Unknown Motives

Author: Alan Hummel

Nothing.

For as far as Slade could see, that's all that there was. Nothingness. The vast, empty void of space really set things into perspective, and he had to wonder if any of the events that had transpired in the past 5 years would bear any meaning 100 years from now. Accompanied only by the low hum of his Apollo's engines, Slade eased back in the cockpit a bit and continued to wait. The Andromeda was supposed to have been there 20 minutes ago, and Slade was beginning to wonder if she'd show at all. He had no idea what he was doing there anyway, aside from the fact that he was carrying some sort of information. But why this information wasn't transmitted on a secure line was puzzling. The GTA EC4 encryption code was reliable – no one had ever broken it – and it was a lot quicker than sending a courier.

A light flashed on his dash. Not that light.

That light. Incoming hostiles. 8, 9…12. 12 of them. Shivan fighters.

And only one of him.

"That's it", he muttered to himself. "I'm not waiting around anymore." Slade engaged his jump engine, and the familiar blue-white glow of subspace appeared before him. As he headed into the portal, he turned his head to see the Shivan fighters heading towards him.

And just beyond them, someone coming out of subspace.

The Andromeda.

Slade grudgingly disengaged his jump drive and kicked in the afterburners. The quickest way past the Shivans was through them. He acquired a missile lock and fired. Scratch one.

Then the missile lock warning went off. Locking on, locking on…they were all readying missiles to shove up his pipes. Slade positioned his thumb over the countermeasure button and awaited the imminent tone that signals a missile a launch.

"Sorry we're late" came a voice over his intercom, from the Andromeda. "We ran into a welcoming party on our way out." Slade looked and even from this distance he could see the damage to the Andromeda's hull. "Get on board as quick as you can. Our turrets will hold them off until we can jump."

By that point the missile launch tone had sounded and Slade was hurryingly releasing countermeasures. He banked to the right a bit as he approached the formation of fighters, and then pulled up and hit the afterburners again. As the Shivans screamed past him, he checked his rear scope to see them all breaking formation to pursue.

But he was going to make it. The Andromeda was getting closer and he was going to be within their turret range in seconds.

The fighters split up into two groups. The first group decided they would trouble Slade with more missiles, while the second group decided that they didn't like the Andromeda too much. Her turrets flashed and Slade's pursuers quickly decreased in number. He approached the landing bay and

initiated landing procedure. He was no more than a few meters inside when the Andromeda initiated her jump sequence and left 7 angry Shivans behind.

Wiping the sweat from his brow, Slade opened the canopy and clamored out, relieved to be, for the time being, safe. He pulled the small, black databox out of the cockpit. This contained the information he was to deliver. And he had to wonder if it had any relation to the Shivan attacks on himself, the Andromeda, or both. As he began his walk out of the landing bay, a familiar voice echoed behind him.

"Trouble always follows you, doesn't it?" It was Paul Kirby. A 6-foot-2, 30 year old black man who had flown with Slade since his academy days. He was skilled, jovial…and Slade considered him his best friend.

"Couldn't you give me a hand out there?" Slade asked accusingly, trying to keep his grin from showing. "And get hit with your friendly fire? I don't think so!" was the response.

The two men exchanged handshakes and continued out of the landing bay. "I didn't know you were here Paul" said Slade, noticing the change of rank apparent on his friend's sleeve. "What's this?" he asked, pointing at the rank insignia. "I've been doing my homework," he replied, "studying everything I can on the Shivan's flight strategies, technique, methodology…I know my enemy."

"You know an ENEMA" Slade replied, blocking the retaliatory punch in the arm from his old friend. "Get out of here Slade. They're waiting for you in Ops." The two agreed to meet later in the officers lounge, and Slade made his way to the turbolift that would take him above decks, to Ops.

Slade carried the sealed databox to debriefing. He was met by the usual security complement, and, surprisingly enough, Admiral Marsh. "This has got to be something big" he thought to himself as he approached the officers assembled there.

"Lieutenant" said the Admiral as Slade assumed a proper military posture and saluted. "I trust you had no problem delivering this to us?" Apparently the Admiral had a sense of humor. "None at all sir" Slade replied, handing over the databox. The Admiral smiled, returned Slade's salute, and said "Dismissed." "Guess I'm not getting filled in on the details of this package", Slade thought to himself.

