

Renegade

A Seraph Universe Novel

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Jade Fantasy

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A NOTE TO MY READERS

Hey, everyone!

I hope you are as excited as I am to return to the Tartarus Cluster after a year off! With your help, I hope to continue dabbling in this universe for a long time to come!

If you'd like to support me long-term, the best thing you can do is join my **Patreon**. The more patrons I have, the less I have to worry about appeasing the Amazon algorithm and existing markets when they inevitably change. Before my next Seraph series, I'll also be asking patrons what type of story they want most. A Blade of the Seraph? An Intelligence Directorate Silencer? Or maybe something else altogether!

And remember, if you'd like more Seraph stories, you should definitely check out *Wings of the Seraph* and *Shadow of the Seraph* as well.

Thanks for reading!

Love,
Sarah

DEDICATION

I want to offer a special thanks to all my wonderful supporters on Patreon, especially my super patrons Alcofribas, Lamar, Paul, Sean, and VanDerWaalz. Without your support, none of this would be possible!

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NEWSLETTER

Sarah *finally* has a newsletter! Make sure you never miss a new release by signing up at:

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HUNTING GROUNDS

“Status report?”

“Shields are down,” the operations officer announced, her voice as calm and crisp as usual despite the circumstances. “The psionic power grid is fluctuating. All weapon systems remain offline.”

“And the cloaking device?” I asked, tilting my head left to look at my first officer.

“Unstable,” the Yarasi woman said. “It cannot mask our drive signature.”

“Good,” I said, standing from the command chair to stretch my legs. “Someone is bound to take the bait sooner or later.”

I stepped between the operations and helm consoles, my gaze focused on the tactical holographic display superimposed over the viewscreen. We had been floating in the middle of nowhere for well over an hour now, more than enough time to get noticed.

Assuming, of course, that the Dowd sensor coverage of this area was as good as Pact Intelligence claimed. They could have been wrong—after nearly two months of devastating hit-and-run attacks on their outposts, I couldn’t exactly blame them for overestimating the capabilities of the enemy. The Pact had the largest fleet and military in the Tartarus Cluster, yet they had suffered significantly more losses than their fellow empires. Ships and firepower weren’t much use if you couldn’t find enemies for them to shoot.

Hopefully, this gambit of ours would finally solve that particular problem.

“You’d think they’d *want* to kill us,” the helmsman, Ensign Reyes, commented from his seat at the console to my left. “After the bloody nose we gave them on Helios.”

“I’m sure they do,” I said, smiling thinly. “In fact, I’m counting on it.”

“I hold out hope that we will yet discover an alternative to this tactic,” my first officer said in her clipped, ethereal voice. “It is...*dishonorable*.”

I glanced back over my shoulder. Velarys, unlike all the humans on the bridge, was wearing her sleek, body-hugging gray Yarasi jumpsuit rather than a Dominion fleet uniform. I had convinced her to wear the proper lieutenant commander’s insignia, at least, and for the most part, the crew had responded to her unorthodox promotion appropriately.

“The Dowd are the dishonorable ones,” our science officer said, a simmering hatred behind her words. “They remorselessly attack defenseless colonies. I would think the Yarasi of all people would wish to punish them.”

“We do, and we will,” Velarys said coolly. “Face to face, blade to blade, in proper combat.”

Ensign Hebeska shifted in her chair, her leathery wings ruffling behind her. The Angoth woman was the only other nonhuman bridge officer in this mixed crew I’d assembled, but the two women definitely hadn’t bonded over their differences. Quite the opposite, unfortunately.

“Given the choice, I would prefer to shoot the Dowd right in their faceless heads,” I said calmly, though I gave both women a warning look to keep their bickering off the bridge. “But war is about making the best of bad choices. We need to draw them out, and that’s exactly what we’re going to do.”

Velarys didn’t reply, but she did favor me with those glowing, blue-violet eyes of hers. As my first officer, she was the only one with the authority to openly challenge my orders on the bridge, but she knew it wasn’t good form to do so often. Not that it particularly mattered in this case—the rest of the crew was firmly behind me.

“I worry they won’t take the bait,” the operations officer said quietly. “The Dowd have repeatedly proven themselves more cunning than anticipated.”

I looked down at Miranda, positioned to my right next to Reyes. Despite the concern in her voice, she looked as composed as ever. Her legs were casually crossed, and her blue eyes and perfect jenny face were looking up at me expectantly.

“Sharks can’t resist blood in the water,” I said. “They’ll be here, don’t worry.”

I put more confidence in my voice than I actually felt—another one of Captain Ellis’s old tricks I’d come to rely on over the past few weeks. I wasn’t as good at it as he’d been, and frankly I doubted I ever would be, but it still had the intended effect. By the time I returned to my chair and sat down, everyone was working diligently at their stations, their expressions tense but focused on the task at hand. They had confidence in our mission.

And they had confidence in *me*.

It was a hell of a change from where we’d started a little over three months ago when a certain haughty jenny cadet had been appalled at the natty ’pounder Captain Ellis had invited onto his bridge. I could still remember the venom in Miranda’s tone...and how quickly it had changed when she’d realized I wasn’t a meatheaded fool like she’d been taught.

I smiled at the memory. Only a hundred days had passed since we’d encountered that derelict Pact freighter in the Stygian Drift, but so much had happened since then that it already felt like a different lifetime. Ellis and the *Stormrider* were gone, the Cluster was at war with the Dowd, and I had been given command of my own ship.

The *Renegade*: a state-of-the-art assault frigate with Pact weaponry, a Yarasi cloaking device, and the only mixed military crew in the Cluster. Not long ago, I wouldn’t have believed that any of this could be possible.

Then again, just seven years ago, I couldn’t have imagined myself wearing a Dominion military uniform, either. The galaxy had a way of keeping you on your toes.

Another hour passed mostly in silence, and I was about to consider changing the location of our trap when the tactical console behind me pinged a warning.

“Enemy contacts!” Lieutenant Olshenko blurted out with the shocked tone of a man whose attention had been drifting. “Two targets, bearing—”

“I see them,” I said, stiffening in my chair but keeping my voice cool. Two red blips had appeared on the tac-holo overlaid on the viewscreen. “Any IDs?”

A slight pause. “Definitely swarm ships, sir,” Olshenko said. “Their weapons are powered, and they’re heading right for us.”

“Forty-two seconds until we are in range of their disruptor cannons,” Velarys added as she consulted the small console on her armrest. “That is significantly closer than our previous engagements.”

“Could be luck,” I said, but I understood the point she was trying to make. Astral shifting was inherently imprecise. Since sensors and navigational buoys couldn’t cross between realspace and astral space, you never knew exactly where you’d end up. It made astral ambushes more difficult than simply jumping out of the weeds to pounce on your prey, since you’d always be a bit farther away than you’d hoped—and possibly at the wrong angle, too.

But given the other technological wonders the insurrectionists had demonstrated thus far in the war, I was grateful that they hadn’t quite overcome this problem yet. Especially considering that they’d seemingly developed a way to send messages from realspace to astral space, something that was believed to be impossible until recently.

Kind of like building a jump gate between the Cluster and the rest of the galaxy.

“Twenty seconds, sir,” Olshenko warned.

“Then it’s almost showtime,” I said, tapping a button on my console. A palm-sized crystalline ball emerged from the end of the armrest, directly beneath my right hand. “Helm, tactical: be ready to execute the attack on my mark. Ops: make sure the engines and weapons get the power they need.”

“Yes, sir,” the confirmation came back from Reyes, Olshenko, and Miranda in near unison. I had no doubt whatsoever that they could do their jobs.

The real question was whether or not I'd be able to do mine.

"It will work," Velarys said, voice soft and encouraging. "You are ready."

The timer on the tac-holo counted down. Five, four, three, two...

I touched the crystal. My breath caught in my throat, and a fiery needle of pain stabbed into my brain as the *Renegade's* shields, hungry for the power they'd deliberately been denied, greedily siphoned energy from a new source.

Namely, me.

My vision went dark as my very consciousness merged with the ship. I could feel flashes of intense heat on my back and sides as the Dowd weapons pummeled us, assuming we'd be an easy kill. But as I'd learned on the *Wildcat*, my Immortal powers could protect more than my own flesh. When linked to a psionic starship, I could boost its defenses to almost unthinkable levels...for a little while. But if we did this right, a little while was all we'd need.

As fresh lances of pain spiked through me, I was vaguely aware of Velarys shouting orders in my stead. The *Renegade* rumbled as if the hull had suffered a nasty hit, but it didn't take much longer for the pain to start fading away. I felt another surge of power rush into the shields—not from me but from the ship's own power core as Miranda stabilized the flow. I held on anyway in case the enemy got off another shot...

But they didn't, and I sucked in a deep breath as I released my hold on the crystal. My vision returned next, slowly but steadily, and I saw the forward viewport light up as the *Renegade* fired its forward plasma cannons.

"Direct hit on the enemy vessel," Olshenko exclaimed excitedly. "Their shields and engines are out; their power core is critically damaged."

"Excellent," Velarys said, now standing. "Helm, lay in a pursuit course for the other vessel. Standard attack pattern."

Reyes nodded as his fingers flew over his controls. "Yes, ma'am. Coming about now, full power to the thrusters."

Velarys turned when she heard me groan, and she promptly returned to her seat at my side. "Commander?"

"I'm fine," I said, voice sounding like I'd just smoked the fattest cigarra in the Cluster. "Any damage?"

"Mild damage only, sir," Miranda put in, half turning in her chair. Her voice was completely professional, but I could see the concern for me on her young face. "The shields held."

"Good. I'd hate to think I took one on the chin for no reason." Grimacing, I tapped my console and lowered the capacitor crystal back into the chair's armrest. One mental fusion was more than enough for today. "Status of the enemy ship?"

"They are attempting to flee, sir," Olshenko said. "Sensors show they are spinning up their astral drive."

"What?" Velarys breathed, eyes narrowing as if she didn't believe our tactical officer. "The Dowd do not retreat."

I had to do a double-take at the tac-holo before I believed it myself. The Dowd weren't coming around to try and avenge their disabled comrades like we'd all expected. Instead, they were flying away from the *Renegade* as quickly as they could. It was a reasonable tactical decision—fully powered and undamaged, armed with both psi-cannons and plasma cannons, the *Renegade* had twice the firepower of a swarm ship.

But the Dowd were the opposite of reasonable. Their defining attribute was ruthlessness. They nearly always pressed the attack no matter the odds, even to the point of suicide runs with their own ships.

"Maybe they've learned their lesson," I said. "Or maybe they've decided they can't afford to waste any more ships."

No one replied. The questions were mostly rhetorical anyway, and the bridge wasn't the place for idle speculation, especially not in the middle of a battle.

"Can we catch them in time?" I asked, watching the tac-holo as the circle representing the range of our weapons slowly drew closer to the fleeing enemy.

"I'm not certain, sir," Olshenko said. "Dowd ships have demonstrated an ability to perform an astral shift quite—"

As if to punctuate his words, there was a distant flash outside the viewport...and then the enemy was gone.

"We could shift and attempt pursuit," Velarys suggested.

I shook my head and swore under my breath. “No. We already have what we wanted. Take us back to the disabled ship.”

“Yes, sir,” Reyes confirmed, a hint of disappointment in his voice. Not merely from our quarry eluding us, I expected, but because I was denying him the chance to show off. Pursuing other vessels in astral space was an immense challenge for a ship and its pilot, and I knew he’d spent a fair bit of time in the simulators practicing in case the opportunity came up.

But he’d get his chance eventually. I had no doubts about that.

“Bridge to Lieutenant Ackers,” I said, opening the comm on my chair.

“Ackers here, sir,” the crisp voice came back.

“Get your squad ready for boarding, but send in the mechs first. We have no idea how many hostiles could still be alive or how many of them could have psionic powers.”

“Understood, sir. We’ll be ready in five.”

“Good.”

Closing the channel, I rose from my seat and approached the viewscreen again. The Dowd swarm ship was growing larger by the second. Visually, the beetle-like alien ship was almost indistinguishable from the swarm ships of the original Dowd War, but they were dramatically more sophisticated. The modern version was more durable and maneuverable, and the disruptors were as powerful as our psi-cannons despite being a full class smaller. Dimly, I wondered how many of those advancements came from the Dowd themselves rather than their insurrectionist masters.

“Keep a close eye on their power levels,” I told Miranda, coming to hover behind her. “Don’t want their engineers to surprise us with some quick repairs.”

She nodded. “No sign of anything so far, sir. Their drive and power core remain offline. I doubt they could make repairs without a space dock.”

“Stay vigilant anyway,” I said, an excited tingle rippling through me. It had been almost two months since we’d left Dominion space, and we’d been on the hunt for five weeks now. Yet despite dozens of engagements, we still hadn’t been able to learn where the Dowd were

striking from. And with every day bringing in fresh reports of attacks on Pact and Yarasi outposts, time was not on our side.

Lives were being lost. Not *human* lives, but that was part of the complication. Many of Admiral Lochlan's contemporaries were content to sit back and watch as the Dominion's enemies were slowly crippled, paving the way for our eventual advance across the Cluster. It was, ironically and frustratingly, a goal they shared with the insurrectionists of the Rividian Column, who believed that the Expansionary Fleet had lost sight of its original mission of conquest in the name of the Seraph.

Still, the enemy hadn't won yet. Destroying the jump gate in the Drift had cut the Dowd off from their reinforcements, and it was probably the reason they were being so skittish. If we could just bring all our firepower to bear on a fixed Dowd target, we might be able to end this war before it turned into an outright calamity.

And yet I felt oddly restless standing here on the bridge doing nothing. Over these past two months sitting in the command chair, I'd had to work very hard to suppress a lot of old habits. I was used to being in the thick of battle. If we'd still been on the *Stormrider* with Ellis in command, I'd have been the one suiting up to head over instead of Ackers. Seraph knew I was tempted to do so anyway. My armor and weapons were sitting there in a locker waiting for me...

But commanding officers weren't supposed to lead ground missions unless it was absolutely necessary. None of them had ever been an Immortal before, though, so I was more than ready to bend the rules in a pinch, especially since we didn't technically have a full squad of troopers on board. Not until the Krosian unit transferred over during our next stop at Nirule.

I scowled at the thought. All things being equal, I would have rather been the only trooper on the damn ship than invite a squad of those merciless aliens aboard. But it was supposedly important for "diplomacy" and "interspecies relations."

Which was all well and good right up until they trashed the ship or threatened one of the crew. At that point, I'd be fully justified in diplomatically flushing them out the airlock.

I felt Miranda looking at me before I glanced down at her. From the confused expression on her face, her telepathy had probably caught some of my thoughts. And if she had, Velarys would have, too.

My distaste for Krosians probably should have been embarrassing. But then, I was the one whose colony had been overrun by the tusk-heads.

“Approaching the enemy vessel now, sir,” Reyes said, interrupting my reverie. “Bringing us within—”

“Wait!” Miranda interrupted, eyes glued on her console. “Power surge from the enemy drive. It could be—”

She never had a chance to finish. There was the briefest flicker on the viewport...

And then the swarm ship exploded.

The shockwave battered our shields, rumbling the deck before the inertial stabilizers could fully compensate. I braced myself against Miranda’s chair to keep my feet, grimacing as the viewscreen became little more than a brilliant flash of fire and metal.

But then the flames vanished, snuffed out by the vacuum of space. All that remained were scattered fragments glittering in the *Renegade’s* running lights. I stared at them in silence, my hand balling into a fist at my side.

Enemies scuttling their own ship to prevent capture was hardly a novel phenomenon. But from the captain’s records, it was an unusual tactic for the Dowd, who vastly preferred to fight off enemy boarding parties or at least lure soldiers aboard *before* toggling the self-destruct. So why in the Seraph’s name had they blown themselves up now, before we’d even launched a shuttle?

“Damage report,” I said.

The stunned silence lingered for several heartbeats before Miranda recovered and returned her attention to her console.

“Minor structural damage to the outer hull, but the shields held,” she said.

“So they didn’t trap our soldiers or even scratch the paint.” I shook my head. “Why didn’t we detect the power build-up? We should have had more warning.”

"I'm not certain, sir," Miranda replied. "But the Dowd have made a habit of fooling our sensors all the way back to the Pact shuttle we discovered in the Drift."

Which means, I thought darkly, that this whole mission of ours might have been a fool's errand. If we can't take them alive or even board their ships, how in the name of the Seraph are we supposed to figure out where they're coming from?

"They are worried we will find them," Velarys said. Her voice came from right behind me, but she'd gotten out of her chair so quietly I hadn't even noticed.

"Maybe," I replied. I wasn't nearly as good at concealing my frustration as Captain Ellis had been, but I did my best to stay calm even as I continued clenching my fists. Forcing myself to take a calming breath, I turned and eyed each of my officers in turn. I could feel the aura of disappointment permeating the bridge, and I could see the frustration on all their faces. Another hunt, another dead-end. It was starting to get repetitive.

Except this wasn't a failure, not really. They needed to understand that.

"Commander," I said, looking at my first officer. "What's this bring our kill count up to?"

"Seven confirmed kills, sir," Velarys said.

"Seven kills," I repeated. "Pretty damn good for one little ship, wouldn't you say?"

"We have eliminated more enemy ships than any other known vessel."

"You're damn right we have," I said. "There are entire battle fleets out there who've struggled to notch two or three. Let's all remember that. Our goal may be to find their bases and flush them out, but we'll kill them one at a time if we have to. Whatever it takes to get the job done."

I gave everyone another measured look, and I was pleased to see that my words did seem like they were sinking in, at least a little. Ensign Hebeska was the only exception, though I understood why. Her people were the ones directly suffering out here, and the longer it took to track down the enemy, the more Angoth would perish.

I reached down and toggled the comm on my chair. “Bridge to engineering.”

“Engineering,” Vrisk’s calm Kali voice came back after the briefest delay.

“Deploy the salvage drones,” I ordered. “Bring in anything they can find, even bits of the hull. I want every square centimeter of that wreckage scrubbed for clues.”

“At once, Commander.”

I nodded at Velarys as I closed the com. “Once Vrisk and the drones complete their analysis, set a course back to Nirule. We have some new crew members waiting to join up.”

“Yes, sir,” she acknowledged.

Offering her a thin smile, I took another look around the bridge.

My bridge. My crew.

No matter what setbacks we encountered, no matter how hard the Dowd tried to run, we were going to find them. For Captain Ellis. For the millions of vulnerable people out there.

For the future of the Cluster.

“I’ll be in my office if you need me,” I said. “Carry on.”



“I’m not going to lie, sir. There are times when all of this still feels...*wrong*.”

I downed the last sip of my Drellian brandy, then set the glass on the desk and looked out the thin viewport behind me. There wasn’t much to see; the Dowd’s self-destruct mechanism had worked annoyingly well. But every few moments, I’d catch a flash of light from one of the tiny salvage drones as it fired its tractor beam and pulled something in for analysis.

“The rank,” I added quietly to the darkness. “The uniform. The fact you’re not here calmly explaining why things aren’t as dire as they seem.”

I looked down at my fancy blue fleet jacket and commander’s insignia. The uniform was comfortable enough—maybe even *too* com-

fortable. I could sleep in this damn thing without any trouble, which didn't make it any easier to stay awake on the long, boring bridge shifts. I never thought I'd miss the subtle chafe of my old 'pounder uniform against my shoulders and legs. It wasn't enough that the jennies got to fly starships—they also got to do it while wearing silken pajamas.

I grinned despite myself. Ellis would have enjoyed that one. He'd always been on my case to smooth the sharp edges off the chip on my shoulder, but he'd never wanted me to whittle it down altogether. And on that point, at least, I knew I wouldn't disappoint him.

I was still staring out the viewport a minute later, debating whether or not I should catch up on some datawork, when the chime sounded. "Come in."

The door hissed open, and I saw Miranda's reflection in the viewport as she stepped inside.

"Commander," she said extra formally before the door shut behind her. "I have the initial report from the salvage drones."

Nodding, I turned around and sat in my chair as she set her datapad on the desk. Not that I needed to read it—I knew the report's conclusion from the frustrated look on her perfect jenny face.

"Nothing useful, I assume," I said.

"No, sir," she confirmed. "One of the Angoth technicians—Krelma—thinks she might be able to perform a detailed analysis on the hull metal to learn where the ship might have been recently, but I'm skeptical."

"The Angoth know their own space better than we do," I said with a shrug. "It might lead to something we can use."

"Perhaps."

I smiled, tempted to ask her for the probability profile she'd undoubtedly calculated on the way here. But the odds didn't really matter; even a low chance was better than no chance, as far as I was concerned.

"More importantly," I said, "it will give her and the other Angoth something to do. They've been more frustrated by our lack of leads than anyone else, for obvious reasons."

"Yes," Miranda agreed. "I admit, it is beyond frustrating. Every day, there's a new report about a Dowd raid on a Pact planet or outpost or supply depot. Where could they be hiding?"

“Turns out that space is pretty big,” I replied mildly. I reached out to grab the datapad, then leaned back in the chair as I thumbed through the analysis. “Lochlan knew this was a long shot when she sent us out here. And we’ve still managed to kill more swarm ships than anyone else I know of.”

I paused in the middle of reading, belatedly realizing what I’d done. A minute ago, when I’d been in here alone, I’d been frustrated by our lack of progress in finding new Dowd bases. But the moment Miranda had expressed similar concerns, I’d immediately buried my doubts and laid out our successes for her instead.

Captain Ellis had done the same thing for me a hundred times. He’d excelled at the pep talks that were so subtle you didn’t even realize what they were until later. Looking back, I wondered how many times he’d been alone with the darkness when I’d walked in, only to turn around and tell his officer what I needed to hear rather than what he was genuinely thinking.

Well, sir, I thought in grim amusement, another lesson learned.

“I am looking forward to meeting the new crew members at Nirule,” Miranda said after a brief pause. “The Angoth ones, anyway. Vrisk will appreciate having a few more capable engineers.”

“I’m sure he will,” I said. “The Krosian troopers are the ones I’m concerned about.”

“I did ensure that their assigned quarters aren’t near any vital systems. And most of the others on that deck are fellow Pact members.”

I nodded absently. On the one hand, the goal of this mission was to bridge the gap between Dominion and Pact forces, and segregating the crews by deck probably wasn’t the best way to integrate them. But on the other, I wasn’t so naive as to think that two disparate crews of rival empires could seamlessly get along just because they’d been ordered to. So far, we had managed to avoid any major problems, but adding Krosians to the mix had the potential to turn the ship into a powderkeg.

