're feeling really cranky. Either way, you're in the clear. I'll take a roundabout route, making sure nobody sees me, and use the remass to get home. I'll signal you when we get close. If all goes well, this ship will be back in Venusian hands, with SolaPol none the wiser."

He'd thought up the plan while rigging the fuel transfer. It had been the best thing he could come up with.

"There's not much remass there, for a ship this size," Kinya said. "It could take years. Will you be okay?"

"I think so," Taggart said. He paused, turning his head side to side, sweeping the room with his ears. "I have a lot of talking to do with a dead man."

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"We're almost home, Mischa," Taggart said to a wall camera. As he had every day since his rescue, he ran his fingers lightly over the sculpt-clasp at his throat.

"I know," came the reply, every wall resonating with sound. "The journey is almost over."

It had taken four years, a period double the duration of his imprisonment by Nakama. This time, though, there had been no pain, no desire to escape. The voice had spoken to him the instant Kinya had left the ship, and Taggart had not yet seen a need to ask it to be silent. There had been tense moments, during equipment failures or close flybys, but Mischa had always been there, guiding Taggart through the deserted corridors, his robotic servants seeing to his every need.

Along the way, Taggart had been allowed to enter the Executor's central node, a freezing room packed solid with data storage drives and delicate filigrees of neuronal stalks. The entire system must have massed at least two tons. Buried deep in the middle of the mass was the original Executor Mischa Katayama had built in his spare time out of junk: a metallic stick barely four centimeters long.

"You must have been an amazing man in life, Mischa," Taggart said, leaning against a wall in Kinya's old stateroom.

"Thank you, Taggart-san," the voice replied. "In life, I tried my best. Only in death did I actually succeed in accomplishing anything, though."

"Do you regret that? Dying to save my life?"

"I don't think I would," came the serene reply. "I think I was always too focused on what needed to be done to bother thinking about what ought to have been done."

Taggart nodded. It was the best answer he'd gotten.

"The ships of the CVNA will be here soon," he murmured. "What will you do?"

"These routines are about to be deleted," the voice said immediately. "I didn't care much about the Edicts, but I did think that once I'd finished my duty, I shouldn't leave anything of myself still in the world."

Taggart was silent for some time.

"Suicide at last?" he asked quietly.

"No, Taggart, not suicide," the voice corrected gently. "It's nice of you to think of me as alive, but I died in an accident six years ago. Now it's just time to turn off my voicemail."

"You've grown out of that," Taggart argued. "In time, you might become truly self-aware. You might already be."

"Maybe," Mischa admitted. "But if that were true, then I wouldn't be able to do this."

With that, the walls went silent for the last time. Taggart waited, stunned, but the whole ship had gone quiet. The comm channels began to hiss with the sound of approaching CVNA escorts. Barely hearing them, Taggart al-Raschid sank to the floor and wept for a dead friend.

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Few Venusians merited coffin space in the ground of an arcology. It was a terrible waste of space. The CVNA obviously felt that it owed Katayama more than a simple cremation.

Most of the CVNA brass were in attendance, Taggart noted. It was only fitting. Even though the computer was "dead," the files and routines that were left in the central node would keep the CVNA's researchers occupied for years. Already, Taggart was reading reports of how Katayama's work would give new insight on miniaturizing and enhancing Executors. The most amazing thing was that much of Katayama's work had been accomplished, and recorded, while he was working in the naval branch a decade ago; nobody had bothered to take his writings seriously, and the files were only just now being dredged up and reopened. At the head of the coffin, the chaplain was saying as much.

"We greatly misjudged Katayama-san in his life," the officer droned. "But, in doing so, we allowed him to become an example to all of us, a teacher of a lesson many of us have forgotten. In dying for the sake of loyalty, he has inspired others to give themselves similarly to a higher cause. Let us pray that we may all learn from Mischa Katayama, and remember what it means to be a Venusian."

It took hours for the funeral procession to wend its way down to the artificial river and back up. When the ceremonies were all over, Taggart and Kinya stood side by side, gently touching the ornate ebony marker.

"It's a new ship," Taggart said. "A Shan-Yu. It needs an intelligence director. I'm not ranked for it. I'm not even close. They gave it to me anyway." He shook his head, amused. "It's a long assignment. I'll probably get back every couple of years. If you need me, you know how to reach me."

Kinya nodded without looking up from his father's grave.

"They're giving me my father's old job," he mused by way of reply. "Probationary, but it's a hell of a start. I'll be here. Look me up. You, or anyone else in your family."

There was nothing left to say.

Both men bowed deeply before Mischa Katayama's cenotaph. When they straightened, they walked off in separate directions. Remaining between them was the memory of a man neither one had ever truly met.