At 2100 hours Slade met with Paul at the officers lounge. "I hope you at least got a 'Thank you' for this one" Paul said with a grin. "What's the deal on your delivery?"

"I'm not sure" Slade replied. "But Admiral Marsh accepted it personally."

"Admiral Marsh is on board?" Paul asked.

"I thought you were doing your homework" Slade replied sarcastically. "You really didn't know?"

"Uh-uh" Paul replied.

"Why all the secrecy" Slade asked himself aloud. "What could that data possibly -- "

He was cut off by the ship's intercom. "Attention, all crew members: there will be an important security meeting in the main briefing room in 10 minutes. Attendance is mandatory."

"You may get your answer Slade", Paul said.

The briefing room was bustling with activity. Crew members were talking amongst themselves, all wondering what could prompt such an impromptu assemblage. At the front of the room, technicians were setting up the holodisplay, and Admiral Marsh was conferring with the ship's captain, Matthew Wallace.

"Your attention please", spoke the Captain. The crew quieted and he continued. "The man to my right needs no introduction". Admiral Marsh gave the crew a nod, and Wallace continued. "The Admiral has been given some important, and intriguing news. Admiral."

Admiral Marsh took a step forward, surveyed the crew, and began speaking. "We have received information via courier about a discovery that could bring new hope to the war. 2 days ago the cruiser Mirus found, floating adrift in space, an unidentified vessel of extreme magnitude." The holodisplay behind the Admiral lit up with an image of the sector of space where the ship was found, followed by an image of the craft itself. A stunned reaction was audible from the crew, reacting to the image of the immense ship in relation to the Fenris class cruiser that had found it.

The Admiral continued: "We have code-named this ship 'The Monolithic'. All attempts at gaining entrance have failed, and the ship exhibits no internal operations. She is powerless and adrift in space. What makes this even more interesting, is this:"

The holodisplay changed again. This time it focused in on a section of the ship's hull. There were visible signs of conflict. Could that be…

The Admiral answered Slade's unasked question: "Shivan energy weapons caused these markings. However the ship is intact and relatively undamaged. And…", the holodisplay changed again, "she boasts enormous firepower."

The Admiral waited for the crew's reaction to subside. "Our assignment is this: we are to meet with the GTA survey team inspecting this vessel, and assist the ships already present there in the event of a Shivan attack."

The Admiral entertained questions from the crew, but Slade wasn't listening. He had too many questions of his own: who built this ship? Where did it come from? Could they be allies? If they had fought with the Shivans, could they be a race with whom the GTA could ally themselves?

Many of the crew were asking these same questions, but Admiral Marsh had no answers. As the assemblage was dismissed, Paul turned to Slade. "Looks like I have more homework to do."

Over the next 6 hours the crew readied themselves for their arrival at the discovery site. Since security was of the utmost concern, battle stations drills were conducted and the crew prepared themselves for the possibility of a Shivan attack. The time passed quickly for Slade, and before he knew it, they had arrived.

Slade and Paul were in Ops when the Andromeda arrived. The Mirus was there, as were the Orion class cruisers Mulhare and Desper. The two pilots examined the image of the Monolithic on one of the viewscreens. It was large alright, dwarfing even a Lucifer class ship. It was a long, oval shaped craft, with a dark, dirty metallic hull. Blast marks, some small, some large, appeared all over the ship, but other than that it appeared undamaged.

Messages between the other GTA vessels were exchanged, and fighter patrols were put into rotation. Paul's wing was assigned to the second fighter group rotation, and Slade requested to be

included in the patrol. Two hours after they had arrived, he was getting his first up-close look at the monstrous space craft.

The patrol was uneventful. Alpha, Beta, and Gamma wings each patrolled different perimeters of the area, and all seemed quiet. As they headed back to the Andromeda, Slade glimpsed the familiar glow of a subspace opening, directly behind the Mirus.

Shivans.

A Lucifier class cruiser was arriving, and no sooner had it's landing bay cleared the subspace portal than the fighters began streaking out. Within seconds, the Mirus was destroyed, falling victim to a horde of Shivan fighters and the Lucifer cruiser's guns. Paul shouted orders to the wing over the commlink, and Alpha wing entered the fray. The commanders of Beta and Gamma wing game similar instructions, and the battle was joined. Meanwhile, pilots on the Andromeda, Mulhare, and Desper were readying bombers, preparing to strike at the Shivan battlecruiser.