“Another reason to find a Dowd base as soon as possible,” I said. “Give something for the Krosians to shoot at.”

Miranda smiled thinly. “I know you have a personal history with them, sir. Ash told me that they’re the ones who drove you off Nirivarr.”

“They did,” I confirmed, my thoughts flashing back to the day that had changed my life forever. Not solely the battle against the Pact raiders, but the Dominion captain who had rescued us afterward. If Ellis hasn’t been in the right place at the right time...

In a way, my entire life had been defined by that moment. Without Ellis, I wouldn’t be here and Ash wouldn’t have her ship.

Ash...

“Have you heard anything from her recently?” Miranda asked.

I blinked. “What?”

“I’m sorry, sir, I wasn’t trying to pry,” she said, lifting her hands apologetically. “It’s just that whenever you think about Ash, it’s very...loud.”

“It’s all right,” I said. “But no, I haven’t heard anything for several days. I probably won’t until we reach Nirule and get in range of the relays. I wouldn’t be surprised if she left an encrypted packet for us.”

Miranda nodded. “It’s frustrating. I wish we could be with her.”

“She can handle herself,” I said, as much for my own benefit as Miranda’s. “And she needs to do this. She’d never forgive me if I forced her to stay here.”

“I know.”

I smiled thinly. Miranda wasn’t simply being polite and telling me what I wanted to hear; she really did understand. She and Ash’s gradual transition from rivals to close friends made me unreasonably happy sometimes. They worked out together, ate meals together, and Ash had even gotten Miranda into some of her terrible holo-dramas.

And of course, they both happily shared my bed. Often at the same time.

“Do you think she’ll find her brother?” Miranda asked quietly.

“Ash can find anyone,” I said. “Assuming Leenam is still alive. And somewhere she can reach.”

“Perhaps she’ll be the one who tells us where the Dowd are hiding. It wouldn’t be the first time she’s saved everyone. I can’t even imagine what would be happening now if she hadn’t found that base on Niri-varr. Or saved us on the Yaras listening post.”

I smiled. “Pretty good for a country girl, huh?”

“For *anyone*,” Miranda said. “It is easy to understand why you fell in love with her.”

We shared a long, knowing smile before she abruptly lifted her datapad and offered it to me across the desk. “There is one other thing I thought you’d be interested in, sir. A second report.”

“About what?” I asked, tapping the screen on the pad and swiping through the drone analysis. There was a second file attached—a medical log.

“The doctor screened me yesterday,” Miranda said. “As the ship’s commanding officer, you have a right to know if your crew is healthy and fit for service.”

I frowned, wondering why she would possibly be bringing this up...until I saw the section she had helpfully highlighted for me.

“Ah,” I said, grinning. “You’re right, this *is* interesting.”

“I’m glad you think so, sir. I only hope the condition is temporary.”

“I’ll make sure it is.”

Her blue eyes brightened. About a month ago, Doctor Trevas had extracted another healthy, fertilized embryo from Miranda and handed it over to the mothership for proper storage and development. And as of yesterday, she was officially clear to get pregnant again.

“Nirule’s at least forty hours away,” I said. “Plenty of time for—”

“With all due respect, sir, I’m not certain we should wait,” Miranda interrupted as she stepped around my desk. “Any delay could prove...*interminable*.”

Keeping her eyes on mine, Miranda hopped up onto the edge of the desk in front of me. The shuffling motion pulled her short skirt up another few centimeters, showing off more of her smooth, toned legs. She crossed them with a slow, dramatic movement that revealed a secret she had apparently been keeping since going on duty this morning.

She was not wearing panties.

“Wouldn’t you agree, sir?” she asked innocently.

I smiled playfully as I reached out to slide my fingers along the length of her calves. “You know,” I said, moving my chair closer. “I could write you up on a uniform code violation.”

Miranda grinned impishly as she braced her palms on the edge of the desk. “While that is true, I could submit a complaint about yours as well.”

I frowned. “How...*ob!*”

I gasped when I unexpectedly felt something press against my crotch. I looked down, wondering if she'd somehow pushed her foot against me, but her dark blue boots were still dangling half a meter away. Then the invisible force shifted, becoming more concentrated and delicate as it opened my belt and pulled down my zipper as gracefully as a pair of experienced fingers.

"Exposing yourself to a junior officer," Miranda said. "You could get in serious trouble, sir."

I groaned again when she telekinetically reached inside my now-open pants to retrieve their prize. All the talk about her medical records had already gotten me to yellow alert, but the pressure of her mental grip curling around my shaft swiftly sent me into red.

This had become a favorite trick of hers ever since her little gambit in the Quintillion on Kenabrius. When we first met, I never would have pegged her as a trickster—she was one of the most straight-laced women I'd ever met. But she had loosened up a lot over the past three months, especially after spending more time with Ash.

That's the problem right there, I thought dryly. *This is one hundred percent Ash's fault.*

Miranda continued her gentle stroking rhythm, a smugly satisfied smirk on her face as she dangled her legs in front of me but made no other movements. And when I tried to reach out and touch her leg again, I found that my entire body was pinned firmly against the chair. Her eyes brightened when I struggled, almost like a Yarasi challenging me to break free and best her.

But Miranda was not Velarys. This was a tease, nothing more. And I knew from experience that she wouldn't be able to restrain herself for long.

I was right. After a few more heartbeats, she tapped the console on the desk to lock my door, then made another show of uncrossing her legs for me. Her bare quim was thoroughly soaked—I could see her young pink flesh glistening—and I thought she might simply leap on top of me and ride me in the chair.

Instead, she dove to her knees in front of me. The telekinetic grip on my cock vanished...and was swiftly replaced with the warm, welcoming suction of her lips.

“Ohhh!” I groaned as my hand settled on the back of her head. Her eyes stayed locked on mine as she swallowed half my length then pulled back, her tongue dragging across the underside then flicking across the tip. She had learned many tricks since our first encounter, also thanks to Ash, and she had developed a genuine passion for all aspects of the craft. From the long, languid sessions in my quarters to the quick, sloppy ones beneath my desk, Miranda had learned to make me cum pretty much whenever she wanted to.

Which, these days, was pretty damn often.

Hissing through my teeth, thoroughly enjoying the warm, velvety embrace of her young throat, I got a firm hold of her black hair to help her choke down the last few centimeters like the good junior officer she was. I knew I needed to be careful not to mess up her hair too much, but I couldn’t resist taking control. It wasn’t long until the tip of my manhood had reached the spongy wall at the back of her throat, and I could already feel myself spiraling toward the abyss. From the way Miranda was still looking up at me, it was clear she was eager to take everything I had to give her.

But no. As much as I enjoyed pumping my unrefined natty seed down her jenny throat, my thoughts were on the datapad lying at the edge of my desk. A member of my crew had a very serious medical condition, and while I may not have been a doctor, in this case, I was the only one capable of administering the cure.

“Enough!” I said, pulling back on her hair. Her lips popped as the suction broke, and she looked straight at me, eagerly awaiting my next order. “Clear the desk. And bend over.”

The instant I released my grip on her hair, she spun around and thrust out her hand. A wave of telekinetic force swept everything off my desk—the datapad, the styluses, even the light I’d set up. But she kept them in her grip long enough to gently set them on the floor without making a mess.

She was on her feet an instant later, placing her palms flat on the desk and lifting her ass to present herself for me. I lunged out my chair to meet her, pushing her skirt further up her hips with one hand and shoving her face down against the desk with the other.

Taking hold of my swollen, spit-slickened stem, I brought the head up to her wet, waiting folds. Miranda moaned in anticipation, her

fingers visibly gripping the opposite edge of the desk. If someone were to open the door right now, they would have one hell of a view of me about to mount my operations officer like a bitch in heat.

I pushed inside. She whimpered as her carnal walls enveloped me, the familiar velvety warmth and comforting tightness sending a shiver of delight rippling through me. I had so many alien lovers it was sometimes easy to forget just how perfect a welcoming human cunt could be.

I allowed myself to sink all the way into her before I pulled back. Had we been alone in my quarters, I would have happily taken my time plundering every centimeter of her depths, but this was an emergency appointment. Speed was of the essence.

Grabbing a clump of her black hair in one hand while pushing down on her back with the other, I slammed into her again. Miranda yelped in delight, and I could see her biting down on her lip as I took her roughly, forcefully, as we both desired. The background hum of the *Renegade's* engines, a sound that always seemed to get louder when I was alone, faded away amidst the rutting slaps of our joined flesh. Now that her precious jenny womb was empty again, I needed to prioritize making at least one deposit inside her every day. Here, in my quarters, in the storage locker...

Anywhere we could. Our duty to the Dominion demanded it.

"Oh!" she gasped as I felt her walls clutching around me.

Snarling under my breath, knowing I was about to crest, I leaned over her and brought my lips to her ear. "Beg for it!"

"Please, sir!" Miranda squeaked. "Please...*ngn*...!"

"Please *what*, Ensign?"

"Please, fuck me. *Breed* me!"

Slamming hard against her nubile flesh, more thankful than ever for the sound proofing in the office, I let myself go. My cock erupted deep inside her, filling her empty womb in a heartbeat. She whimpered in rhythm with each spasm, her walls clenching even more tightly as if to ensure they milked me of every drop.

And then we were both spent. I collapsed on top of her, panting, all the troubles in the galaxy swiftly forgotten.

Once I'd finally caught my breath, I brought my lips to her ear. "Stop by my quarters when you're off-duty tonight."

“I intend to, sir,” Miranda breathed contentedly.

“Good. And you should probably pack an extra uniform, too.”
I smiled and stroked her hair. “Because you’ll still be there in the morning.”

2

DIPLOMACY

Of the three Gateway Worlds in the Cluster, Nirule was the most honest reflection of the empire it protected. That was what Captain Ellis had always claimed, anyway, and as with most pearls of wisdom he'd dropped in my lap over the years, I had eventually come to realize he was right.

On the Dominion side of the Borderlands, Rividian was a poor representation of our society as a whole. While the system did possess the population and wealth of one of the Golden Worlds like Eladrell Prime or New Praxius, it was first and foremost a military stronghold dedicated to policing the Dominion's border. Rividian was ruled by Fleet Command, not the Great Houses, and the culture on the surface was fundamentally different because of it.

Oscura was much the same. The planet personified the natural beauty and openness the Yarasi valued so highly, but it was also the only system in the Empire that welcomed outsiders. It presented an illusion of mixed cultures and customs that simply didn't exist if one ventured deeper into the heart of Yarasi territory.

Then there was Nirule, the Gateway World to the Pact. It was exactly what everyone thought it would be.

"We are approaching the planetary defense cordon now, Commander," Ensign Mesko, our communications officer, called out from his station on the back right of the bridge. "Shall I transmit the codes?"

"Please do," I said. "I'd rather not get blasted into atoms before breakfast."

I heard Olshenko chuckle from behind me, but Mesko seemed too nervous for that. Not everyone had gotten used to staying cool with a hundred guns pointed at them.

“Transmitting now, sir,” he said.

Having spent so much time in Pact space over the last month, the view before us was starting to seem almost normal. A dozen massive orbital defense stations glittered in the distance around the red-brown planet, barely visible without the magnification from the viewscreen. Each individual station possessed enough firepower to slag a small fleet, but the Pact hadn’t stopped there. Our sensors were already detecting almost five hundred military ships on top of the two thousand civilian ones flying back and forth between the planet, the defense cordon, and the six moons in between.

I couldn’t even begin to calculate the expense of maintaining this kind of military presence, especially since it was the same nearly everywhere we went. There may have been fewer ships and stations on the other major Pact worlds, but they all felt as if they were preparing for war.

I found it strangely ironic—and more amusing than I should have—that despite all the time and resources poured into building such a vast military, the Pact had proven the least ready to handle the real war against the Dowd. The constant swarm ship attacks on their shipping lanes and supply depots had devastated the economies of numerous sectors, and without an enemy base to target, all this firepower was almost useless. The Dowd and their Column allies had realized that they didn’t need to attack fortified worlds directly to wreak havoc. The slow destabilization of the Pact economy might prove more effective than any bomb.

“How many Krosian soldiers are on those ships right now?” Reyes asked softly.

Too many, I thought to myself, conjuring up a mental image of a million Krosians shock troopers storming a Dominion world. That was the war the Pact had *actually* been preparing for the past few decades—and why plenty of voices back in Fleet Command had argued against Admiral Lochlan and this mission. Many of the admirals had no qualms about letting the Dowd cull the herd a bit, as it were. I couldn’t entirely blame them.

“We’ve received confirmation, sir,” Mesko said. “Control is ordering us to proceed to one of the defense platforms.”

I nodded. “All right, Helm: take us in.”

There was precious little to do besides relax and enjoy the intimidating view as Reyes brought us into one of the docking ports sticking out of the defense platform. The closer we got, the more intimidating the massive plasma batteries and torpedo launchers became. I remembered looking over one of the military simulations with Captain Ellis once. Thanks to our advanced psionic tech, Dominion ships were often significantly more powerful than their Pact counterparts, but numbers still mattered. Fleet Command estimated that a direct attack on Nirule would require almost a third of the fleet to have any chance of success, and the losses would take generations to replenish.

“Control informs us that the crew transport is on its way,” Mesko said. “They are inquiring if we require any repairs.”

“No repairs, just the standard resupply,” I said. “What’s the ETA on the transport?”

“They say it will not be long, sir.”

Nodding, I settled back in my chair to wait. And I was glad I hadn’t headed down to the hangar early, because “not long” turned out to be a hell of an understatement. All told, it took several *hours* before the station informed us that a Pact transport carrying our fresh troops was finally on its way.

My first instinct was to blame the interminable delay on good, old-fashioned governmental inefficiency. But in this case, I wondered if there might be more to the story. If the fighting was disrupting the Pact economy as badly as some of the reports I’d read had indicated, it was entirely possible that the officials here on Nirule simply had their hands full trying to put out a million tiny little fires.

But it was *also* possible that the delay was an intentional slight against the human commander who didn’t really belong in Pact space—and whose species was responsible for unleashing the Dowd back upon the galaxy at-large. Angoth weren’t usually that petty, in my experience, but bureaucratic power could transform anyone into a jackass.

Still, there wasn't much we could do about it besides grouse. And once we officially had an ETA, it was time to get ready and greet our new arrivals.



At a glance, the *Renegade's* hangar was the same size as the one on the *Stormrider*, though it was technically two meters wider. The difference, according to the engineers, was to make sufficient space for the bay to comfortably house two drop shuttles, four Valkyries, or a combination of the two. For our particular mission, I had originally intended to dedicate half that space for Ash and the *Wildcat*, but after the Yarasi technicians who had installed our cloaking device had fixed her ship's astral drive, that space was no longer necessary. As a result, we had our own drop shuttle and two Valkyries, which were a nice addition to our already impressive firepower. And if the *Wildcat* absolutely *had* to fit inside for some reason, we could manage it.

For now, the Valkyries were making laps around the station, opening up their docking space for the incoming Pact transport to land and deliver our new crew members. The rest of the greeting party was waiting when I arrived, including Chief Engineer Vrisk and our trooper squad leader, Lieutenant Ackers. The latter had his helmet off, but was otherwise fully clad in his black armor.

I had expected him to show up wearing his standard red ground pounder uniform, but I was glad he'd chosen otherwise. Had our positions had been reversed, I definitely would have been wearing armor, too. Krosians respected strength, not protocol. Outside of punching their highest-ranking soldier in the face—or maybe pissing on their landing ramp to establish dominance—greeting them while fully armed and armored was probably the best move.

"Exciting times," I commented as I strode up between my two officers. "Before you ask, it's too late to request a transfer."

Ackers chuckled. "Don't worry, sir. We can handle them."

"You say that now. Wait until you have to share a table in the galley."

He smiled but otherwise kept his disciplined posture. The tall, lanky man was a year older than me, and he'd served on the front lines of several Borderlands skirmishes over the past five years. Lochlan had given me a choice of officers for this mission, and I'd selected him the moment I'd read his record. He'd been in tough fights on bad worlds, and he'd been forced to work with a mixed crew on an off-the-books mission on Rylax two years ago. I considered all of it a bonus.

He'd buzzed his hair down to little more than fuzz, and he'd never had the medics repair the long scar on his left cheek. I'd never asked why, but he'd probably assumed it would get him more women. And since he'd gotten married a little over a year after getting it, his gamble might have paid off.

"It is not their eating habits which most concern me," Vrisk commented as the Pact shuttle slowly entered the bay. "But rather, their interactions with the rest of the crew."

"We're keeping them separated for exactly that reason," I said.

A thoughtful black shimmer rippled down the back of the Kali's neck scales. "I do not mean their interactions with the crew of the *Renegade*," Vrisk said. "I am more concerned about their behavior around the Angoth."

I frowned. "Why's that?"

"Because on many Pact ships, the engineers and scientists are often treated poorly. Each of my technicians has shared stories about abuse at the hand of the warrior caste."

I bit down on my lip. *Not on my ship.*

"We'll have to keep an eye on it," I said. "If they report anything to you, make sure it gets back to me."

"I will," Vrisk said coolly. "In any event, the supplementary Angoth crew members will be a welcome addition. The *Renegade's* plasma cannons possess remarkable energy output, but they are proving difficult to maintain."

"I'm sure you'll give them plenty to do."

The Pact shuttle's ramp extended mere seconds after it touched down. A small team of Angoth engineers were the first to emerge—all female, just like the others already on the ship. I offered them a simple greeting before handing them off to Vrisk. Kali weren't known for their social skills, but frankly neither were Angoth females. The

important thing was that they all spoke the same language—science—and thus far that had been more than enough to keep the engineering crews well integrated.

A ripple of thoughtful purple shimmered across Vrisk's neck scales as he led them out of the bay, though I saw the faintest glimmer of apologetic red when he turned his snake-like head back to look at me on his way out the door. He was well aware that he had the easy job here.

The sound of heavy boots crunching on the ramp snapped my attention back to the shuttle. All six hulking Krosian warriors emerged as a group, not in a line or any type of military formation, but like a mob of drunks stumbling out of a bar at two in the morning. Most of them were laughing at something as they descended, and the leader fastened his orange-red eyes upon me.

"Commander Zeris," he said in a low voice.

"First Warrior Sekvoth," I replied. "Welcome aboard the *Renegade*."

He gave me the Krosian equivalent of a grin. Since his lipless mouth left his jagged teeth fully exposed, the expression may have been more nightmarish than the race of faceless monsters we were supposed to be hunting.

"It is a pleasure to stand aboard a Dominion warship," he said, his eyes drifting around the hangar. "If this *is* a warship. It is smaller and weaker than I expected."

Probably because you were too illiterate to read the briefings.

"She's lean, but hardly weak," I said instead, though I knew my knuckles had gone white behind my back. "The *Renegade* packs a punch far above her weight."

"Let us hope," Sekvoth said, still smirking. He was at least thirty centimeters taller than I was, and the bone tusks jutting out of his jaw seemed sharp enough to skewer a small animal. His voice was smoother and more eloquent than most of his kin, though it was still far less cultured than Gor's. I assumed it was a result of his Brood Leader training and genetic enhancements. Unlike the Dominion, who engineered all their jennies to be smart and fast, the Pact only bothered to give one in twenty Krosian more than a handful of brain cells.

“This is Lieutenant Ackers,” I said, gesturing to the armored man next to me. “You’ll be serving under him alongside the other troopers.”

Ackers nodded. “I look forward to seeing what your men can—”

“Do you no longer lead your own men in battle, Commander?” Sekvoth interrupted, not even acknowledging the other man’s presence. “I was told that you were a soldier, not a mewling *sik’lak*.”

My jaw twitched. I was actually grateful my translator stumbled on the word, otherwise I might have hauled off and punched him.

“I am the commander of the vessel,” I said firmly. “I will lead the troops on the ground when it’s appropriate.”

“Ah, of course,” Sekvoth said, turning to his men and sharing a chuckle. “I would have been disappointed otherwise. The Brood Worlds are rife with tales of the vaunted Seraphim Immortals. I had hoped to witness your...*prohess*...first hand.”

His eyes flashed in a challenge, and I belatedly wondered if it would have been better if Ackers had been here alone to solidify his own authority. But I suspected it wouldn’t have mattered in the end—Sekvoth wanted to challenge *me*, and he would have found a way to do so even if I hadn’t been here in the hangar.

“You’ll get your chance,” I promised. “But in the meantime, Lieutenant Ackers will be giving orders to your men.”

Sekvoth grinned again. “My warriors will only follow worthy leaders, Commander. Men like you, who have claimed the tusks of many of our kind.”

“You will take orders from whoever I tell you to,” I said coldly. “Or you can head back up that ramp and get off my ship. That’s the deal, take it or leave it.”

Sekvoth laughed deep in the back of his throat. “We both know that’s not possible, Commander. Our superiors are quite insistent about us working together. I can’t leave this ship any more than you can throw me off it.”

I took a menacing step forward. I could feel everyone around me collectively holding their breath, wondering if their trooper-turned-naval officer commander might lose his nerve. But one bonus of being an Immortal was that you didn’t need to throw the first punch to win a fight.

“I’m happy to test that theory if you are,” I said. “The airlock is right over there.”

We glared at one another for several long, tense heartbeats, and I was half tempted to grab one of his tusks and break it off to make a point. The behavior wouldn’t have been that out-of-place on a Krosian ship, where rank was often little more than an extension of whoever had won the latest pissing contest.

But this wasn’t a Krosian ship, and I wasn’t about to let these brutes turn it into one. They could behave, or they could get flushed. That was the limit of my diplomatic patience.

“It is a pity your kind do not keep trophies, Commander,” Sekvoth said. “Were our positions reversed, I would have proudly displayed a necklace from the tusks of the Krosians I’ve killed.”

“Might not have enough space,” I replied darkly. “But I’ll still happily add yours to the pile if you disobey my orders. Or if you lift a finger to harm my crew.”

His glare intensified for a fraction of a second before he shared another chortle with his men. “Perhaps one day I will show you my collection, Commander. It is a pity that human bones make such poor jewelry.”

Sekvoth looked back at his men, then gave me a nod. “Together, we shall hunt these faceless cowards until they are extinct once more.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” I said.

The Krosian turned to Ackers. To his credit, he hadn’t flinched or moved away during the confrontation; his expression was as hard as thorotite.

“I place my warriors in your care, Lieutenant,” Sekvoth said. “What do you wish us to kill today?”

“Nothing yet,” Ackers said. “But you can follow me to the barracks. We can get you settled in...and explain the rules of this ship and the duties you’ll be expected to perform while aboard.”

Sekvoth nodded. “Of course. By our might, our enemies will suffer.”

“Right,” Ackers said. For a brief moment, I wondered if he had also been considering flushing them out the airlock. Or perhaps simply mowing them all down with his pulse rifle. “This way.”



I was still quietly fuming in my command chair on the bridge when the comm station behind me beeped half an hour later.

“Incoming transmission, sir,” Mesko announced.

“Resupply finally finished?” I asked.

“No, sir. At least, I don’t think so. It is a private message, text only, addressed to you personally.”

I shared a frown with Velarys. She was standing near Olshenko at the tactical station reviewing some logs, but she smoothly made her way back to my side.

“Send it to my chair,” I said.

“Yes, sir,” Mesko replied.

The message scrolled across the display on my armrest. It was short and simple, but it still made every hair on my body stand upright. I read it over twice before I believed it was real, and then again just to be sure.

“Is something wrong, Commander?”

Inhaling sharply, I turned to look into the glowing eyes of my first officer. While I knew she had been making an effort to respect the mental privacy of everyone on board, Yarasi couldn’t turn off their natural telepathy any more than I could turn off my sense of smell. She’d undoubtedly sensed my mental hiccup even if she hadn’t pried into my actual thoughts.

“Not exactly,” I said. “But it seems as though we’ll have another guest on the way before we depart.”

She cocked a white eyebrow. “Additional crew members?”

“No.” Taking a deep breath, I rose to my feet and then swiveled to face the tactical officer behind us. “Lieutenant, I need you to get a security team together. There are two special guests coming aboard who will need an appropriate escort to the observation room.”

Olshenko blinked curiously, but he knew better than to pry. “Yes, sir.”

I looked back at Velarys. One advantage of her telepathy was that I didn't need to announce that I wanted to have a private chat with her. She simply nodded and followed me into my office.

"Councilor Vokal," she breathed once we were alone and I told her the news. "Here, on Nirule?"

"So it would seem," I grumbled as I sank into my chair. Dealing with an annoying Krosian warrior had been irritating enough, but this was going to be so much worse.

Councilor Vokal, the Pact representative on the Security Council, was one of the *last* people in the Cluster I wanted to talk to. Though, I suppose I technically wouldn't be talking with just him; his Angoth advisor and translator, Golma, would be there as well. They had given me a lot of shit two months ago when Ellis and I had told them about what happened at Nirivarr.

I hadn't spoken with them or any other Councilor since—Admiral Lochlan had been falling on that particular grenade for me. But we were technically operating on behalf of the Security Council, and they had every right to poke around if they wanted to. We had probably been coasting on borrowed time for a while.

"I assumed Vokal would still be on Kenabrius," Velarys mused.

"He was, as of the last public HoloSphere broadcast," I said. "I didn't realize this little crew transfer was important enough to warrant a visit from someone like him. We're only picking up fourteen people."

Velarys considered the matter, her eyes narrowing slightly. "It is curious. As I understand it, Vokal rarely meets with anyone, even other members of the Security Council."

"So what the hell is so important that he wants a private meeting with *me*?"

"Perhaps he simply recognizes the importance of our mission," she mused. "Or wishes to personally congratulate us for destroying more Dowd vessels."

"Somehow, I doubt that," I muttered. "Important people send compliments over comms—they deliver excoriations personally. It's an iron law of the universe."

"I am not aware of any such law."

"Consider yourself lucky." I shrugged. "My guess is that he's going to scream at us for not finding a Dowd base yet."

“Sillibar do not scream.”

“His interpreter might.”

Velarys arched a white eyebrow. “Then how do you wish to proceed?”

“By sitting there and taking it,” I said. “It’s what Immortals do.”

I tapped my fingers on the desk in thought. They probably expected me to meet them alone, but I was well within my rights to have my first officer with me. If they bristled at the prospect...well, it was my ship, and that was their problem.

I sighed again and rubbed my face. After the better part of two months commanding the *Renegade*, I had been starting to come around and enjoy my career change from ‘pounder to naval officer. Aside from the nicer quarters, better pay, and the constant amusement of seeing jennies who’d hated me a year ago needing to salute me, starship combat was starting to grow on me as well. While I imagined I’d always miss the tactile enjoyment of stabbing a Krosian slaver to death with his own tusk, outthinking an opponent had proven immensely satisfying.

But nothing in the galaxy would ever make me enjoy diplomacy. I would rather personally lead the *Renegade* on a suicide mission against the *Fist of the Seraph* than sit down across the table from a professional politician.

My mind suddenly flashed to an image of Captain Ellis smirking at me from beyond the grave. Normally when I thought about him these days, it was out of mournful respect. Right now, though, I wanted to slap his ghost around. If he hadn’t gotten himself killed, I wouldn’t have had to deal with this bullshit at all.

“We might as well wait in the observation room,” I said.

“Shall I accompany you?” Velarys asked.

“Yes,” I told her. “If there’s going to be two of them, it only seems fair to have two of us.”

She considered that for a heartbeat, then nodded. “Very well.”

“A human, a Yarasi, and a Sillibar walk into a room,” I murmured, standing. “What could possibly go wrong?”



Velarys and I made our way to the observation room while the security team escorted our guests from the hangar. The *Renegade* didn't have the most elegant accommodations, what with being an assault frigate and all, but I had still had the galley send up some drinks in case Advisor Golma happened to be thirsty. My first officer and I sat down at the far end of the long meeting table, and I did my best not to fidget impatiently while we waited. If nothing else, the view outside was a bit more active than normal—the entire starboard wall was basically a giant window, and we could see hundreds of ships swarming around the planet like agitated insects.

I wouldn't have been surprised if the orbital traffic always looked this chaotic, but I also wouldn't have been surprised if it was a bit more hectic than normal. Nirule hadn't been attacked by the Dowd yet, but several of the outlying mining and mercantile colonies in the system had been. The Pact didn't share many details about their casualty lists, but it seemed like a safe bet to double or even triple the official estimates.

Perhaps ten minutes later, our guests arrived in the observation room. Velarys and I stood politely as the two men entered, and I gave the security team a nod for them to wait outside during the meeting.

“Councilor Vokal,” I said, forcing a smile at the mouthless alien. “You honor us with your presence.”

Vokal studied me with his large, milky white eyes. The Sillibar Stare, I'd once heard it called, was a look that seemed to creep out basically every other species in the Cluster. The lack of traditional facial features was bizarre enough, but the fact that their eyes didn't blink was frankly even more disturbing.

And to top it all off, the whole silence routine was completely unnecessary. Sillibar were master shapeshifters, capable of assuming virtually any form imaginable. He could easily give himself a mouth and vocal chords if he so desired, or wear one of the mechanical vo-

calizers I'd seen others use. Hell, he could look and speak exactly like his own translator if he wanted to.

But he didn't, and perhaps that was the point. The whole translator thing seemed almost like a political statement of some kind, as if the Sillibar refused to adopt the form of lesser species out of principle. I didn't claim to understand the alien psychology at work, and for whatever reason, neither Ellis nor Razael had ever tried to explain it to me.

"Councilor Vokal is pleased to be aboard such a fine vessel," his elderly Angoth interpreter, Golma, said in his dry, almost parched voice. "And to see you again, *Commander*."

He emphasized the rank a bit strangely, as if he were still unsure it was appropriate. I probably should have been offended, but I decided to ignore it for diplomacy's sake.

"And you, Kethron," Golma added. "Councilor Vokal is pleased to see that the Yarasi Empire has offered this joint mission the service of *one* of their valuable soldiers."

I winced at the not-so-subtle implication. I had been able to roll with his punch, but Velarys didn't take blows as gracefully.

"My rank is Lieutenant Commander for the purposes of this joint mission," she said coolly. "And I am the only Yarasi soldier *required* to complete this mission. The Empire's donation of a cloaking device has also been critical during our successful engagements."

"We're sure it has," Golma replied just as coolly. "Our only hope of defeating an enemy as ruthless as the Dowd is for all of us to work together. Still..." He panned his gaze around the small room almost theatrically. "Councilor Vokal remains concerned that our Dominion allies chose a vessel of such *modest* capabilities for a mission of this importance."

I repressed another wince. First the Krosians, now the Angoth. I wasn't the type of man whose cock shriveled when someone insulted his ride, but I *was* the kind of man who usually knocked the offender's teeth out instead. It wouldn't even be difficult—Golma had to be at least a century old.

But somehow, I managed to steel myself again. If this old jackass expected to throw me off with a few casual conversational potshots, he was going to be disappointed.

“The *Renegade* is a state-of-the-art assault frigate,” I told him. “She’s a huntress, not a ship-of-the-line. And she’s quite good at what she does.”

“Seven confirmed kills in one standard Keledonian month,” Velarys put in. “Commander Zeris’s record speaks for itself.”

I smiled thinly. Velarys had truly proven herself to be the perfect first officer. She was willing to challenge my orders when appropriate, but also defend me the instant anyone else dared impugn my competence or integrity. It was yet another entry to the growing list of reasons why I couldn’t imagine doing this job without her.

“Every Dowd you destroy brings us one step closer to peace,” Golma said, nodding his gray ridged brow at Velarys.

“So it does,” I said. “To that end, I would like to personally thank the honored Councilor for the additional crew members. I’ve no doubt they will all prove themselves capable in the days ahead.”

Golma smiled, an expression with no warmth whatsoever. “They will, Commander. The Pact takes its obligations seriously.”

I smiled back, then gestured for them to take a seat at the other side of the table. Once they did so, Velarys and I returned to ours.

“I admit, I wasn’t expecting a visit from a member of the Security Council,” I said. “Is there something specific you wish to discuss?”

“The Councilor has followed your mission quite closely, Commander,” Golma said, “and we have been in regular contact with the crew.”

“Of course.”

It wasn’t a mystery that our Angoth crew members had been sending frequent reports back home. In fact, I’d encouraged it. I’d even had Vrisk give them a private encrypted channel they could use. Admiral Lochlan had made it clear that we needed to do everything we could to make our Pact allies seem welcome, and that had been one of my first olive branches.

“They tell us that you have proven yourself a cunning and efficient commander,” Golma added. “For that, Councilor Vokal is grateful. The importance of this mission cannot be understated.”

“No, it can’t,” I agreed, just waiting for the other boot to drop. There was no possible way they had come onto the ship like this only to drop a few compliments on me.

“Unfortunately, cunning and efficiency have not proven sufficient to locate an enemy base of operations. And I fear we may be running out of time.”

I pursed my lips. If they’d come here to tell me the Pact was on the verge of pulling out of this joint operation, I was going to be pissed. But something in his tone suggested it might not be that simple.

“From the reports I’ve seen, none of the attacks in the past two weeks have caused significant damage,” I said. “The enemy may be adept at hiding, but now that everyone has had more time to prepare their defenses, we seem to be limiting their effectiveness quite well.”

Golma looked at Vokal. The Sillibar’s alien face remained unreadable, but Golma must have been able to glean *something* from it. That, or they had worked out this conversation in private.

“What we are about to share with you is highly confidential, Commander,” Golma said. “The Councilor spent a great deal of time deliberating whether we should tell you at all. But the truth is that despite your inexperience and the inadequacies of your vessel, you are perhaps the only person in the Cluster in a position to help us.”

Once again, I shrugged off the subtle barbs. It was much easier this time, given the severity of his tone.

“We’re listening,” I said.

Golma strummed his fingers on the surface of the table, and his old, leathery wings lifted briefly. I was no expert on Angoth, but I knew enough about their body language to recognize that this was not easy for him. It almost seemed like he was still trying to decide whether or not to go through with it, even here at the last moment.

“The greatest threat to the peace right now may no longer be the Dowd or the humans who are aiding them,” he said eventually. “Yet if they are not defeated soon, we will all suffer because of it.”

I frowned. “I’m not sure I understand.”

“Many of our outposts have received more damage than we have publicly expressed,” Golma said, mouth twisting as if he reviled speaking every word. “But it is not the physical damage that concerns us. It is the instability it has caused, particularly among certain Pact members.”

The old Angoth paused, and his wings rumbled again. “The Krosians were built for war, Commander—you know this as well as

anyone. We have spent a generation breeding new warriors in anticipation of a conflict with your people. But now a different enemy lies before us, and they are proving more difficult to strike.”

“It *is* annoying,” I agreed, an anxious knot twisting in my stomach as I tried to figure out what he was trying to tell me. “But we’ll find their bases soon, I’m sure of it.”

“I sincerely hope you’re right, Commander. Because while the Assembly fully supports your efforts, many in the Governing Authority do not. If you cannot provide us with a suitable target soon, I fear this diplomatic foray will come to an abrupt and unfortunate end.”

I grimaced. “We’ve only had a month, and we’ve already killed seven Dowd ships. Surely that’s worth the continued investment in a few soldiers and engineers.”

“To us it is,” Golma said. “But it isn’t the resources that most concern the Authority, Commander. For reasons I would hope are quite obvious, many of them are hesitant to allow a Dominion ship shrouded in a Yarasi cloaking device free access to our space.”

“They believe we are so dishonorable that we would attack your colonies in secret?” Velarys asked, her gray brow furrowing.

That wasn’t their concern, I knew, but I didn’t want to vocalize the real reason. Doing so might seem suspicious, so I waited to see if Golma would do the honors instead. And thankfully, my gamble paid off.

“That is not their primary concern,” the Angoth said. “But your mission has granted you unprecedented access to our space. And since we cannot effectively track your position, there is little to stop you from surveying our territory and sharing the results with your own empires. Empires who, I should add, are a direct threat to the security of the Pact and its colonies.”

“The Yarasi Empire is no threat to anyone unless they attack us first,” Velarys insisted. “If you are suggesting—”

“I understand where they’re coming from,” I said, shooting her a warning look. “Honestly, if our positions were reversed, I imagine the Dominion would have similar concerns.”

“We imagine they would,” Golma replied with a faint smile, though I couldn’t tell if it was because he appreciated me being honest or because it amused him that I cut off my Yarasi officer.

“Which is why I feel the need to reiterate that we have hunted down and destroyed seven Dowd ships,” I added. “If we were busy surveying your worlds for weaknesses, I doubt we’d have time for that.”

“No, you likely wouldn’t. And that is one of the reasons Councilor Vokal continues to advocate on your behalf. He merely wishes to express his concerns about the future, and to ensure you understand the gravity—and time-sensitive nature—of the task before you.”

“Of course.”

So *that* was the purpose of this meeting. Despite our successful hunts, Vokal still wanted to give me a little kick in the ass before I left his space.

Honestly, it was all the proof I needed that the Assembly could indeed function in the long-term. Because despite all the different aliens and cultures it was trying to represent, this made it more clear to me than ever that every single species—even long-lived and theoretically wise ones like the Sillibar—could be as petty and pathetic as the average human politician.

It might not have been as inspiring a rallying cry as the usual tripe, like saying we were all in this together. But at least it meant that we were all fundamentally the same shitty people in the end.

“With that in mind, we continue to hope that you will be able to locate our shared enemy in the near future,” Golma said. “We hate to waste this potentially momentous diplomatic endeavor.”

“I’m glad we all agree,” I replied, hoping I didn’t sound sarcastic. “But perhaps you should remind the Authority that the *Renegade* is still only one ship. We’re doing the best we can, but they shouldn’t expect a miracle.”

“Oh, they are very much aware of that fact, Commander. And I’ve no doubt they will take it into consideration.”

Somehow, I managed not to snort. The odds that we’d find the Dowd in the next couple days or weeks was preposterously low, especially considering we didn’t even have leads at the moment. Vrisk’s post-battle analysis hadn’t given us much to go on, and our little helpless ship routine seemed unlikely to work a second time.

“Well, if they happen to find any information we could use, I’d appreciate the help,” I said. “Otherwise, we should probably get back to the hunt.”

I was about to stand when Councilor Vokal abruptly reached into his robe. His hand withdrew a small data drive, which he silently placed upon the table.

“The Councilor understands the difficult position you’re in, Commander,” Golma said. “And since we continue to hope for the success of your mission, we didn’t want to depart without providing aid. This drive contains everything we’ve learned about the Dowd over the past two months. The Pact fleet and the Kaori Tash have been pursuing these leads as well, but they have certain limitations that you do not.”

I frowned at the drive, then at Velarys. This was unexpected, to say the least.

“Does this include information about all their attacks?” I asked. “Like details you may have excluded from public reports?”

“It includes *everything*, Commander,” Golma said. “Use it with care.”

I nodded grimly, wondering if I might have been willing to throw Vokal under the proverbial tram too quickly. I found it difficult to believe that this drive would contain truly sensitive information, especially given the specific nature of the concerns about our mission—namely that it was a thinly veiled attempt by the Dominion and the Yarasi to gather intel on their shared enemy. But if it did...

Well, then maybe Vokal *did* care about the future of the Assembly. Maybe this little visit wasn’t just a pointless little power play.

“Thank you,” I said, and meant it. “We’ll start analyzing it right away.”

“Good. We thank you for your hospitality, Commander,” Golma said, rising when Councilor Vokal did the same. “May Shak’Ath guide your hunt.”

Both men made to leave. But once the door opened, Vokal paused and swiveled his milky alien eyes back to us. It was difficult to tell where they were looking, but they seemed to be focused on Velarys. Then he abruptly turned, and they were gone.

“Well, that was interesting,” I muttered, picking up the drive. “Can you believe...?”

I trailed off when I saw the tight expression on her face. Velarys looked downright haunted.

“What is it?” I asked.

“He allowed me to see his thoughts,” she said. “Only for an instant, yet it was enough.”

“What did you see?”

“His fears should the Assembly unravel. His concerns that this war threatens to end the cold peace, whether we are victorious against the Dowd or not.”

My chest tightened. The cynic in me was wary that he might be trying to manipulate her. It was, as a point of historical fact, something the Sillibar did better than anyone. But then again, perhaps Vokal was more like Captain Ellis—both the original and Razael, the Sillibar who had replaced him—than I’d thought. Both of those men had dedicated their lives to maintaining the peace. They had believed that the Tripartite Accords, flawed as they may have been, were the only thing preventing calamity on an unimaginable scale. We had even destroyed the Straw, our only way home to the rest of the galaxy, to maintain that peace a bit longer.

And yet it was still hanging in the balance, as precarious as ever.

“Vokal did not seem duplicitous,” Velarys said, now looking at me. “But I cannot guarantee anything.”

“That’s all right,” I said, holding up the drive. “This will tell us what we need to know. If there’s real information we can use, then he’s an ally. And if not...”

I shrugged. “Well, then this little mission of ours may be over a lot sooner than we thought.”

INTERLUDE

The Fist of the Seraph, Location Unknown

“Where is Fohn?”

The admiral’s voice thundered across the observation deck. With his oversized ghostly hologram floating there against the backdrop of an endless starry abyss, Malura, Shadow of the Seraph, almost felt like she was being lectured to by the disembodied head of a god.

“The Master is occupied elsewhere,” she said, keeping her voice calm even as she inwardly recoiled at the thought of DeGale as anything other than the weak, feckless stooge he clearly was.

“*Occupied?*” DeGale snarled. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means he is not here,” Malura replied mildly. “The Master will be out of contact for the foreseeable future.”

The admiral’s face twisted, an expression made even more dramatic by his large, sagging jowls. “Now?” he practically spat. “At this critical moment?”

Malura kept her gaze firm. “Master Fohn has provided us with everything we need to ensure victory. He will return when his presence is required.”

DeGale audibly growled. Had his eyes had been pulse cannons, they would have fired everything they had in her direction.

To some extent, she understood his frustration—the timing of the Master’s absence *was* rather inconvenient. Fohn had intended to be present for the entire duration of the war, and the forces of the New Dominion would have been better off for it. But the destruction of the jump gate had necessitated certain changes to the timeline of their

plans, and even a powerful psychic like Soren Fohn couldn't truly be in multiple places at once. At least, not at full strength.

"You needn't worry, Admiral," Captain Dykastra put in. The tall, dark-haired young man was standing right at her side. "The Pact economy is crumbling more quickly than we projected. It will not be long before more systems fall into chaos."

"Chaos we won't be able to control," DeGale said sharply. "The point was to *weaken* the Pact, not unravel it before their military has been crippled. We can't afford to have Krosian warlords roaming around the Cluster with entire war fleets at their disposal."

Malura shared a look with Dykastra. They were the only two people on the *Fist of the Seraph's* observation deck at the moment, though they would both rather be elsewhere. Dykastra had a ship to run, and Malura had a network of her fellow Shadows to organize and deploy. But DeGale wasn't the type of man who simply left a message, and they couldn't afford to dismiss him. Keeping him happy—or at least mollified—remained in their best interests.

For now.

"If the Pact begins to disintegrate, the Master believes the Krosians will spend more time fighting each other than anyone else," Malura said. "And whichever clan triumphs will turn its wrath upon the Angoth and Sillibar next."

DeGale scoffed. "That's pure speculation."

"The Master does not speculate. He is the Hand of the Seraph, and Her power has revealed the path to our final victory."

"Strange, then, that She didn't warn him about the jump gate," DeGale said acidly. "Or the countless other setbacks we've endured. This is a dangerous game he's playing. Even in chaos, the Pact has the firepower to wreak havoc across the Cluster. The Dominion cannot be reborn if our colonies are on fire."

"With all due respect, Admiral, the war continues to go well," Dykastra replied. "Despite the loss of the gate, we've achieved victories on nearly all fronts. Our enemies scramble for purchase while we slowly weaken them. There is much to celebrate and little to cause worry."

Malura resisted the urge to smile. Dykastra was a poised and confident man, she had to give him that. Though considering those were

the qualities for which he'd specifically been bred, it shouldn't have been surprising. The only strange thing about him was the fact that he was wearing a Dominion fleet captain's insignia despite the fact he looked like he was in his early to mid twenties. But that was the point of the Gen-63 Gammas—they matured twice as fast as normal humans. And with the technology to telepathically imprint the stored knowledge of the Dominion's greatest commanders, he had a dozen lifetimes' worth of experience to draw upon.

Besides, his youth had never bothered her. Malura was quite a bit younger, in fact, having only stepped out of the cloning tank about four years ago. Yet she also appeared as if she were in her mid twenties, the same as all the other Shadows of the Seraph who shared her face.

"What about the *Renegade*?" DeGale asked. "The Admiralty still believes that Lochlan's pet project is a waste of resources, but every time Zeris destroys a Dowd ship, one of them changes their mind. We can't afford to let Zeris score a real victory."