Slade weaved in and out of the Shivan fire, taking down two fighters rather quickly and heading for his third kill when he was hit with a barrage of fire from behind. He acquired a new target and pursued the fighter that had hit him.

A bright flash from his starboard side lit up his cockpit, and he felt his ship shudder as he turned to see the Desper catch flames and explode. "Look alive pilot!" came a voice over the intercom, as he looked up to see two Shivan fighters drawing a bead on him. He hit his afterburners and went into a spiral maneuver that took him out of harms way, at least momentarily. As he swung his fighter around he locked onto a Shivan Dragon fighter and gave chase. The enemy pilot was skilled, avoiding all of Slade's shots, twisting and turning through the barrage of laser fire.

They were, at this point, away from the main battle group. The Shivan fighter, in it's attempt to shake Slade's pursuit, drew nearer and nearer to the Monolithic. Suddenly:

"Did you see that?"

"What?"

"The engines! Her engines are powering up!"

Slade began to see various lights and systems powering up all across the surface of the Monolithic. As the Shivan fighter gave a wide port arc, Slade passed by the aft end of the giant ship and turned to see that indeed, the vessels engines had powered up and were glowing a deep, bright red.

The Shivan fighter was now tailing him. But before he could pull back on the flight stick to evade him, he was hit by a barrage of laser fire. His rear shields had been penetrated and he had taken some hull damage. Another shot damaged some of his systems, and as he was spinning around to turn the tide, a bright green flash of light danced across his canopy and he turned to see the Monolithic, unleashing a gattling blast of energy at the Shivan fighter. Quick, bright energy blasts quickly destroyed his pursuer and it was engulfed in flames.

Slade hit the afterburners again, pulling away from the area of the Monolithic, weaving, and hoping that he would not be the next target.

But he wasn't. As he stared, amazed, at the giant vessel, tracing lasers burst into action, cutting down Shivan fighters left and right. "What do we do? What do we do!?" shouted one of Gamma

wing's pilots. The response from his commander was concise: "Don't fire until fired upon!"

That never happened. In less than a minute, the swarm of Shivan fighters had been all but eliminated. The Monolithic had engaged its engines and was now heading towards the Lucifier class ship. From around it's forward section, five large polygonal devices rose from the ships hull. Then, with a flash of red light, each emitted a beam which tore into the Lucifer ship, and a second later, it was destroyed.

The explosion rocked Slade's ship, and 3 fighters from Beta wing were destroyed by the shockwave, as well as the few remaining Shivan fighters. Meanwhile, the bomber groups that had been launched from the Andromeda were trying in vain to pull back, but were severely damaged by the explosion and debris.

Damage reports were filling the commlink airwaves. Slade tuned them out as he watched the Monolithic change direction again, this time setting a course between the Andromeda and the Mulhare. The massive ship traveled quickly. Onboard the GTA vessels, gunners nervously awaited the order to fire.

Without warning, a subspace portal opened behind the GTA cruisers. But it wasn't the familiar blue-white – it was a bright purple, seething with what appeared to be static electric charges.

The Monolithic passed by the two vessels and entered the portal. As the aft section finished passing through, the portal collapsed in on itself, causing a gravitational pull that drew the Andromeda and Mulhare from their positions. Onboard the Andromeda, Captain Wallace shouted orders to engage directional thrusters to maintain their position.

But it was in vain. In a fiery spectacle, the Andromeda and Mulhare collided, lighting the surrounding area with a flash of white light and the shockwaves of the dying vessels. The GTA bombers, and the entire Gamma wing were destroyed. Admiral Marsh, Captain Wallace, and the crews of the Andromeda and Mulhare, were gone.

More damage reports were coming in over the commlink. Meanwhile, Slade could make out Paul's voice above the chatter, sending an urgent long-range message to any available GTA cruisers in the area.

3 hours passed. The remaining fighters sat, stationary, in space. No one spoke much. Slade was pondering the events that had just transpired, and wondered where the Monolithic had set it's course to when it had left. Just then, a quiet transmission was barely audible over the commlink:

"This is the GTA cruiser Journeyman. We are on route to your location. ETA 4 hours, 15 minutes."

They would be rescued. But Slade had to wonder if they had made a new ally today, or a new enemy.