"We have the situation under control, Admiral," Malura assured him. "They have yet to discover any of our installations. They cannot attack what they cannot find."

"He has still managed to destroy several Dowd ships."

"Mistakes which will not be repeated."

DeGale snorted. "Your pets are unpredictable. I told Fohn this was a mistake from the very beginning."

"The Dowd will serve their purpose," Malura replied coolly. "And you needn't worry about your peers in the Admiralty for long. We've just received information that could greatly accelerate the pace of the war."

The admiral's brow furrowed. "What information?"

"One of our Shadows captured a Sillibar operative in Angoth space. Preliminary interrogations have proven quite fruitful."

"Kaori Tash?" DeGale asked, suddenly very interested.

"Indeed," Malura confirmed. She tried to keep her smile from turning smug, but it was difficult. Even the Dominion Intelligence Directorate had never captured one of the Sillibar's elite spies alive. Yet her sister—one of the Sevens—had done so less than a month into her deployment.

"What have you learned?" the admiral asked.

“Several details about their current operations we’re working to confirm, but that’s not the biggest prize. Our interrogators at Endikar pulled coordinates from the alien’s mind—coordinates located deep within the Cocytus Nebula.”

She had the satisfaction of seeing DeGale’s mouth drop open.

“Exodus?” he asked.

“We’re not certain yet,” Malura said. “But if we are able to locate the Sillibar’s new homeworld...”

A hard, hungry smile spread over DeGale’s face.

“The Dowd have been seeking that information since their banishment into the Veil,” Malura added. “They are absolutely obsessed with the Sillibar.”

The admiral’s eyes narrowed. “Are they aware you captured a Kaori Tash?”

“No,” Malura said. “I don’t plan to tell them anything until we’ve confirmed the coordinates. Once that happens, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Good,” DeGale said. His eyes went distant for a moment before they refocused. “In the meantime, do not allow Zeris to destroy any more ships. Because if Lochlan’s gambit pays off and her attack hound is able to find your bases—”

“That won’t happen, Admiral,” Malura assured him. “We have everything under control.”

DeGale snorted. “Your ‘master’ talked like that before. Then Zeris exposed his plan and destroyed his gate. Make certain it doesn’t happen again.”

His projection vanished before anyone could respond. Malura stood there staring at the starscape for several heartbeats, rage roiling inside her, before she hissed and touched the controls on the wall. The illusion of space surrounding them on all sides was slowly replaced by white walls. After another few seconds, she and Dykastra were standing in an otherwise empty circular room with naught but the closed door behind them.

“He is becoming a problem,” Dykastra observed.

“He was *always* a problem,” Malura grumbled. “Fleet Command lost their nerve generations ago. There’s a reason the Master intends to replace them. The New Dominion needs officers with vision.”

“But he’s all we have for now. And we can’t yet control the Admiralty without him.”

“He can’t back away from us, and he knows it. No matter how much he might bluster, he’s in far too deep. All we’d have to do is expose his treachery to the others and his career would be over.”

“Perhaps,” Dykastra replied, clearly not convinced. “But it may still be worth keeping a closer eye on him, especially now that he knows the Master is away.”

“You may be right.” Malura pursed her lips. “I’ll send one of the Sevens to keep him under observation. Perhaps the one that found us our Sillibar, in fact.”

“The fleet has spent many years preparing for a Sillibar infiltration,” Dykastra warned. “Even a shapeshifter could get discovered.”

Malura snorted. He still didn’t quite grasp what made the Shadows of the Seraph so special. She couldn’t really blame him, though—for all their virtues, the Gen-63s were still merely “normal” psychics with a wide variety of innate abilities of moderate power. They were fleet officers first, and Seraphim second.

But the Shadows were different. Each distinct line of her sisters was cultivated specifically to master one psionic discipline, though they often naturally developed a few secondary powers as well. The psychometamorphic abilities of the Sevens were unparalleled.

“The Sillibar aren’t psychics,” Malura told him. “They can’t defend their minds from intrusion like the Sevens, as our interrogations have shown. No casual probe will expose her. And her presence at DeGale’s side has another value. If he thinks himself beyond the Master’s reach, he can be disabused of that notion to ensure his compliance.”

Dykastra chewed it over for a minute, his young face looking wise beyond its years. Despite all the unforeseen wrinkles in their plans so far, like then-Major Zeris uncovering their plot to bait the Pact and Yarasi into a war, the Gen-63 Gammas had still worked out better than anyone could have imagined. The *Fist of the Seraph* was the most powerful warship in the Cluster, and it had the best crew as well. Only the finest embryos had been selected for this experiment, and the officers they’d become proved that.

This ship was a task force in and of itself. And one day soon, they would be ready to bring its full firepower to bear on the enemies of the New Dominion.

Before Dykastra could say anything else, the door to the observation deck abruptly *whooshed* open. Malura turned, assuming that one of her sisters was bringing her a report...

Only to see a tall, faceless alien with smooth, black skin exit the lift.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded.

[*Answers are required.*] the Dowd Exarch projected into her mind as it floated forward, feet hovering above the deck as it propelled itself with nothing but telekinetic force.

A muscle in Malura’s jaw twitched. Even with telepathy, the Dowd’s buzzing, not-quite language could be oddly difficult to understand. It was just so...*alien*.

“What answers?” she asked. “Your directives couldn’t be more clear.”

[*The vessel was destroyed. Not by the enemy.*]

Malura had to think for a moment before she realized what the creature was even talking about. “The vessel that was lost near L’shaa?”

[*Not lost. Silenced. By you.*]

“What does it want?” Dykastra asked.

She waved a hand, bidding the captain to wait. Evidently the Exarch was only sharing its thoughts with her.

“We couldn’t afford to allow the *Renegade* to board the ship,” she said. “It wasn’t worth the risk of our bases being discovered.”

[*The dirge had not yet begun. Yet the Singers were silenced.*]

The Exarch may not have had a face, but Malura could feel its anger. The ship it was talking about had self-destructed—not at the order of the crew onboard, but because of the trigger the Master had ordered installed on most of the swarm ships. Without it, the Dowd on board would have happily fought to the bitter end, enabling Commander Zeris and his minions to pick over the craft to their heart’s content afterward.

Thankfully, the Master had planned for this eventuality. Losing a few ships here and there was a small price to pay for keeping their operations hidden from the enemy.

“The vessel was disabled,” she said. “Your ships were baited into an ambush. We’re lucky only one was destroyed.”

[*The dirge had not yet begun,*] the Exarch repeated. [*Yet the Singers were silenced.*]

Malura winced. The Dowd wasn’t merely angry—it was *enraged*. In some ways, these faceless monsters were even more primitive than the Krosians.

“They died in service of the Master,” she said. “Never forget that he is the one who resurrected your people and allowed them to hear the Chorus of the Void for the first time. Your lives are his, to do with as he sees fit.”

[*His. Not yours.*]

She clenched her teeth. “I am born of the Seraph’s divine blood,” she snarled. “While the Master is absent, I speak with his voice and enforce his will. Now leave this chamber and return to the Hive. You’re supposed to be fighting a war.”

Malura had never had a staring match with a faceless being before, and it was just as unsatisfying as she expected. The Exarch simply hovered there, an opaque mask with no discernable body language. It was...*unsettling*.

But then the Dowd floated back toward the lift. The door closed behind it, and it was gone.

“What the hell was that about?” Dykastra asked warily.

“A disagreement on tactics,” Malura muttered. “It’s upset we scuttled their ship.”

“It’s not as if we had much choice.”

“I’m aware. One would hope the Dowd would understand that as well, but evidently not.”

Dykastra chewed at his lip as he eyed the closed door. “Should we be worried about them?”

“No,” Malura said with a dismissive wave. “Foln is their god. They still believe he’s the one who awakened them.”

That wasn’t technically true, of course—the Master hadn’t given the Dowd their new psionic abilities. Decades of exposure to the astral energies of the Tartaran Veil had started that process long ago.

But the Dowd didn’t know that. They had mistaken their accidental exposure for a divine gift, and the Master had worked long and hard

to nurture that misconception. The Dowd were relentless enough that it was usually sufficient to simply point them at a target, but believing they were the servants of a living god was an even better motivation.

“And besides, if we have discovered Exodus, it will make them more loyal to us than ever,” Malura added.

“Provided they don’t feel we’re keeping that information from them,” Dykastra said. “Their obedience balances on a razor’s edge.”

“You overestimate them, Captain. No matter their numbers or even their powers, they are still alien filth. They will do as we command, or we will destroy them.”

Malura drew in a deep breath. “You may as well return to the bridge. Continue preparations for the next raid. Our scouts have given us some new vulnerable targets.”

“Right,” Dykastra said, still eyeing the door. Unlike the Dowd, he *did* have a face Malura could read, and she could tell he remained unsettled. Interacting with the Exarch was never an enjoyable experience.

But then, the Dowd were never meant to be their friends. They were the monsters in the closet, meant to terrorize their enemies. And for the most part, it was working.

Once Dykastra had departed, Malura once again activated the observatory filters so she could stand amidst the stars. The Master was out there somewhere, an incalculable distance away, preparing the rest of the galaxy for the Dominion’s inevitable return. He may not have given the Dowd their powers, but they were still right to treat him as a god. Who else could reach across the void and mold the galaxy in his image?

Smiling at the thought, Malura stood alone, hands clasped behind her back, and basked in the darkness of the infinite abyss that would soon be theirs.

3

ANALYSIS

With the Pact data drive in hand and thoughts of galactic chaos swirling in my mind, I made my way back to my office to record a report for Admiral Lochlan as quickly as I could. There wasn't all that much to say yet, but I tried to be as thorough as possible with my personal reading of the situation. Even as I spoke the words into the recorder, I feared how they might be translated through the rest of the Admiralty. Many of them had opposed this mission in the first place, so the Pact leadership wavering on their commitment would only embolden those voices. I sincerely hoped the rest of Lochlan's comrades wouldn't be so short-sighted as to try and pull the plug this early, but I couldn't know for certain.

After I'd finished, I sat staring at the projector in silence for several minutes, debating if it might be better to keep this to myself for a while longer. It was damn tempting, if only to avoid giving fuel to the skeptics in Fleet Command. If men like Admiral DeGale had their way, the Dominion would sit back doing nothing while our rivals slowly fell into chaos—a strategy that would ultimately give the insurrectionists exactly what they wanted. If I kept what I'd learned secret, I would have full control over the outcome.

But that simply wasn't realistic. Once Velarys informed the Yarasi, it would only be a matter of time before the Admiralty learned the truth about the Pact's wavering support as well. And even if that weren't a consideration, duty compelled me to inform my superiors. If this diplomatic exercise was going to fall apart, the Dominion needed to be prepared.

So after letting out about ten heavy sighs, I encrypted the message and fired it off into deep space. In a day or so, it would hit one of the technically illegal Dominion relays in the Borderlands, after which it would get routed to Lochlan's office on Rividian. Getting a return message would take just as long if not longer, depending where we happened to be at the time.

I glanced down at the data drive in my hand. If this had as much information on it as I hoped, I could probably spend a week pouring over it.

Or I could call in someone who'd get through it in a fraction of the time.

"Ensign Pierce," I said, opening the comm on my desk. "I need to see you in my office as soon as you're available."

"I'm on my way, sir," she replied with her trademark crispness.

I only had time to twirl the small silver cylinder in my fingers a few times before the door opened and Miranda stepped inside. She approached my desk, an inquisitive look on her face.

"How did the meeting go, sir?" she asked.

"It's over," I replied dryly. "That's what's important."

Miranda raised a black eyebrow. "That bad?"

"It could have been worse. But forget that. I need your help."

The corner of her mouth perked up in a half smile. "If you would like to work out your frustrations, I could clear the desk again."

I snorted. "Not that kind of help, unfortunately. I need that wonderful jenny brain of yours to analyze this."

I handed her the data drive, which quickly turned her playful smile into a frown. "Sir?"

"A present from Councilor Vokal," I explained. "In theory, it holds all the data the Pact has collected about the Dowd, including details of every attack in their territory since this whole invasion began."

Miranda blinked. "He gave this to *us*?"

I nodded. Technically, I probably shouldn't have shared anything this monumental with a junior officer, but I obviously trusted her implicitly. And more to the point, she was the smartest person on this ship, with the possible exception of Vrisk. If anyone could draw connections from the data, it was her.

"He had his reasons," I said. "Honestly, it's easier to show you."

Reaching across the desk, I took her free hand and brought it to my face. Miranda took the hint; I felt her reach into my mind almost immediately. I thought about my conversation with Vokal and Golma, hoping it would make it even easier for her to understand.

It only took a few moments before she inhaled sharply and pulled back. "I see," she murmured. "I expected their resolve to waver eventually, but not this soon. We've made remarkable progress given the circumstances."

"Sadly, killing Dowd ships won't be enough," I said. "That's why I need you to comb through this and see if you can find anything. Patterns, sensor logs, anything they might have overlooked that could give us a clue where our enemies are hiding. Right now, we're hunting hounds without a scent. We need to pick one up, and soon."

Miranda nodded. "Then I will take a look immediately, sir."

"Good. You're excused from bridge duty for as long as it takes. This is your top priority."

"I understand."

"You're also excused from the party in the lounge tonight," I said, offering her a tight grin as I stood and circled around the table. "You can thank me for that later."

It took a moment for her to recover from her shock before her expression lightened. "What makes you think I wouldn't want to go?"

"Hmm, let me think," I said, sliding my arms around her waist. "A night of useless small talk with new crew members versus a night of crunching numbers and sifting through data. I wonder which you'd prefer?"

"Well, when you put it that way..."

Miranda smiled, then stretched up to give me a quick, soft kiss. I held her blue eyes for several moments, and I was suddenly tempted to bend her over my desk again. But that would just have to wait.

"I'll work as quickly as I can," she told me.

"Good," I said, giving her a squeeze. "Let me know the moment you learn anything."



With Miranda on the case, there wasn't much left for the rest of us to do besides wait and see what leads, if any, she could find. In theory, I probably could have kept the *Renegade* in port for another day if I were so inclined, and if we'd been on Kenabrius or Rividian, I might have even given the crew some quick shore leave to clear their heads. But Nirule was hardly a vacation resort, and I had no interest in sticking around any longer than was absolutely necessary.

I gave the order for us to head out the moment we were fully resupplied. Before our semi-successful hunt the other day, I'd been planning on taking the ship closer to the Span to continue our search deeper into Pact space, but I couldn't think of any strong reason to stick to that schedule now. Traveling between the worlds and outposts the Dowd had already hit was more efficient than a completely random search in deep space, but not by all that much. It was the equivalent of searching for a needle in a galaxy-sized haystack either way.

So rather than wasting our time meandering through the middle of nowhere, I decided to take us closer to Kenabrius. I couldn't shave off the time it would take for Admiral Lochlan to get my message, but I could make it quicker and easier for her to respond. The last time I'd checked in, she had been planning to establish an office on Kenabrius anyway. If she happened to be there when the message arrived, we might actually be able to enjoy real-time comms with the station's advanced relay system. Ideally, Miranda might have even scored us a lead by then.

In the meantime, I had a welcoming party to attend in the ship's lounge that night. Given the choice, I would have preferred to sit back and enjoy one of the recent kreball matches I'd downloaded off the HoloSphere before we left Nirule, but I didn't want to shirk my basic duties as the commander of the ship.

More importantly, I didn't want to disappoint my unofficial morale officer. This party had been her idea, after all, and I'd long since learned to trust her judgment.

I arrived in the lounge perhaps twenty minutes after the party had started, enough to allow everyone to mingle a bit before the boss showed up. To my surprise, no one even seemed to notice me enter right away. Not because they were being rude or disrespectful, but because they were thoroughly occupied by the evening's entertainment.

And the best hostess in the Cluster.

Smiling inwardly, I headed inside. The lounge was a cozy half circle with enough space to comfortably fit a few dozen people. The port wall had been replaced by a long viewport, allowing patrons to look out into space while they enjoyed their drinks. The U-shaped bar was on the opposite side, the warm, soothing glow of its pristine white surface practically inviting everyone to come chat with the bartender. A floating janitorial drone made sure to keep everything spotless.

No one was tending the bar at the moment, but I spotted the owner speaking with the Krosians in the back corner of the lounge. Her pink luminescent eyes seemed to glow even brighter than normal thanks to the intentionally dim lighting, and her crimson skin was as exotic as ever. She was wearing one of her many elegant black dresses, though this one was considerably less scandalous than those she'd worn in the *Second Wind* on the mothership. The long slit up the side still revealed a tasteful glimpse of her toned legs, however, and her low-cut, spaghetti-string top wasn't shy about showing off her bountiful cleavage, either.

A part of me still couldn't believe that I'd agreed to bring Saleya on board the ship, but her proposal had eventually convinced me. Nearly every warship in the fleet had a lounge in addition to the galley, and there was no one more qualified than her to navigate the delicate waters of a mixed crew like we had on the *Renegade*. I hadn't technically approved her position with Admiral Lochlan, but she'd given me broad authority to handle the crew as I saw fit. And to her credit—and my surprise—Lochlan had expressly told me that she wasn't interested in micromanaging every little detail of our mission. Frankly, she couldn't have even if she wanted to. That was the nature of a long-term assignment behind enemy lines.

For Saleya's part, the assignment was a massive, if regrettably necessary, change of lifestyle. Before we'd set out, she'd had a little time to get the organization up and running reasonably well on Rividian, but

she obviously couldn't manage the day-to-day affairs from out here. She insisted it was for the best, since she needed to lay low for a while anyway. Now that the insurrectionists had identified her as the leader of an alien-friendly organization, she would be a target anywhere she went.

Except here, at my side.

Though frankly, she probably wouldn't have been able to work anywhere else regardless, not after she'd insisted on Imprinting herself upon me. Her Velothi body was now connected to mine on a biological level, so she *needed* to stay close to me. If I didn't touch her periodically, she would become physically ill. With a long enough separation, she might actually die.

Even as she'd begged me to make her my bond mate, I had worried what the future would hold afterward, for both the organization and for her. But as she'd repeatedly insisted, the only fight that mattered right now was this one. The Column and their Dowd allies had to be defeated, and someone had to keep the crew's morale high.

She had certainly been doing wonders for mine.

I headed over to the bar as I watched her mingle, amused as always by how easily she could engage with people. The Krosians seemed to be regaling her with loud war stories, which she was devouring with rapt attention. I couldn't tell if she was faking, but her tail was flicking behind her as if she were genuinely enthralled by their stories.

A dark part of me—the part that would probably forever resent Krosians after what they'd done to Nirivarr—almost wished that one of them would put their hands on her just so I'd have an excuse to run over and break off their tusks. But surprisingly, they were behaving themselves quite well. When Sekvoth noticed me, he even lifted his drink slightly in greeting.

I growled inwardly even as I nodded back. I had spent my entire adult life defending aliens from the worst of the Dominion's xenophobic impulses. Surely I could figure out how to get along with Krosians, too.

Except Gor. I would hate his stupid fancy suits forever.

“Commander! Good to see you.”

I turned as the only waitress on duty tonight glided toward me while holding a tray of drinks. She was dressed *much* more conserv-

actively than her usual standard, though that had more to do with the fact that most of the times I'd previously encountered her, she'd been actively stripping off her clothes.

Astra, the Neyris dancer, was wearing a tasteful black skirt that flaunted more leg than Saleya's but concealed a bit more on top. Though as usual, my eyes were magnetically drawn downward to her preposterously high heels. Ash had amassed an impressive collection of similar shoes over the years, and she loved it when I gave her the opportunity to wear them out somewhere. But even she couldn't float like Astra did.

"Not a bad turnout," I commented, flashing her a smile and looking between the tables. "I didn't even have to order anyone to attend."

"Most of them are regulars—probably just good timing," Astra said, grinning back. "Ramanis Sunrise?"

"Please," I said, plucking the glass of orange liquid from the tray. Astra had undoubtedly been instructed to make it for me, and Saleya had probably guessed precisely when I'd show up, too. She might not have been a Seraphim Seer, but there were times when it sure felt like she had some kind of psychic power.

"Everyone behaving so far?" I asked, panning my eyes around the lounge and trying not to dwell on the Krosians.

"Perfectly," Astra said. "Though the Angoth girls never give us any trouble. And they tip *very* well."

I raised an eyebrow as I scanned the two tables filled with Angoth engineers and a smaller assortment of the human technicians who worked with them on a daily basis. They all seemed to be enjoying themselves, with Hebeska and the others who'd been serving on the ship for a while bringing the newcomers up to speed.

Vrisk wasn't here, I noticed, though that wasn't especially surprising. He was due to start a hibernation cycle tonight, and I'd give him permission to begin early. Better now than when we were back on a hunt and needed him.

"Angoth are a communal people," I said. "Saleya told me that their colonies are actually pretty nice places to live if you're a laborer. There's almost no poverty."

"Sounds great to me," Astra said, though notably her eyes remained fixed on me. She had also scooched a bit closer. Not enough to be

awkward, but definitely enough to seem intentional. “How is the drink?”

“Good,” I told her. “Little sweeter than normal, exactly the way I like.”

“Saleya did mention that,” Astra said, leaning in yet another centimeter. The scent of her flowery perfume was intoxicating, as was my view of her ample yellow cleavage. “If you’d like me to make you another—or get you anything else—please ask.”

She held my eyes for several more heartbeats, her *veroshi* tendrils swaying gently, before she turned and strutted off for another table. Despite my best efforts, I couldn’t help but watch the delicate bounce of her legs as she moved. And the way her *veroshi* swayed in perfect rhythm with her hips...

Focus, I scolded myself. You’re not in the Second Wind anymore.

Gritting my teeth, I turned back to the bar. For some reason, I was suddenly finding it difficult not to think back to that time when Astra and Nyxe had given me a personal demonstration of their dancing abilities. To this day, I’d never seen two bodies move so perfectly in sync together...

“Glad you made it, dear.”

I snapped out of my reverie as Saleya approached me from behind, her voice dark and smooth and utterly enthralling.

“I was starting to wonder if I’d need to send the girls to fetch you,” she added as she passed by and stepped around the bar. Her fingers grazed mine as she walked past, and her tail did the same with my leg. She knew she couldn’t show affection here in public, but even a faint touch from her still triggered a wave of contentment.

“Guess I should have waited, then,” I said. “Sounds like a good time.”

“Mm,” she murmured, giving me a sly smirk. “I know how much you adore social gatherings.”

“Some are better than others.” I finished my drink, then threw a casual glance back over my shoulder when two of the Krosians let out a bellowing laugh as they slammed their empty glasses on the table. “Hopefully our new soldiers didn’t give you any trouble.”

“Not at all. They’re quite charming.”

My expression soured. “Really?”

“Perhaps *charming* is a bit much. But I expect they’ll be excellent customers.”

“Until they come in here so often they drink out your whole supply.”

“So much the better—I could use the business.” Saleya flashed me a smirk, then reached down beneath the bar to retrieve some bottles and began mixing new drinks. “Besides, I know several of the Pact quartermasters on Nirule. They won’t mind when I send them the bill.”

“I’m being serious,” I said. “This is different than dealing with drunken ’pounders on the mothership.”

“Not as different as you might think,” she replied mildly. “I’ve dealt with plenty of Krosians before, dear. I can handle them.”

“If you’re referring to Gor, he doesn’t count,” I said. “These are real soldiers.”

Saleya tittered at me. “I know you aren’t accustomed to dealing with problems you can’t punch in the face, but I am. I’ll be fine.”

I sighed. As tempting as it was to argue with her, it was obviously a lost cause. And she was probably right anyway. She’d handled far worse things over the years than a few rowdy Pact soldiers.

Relenting, I sat down on the barstool as she handed me another Sunrise. The warm liquor was sweet enough to tantalize the taste buds but also sour enough that a man could enjoy it without feeling emasculated.

“I still can’t believe I let you talk me into this,” I said, looking around the lounge.

“Relaxation is important,” Saleya admonished. “Your crew may come from different worlds, but they can all delight in a good drink with a pleasing view.”

“I mean letting you set up shop here on the ship. It’s too dangerous.”

“Nonsense. The safest place in the galaxy is close to you.”

I grunted softly and downed half the glass. The crazy part was that she wasn’t humoring me—she really believed it. But then again, she had spent most of the last five years on the mothership constantly avoiding the watchful eyes of the Intelligence Directorate while she secretly ran one of the Cluster’s most influential underworld orga-

nizations. Hunting the Dowd behind enemy lines probably seemed relaxing by comparison.

“Is Astra doing all right?” I asked, looking back over my shoulder to the Neyris as she sat down to chat at one of the Angoth tables.

“If the question is whether she prefers serving drinks on a starship to stripping for horny natty soldiers, the answer is a qualified yes,” Saleya said. “Though I still think you should let her perform at least once a week.”

I snorted. “It was difficult enough to convince Lochlan that we should have an interspecies bar. But there’s no way in hell I’d get permission for a nightclub on a Dominion warship.”

“We’re a long way from Dominion space. On the frontier, you make the rules.” She gave me a particularly sultry smirk. “Besides, we both know the crew would appreciate it.”

I grunted and took another sip. She wasn’t being serious—at least, not completely—but I did sometimes wonder if any part of her missed the atmosphere on the Second Wind. Running a lounge on a starship with a crew of less than a hundred had to be like moving to a rural town in the Borderlands after spending years living on one of the Golden Worlds.

“Well, if a weekly performance is out of the question, there are other options,” Saleya said, a sly grin on her lips as she poured some kind of blue liquid into an empty glass. “Private performances, for example.”

I raised an eyebrow. “How private?”

Saleya shrugged fractionally. “Astra has seen how tense you’ve been lately. A higher rank, new responsibilities, a difficult assignment...you deserve a chance to relax. She’s put together a show she thought you’d enjoy.”

Pushing my tongue into the back of my teeth, I glanced over my shoulder. Astra had moved from the Angoth engineers to a mixed table with Angoth and humans. They were all laughing at a joke someone had told, but Astra turned and caught my eye. She flashed me a warm smile, and she twisted in her chair just enough to give me an even better view of her slender yellow thighs.

“She’s used to dancing with a partner, but unfortunately Nyxe is on Kenabrius,” Saleya said. “Still, I’m sure I could fill in for her in a pinch...”

She gave me a coquettish smile as her tail flicked up next to her shoulder. It was curled around a vial she had plucked from somewhere beneath the bar. When she added its contents to the drink, the liquid began to fizz so loudly it seemed like it might burst.

“What do you think?” Saleya asked, lifting the glass to her lips and letting her tendrils play across the rim. “Sound like something you’d enjoy?”

“I would hate to think she developed a new show for nothing,” I said. “Maybe in a few days when things have calmed down with the new crew.”

“We’ll hold you to that,” Saleya said.

I looked deep into her pink eyes, and it took all my willpower not to reach across the table and pull her in for a kiss. My relationship with her wasn’t much of a secret among the crew, nor was it considered scandalous—alien mistresses were a common sight on most Dominion starships. Captain Ellis had been a rare exception to what was otherwise an unspoken rule.

But private fun with a mistress was one thing, and open displays of affection were another. Even sitting this close to her for so long in public was probably pushing the limits of protocol.

“I’ll close the bar one night whenever you’re ready,” Saleya said, taking another sultry sip of the fizzy liquid. “Your quarters lack the proper furniture for the dance she has in mind. And the lounge has a much better view.”

I smiled. As if any view would matter when Astra was dancing in front of me. We could be a kilometer away from the heart of the Novis Vortex and I still wouldn’t be able to take my eyes off her glorious yellow flesh. Or Saleya’s for that matter. She hadn’t spent the night in my quarters for five days now, and I couldn’t help but wonder how much of her eagerness was being driven by her increasing physical need to have her bond mate inside her.

Either way, I certainly wasn’t going to complain.

I cleared my throat and leaned back. “Velarys is on the bridge. I doubt she’s planning to attend. She dislikes these things even more than I do.”

“Such a shame,” Saleya said. “I picked up several bottles of *visnar* for her a while back. It’s illegal outside the Old Empire.”

“I didn’t hear that,” I replied with a grunt. It was best for everyone if I didn’t know how she’d gotten her hands on it. “But it’s not the drinks that keep her away. She hasn’t told me as much, but I think that life on a non-Yarasi ship is proving a bit harder on her than she expected.”

Saleya’s brow furrowed. “Because she can’t share her thoughts with the crew?”

“That’s definitely part of it. She’s also going out of her way to try and avoid snooping on anyone else’s thoughts. The Angoth have generally been very cooperative, but it’s obvious her presence makes them uncomfortable at times.”

“Sounds like their problem, not hers,” Saleya said. “You should tell her to pay us a visit, Kal. Astra and I will make her feel right at home, I promise.”

I smiled. I had been meaning to try and spend more time with Velarys anyway, but sharing command of the ship had proven more taxing on our schedules than I’d anticipated. I was delighted that she was here, and she had thoroughly exceeded my expectations as first officer, but part of the reason for her presence was that she intended to complete a *jahumir*—a motherhood cycle—while on board.

Normally, Yarasi warriors returned home for several years to produce several children for the Empire before returning to the front lines. Velarys had convinced her people to let her stay on the *Renegade* instead, but she had only shared my bed a single time since we’d left port. She had insisted that she would let me know when the time was right, and I had respected her privacy and customs. At this point, though, I was starting to wonder if something might be wrong.

“I know you’ve been dying to see her in a dress,” I said into the pause.

“My dear, I would die a happy woman if you could get her on the dance floor for me just once,” Saleya said. “If only Ash were here. If she can drag you to parties, I bet she can do it with Velarys, too.”

I grinned at the thought. If Ash were on the ship, I had no doubt that she’d spent plenty of time here in the lounge with Saleya and Astra. I had expected all sorts of shenanigans between them when we’d set out, but that also hadn’t gone quite as planned. Ash was out there right now searching for her brother...

“She’ll be fine,” Saleya said, her tone suddenly serious. “She’s a tough girl.”

It never failed to astonish me how well Saleya could read the shifts in my mood. Even before the Imprint, her knack for knowing what I was thinking bordered on uncanny. Now it was almost spooky.

“I know,” I said, finishing the rest of my drink and burying my worries as best I could. It didn’t quite work.

“Now go be a good leader and mingle, dear,” Saleya said. “Let them know who’s in charge.”

“Right,” I said, finishing the rest of my second glass. “Duty calls.”

4

CONTESTS OF WILL

The rest of the party passed smoothly enough, with me doing the rounds between the tables and having brief if stoic conversations with each group. Ellis hadn't taught me anything about how to handle this particular duty, but I did remember how he'd handled the various changes in crew the *Alaru* had gone through during my time serving aboard her. That, combined with my own experience leading 'pounders in the field, was enough to give me a basic strategy for the evening. A leader needed to be seen but not necessarily known; he needed to command respect without coming off as overly chummy.

All of which was a fancy way of saying I didn't need to sit down and personally shoot the shit with every officer under my command. Giving them a bit of individual attention was probably a good idea, though, so I spoke with as many as I could. Reyes and Olshenko both proved themselves useful by swooping in as I moved on to continue the conversation and fulfill the "chummy" role a commander couldn't afford to take.

I left perhaps half an hour later, content that I'd done my part and could leave the rest to the other senior officers. The one benefit of our downtime here was that the various department leaders would have several days to run drills and get all the newcomers up to speed. By the time we got into battle, everyone should be ready.

We spent the next day in transit toward Kenabrius, barreling closer to a point where I could exchange real-time comms with Admiral Lochlan. Miranda skipped her shift to continue her analysis, and I only checked in once to see if she needed anything. As tempting as it

was to sit there peering over her shoulder, I would only get in her way. There was nothing for any of us to do but wait.

That night, I finally had a moment to breathe and catch up on those krekball games I'd missed. There were some pretty close matches, especially considering the complete dominance of the New Praxian teams over the past few seasons, but I still got restless after an hour or so. As a soldier, I was accustomed to having downtime before my next assignment. But not knowing what the assignment would be—or if I'd even have one—was different. The enemy was out there right now, and it was absolutely infuriating that we had no way to engage them.

Eventually, I got annoyed enough to flip off the holo-vids and head down to get some exercise. The *Renegade* didn't have the space for a full rec center or battle simulator or anything as elaborate as one might find on a true capital ship, but we had converted the main cargo hold into the most robust training center we could manage, given our restraints. A sparring ring, a firing range, a zero-gee sim cube—for having only one squad of troopers aboard, it was a pretty good setup. I'd been on plenty of missions where the 'pounders weren't afforded jack shit besides their bunks.

I wasn't surprised to find it occupied when I arrived, since Lieutenant Ackers was quite adamant about keeping his men sharp during downtime. But as I stepped further inside, I realized it was the Krosians, not our troopers, who were making use of the sparring ring.

"Again!" the First Warrior demanded, gesturing to the three men currently in the ring. The Krosians, armed with shock staves, threw themselves at each other like stymied-up gladiators in a Borderlands cage brawl. At first, I thought they might be practicing swarm tactics, with two of the warriors ganging up on the third. But I quickly realized that it was a pure free-for-all.

The warriors fought mercilessly; none of them holding back in the hopes that the other two would weaken themselves. It was as if all three were fighting purely for the kill, not necessarily to win. And when there were no crackles of energy when their staves collided with bone, I realized they weren't using shock weapons after all.

They were bashing each other with regular, old-fashioned truncheons.

A hideous crack from one of the warriors signaled a broken bone, but he still didn't relent until he'd taken another strike to his skull. The remaining two warriors battled every bit as brutally, literally clubbing each other until one finally smashed the other to the mat, then roared in triumph.

"Better," Sekvoth said. "But you still hesitate. You fear pain and death. The enemy fears neither."

"What in the fresh hell is this?" I asked as I approached the side of the ring.

The First Warrior swiveled his orange eyes over to me almost casually. "Commander," he greeted with a reasonable approximation of a human nod. "I regret that you were forced to witness such a pathetic display. But I assure you, my warriors will be prepared when the Dowd are upon us."

I scowled at the wounded Krosians as they dragged themselves to the sides of the mat. They were bleeding everywhere, yet even the one with an obviously broken arm wasn't scrambling for an aid kit or koboro stim.

"The Dowd don't fight with clubs and spears," I said. "What are you practicing?"

"How to endure pain and conquer fear," Sekvoth said as if it were obvious. "On the battlefield, hesitation is death."

"So is being crippled before your enemy finds you," I countered flatly. "Do you use live rounds in battle sims, too?"

"Yes."

I hissed softly through my teeth, too stunned to speak. For once, all the insane and stupid rumors I'd heard about a foe might actually be true. The barbarity made the man's eloquent speech all the more shocking, though some of that was probably a result of my translator implant.

"I'm sorry I asked," I muttered.

"A unit is only as strong as its weakest warrior," Sekvoth said. "Do you not agree?"

"I do, which is why it's idiotic to cripple yourselves before a fight." I stepped in front of him and shook my head. "This little exercise of yours is over. Do you understand?"

The First Warrior's eyes bored into mine. He seemed more amused than annoyed, as if I'd just confirmed his preconceptions about humans.

"As you command, of course," Sekvoth said. "If you have a different training regimen planned for your soldiers, mine will eagerly participate."

"We'll see," I said. "*After* they've had their bones set."

Sekvoth growled low in his throat, the Krosian equivalent of a chuckle. "Your people are more like the Yarasi than we believed. Your Seraphim possess powerful healing magic—you could teach your warriors to endure pain and torment without risk of injury, yet you coddle them instead. Perhaps that is why Dominion soldiers are so unprepared when true battle is finally upon them."

"So unprepared we've held the line against Pact aggression for decades," I reminded him. "The skirmishes on Dormire and other Borderlands colonies prove that."

"Come now, Commander, we both know the truth. You are one of the Dominion's elite warriors—without their Immortal vanguards, your worlds are practically defenseless." He growl-chuckled again. "I fought a unit of your soldiers on Rylax not long ago. They were weak and undisciplined. Killing one shattered the resolve of the entire squad."

My hand balled into a fist at my side. After our little chest-thumping display in the hangar yesterday, I had hoped we might avoid another one for a while. But I had a sneaking suspicion that Sekvoth and I would be repeating versions of this conversation every time we saw each other.

At least until I snapped and broke him in half.

"Their leader fought better than the rest," the Krosian added. "But he was no Immortal. His frail body broke as easily as the others."

"You'll find that my crew is *very* disciplined," I told him. "Every trooper on this ship has survived at least a dozen engagements."

"Excellent," Sekvoth said. "Then you agree with me that warriors must learn to spill blood before they can be trusted to fight."

"I agree that experience is important. But the point of training isn't to do our enemy's work for them." I gestured to the arena. "Spar all you want, but Doctor Trevas better not have your men showing up

with missing limbs. And if your men ever use live rounds when we aren't shooting at the Dowd, they'll be floating back to Nirule. Do you understand?"

I stared into his orange eyes, fully aware that I couldn't afford to show any sign of weakness. A part of me wondered if this whole thing might have been a test, but that seemed far too clever for idiots who'd been beating each other with clubs like they'd crawled out of the primordial muck an hour ago. This was probably just how they were.

"Perfectly," Sekvoth said, his teeth widening into a not-quite smile. "Good."

I held his gaze for another few heartbeats, seriously debating if I should grab one of the truncheons and hit him with it to make a point. But right when I was about to turn, he continued.

"Perhaps there is one training regimen that could aid both our squads, Commander," Sekvoth said. "Such as battling the Yarasi female."

My hackles instantly rose. "Explain."

"The Dowd are physically frail and pathetic, but they have evolved great psychic powers. Practicing against a Yarasi could teach us all how to properly defeat such a foe."

With my hands already clenched, I could have punched him so easily. I wouldn't have been surprised if that was what he wanted. But in this case, his bait was too obvious for me to swallow. And more to the point, I didn't need to.

"I don't think that's a good idea," I said.

Sekvoth grunted. "If you are worried about us injuring her, Commander, I can assure you that—"

"You misunderstand," I said, shaking my head. "I wouldn't be worried about Velarys—I'd be worried about *you*."

The Krosian tilted his head. "Surely you jest."

"Not at all. You see, *I* am under orders to play nice here. Admiral Lochlan is genuinely hopeful that this joint mission might be the first step in forging a real relationship between our peoples." I smiled darkly. "The Yarasi aren't so optimistic. The Executrix never told Velarys to make friends. So if the two of you ever do fight, she won't have to pretend to tolerate you. She'll just kill you and be done with it."

Sekvoth stared back at me in silence, and I could feel the eyes of his men upon us. But then he growl-chuckled yet again.

“You are loyal to your fellow soldiers, Commander,” Sekvoth said. “The sign of a great warrior. I look forward to spilling blood with you against our common foe.”

“Hopefully we won’t have to wait long. Now get your men to the infirmary. And remember what I said—I won’t remind you again.”

“You will not need to,” the Krosian replied. “Of that, you can be certain.”



I never ended up exercising, since my standoff with Sekvoth had gotten my blood pumping harder than a full throw-boxing match. I did hang around long enough to make sure they went to the infirmary, and I did seriously consider kicking the shit out of one of the training mechs afterward. But then I felt a mental tug in the back of my consciousness, and I realized that my first officer was calling out to me.

Frowning, I checked the time. Velarys should have finished her bridge shift about half an hour ago, and this was one of the rare moments whether neither of us were on duty or resting. Perhaps her Yarasi senses had heard me thinking about her. Regardless, I had been meaning to speak to her in private anyway, and this seemed as good a time as any.

Her quarters were only a few doors down from mine on the officer’s deck. I preemptively reached out my hand to touch the panel when I approached, but I needn’t have bothered. The door *whooshed* open the instant I got close.

Enter.

I smiled at the sound of her voice in my head. When she’d first awakened on the *Wildcat*, her casual use of telepathy had been a little disconcerting, but I’d mostly gotten used to it. Especially since I knew how hard she tried to respect everyone’s mental privacy despite how uncomfortable it made her. She had spent her whole life being

connected to her warrior sisters, and in some ways she was now the most isolated person on the ship.

The lights were off in her quarters, but since the shutters were open, the main cabin was bathed in the flickering, pinkish-red glow of astral space. She hadn't decorated this room much aside from placing a few Yarasi statuettes here and there, though I doubted she spent much time in here anyway. Ash and I had never been able to get her interested in any holo-vids, so when she was off-duty, she spent most of her time in her bedroom working out or meditating.

Saleyra was right earlier, I mused. I need to convince her to spend some time in the lounge.

Turning to my right, I entered the bedroom. The shutters were closed in here, but there was still some dim light thanks to the glowing psionic crystals she'd arranged around her meditation mat—almost like candles at an old-fashioned seance. Velarys herself was sitting at the center of the crystals on the floor, her eyes closed and her legs crossed.

And naturally, she was completely naked.

"I don't mean to interrupt," I said, voice low.

"You are not. I summoned you."

I smiled down at her. As always, the sight of her light gray skin and ageless athletic figure sent a tingle of anticipation racing through me. It really had been far too long since we'd been together.

"I'm glad you did," I said, lingering in the doorway. "I've been wanting to talk in private for a while."

"About our mission?"

"About everything else, actually. Feels like we haven't been able to spend much time together recently despite being on the same ship."

Her glowing blue-violet eyes slowly fluttered open, and she pivoted her head back to look at me. "You are worried that I am unsatisfied with our relationship."

"Not exactly," I said. "If that were the case, I'm reasonably sure you would have just told me."

"You are correct. I am not an insecure human female who requires constant reassurance."

Drawing in a final meditative breath, Velarys rose to her feet and spun around to face me. Seeing her gray body on full display made me feel seriously overdressed.

"I'm glad to hear that," I said, gently placing my hands on her waist when she stepped close. A familiar buzz of psionic energy tickled my mind when we touched.

"I sensed your consternation earlier," she said. "You were having a confrontation with the Krosian squad leader?"

"Not really a confrontation. More like a difference of opinion on appropriate training techniques."

"It felt stronger than a difference in opinion."

"It's not a problem," I assured her as I gave her slender waist a squeeze. "Or at least it won't be, when I flush them all out the airlock."

She arched a white eyebrow.

I sighed and shook my head. "I should have fought Lochlan harder on this. Angoth techs are all well and good, but I never should have allowed Krosians on board."

"The Pact would have surely insisted upon it eventually. If anything, we are fortunate they waited this long." She paused, and both her eyebrows rose this time. "It is curious that you seem able to deal with members of many other species, but not Krosians."

"There's nothing curious about it," I said. "They're literally born and bred to be killers."

"One could say the same about Dominion fleet officers."

"They can say it all they like, but that doesn't make it true."

Velarys continued looking at me in silence.

"Don't tell me that you're making apologies for the Krosians now," I said with a groan. "Your people hate them as much as mine do."

"And with good reason," she said. "But I am talking about you, Kaldor Zeris, not the Yarasi. You have ardently defended the rights of aliens all across Dominion space."

"The ones who deserve it," I said. "The weak need protection. Thugs need a fist in the face. It's not that complicated."

I swore I could feel her telepathy probing at the edges of my thoughts. Despite her continued efforts to respect everyone's privacy, I knew it wasn't as easy for her as Miranda. Telling a Yarasi not to use their telepathy was like telling a human to keep their eyes closed.

"I wish to understand," Velarys said. "May I enter your mind?"

Sighing, I took hold of her wrists and lifted her hands to the sides of my face, then gently leaned my forehead against hers. "Go ahead."

Her glowing eyes brightened, and I felt the faintest tickle in the back of my mind. I stayed calm and let her rummage through my thoughts and memories. Her telepathy was much more invasive than Ash's psychometry, but after taking two different telepathic women as lovers, I'd just gotten used to sharing my most intimate secrets. I trusted them both.

"The First Warrior wishes to spar with me?" she asked.

"Maybe," I said. "Mostly I think he was trying to get under my skin."

Her forehead creased slightly. "Perhaps. But it may still be worth teaching them a lesson in humility."

I smiled. "You would kick their ass, wouldn't you?"

"I doubt I would need to resort to martial arts. The Krosians are fortunate that their numbers are so vast, because even the most powerful among them are no match for a trained Yarasi warrior."

I chuckled. "You know, we might end up needing a bigger ship after all, what with all these warrior egos aboard."

Velarys either missed or ignored my comment as she continued her probe into my thoughts. Her eyes reopened after a few more heartbeats, and she leaned back and let her hands slide off my face to settle on my chest.

"You harbor great resentment for them," she said. "I was aware that they attacked your home, but that was many years ago."

"Does that really matter?" I asked. "You would let it go if they'd attacked your sisters?"

"They *have* attacked my sisters," Velarys said. "And I will never forgive them for it."

"But you think *I* should?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because you are better than me."

I blinked, then stared into her eyes for several long heartbeats before a faint smile tugged at her lips.

"Wait," I said. "Was that...a joke?"

"Of course," Velarys said. "Despite your many virtues, you will always be a member of an inferior race."

I snorted. "Right. How could I forget?"

Her smile widened, and she slid her hands across my cheeks and ran her fingers over the lobes of my ears. “But you are a fortunate man,” she said. “Because I am ready to provide you with the opportunity to produce superior offspring.”

“I was wondering when you’d bring that up,” I said, glancing downward to remind myself of her glorious gray body on full display. “I, uh, I didn’t want to pressure you, but I knew it was part of the reason your people agreed to let you serve here instead of back home. But we’ve been on our own for a while now, and you stopped mentioning it.”

“I needed time to perform the proper meditations and focus my mind,” Velarys said. “That is why I summoned you tonight. My *jahumir* has begun.”

“Ah,” I said, letting my hands fall back to her waist. “What does that mean, exactly?”

“It means I have reached the height of my fertility. Even your comparatively weak human seed should now be able to take root within me.”

“Is that so?” I asked, allowing my gaze to drift upward from her flat stomach to her plump, perky breasts. It really had been too long since we’d been together. “I suppose I’ll take all the help I can get.”

“I know you have already fertilized Ensign Pierce several times, and that you aspire to do the same with your Huntress,” Velarys said. “But you should know that if you succeed in fertilizing me, our children will be far more powerful than theirs.”

I assumed she was joking again. But the look on her face was deadly serious.

“Uh...okay,” I managed. “I wasn’t planning on pitting them against each other.”

“Neither am I. They are both capable females worthy of your attention.” Velarys cocked her head slightly. “I merely wish you to understand why I am the superior mate.”

Somehow, I managed not to snicker. “Good to know. Though I didn’t realize you were feeling jealous.”

“I am not,” she said, frowning. “As I just explained, I have no reason to be.”

“Right,” I murmured.

“But you should be aware that during this cycle, my needs for carnal engagement will be quite extreme,” Velarys added, her glowing eyes turning almost feral. “We will need to set aside many of our off-duty hours for copulation. The needs of your other females will have to wait.”

“I see.” I tugged on her waist and pulled her more tightly against me. Her violet nipples were so hard I could feel them through my uniform jacket. “But Miranda and Saleya may not be happy about that.”

“Their happiness is not my concern,” Velarys said. “I am merely stating reality. Until the cycle is complete, I will not allow the other females to interfere.”

I pressed my lips into a tight line. Well, this was going to be awkward...

“A moment ago, you said *if* I succeed,” I noted. “I know that humans and Yarasi aren’t genetically compatible naturally, so I’m not sure about the odds.”

“It is not a matter of probability, but of willpower. If you still wish to plant your seed within me, you must prove your worth.”

I frowned. “I thought I had.”

“Worthiness is a constant struggle. I am not a mere bauble to be won and forgotten on a mantle.” Her hands slid down my cheeks and jawline...and then settled around my throat. “I am a prize that must be constantly reclaimed.”

I looked hard into her eyes, wondering if this was truly a part of Yarasi mating rituals or if she’d come up with this part of the game herself. From everything I’d heard about their males, I had a hard time believing they could overpower their women...

“Claim me,” Velarys said, her grip tightening until she began choking me. “Or forever be denied my power.”

A tingle of excitement rushed through me. If she wanted a fight, I was more than happy to give her one.

Gritting my teeth, I grabbed hold of her wrists and tried to tear them off my throat. But she had already used her psychometabolic abilities to enhance her strength, making her hands a thorotone vise. I boosted my own strength in response, using my powers to trigger a surge of adrenaline. Slowly but surely, my strength increased until

it once again exceeded hers. She clenched her teeth in exertion as her fingers began to lose their grip...

And then suddenly relaxed, sending my arms flying wildly to the side. In that moment while I was off-balance, she made her move, shifting her right leg between mine and executing a fast, effective throw that sent me crashing face-first to the floor. It would have hurt like hell without my psionic fortification; with it, I didn't even get the wind knocked out of me. But Velarys still ended up on top of me, and she twisted my left arm behind my back while jabbing her elbow into my spine.

"Strength alone will not be enough to defeat me!" Velarys said, mouth at my ears as she pinned me in place. "I had hoped you would have learned this lesson."

I snarled in protest, my thoughts flashing back to our first wrestling match back on the *Wildcat*. She had taken me by surprise there as well, though I'd managed to bait and throw her with a bit of improvisation. Unfortunately, I knew that trick wouldn't work twice. I'd have to come up with something new and clever.

"Perhaps the command chair has made you soft," Velarys taunted. "Perhaps you are no longer a worthy mate."

She twisted my arm harder, sending a spike of pain shooting through my tendons. I could have tried to roll her off or lash out with my free elbow, but those moves were too obvious. I needed something new, something surprising.

Something that would get her beneath me where she belonged.

Snarling, I tried to worm out of her pin on my left arm while I planted my right hand on the carpet. Even with her elbow in my back, she couldn't really stop me from doing the one armed pushup, and she didn't try. It probably seemed innocuous or even silly, since there was no obvious benefit to lifting myself off the deck. I held us up for a few seconds, then wobbled to make it seem like I was losing strength...

And then pushed as hard as I could while releasing the kinetic energy I had absorbed from my fall. The added force hurled my entire body upright in a single motion, at which point I slammed her into the wall behind us. She yelped in surprise, and her grip on my other arm faltered for a heartbeat. I took the opportunity to charge forward

and lower my head, effectively throwing her off my back and onto the bed.

Knowing how quickly she could move if I gave her the chance, I lunged on top of her, pinning her face down against the mattress. She squirmed so violently she nearly wrenched herself free, but I was too strong—and too motivated—to let her escape. Amidst the growling melee, I managed to get a firm hold of her wrists and lock them together behind her back.

“Satisfied?” I breathed into her ear as I put all my weight on top of her.

I could already feel her breaths hitching in her chest—not from exertion, but from arousal.

“Excellent,” Velarys said. “The chair has not dulled your warrior instinct.”

“Not even close.”

“But I will never understand why you hesitate. I am defenseless. Take me!”

Shifting my weight, I freed one hand while clasping both of her slender wrists together with the other. Velarys didn’t make it easy—she squirmed and struggled the entire time as I frantically unbuckled my belt. But the moment I placed the tip of my throbbing manhood against flesh, she held her breath and seized up in anticipation. Her smooth Yarasi cunt was as warm and slick as ever as I pushed inside—

And felt the familiar yet always surprising ripple of psionic energy shoot through me. I gasped as I thrust deeper, overwhelmed by the sensation. In one instant, it was like a tingle across every centimeter of my body; in the next, it was like I was a split second from cumming all over her. I was suddenly worried that it actually *had* been too long since we’d been together. I could lose control at any second.

“No!” she snarled. Her head was turned to the side against the mattress so she could glare at me with one eye. “I will not allow you to defile me!”

I could feel the surge of her psychometric powers flood through me, holding my body in a kind of stasis through sheer force of will. My cock was eager and ready to explode, but her mind held me at the precipice, giving me time to adapt just like when I’d first entered her.

Calling on that experience, I steeled myself against the onslaught of pleasure until I could pull back then thrust into her again. Velarys moaned in bliss with my movements, and she began gasping uncontrollably when I became confident enough to pick up the pace. She wanted me to take her—*needed* me to take her. And there was no chance in the galaxy that I was going to disappoint her.

Growling low in my throat, I leaned down further, nudging her white hair out of the way with my nose and bringing my teeth against the tip of her serrated ear. I nibbled gently, sweetly, as I forced myself deeper inside her.

“I knew Yarasi were weak,” I growled. “Easily defeated. Easily humiliated.”

“I will not...*obbbb...*” Velarys groaned in protest. “I will never subm...*ngnn!*”

Her body convulsed beneath me when my gentle, loving thrusts turned into forceful, brutish ruts. Her resistance crumbled as her desire swiftly overpowered her pride. I knew it wouldn’t be long before she lost control, and when she did, I would follow in a heartbeat. Her mental discipline was the only thing holding back the flood for both of us.

And I knew exactly how to break it.

“Your body is mine,” I told her as the wet slaps of our flesh echoed through her quarters. “I’m going to breed you over and over...”

“I am a proud Yara...ooooo!” she blubbered, voice trembling. “You cannot...I will not...oh!”

Velarys came with a breathless yelp, her body seizing and her eyes blazing twice as brightly as before. I burst the instant her control broke, flooding her alien womb with the inferior human seed she craved so badly. She took it all, twitching in rhythm with every spurt, as if our bodies were connected both physically and mentally.

And then we were both spent. I released my hold on her wrists, allowing her arms to slide listlessly to her side as I laid on top of her and shared in her clawing breaths, our bodies framed in the glimmer of the psionic crystals on the meditation mat behind us.

“Shit,” I rasped, gently kissing her cheek. “I hope you’re satisfied.”

“Satisfied,” Velarys whispered, “but not sated.”

I snorted softly. “Well, then it’s a good thing I’m not due on the bridge for another five hours.”

“Yes. Because I will require all of them.”

“You weren’t kidding about being pent-up, were you?”

“Yarasi warriors do not lie.”

“I suppose not,” I breathed, stroking her hair and appreciating the ethereal beauty of her silhouette in the dim light. “But that’s a lot to ask. I hope you’re ready to provide some help.”

Velarys stayed silent for a long moment, breathing softly as I continued kissing my way across her ear and then down her neck. My cock throbbed inside her, drained yet still eager for more of her flesh.

“I am aware of the limits of your human endurance,” she said. “My powers will sustain you beyond them.”

“Good.”

I finally lifted my weight off her as I continued my kissing trail across her slender shoulders. She shivered in delight, and her hand reached down to squeeze my leg.

“You are an exceptional mate,” Velarys said.

I smiled. “I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

“It is beyond mere enjoyment. I never imagined that I would have the satisfaction of being claimed by a fellow warrior. It is...special.”

I paused mid-kiss. “You’re saying that if I were a Yarasi man, I’d be the one on the bottom?”

“Yes. You would wait to be claimed by a female. And after the *jahumir*, we would part company and likely never speak again.”

“That sounds awful.”

Velarys stayed silent for a long moment. “It is how things are done. The spheres of male and female only intersect when required. It is natural.”

“Doesn’t sound natural at all to me,” I said.

“It *seemed* natural,” she whispered. “I am no longer certain.”

Leaning up, I gently took hold of her arm and helped flip her over beneath me. She waited patiently as I stripped off my uniform jacket and undershirt, then spread her legs and pulled me back on top of her. Once our bodies were pressed together, her hand guided my re-hardening cock right back inside her alien depths.

"I do not wish to be apart from you," Velarys said, her arms wrapping around my neck and she pulled me within a centimeter of her lips. "Not even when the *jabumir* is complete."

"Why would you need to be?" I asked.

Her glowered eyes flickered slightly, and her thighs seemed to squeeze me a bit tighter. "My people will expect me to return home and give birth on Draconis. It is...traditional."

"And there are never any exceptions?"

"Rarely, and typically only for Huntresses who cannot be interrupted. Warriors are expected to take a ceremonial leave from duty."

"Well, we're on a hunt that can't be interrupted," I reminded her. "Maybe that's all you need to tell them."

"I do not believe that will convince them. I am still surprised they agreed to allow me to serve on this ship at all."

I brushed a clump of white hair from her eyes, then leaned down to plant a kiss on her lips. I expected to pull back, but she didn't allow it. Her arms locked in place behind my neck, holding me close as her tongue parted my lips and danced with mine. A psionic tingle rippled through my entire body, and I felt a flash of her deepest emotions as our minds connected. Warmth. Contentment.

And beneath, fear.

"I know it hasn't been easy for you here," I told her when our lips parted. "Not being connected to the entire crew. It must feel...lonely."

"It is," Velarys whispered, swallowing heavily. "Except when I am with you."

"Then be with me," I said. "No matter what your people say."

"I am a soldier of the Empire. My duty is to the Executrix."

"You can serve your people's interests right here with me."

She smiled thinly. "I do not think that would help our cause."

"I can be pretty persuasive when the stakes are high enough."

"You are a male. It is not your place to make demands."

I grunted. "Okay, then I'll have Admiral Lochlan do it. Will that help?"

"Perhaps."

Her smile widened, and I leaned down for another kiss. Her hips began to churn against me again, pulling my cock deeper inside her.

“I do not wish to leave you,” Velarys said as our lips parted, her voice so gentle she sounded like a completely different person. “We are stronger as one.”

“Yes, we are,” I told her. “And we can become stronger still. If you open yourself to the others, I promise they’ll let you in, too. Ash is crazy about you.”

“The Huntress is a worthy ally. And another worthy mate for you.”

She paused and smiled again, and her gaze shifted from forlorn to almost feral. “But tonight is about us,” she said. “The *jabumir* has begun, and there is no turning back. You will take me again. Now.”

Grinning, I rolled my hips back, withdrawing from her a few centimeters before abruptly slamming back in. Her yelp of delight was just as satisfying as I’d hoped.

“I will,” I promised. “But how do you want it this time?”

Velarys swallowed visibly as I continued thrusting gently. “I am defeated and at your mercy,” she said. “You may enjoy the spoils of your conquest any way you desire.”

I snickered. “Even slowly and sweetly?”

“If that is your desire,” she replied, not bothering to mask her disappointment.

I chuckled and gave her another, longer kiss.

“My desire,” I said, “is you.”

“Then take me, Kaldor Zeris,” Velarys said, eyes twinkling. “For I am yours.”

INTERLUDE

Kaborra System, Pact Space

Having spent all of her childhood and most of her adult life in the Borderlands, Nashira Telaar was quite accustomed to the sight of desperate people trying to survive on struggling colonies. But seeing the same misery and ruin on display inside the territory of a powerful interstellar empire was something new and different.

But equally horrible.

“Shit,” she hissed into her rebreather as she glanced across the street to see yet another building which had been reduced to rubble. “Dowd hit this place a lot harder than I thought.”

“The Pact Governing Authority does not often share casualty or damage reports with outsiders,” Zilex said, his artificial voice sounded virtually identical to his Kali creator, Vrisk. “And the official news reports they send to the Holosphere are rarely trustworthy.”

“Well, yeah. But still...this is awful.”

Ash took a deep breath of recycled air as she picked up her pace. Kaborra II had been ugly even before the Dowd attack. A dim yellow haze surrounded everything, a byproduct of the near-toxic atmosphere the air scrubbers couldn't quite fix on their own. And while the buildings were all sturdy and modern enough, they were all badly in need of maintenance, even the ones the Dowd hadn't hit.

She knew there were colonies in Dominion space that were more or less the same, particularly in the Driftward Worlds, but it was still shocking to see in person. Empires projected an illusion of strength; the people she'd grown up with on Nirivarr had always pined for the glitz and glamor of the wealthy worlds they'd likely never set foot on.

If only they knew the truth.

Kaborra was not an important world by any metric. Located less than a hundred light-years inside Pact space, one might have assumed the colony deserved a proper defense fleet and a jump corridor, but it possessed neither. She didn't know the history here aside from the basics, but evidently some enterprising Angoth businessman had believed they could colonize this planet and turn it into a fuel depot for ships crossing back and forth into the Borderlands. Unfortunately for him and everyone he conned into moving here, the enterprise had turned sour when the Pact Governing Authority reneged on its promise to tunnel new trade lanes and build a jump corridor. The result was a world which had turned to mining resource-poor comets and asteroids to sustain itself.

And the Dowd had all but obliterated it.

"Surprised they didn't just launch a few torpedoes at the edge of the colony," Ash said, gesturing through the haze to one of the massive air scrubbers jutting up over the buildings like a great rusty metal tree.

"The Dowd did not intend to destroy the colony, but to terrorize the population," Zilex pointed out in that unintentionally condescending way of his. "And if you recall, they returned after the emergency defense fleet arrived and destroyed several of those ships to further make their point."

"Yeah, we passed through the wreckage on the way in," Ash replied tartly. "You really think I forgot already?"

"Organic memories are prone to grievous inaccuracies."

"Lucky for you. Means I might forget all the times you talked back to me when I tell Vrisk how you did."

"I would prefer you deliver an accurate report. It is the best way to ensure he improves my programming."

"Or shuts you off and starts from scratch," Ash replied. "I suppose it's a win for me either way."

The android didn't reply. There were times when she could almost forget that she wasn't talking to Vrisk himself. The Kali engineer had programmed his creation to be a near facsimile of his person, right down to the lankly skeletal structure and narrow, serpent-like head. It was kind of creepy at times, especially the face. Ash had never had any trouble interacting with real Kali, but she had the same healthy fear of snakes as anyone who grew up around Nirivarr coppermouths.

And Zilek's smooth, metallic serpent-like head reminded her more of the two-meter-long terror Kal had once hauled out of her parents' basement than Vrisk ever had.

Still, having an android as backup was probably better than roaming the edges of Pact space on her own. While she wasn't a stranger to that—having spent almost five years operating solo in the Borderlands—the Dowd hadn't been wandering around shooting everything at the time. And she hadn't been a known accomplice of a Dominion soldier whose notoriety seemed to be growing every week. The HoloSphere was filled with all sorts of rumors about Commander Zeris—a man who was either a hero fighting the Dowd or a secret Dominion operative attempting to destroy the Pact from within.

Ash's heart ached when she thought about him. They hadn't seen each other in weeks now, not since she'd set out on this quest to track down her brother. It was starting to feel as if they'd gone back to the interminable long-distance relationship they'd maintained while she'd been on Sykaris. But she reminded herself that this was different—once she found Leenam, she'd be back with Kal in a heartbeat. And Miranda. And maybe a little Velarys for good measure.

She grinned under her mask, wishing he were here right now. But she knew he would only be a liability in a place like this. Unlike a standard Dominion pulse rifle, her boyfriend didn't have a stun setting. Kal had many virtues, but he wasn't exactly the most subtle man she'd ever met.

Just the best.

"Our destination is one hundred meters ahead across that plaza," Zilex said helpfully. "Afterward, we should depart. Quickly."

Ash snorted softly. "Almost sounds like you're tryin' to boss me around."

"I am merely stating a recommended course of action. Lingering on Kaborra seems unwise."

"You aren't wrong," she admitted, turning to move through the plaza and keeping her eyes out for any trouble. There were only a few dozen people in sight today, mostly Angoth laborers working to repair the damage. But there were a handful of other aliens around as well—Grotheki, Merzeg, even a few Norgon—and many of them had the look of desperate men searching for potential prey.

Her thick cloak and hood concealed her features and gender, but if any thugs decided to try their luck anyway, she wouldn't mind teaching them a lesson. She wore her black and green huntress armor beneath her cloak, as well as two pulse pistols—one on her hip and another in her boot—and a couple of micro-explosives for good measure.

“Wish the Authority had sent more aid,” Ash commented, watching a pair of Angoth children sift through the rubble.

“Contrary to the propaganda on the HoloSphere, food shortages have always been common on outlying Pact colonies,” Zilex said. “Most of the surplus goes to feeding the Krosian broods.”

“Yet there are barely any soldiers here. Who the hell do they think is going to keep order?”

They reached the edge of the plaza, or at least what was left of it. A disruptor blast had practically vaporized an entire row of stores, leaving behind a rubble-filled crater and huge piles of black dust on the sidewalks and streets. It was almost as if a construction crew had torn down the buildings all the way to the foundation in order to make room for a new project. But Ash had a feeling nothing here would get rebuilt.

Tapping Zilex on the arm, she headed down a narrow street toward a battered building about twenty meters away. The shop looked like it hadn't been open in months, possibly years, but their contact should be waiting inside.

Just before they entered, Ash surreptitiously reached into her cloak and retrieved one of her surveillance drones. The insect-like robot buzzed out of her hand and took up position above the doorway. Since she'd linked them all with Zilex, he could process their camera feeds as well as their sensor data.

“Here goes nothin’,” she said, hand settling on her holstered pistol as she stepped inside the building.

The interior was completely empty, from the shelves to the display stands to the broken-open strongbox behind the sales counter. She was a little surprised no one had tried to squat in here...until a battered but functional-looking security mech appeared in the doorway leading to the storage area in the back. The two-meter-tall robot was holding a Pact-made plasma pistol, though it wasn't pointing at them. Yet.

“Your presence is expected,” the mech said in the kind of stunted, heavily digitized voice that suggested its creators hadn’t wanted to splurge on proper software.

“Glad to hear it,” Ash said, feeling herself relax slightly. Given that the summons had come from Saleya’s organization, she hadn’t really expected this to be a trap. But one never knew for sure here on the fringes of galactic society. Especially not with the Column and the Dowd out here trying to disrupt the organization’s operations.

The mech stepped to the side and gestured stiffly toward the back room. Ash moved forward with Zilex in tow, wondering just how many people Saleya had on Kaborra. Hopefully not many. The only point of setting up shop here would be to try and hide, since it was so far off the normal trade lanes. But with the Dowd lurking around searching for vulnerable targets, places like this were *more* dangerous, not less.

The storage area was roughly the same size as the shop, and the many shelves lining the walls were just as empty. But there was a single figure waiting inside.

“I’m so glad you made it!” the blue-skinned Velothi girl said in a melodious voice that seemed utterly out of place for the gritty location. “I didn’t want to stick around any longer than I had to.”

“I don’t blame ya,” Ash said. “You must be Nyxe.”

“And you must be Nashira,” she replied. “I’ve heard a lot about you. Lady Saleya says you’ve rescued many people.”

“Not as many as I would have liked. But you can call me Ash.”

Nyxe smiled. The girl was undeniably pretty—even her unflattering cloak and loose spacer’s jumpsuit couldn’t conceal her slim dancer’s figure, sweet face, and luminescent eyes. Of course, it helped that Ash knew what she looked like when she was wearing practically nothing; she had seen this girl through Kal’s eyes with her psychometry. And she knew exactly how good he had felt when she’d used those delicate cranial tendrils of hers to pleasure him.

Next time, Ash promised herself, I’m going to be there in person.

“I know how strange this must seem,” Nyxe said, “but Lady Saleya let us know you were out searching for your brother. Then a few days ago, one of our people picked up a transmission sent to one of your old kips on Sykaris.”

“Strange,” Ash reasoned, her stomach fluttering in anticipation. After what had happened on Kenabrius and then the mothership, she had assumed she’d have to track down Leenam herself. But if he’d sent her a message...

She tried to tamp down her building excitement. If there was one thing she wished she knew about her brother—aside from his current location—it was what the hell he’d been trying to accomplish the past two months. So far, all her hunt had revealed was that he hadn’t gone back to the insurrectionists. From the bits and pieces she’d been able to put together with her psychic impressions and some old-fashioned detective work, he had been flitting around the Borderlands ever since they’d chased him off the mothership. He was behaving more like a vagrant than a Rividian Column operative. It didn’t make any sense.

She wanted to believe that Leenam had come to his senses and decided to abandon the Column after his encounter with Saleya. But Ash knew that was probably wishful thinking on her part. Without understanding why he had joined them in the first place, she couldn’t reasonably guess why he would turn away. All she could really do was hope he wasn’t beyond saving.

But deep down, Ash knew she needed to prepare herself for the worst. Leenam could have been fighting for these bastards voluntarily. And if that was true...

“It’s encrypted,” Nyxe said, reaching into her pocket and retrieving a data drive. “We’re stretched pretty thin and didn’t have any techs to work on it. But I figured Saleya would want me to get it to you as soon as possible anyway.”

Nodding, Ash took the drive and slid it into her holopad. “My companion here can get started on it when we get back to the ship. I just wonder...”

She trailed off as she looked at the encryption. She was a much better mechanic than she was a slicer, but something about it seemed familiar. On a lark, she pulled up a decryption scheme she hadn’t touched since before she’d left Nirivarr...

“Never mind,” Ash said, her pulse quickening. “One of the old family decrypts worked.”

The message was right there, along with a small data file. Holding her breath, she opened the audio component.

“Ash...I don’t even know where to begin. There’s so much I want to say. So much I want to explain.”

Ash’s breath caught in her throat when she heard the familiar sound of her brother’s voice. It was actually real...

“They’ve...they’ve done somethin’ to me,” the message went on. “Put somethin’ inside my head, twistin’ my thoughts. I ran away and tried to get help...but it’s gettin’ worse. I found a way to slow it down, but I can’t stop it. I’m not sure anyone can.

“I don’t know how long I have left, and I don’t even know if you’ll get this. But if you do, maybe there’s still a chance. And if the Column intercepts this...well, there’s no point in hiding from them now anyway. Whatever is left of me won’t be around much longer either way.

“I’m on Talumi, Ash. Come to a nightclub called the *Infernium*. I included instructions for how to get in touch with the Red Claw underboss there. I know it seems crazy why I’d go to them for help, but you’ll understand once you get here. *If* you get here. If you can’t...then I’m sorry. For everythin’.”

Ash’s hand was shaking by the time the message ended. She stared at the holopad for what felt like minutes before she finally inhaled sharply and looked at Zilex.

“Talumi,” Ash breathed. “How long will it take to get there?”

“Just over three days,” the android calculated. “But I strongly advise against such a course of action.”

“You can advise all you want. We’re going.”

The android paused. “But this transmission could be inauthentic. The insurrectionists could be attempting to lure you—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Ash said. “If there’s even a chance that Leenam is there, I gotta know.”

She opened the file attached to the message. The document was tiny, containing only the name of a contact and the proper procedure for getting their attention when she arrived. She was familiar with the *Infernium*—it was one of many similar nightclubs in Talumi’s red-light district. It also happened to be a major hub for the Red Claw slavers, one of the worst alien-trafficking rings in the entire Cluster.

Swallowing heavily, Ash looked up at the Velothi girl. “Thank you for getting this to me,” she said.

“It’s no trouble at all,” Nyxe said, offering her a sympathetic smile. “I’m just glad we were able to reach you. If there’s anything else we can do for you...”

“No,” Ash said, placing a hand on the other woman’s shoulder and giving it a squeeze. “But you shouldn’t stay here, either. It’s too dangerous.”

“We’ll be leaving soon. Lady Saleya had a few errands to run, but I’ll be back on Kenabrius in a few days.”

Ash nodded, as impressed as always how Saleya had managed to build such a vast network of contacts and spies all over the Cluster. She only knew about a tiny fraction of the organization, and she’d worried it might crumble after the incident on the mothership. But she should have known better. Saleya and her people were as resilient as the Immortal who protected them.

“Hopefully we’ll get a chance to see you there,” Ash said. “Whenever this is finally over.”

“I’d like that,” Nyxe said, her tail briefly touching Ash’s leg. “Good luck. Oh, and...give Kal my regards, would you?”

“I will,” Ash promised.

Beckoning for Zilex to follow, she left the shop and retrieved her drone on the way out. She moved even more quickly than before, desperate to get back to the *Wildcat* as quickly as possible.

“I reiterate my position that we should ignore this message,” Zilex said.

“Too bad, ’cuz we’re goin’ to Talumi,” Ash said. “And we’re goin’ to find my brother.”

5

TACKING INTO THE WIND

Early the next morning, Miranda had her breakthrough.

Not a *good* breakthrough, unfortunately, which I deduced about five seconds after entering her quarters. Not because of how she looked—her makeup was still perfect, and her uniform looked as straight and pressed as if she'd just put it on. But there was one clue that told me everything I needed to know about how the night had gone and her current state of mind.

Clutter.

Not clutter by any normal person's standards, of course—one half-finished drink on the nightstand was hardly an indictment of anyone's standards of cleanliness. But for Miranda, it was so out-of-character that I had to assume she hadn't slept a wink last night. It was the only explanation for how the glass could have survived her wrath.

"Commander," she said, bouncing to her feet.

"Ensign," I greeted as the door hissed shut behind me. A quick glance to my right into her bedroom confirmed that the sheets were still folded, though that didn't mean much where she was concerned. I did notice that she had another datapad lying on her desk at roughly an eighty-degree angle rather than a perfect ninety, which was another disturbing indicator of her current mental state.

"I've looked through everything," Miranda said. "There's more here than I ever would have thought. I don't think they held anything back."

"That's good to hear. Shows they're at least taking this as seriously as they should."

Despite her obvious consternation—and the fact that we desperately needed a lead—I still found myself having to repress a smile. She was cute when she was frustrated, there was no doubt about it. I didn't know why, exactly, but it was probably the same reason I found it so arousing when I mussed up her hair or ruined her makeup when I fucked her. There was just something special about destroying a beautiful, put-together woman.

"I've learned more about Pact operations than I thought possible," Miranda said, holding up the pad and staring at the screen. "The DID would have paid a fortune to get their hands on this."

"I'm sure," I replied. "The question is, can any of it help us find the Dowd."

She sighed, and her expression wilted. "I don't know."

"No clues? No patterns?"

"There are some of both, but not enough to meaningfully narrow a search. The Dowd seem like they can strike everywhere from anywhere."

I held back my own sigh. It wasn't all that surprising, really—the power of astral drive technology wasn't merely the ability to travel quickly without jump corridors. Ships in astral space couldn't be detected from realspace, meaning they could emerge and strike without warning. It was the main reason the Yarasi had been able to build and defend their empire with a relatively small population, and why a war between two astral powers could be especially devastating.

Still, it wasn't as if there weren't any traces. If the Dominion or the Yarasi had launched an invasion, someone would have noticed all the ships disappearing, and no species was capable of staying in astral space forever without the Koro Effect turning their brains into pudding. If the Dowd were striking all across Pact space, they would still need to pop into realspace now and again. It seemed like a listening post or sensor array should have eventually noticed *something*.

"I did solve another problem when I got frustrated and needed a break," Miranda said, shifting the current display on the pad. "I think I figured out why we missed the power surge for the self-destruct sequence on that Dowd ship."

I blinked as I examined the display. "You took a break by working on a completely unrelated mystery?"

She nodded as if it were a perfectly normal thing to do. “When I get stuck on something, it helps to focus hard on a different problem. I’m not sure why.”

Neither am I, I thought to myself. Most people cleared their heads by watching a holo-vid or reading a book or just literally not using their brain. But Miranda wasn’t most people.

“I’ll, um, spare you the technical details,” she said carefully, “but a few tweaks to the sensors should do the trick. If it happens again, we should have at least a minute of warning. Assuming they use the same overloading technique on other ships, anyway.”

“Good work,” I said, and meant it. “I’ll show Vrisk the moment he wakes up. He’ll be impressed.”

“He would have figured it out eventually,” Miranda said with a dismissive wave. “I only wish I had better news on the other front. I honestly don’t know what else to do.”

“Getting some sleep probably wouldn’t hurt,” I said. “But maybe what you need is a fresh set of eyes.”

“I don’t think that’s going to help,” she replied, sitting back down on her couch and crossing her legs. “Like I said, they could be striking from virtually anywhere.”

“Not *anywhere*,” I said, reaching to the console on the table in front of her and calling up a projection of Pact space. “The Pact will obviously never give us the precise range of their sensor coverage, but these are the DID estimates based on their technology and likely deployments of probes and listening arrays. Can’t we use this to narrow it down?”

“I ran all that through the algorithm already,” she said, shaking her head. “It gave us about a hundred leads. We’d need years to chase down all those shadows.”

“I’m sure we can narrow it down further with some judgment calls,” I said. “Pull up the results you had.”

With an uncharacteristically exhausted groan, Miranda leaned forward to touch the console. Several overlays appeared over the region of Pact space, all highlighting likely areas for supply depots or bases based on the pattern of attacks. She wasn’t wrong to find it overwhelming—given the sheer size of the area they covered, it was barely more useful than a random guess.

“You see what I mean,” she said.

“Yeah,” I grumbled, my eyes narrowing as they flicked between the various systems on display. “Not exactly a giant red X on a map.”

“It’s so vast it made me consider a possibility we hadn’t thought of before,” Miranda said. “What if their bases are located in astral space?”

I frowned. “That’s not possible.”

“Why not? Astral energies tear away at *human* minds, but we know almost nothing about Dowd physiology. The Koro Effect may not apply to them.”

I pursed my lips. That line of thinking had never even occurred to me, and for a good reason: Astral space was far too unstable for anything resembling a base of operations. No one, not even the Yarasi, spent more time there than was absolutely necessary.

“No,” I murmured, shaking my head. “Even if the Dowd handle astral exposure better than we do, they’re still being led by the Column. There’s no way the human leadership would allow their alien attack hounds to have a private base they couldn’t use or reach themselves.”

“Unless the Column has figured out a way to defeat the Koro Effect,” Miranda said. “Considering the other technologies they’ve developed, we can’t completely rule it out.”

No, I agreed silently. We can’t, can we?

My chest tightened at the thought. The Science Directorate had run all sorts of experiments over the past two centuries trying to beat the Koro Effect, the mind-shredding phenomena of spending too long in astral space. As far as I knew, none of them had produced results. But then, the Straw had also been little more than a fantasy, and yet the jump gate we’d discovered in the Drift had been very real.

On the surface, it seemed utterly unthinkable that the insurrectionists could have achieved *three* massive scientific breakthroughs without the rest of the Dominion knowing about them. The Gen-63 Gammas, the Straw...those were remarkable enough without adding some kind of new astral shielding tech to the mix.

“If they have the ability to strike from astral space, this mission is completely hopeless,” I said. “So let’s assume they don’t.”

Miranda shrugged and gestured to the projection. “Even without astral bases, we still have to deal with this.”

“Not everything is about probability profiles,” I told her. “Sometimes you just need to know your enemy and follow your gut.”

She arched an eyebrow. I didn’t blame her for being skeptical—shooting from the hip was about as antithetical to her being as an unmade bed. But war wasn’t always predictable, and life had taught me that good instincts could be every bit as valuable as good data in the right situation. Particularly a hopeless one like this.

“If you’re going to hunt deadly prey, you need to think like they do,” I said. “So what do we know about how the Dowd think?”

“Almost nothing,” Miranda said. “They’re a complete enigma.”

“That’s not entirely true. I’ve watched Captain Ellis’s old war holos a bunch of times, and we’ve seen how they behaved here during the war. What stands out?”

She shook her head. “They’re psychopathic monsters?”

“They’re ruthless. And willing to go to virtually any lengths to win, even suicide runs.” I gestured to the map. “They’ve also decided to focus their efforts here in Pact space—most of which used to be theirs, long before the Dominion arrived in the Cluster. Plenty of their attacks are localized around the Conduit close to their original homeworld of Maltar.”

“And plenty of their attacks *aren’t* localized by the Conduit,” Miranda countered. “It’s not much of a pattern.”

“But it is something,” I said. “Everything we’ve learned about the Dowd—and everything Captain Ellis told me about them—suggests that they’re motivated by spite and vengeance. That tracks with how many of their attacks have focused on locations where there are known to be Sillibar civilians. It’s like they can’t let go of the past.”

“A past where they’re the ones who tried to commit genocide?” She scoffed. “Seems like they have the villains and heroes reversed in their minds.”

“Wars are rarely as simple as heroes and villains,” I said soberly. “All Ellis ever told me was that the Dowd tried to expand into Sillibar territory, and it eventually triggered a war. But there has to be more to the story than that.”

Miranda eyed me for a moment. “Did the captain ever tell you why he was so obsessed with that period in history?”

“Not exactly,” I lied.

As much as I wanted to tell her the truth about Ellis—that he had died and been replaced by a Sillibar years ago—I still feared what might happen if anyone else learned the truth. That was a secret I planned to keep from everyone until after the war. And maybe all the way to the grave.

“But he had an impressive collection of data and holos gathered over a lifetime,” I added, sealing off the thoughts in case Miranda started unintentionally poking around with that telepathic brain of hers. “I’ve just never seen anything that explains what the original war was about. Even the Yarasi paint the same picture—they say that the Dowd waged a war of aggression across most of the Cluster.”

“Maybe that’s all it is, then,” Miranda said. “The HoloSphere is filled with ridiculous conspiracies about all sorts of things when the truth is often obvious and boring.”

“It might be,” I admitted. “But I’ll trust the captain’s judgment that the Dowd are highly motivated by vengeance over something that happened in the war. For all we know, the Sillibar did something to the Dowd homeworld first.”

“Perhaps.” Opening her fingers, she used her telekinesis to manipulate the map controls and scroll the projection around. “According to this, Maltar is a desolate wasteland of a planet. Maybe it didn’t used to be.”

I nodded as text scrolled across the planetary display. The Dominion knew precious little about worlds this deep in Pact space, but Vokal’s data drive had filled in a lot of astrogational gaps. Evidently, Maltar had once possessed vast underground caverns, but most of them had collapsed in on themselves. We simply didn’t know why.

“Let’s assume the Sillibar did something to the planet,” I said. “It would definitely give the Dowd motivation to seek vengeance.”

“True. But I still don’t know how that helps us.”

“We need to put ourselves in their place. Humans are vengeful and petty, especially at the top. I’ve heard stories of Great House nobles going to great lengths to punish and humiliate rivals over the smallest...”

I trailed off as a thought belatedly struck me. Zooming back out on the projection, I took another look at the potential base zones Miranda had outlined...and an excited tingle raced down the back of my neck.

“Sir?” Miranda asked.

“Vengeful and petty,” I repeated as if in a trance. “Like the ruined homeworld of your greatest enemy.”

Her blue eyes tracked across the holomap. There, within one of the large circles she’d outlined, was an isolated system without a single functional jump corridor.

“Zurix?” she asked.

“Zurix,” I confirmed.

On the one hand, it seemed insane. Building a secret base in a system that had once been the hub of an interstellar empire seemed about as smart as trying to hide from the police at the scene of the crime. But when the Dowd had razed Zurix during the war two centuries ago, they had allegedly been quite thorough. Ellis had told me stories about the pulothium bombs that had rained down upon the planet, destroying its surface and setting fire to the atmosphere. The attempted genocide had brought the Sillibar to the brink of extinction.

“There’s nothing left,” I said. “The planet was beyond restoration, and as far as we know, there’s nothing else particularly valuable in that system. The Sillibar moved to Exodus and never looked back.”

“No jump corridors, no listening posts that we are aware of,” Miranda said, scrolling around the map. “But why wouldn’t they at least build a monument to the fallen? Or perhaps a station there to honor the memory of the dead?”

“They’re not human,” I reminded her. “Alien thoughts and psychology. We build monuments and create holo-vid specials and do everything we can to make sure future generations remember the tragedy, but the Sillibar aren’t like that. They *want* to forget.”

She eyed me curiously. “You sound quite certain of that. How do you know how the Sillibar think?”

“I’ve met a few,” I murmured. “But the point is that there’s nothing in the system, not even on the logs Vokal gave us. It’s certainly not the worst place to hide a base. Especially if you have astral drive technology and your enemy doesn’t. They could easily launch attacks from that system without any risk of being followed. The closest Pact base is sixty or seventy hours without a jump corridor.”

“I suppose,” Miranda said. “But with all due respect, sir, you’re making a lot of assumptions without any strong evidence.”

“I’m playing a hunch,” I told her. “When you don’t have real leads, it’s about all you can do.”

I paced around the map and drew in a long, heavy breath. It wasn’t just a hunch—it was a gamble. A potentially huge gamble at that, considering how long it would take us to get to Zurix and search the system. We’d lose at least a week, possibly more. That was on top of the fact that poking around deep in Pact space might seem extra suspicious to the naysayers within the Authority. If they feared that we were secretly gathering astrogational information to feed to the Dominion, poking around Zurix might look especially bad.

But at this point, it almost didn’t matter. The timer was counting down, and it wasn’t as if we had any other leads. The choice wasn’t between a hunch and something else—it was between a hunch and nothing.

I wasn’t the type of man who sat around waiting for the galaxy to throw him a bone. If this mission was doomed to fail, I would rather go down shooting than sitting around with my thumb up my ass.

“Zeris to the bridge,” I said, opening the comm on her nightstand.

“Go ahead, Commander,” Velarys’s cool voice came back.

“How long until we’re in position for real-time comms with Kenabrius?”

I saw Miranda mouth the answer before the bridge could reply.

“Five hours, twenty-three minutes,” Velarys said. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” I said. “But I think we might have found the clue we were looking for.”



Even with the sophisticated communication relays in Dominion space, real-time comms required annoyingly close proximity. That limitation was why the governments of the Cluster had spent a fortune building the fastest relay in the Cluster on Kenabrius Station, with the ostensible goal of allowing the diplomats who lived there to communicate with their empires more effectively. Only the Yarasi telepathic

network was quicker, and I still didn't fully understand how that even worked.

Because of the advanced relay, we only needed to move a few light-years into the Borderlands to establish near real-time comms with Kenabrius. I expected to be able to speak with one of Admiral Lochlan's aides, who could then send our message on to Rividian.

What I didn't expect was to speak with the admiral herself.

"Admiral," I said in astonishment when her stern face answered my call. "I didn't realize you'd moved your office to Kenabrius."

"I haven't, at least not officially," Lochlan replied. "But I packed up the moment I read your latest report. We have a great deal to discuss."

I nodded. "Yes, we do."

Her projection was little more than a disembodied head floating over my desk, and she turned and made a dismissive motion at someone off screen—probably the aforementioned aide—to shoo them away.

"I'm surprised that Councilor Vokal met with you personally," she said. "And that he was willing to give you sensitive data."

"It was unexpected, to say the least," I agreed.

"It's less surprising that the Governing Authority isn't thrilled about your mission. I knew it would be a tough sell in the long term, and so did the rest of the Assembly."

"True, but it's not like we haven't produced results," I said, feeling a little defensive for whatever reason. "We've killed seven Dowd ships. And since we have Pact crew members aboard, it's not like we could take a joyride round their space without anyone knowing. They should be more worried about the Dowd than about us spying."

"They should be," Lochlan agreed. "But as wars drag on, politicians are usually the first to lose their nerve. Eventually, the *Renegade* will become a useful scapegoat, especially since the broader public doesn't even know about the mission in the first place. A clever planetary governor or two could start demagoguing about reckless foreign intervention as a way to save their own skin."

I nodded. Hating politicians wasn't exactly a novel concept among the military, and one of the major ongoing stories in the modern Dominion was the battle between the Golden Worlds and Fleet Command. I certainly wasn't blind to the need for civilian oversight in some

matters, and it wasn't as if I had a particularly high opinion of many of Lochlan's contemporaries in the Admiralty. But I had zero patience for spineless cowards in any walk of life.

"Well, hopefully we can put their concerns to rest," I said. "We analyzed the information Vokal gave us. With your permission, I'd like to chase down a lead."

Lochlan leaned forward a centimeter. "Where?"

"I'm hesitant to say over a public relay, even with encryption," I told her. "We wouldn't want a repeat of Gallien's Run."

"No, we wouldn't," she replied, her voice tinged with frustration.

Another of the annoying issues with being so far from command was the need to come up with all kinds of silly code names for contingencies. In this case, I was letting her know that the potential target was deep enough in Pact space that if the enemy suspected we were coming, they might have enough time to clean the house before we arrived. While we still didn't have any indication that they'd cracked Vrisk's latest encryption schemes, it still didn't seem worth the risk.

"What's your probability profile?" Lochlan asked.

"High enough I think it's worth the time, especially since we don't have any other leads," I told her. "But it is a bit of a longshot, and it's not without risks."

She studied me for several heartbeats, then smiled almost imperceptibly. "I'm trying to imagine what I might have said if you'd asked me to trust your judgment six months ago."

"Nothing kind, I suspect," I said, smiling back. "I know what's at stake, Admiral, but I'm trusting my gut on this one. If I'm wrong..."

Lochlan nodded. "Do you want backup?"

"Not yet. For now, I just want to play the hunch. If I'm right and it's as vulnerable and isolated as I hope, we'll strike. If not, we'll call in the cavalry. And whatever happens, I'll let you know as soon as possible."

Sighing, Lochlan leaned back in her chair, that hard yet undeniably attractive face of hers creasing in thought. Every time we spoke, I couldn't help but think about how much I'd reviled this woman in the not-so-distant past. She had been a persistent thorn in our side with her constant efforts to expose Ellis's off-the-books activities with Saleya and her people.

But in a twist of fate every bit as shocking as the return of the Dowd, Lochlan had become my fiercest ally. Perhaps my *only* ally, actually, given how little the rest of Fleet Command thought about this mission. She had tied her fate to mine, believing that this was the best and only way to try and navigate the current crises. Approving the mission—and reaching out to the Assembly to put it together in the first place—had been an immense act of courage, both professionally and politically. Whatever else Lochlan might have been, she definitely wasn't spineless.

With that in mind, I couldn't imagine how frustrating this must have been for her. Command was accustomed to giving orders, not implementing them, but this was different. If we'd been operating in Dominion space, we would have been able to speak with only minimal delays between messages, even while actively on assignment. But here, she would effectively be in the dark for many days at a time. It almost felt like a return to ancient times when you'd have to send a rider and hope like hell he didn't get lost or captured while carrying the mail.

"All right, play your hunch," she said after a pause. "I'll do what I can to put out any fires that spring up on this end."

"I appreciate that, Admiral," I said. "I wonder if it might be worth reaching out to Vokal personally. He obviously wants to help, and he must have some pull with the rest of the Authority."

"Perhaps, though I suspect they didn't approve of the intelligence he gave you."

"All the more reason to try and make him an ally."

Lochlan gave me another thin smile. "That sounds almost eerily like something Jarod would have told me."

"Captain Ellis was a wise man," I said. "I picked up a few things during my time with him."

"More than a few, I'd say. Good and bad."

"Hopefully more of the former than the latter."

"Mm," she murmured, though her smile seemed to widen a bit before it vanished altogether. "Get moving as soon as you can, Commander. We need to make some real progress here—and soon."

"We will, Admiral," I said. "You can count on it."

INTERLUDE

Talumi System, The Borderlands

The nightclub was dark, sleazy, and loud, exactly like Ash had known it would be. Not that her prediction was particularly bold, given how the *Infernium* seemed like a printed template of every other club here in Talumi's red-light district.

She took a deep draw of her rebreather's stale filtered air, wishing she didn't need the mask for anonymity, then headed through the entry foyer and into the club. The building was an impressive six stories high, with walls and ceilings made of a hard plastic that looked indistinguishable from glass. Some of the surfaces were transparent, while others were mirrored. The design created an optical illusion where everything looked more spacious than it actually was, especially if you glanced upward. The gimmick reminded her of the observation level in the *Quintillion* back on Kenabrius, though that was designed to make people hungry while they waited for their table. The owner of the *Infernium* had a more salacious intent.

From virtually anywhere on the lower level, a patron could look up and watch an alien dancer performing for crowds of men, either directly or because of a trick of the mirrors. The nature of the viewing angle left little to the imagination, especially since precious few of the girls seemed to be wearing anything beneath their skirts. Where she was standing, she could see three different Neyris girls gyrating for customers, their yellow bodies and silky smooth quims on full display for everyone below them.

Perhaps it ain't that different from the Quintillion after all, Ash thought wryly. Still tryin' to get people hungry.

She made her way across the main floor to one of the darkened, semi-circular tables in a booth. One of the hostesses—a full-blooded Kreen with bright yellow eyes and more makeup than a two-chit Sykaris whore, tried to offer her a drink, but Ash waved away the request. She wasn't all that worried about drawing attention to herself, since that was inevitable.

She was dressed like a professional bounty huntress in an establishment meant for legitimate businessmen. It was only a matter of time before someone—or, more likely, multiple heavily-muscled someones—paid her a visit.

“Are you certain you do not require backup?” Zilex asked into her earpiece.

“Positive,” she told him, keeping her voice low. “I'll let you know if that changes.”

Sliding into the booth, Ash touched the console in the center of the table and called up a holographic projection of what was on sale tonight. As expected, it was an impressive list, both in terms of food and services. Since Talumi was governed by puritanical religious fanatics, every remotely fun activity was confined here, in the red-light district. As a result, every place of business needed to cater to more than one vice at a time if it wanted to justify occupying precious space. The *Infernium* had been around for the better part of five decades, and it catered to every desire one could imagine. And several more beyond.

Her nose curled when she scrolled past the list of companion services and into those available for “lease.” It would have been one thing if this place were a brothel—exchanging credits for sex was straightforward enough. But most of the women on this list were one notch short of being literal slaves, and she knew for a fact that nearly every major trafficking cartel in the Borderlands ran merchandise through here. Saleya had spent many years working diligently to prevent her own girls from suffering the same fate.

A fate Ash could have easily met herself if Kal hadn't been there to protect her back on Nirivarr.

Grimacing at the awful thought, she continued perusing the stock for another minute before making her selection: a Kreen female, twenty years old, heavily discounted thanks to the facial scars. Most of the clientele here would immediately pass on the offer, though a

few would probably jump at the potential bargain and buy her reconstructive surgery later. Merely thinking about it made Ash's gut twist. The galaxy truly was a wretched place in so many ways. At times, a race of faceless genocidal monsters like the Dowd almost seemed tame by comparison. True evil was often so much more banal.

But she reminded herself that this girl wasn't a real person, just a prearranged code for people who wanted a private meeting with the man in charge. And that was the real reason she was here.

She left the menu up even after making her selection, mostly as a distraction so none of the hostesses or anyone else would bother her. Meanwhile, her hands moved beneath the table, carefully extracting the drone components stashed in the tiny concealed equipment pouches all across her armor. The security sensors would have detected them if the devices had been activated before coming in, but she'd spent hours practicing their reconstruction on the way to Talumi. First in the light, then with her eyes closed.

All told, it took her less than three minutes to reassemble each of the drones, and the activation code on her holopad sent them all scurrying across the room. At a glance, they could easily pass for common roaches, though they were programmed to move into position quickly and quietly so as to avoid getting spotted. And since the ground level of the *Infernium* wasn't particularly busy at this hour, there was even less chance anyone would notice them.

Ash briefly considered reassembling her bow as well. She wasn't aware of any commercial scanners that could detect the weapon, but it was so large that she had still needed to disassemble it before walking around Talumi. Once she put it back together, there would be no way to hide it again.

Besides, she hopefully wouldn't need it. She hadn't come here for a firefight.

Perhaps a minute later, and less than five total after she'd made her selection on the menu, she saw the first Grotheki guard enter the club. The tall, furry aliens weren't quite as common as Krosians or Merzeg, though their strong musculature and notorious lack of ethics made them common enforcers and bodyguards here in the Borderlands. She couldn't make out the newcomer's features, since he was clinging to the dark booths on the opposite side of the bar, but all Grotheki faces

reminded her of one of the hounds commonly used as guard dogs on Nirivarr. Just much, much uglier.

Two more thugs entered about thirty seconds apart, each moving into a position roughly equidistant from her. It wasn't a subtle maneuver, as these things went, but they either didn't care or thought she'd be too distracted by the upskirt shots above her to notice.

They weren't completely wrong. One of the Velothi dancers in her line of sight *was* unbelievably cute, and her ass-shaking ability seemed to defy the laws of physics. If Kal had been here, he wouldn't have been able to pay attention to anything else. Ash might have even encouraged him to go and try to get a taste so he could share with her later.

But then she reminded herself that these girls weren't here of their own volition. And besides, he'd undoubtedly have a score of new experiences during their time apart. He'd been alone with Miranda and Velarys and Saleya for weeks now. He'd have a veritable feast ready for Ash's psychometry when she finally got back to his new ship.

Burying the thought for a more appropriate moment, Ash closed down the holographic menu and settled in to wait.

It took longer than she expected—perhaps another five or six minutes—before the man she actually wanted to see entered through the private door behind the bar. Like his goons, he was tall and reasonably well built; unlike them, he had a basic concept of fashion. His black suit was probably worth as much as half the girls here. If Ash didn't know better, she might have thought he was a respectable businessman.

But Laganis Orophel, the Red Claw underboss here on Talumi, was anything but.

"The organization classifies Orophel as a significant threat," Zilex said into her ear. "As well as an excellent target of opportunity."

"I'm not here to fight," Ash reminded him under her breath. "Just to find Leenam."

After a quick conversation with the bartender and one of the serving girls, Orophel meandered his way toward Ash's table. His black hair matched his suit quite nicely, and his red Kreen skin was oddly glossy, as if he'd just polished himself. He wasn't visibly armed, though he undoubtedly had at least one small pulse pistol concealed somewhere on his person.

“Welcome to the *Infernium*, honored patron,” Orophel said, his voice rich and smooth with the barest hint of concealed malice. “I deeply apologize for the delay.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Ash replied. “Long as you’re willin’ to do business, that’s all that matters.”

“Always.” The Kreen offered her a cold smile. “Though I must admit, I wasn’t expecting that particular lot to sell so quickly after it became available. Faulty merchandise and all that.”

Ash leaned back in the booth and stretched her arms out along the backrest. It was something of a power move—a Kal move—and she wondered when she’d picked it up from him. Of course, it was a lot more intimidating when you were a two-meter-tall man whose skin could absorb pulsefire. A woman thirty centimeters shorter and forty kilograms lighter didn’t have the same menacing presence.

“Then it’s your lucky day,” Ash said, projecting confidence anyway. “Because I ain’t here for the merchandise.”

Orophel raised a black eyebrow as he took the empty seat opposite her table. “I see,” he replied smoothly. “Then perhaps you’ve been misinformed about the services we offer.”

“Oh, I doubt that. You see, I’m lookin’ for someone. He said he’d meet me here, and he told me you could lead me to him.”

“Is that so? And who is this person?”

“I doubt he told you his real name,” she said, reaching up to pull her hood back a few centimeters to give him a clear view of her face. “But he looks a lot like me.”

Orophel looked at her Kreen eyes and human skin...and his cheek immediately twitched. The movement was so subtle it was almost imperceptible, but Ash had been at this long enough to spot the smallest cracks in someone’s armor. He *definitely* knew her brother, the only other Kreen-human hybrid in the Cluster, possibly even the entire galaxy. Yet he was surprised by her presence.

Very surprised. As if he’d had no idea she was coming.

“I’m afraid I don’t know who you’re referring to, my dear,” the Kreen man said. “I can’t recall ever seeing anyone like you before.”

“Odd, because he was quite specific about how to get your attention,” Ash said flatly. “He said you’d been helping him hide out for quite a while now.”

Orophel shrugged. “I’m sorry, but you must have confused me for someone else. There are many other clubs on Talumi, after all.”

Ash studied him for a moment. Leenam’s message had been quite clear, and Orophel was obviously lying. The question was why.

“I don’t know what your game is, but I know he’s here,” Ash said, eyes narrowing. “And you and that slick hair of yours are going to tell me where.”

“I can’t tell you what I don’t know,” Orophel said, voice cooling several degrees. “Now, I suggest that you—”

“There’s no need for posturin’, honey,” Ash said, slowly putting her hands on the table in plain sight so his bodyguards didn’t get jumpy. “And there’s no point in lyin’. You see, I don’t need you to talk to learn everythin’ you know. If you just sit still, I’ll pull what I need right outta that pretty head of yours.”

She hadn’t really expected to intimidate a Red Claw underboss. And she didn’t.

“I don’t know who you think you are, *girl*,” Orophel said, voice now deathly cold, “but no one threatens me in my club.”

“Oh, it wasn’t a threat—just a fact,” Ash told him. “I’m not here to shut you down or even rat you out to the zealots who run this planet. I just want you to tell me where you’re hidin’ my friend.”

Orophel glared at her for several seconds, but then his expression abruptly relaxed. “Then I’ll show you,” he said, flashing her a dark grin. “The people who paid us for him will undoubtedly pay as much for you as well.”

He flicked his hand upward to signal his men. All four of the Grotheki produced pistols from inside their jackets, prompting more than a few startled gasps from the nearby patrons, who quickly cleared out of the way. With the positions they’d taken throughout the club, the guards had Ash covered from every angle. Even if she had assembled her bow, there was no conceivable way she could get off a shot before they gunned her down.

But that was precisely why she had brought along some help.

She had positioned her hands close enough together atop the table that it required only the smallest movement for her finger to tap the control button on her wrist-mounted holopad. There was no explosion or sudden flurry of pulsefire or anything so dramatic, but it only

took about two seconds for each of the Grotheki to let out a hellacious shriek and clutch at their floppy ears.

The guests on this level of the club went into a full panic, either fleeing for the door or one of the back rooms. But since no one had fired a weapon—and since the sonic disruptors in her drones were keyed to an auditory frequency that only Grotheki and a few other species could hear—no one on the upper levels had any idea what was happening.

Orophel, for his part, was caught completely flat-footed when Ash lunged over the table and slammed into him, knocking him out of his chair and sending him sprawling across the strobing dance floor. But he wasn't out of the fight; his hand darted into his jacket to retrieve his pistol while he regained his composure. If Ash had hesitated for even a heartbeat, he might have been able to bring the weapon to bear.

But she had already vaulted out of the booth by the time his hand closed around the pistol, and a whirling kick sent his weapon skittering harmlessly away. Growling, Orophel tried to simply slug her next, but Ash had spent years training with Kal to learn how to leverage her quickness against larger and stronger opponents. So when Orophel's arm streaked toward her, she reflexively dropped into the perfect counter-move, grabbing his arm and turning his own weight and power against him. His face hit the floor with a *crack* so loud it was audible over the pounding music, and blood spewed liberally from his broken nose.

Ash pinned him before he could recover, and she drew the Yarasi knife Velarys had loaned her out of its concealed wrist-holster. Without metal, the blade couldn't be detected by normal scanners...but in the hands of a psychic, the shimmering blue psionic blade it projected was every bit as lethal as steel. She had it pressed to Orophel's throat in an instant, and he very quickly stopped thrashing.

"I suggest you hold still, honey," she said. "I'm told this blade can burn through practically anything, even that nice red skin of yours."

"You'll never leave this planet, bitch!" Orophel snarled, though his voice was so nasally thanks to his shattered nose that it really dulled the impact of the threat. "The Claw will—"

"Yeah, yeah," Ash interrupted, setting her free hand against his head while keeping her knee pressed hard into his spine. "Just be quiet,

would ya? Like I said, I don't need you to speak for you to tell me everythin' you know..."

Closing her eyes, she focused on her psychometry. Sometimes, the psychic impressions from an object or person were so overwhelming she didn't even need to concentrate to use her powers. But in this case, she was looking for more than intense surface emotions. She needed to sift through several days of experiences to get what she needed, and there was no guarantee it would work.

But this time it did.

The initial images rushed over her quickly—fits of rage at his incompetent employees, bursts of pleasure when he "sampled" his slaves, and all manner of daily peaks in emotion that Ash had no interest in exploring. At times, she wished she were a telepath instead; rummaging through someone's head directly was probably a hell of a lot easier, at least for investigations like this.

But psychometry had its own advantages, like the ability to touch a wall or a desk or a weapon to learn all sorts of dark secrets about the owner. Even when she did a reading on a person, she could glean things about them and their experiences that even they weren't aware of.

And that was precisely the path she took here. Following the trail of Orophel's emotions over the past few days, she latched onto a business deal he'd conducted right here in the *Infernium*. Ash saw fleeting images of men at one of the booths, and she felt Orophel's satisfaction at the payment he received for services rendered. She didn't recognize any of the buyers, but they were all human...

Ash grimaced as she pushed harder, following Orophel's memories as he led the men into a Red Claw base elsewhere on the planet. The images were blurry and vague, but she saw a strange chamber filled with what appeared to be some kind of medical pods, though she couldn't tell if they were for regeneration or stasis or something else entirely. But what she did see was the face of the man inside the pod Orophel had sold.

Leenam. Her wayward brother.

Inhaling sharply, Ash pulled back from the psychometric trance. Orophel was still struggling beneath her, and the Grotheki were still

clutching their heads. But even though the reading had probably only taken a few seconds, she knew she didn't have much time.

"You betrayed him," she hissed. "You sold him out to the Column!"

Orophel snarled but stayed silent. She started to demand he tell her where the Column had taken her brother, but asking was pointless when she could simply recover the information herself.

Releasing her free hand from his face, she slipped it down to search his pockets instead. There was no guarantee he would know where the Column operatives had gone, but she'd battled the Red Claw enough over the years to know that they were in the business of tracking their clients very closely, usually to extort them later. Hopefully they'd done the same with the Column...

She eventually found his holopad. As an underworld crime boss, he probably wasn't stupid enough to leave critical information on his person, certainly not without it being heavily encrypted. But just like she didn't need to be a telepath to open Orophel's mind, she didn't need to be a slicer to peer into his holopad.

Ash stretched out with her powers again, knowing it would be difficult or even impossible to get a proper psychometric reading unless Orophel had imprinted strong emotions on the pad. She sifted back through his recent memories, searching for any shift in emotions related to her brother and Orophel's betrayal.

It took longer than she wanted—possibly longer than she had—but she eventually saw the image of the Red Claw meeting with Column operatives. Frustratingly, the voices were mostly too indistinct to hear, but she could make out another conversation with Orophel talking to his men about the tracking device they'd placed on the Column vessel. She tried to follow the conversation in an attempt to glean anything she could use...

And there it was, a flicker of surprise when Orophel had learned about a Column base in the Endikar System just a few light-years outside the Angoth Colonies.

Ash withdrew from the psychometric trance again, and she dropped the holopad on the floor. "Thanks for the help, honey," she said. "Now, this is gonna hurt. A lot."

She pulled the psionic dagger away from his throat...and then jammed it straight into his head.

It didn't kill Orophel outright, but the psionic energy in the blade instantly overloaded his brain, knocking him unconscious as swiftly as a stun grenade. All Yarasi weapons—including Ash's bow—could be set to overload the synapses of living creatures on contact, knocking them out and usually frying their short-term memories, too. And even though Orophel and men like him certainly deserved a real dagger to the skull, Ash wasn't an assassin. She was a huntress, and she'd gotten her next target.

The Grotheki thugs had finally started pulling themselves together when she slipped out of the *Infernium* and back into Talumi's red-light district. It wouldn't be long before more of them showed up, given how much muscle the Red Claw had on this planet, but Ash had no intention of sticking around. Dashing into the side streets, she activated the tiny hologuise projector on her belt and summoned a reasonably convincing image of a nondescript, middle-aged human man. The illusion wouldn't fool anyone who examined her at close range, but it would be more than enough to get her back to the *Wildcat* and blast out here before anyone else was the wiser. And once she was gone, she'd be one step closer to tracking down her wayward brother.

And one step closer to finally figuring out what the Column had done to him.

Chapter 6

History's Graveyard

“Approaching the Zurix System now, sir,” Reyes reported from the helm. “Astral shift in thirty seconds.”

“Good,” I said, sitting up straight in my chair. “Proceed.”

I could feel the sudden shift in attention from everyone on the bridge. After nearly five days traveling through astral space, we were all eager to finally see some action. That is, assuming my hunch was correct and the Dowd actually *had* built a base here in the Sillibar’s original home system. If not...

Well, if not, this would have been an extraordinary waste of time. The crew would be restless, I’d have a big fat egg on my face, and the entire mission might even be in jeopardy. The stakes were pretty damn high.

Yet I wasn’t particularly nervous. I’d learned to deal with pressure a long time ago. Most of the time, stress made me perform *better*, not worse. Getting shot at for a living did wonders for a man’s self-confidence.

Though in this particular case, my poise had nothing to do with stress management. The more I’d mulled it over the past few days, the more convinced I was that my hunch was right. I may not have known

why the Dowd hated the Sillibar so much, but I knew they did. They were out here somewhere, waiting to take a piss in the cemetery of their ancient enemies. I knew it in my bones.

“Astral shift in five seconds,” Reyes announced. “Here we go.”

The timer ticked down on the viewscreen overlay, and with a dramatic flash, the endless astral expanse gave way to the utter blackness of normal space.

“Shift complete; all systems green,” Miranda reported. “The ship is fully at your command, sir.”

“Then I suppose it’s time to start digging,” I said, glancing over my shoulder to the science station. “Just to be absolutely clear, you’re *certain* there’s no Pact base in this system, Ensign?”

“None that I am aware of, sir,” Ensign Hebeska assured me, her wings lifting slightly behind her as she spoke. “I triple checked the records last night. The closest thing to an official base is a listening post at the outskirts of the system.”

I shifted my attention back to Miranda. “You’ve accounted for that in the search pattern?”

“Yes, sir,” she confirmed. “Normally, the presence of a listening post would significantly reduce our potential search zones in the system. There are only a handful of locations where the Dowd could realistically conceal a base.”

“Except the Dowd have demonstrated an uncanny ability to hide from conventional sensors even without cloaking devices.”

“Precisely. With that in mind, I would suggest running a full sweep of the system despite the extra time it will require.”

Velarys stirred in her chair to my left. “How much extra time?”

“Sixteen hours instead of four,” Miranda said. “And we will need to drop the cloak.”

I pursed my lips. Half a day was a big difference, especially since we'd already spent so long flying out here. But it seemed silly to waste so much time and effort heading deep into Pact space only to halfass the search once you arrived.

"Run the full sweep," I said. "I'd rather be as thorough as possible."

"Initiating search pattern now, sir," Miranda acknowledged with a nod to Reyes at the helm.

The sublight engines fired as Reyes put us on Miranda's prescribed course. I watched the display, fingertips idly tapping at the armrest. This was going to be like one of those insufferable krekball matches where everyone used all their timeouts in the last minute and forced the game to drag on.

"Everyone buckle in," I said. "This will take a while, but it's why we're all here. With a little bit of luck, we'll finally have a target to shoot."

I turned to Velarys. "Go ahead and drop the cloak."

"Yes, sir," she said, placing her palm on the capacitor crystal at the end of her left armrest. There was no sound or discernable rumble from the ship, but the blue bridge lighting returned to its standard soft white. All things being equal, I would have preferred to stalk around the system while invisible, but it wasn't worth partially blinding ourselves in exchange. Even incredible Yarasi tech had its downsides.

I opened the comm on my chair. "Engineering; Bridge."

"Go ahead, Commander," Vrisk's voice came back.

"We're about to perform a full sweep of the system. Anything you can do to boost sensitivity or speed things up would be welcome."

"I am certain they would, sir, but the *Renegade* is not a science vessel." Freshly out of his hibernation cycle, the Kali man's voice was groggier than normal. And a touch grouchier, too. "Our sensor capabilities are limited."

“Technical limitations have never stopped you before,” I reminded him. “I’m sure you have at least three or four ideas in mind.”

“Seven,” Vrisk replied mildly. “I will see what we can do to implement them, sir.”

“Good. Keep me informed.”

I smiled and closed the channel. “He’ll figure out a way to speed things up, don’t worry. Even if he has to cross a few wires in the process.”

Folding my hands in my lap, I leaned back in my chair and settled in for a long wait. Miranda would naturally choose the higher probability areas to scan first, so it was always possible that we’d get lucky earlier rather than later. But experience had taught me to prepare myself for the worst and work backward from there. We were all likely in for a long, boring day.

Or so I thought. But it took less than two hours before the sensors lit up with something we hadn’t expected.

“Contact on sensors,” Miranda said, her voice tense as she examined her instruments. “Multiple metallic fragments, possibly the wreckage of a vessel.”

“Put it on the overlay,” I ordered.

The display on the viewport shifted to reveal a sensor ping near the edge of our sensor range by the third planet in the system. There appeared to be quite a few metal fragments, enough to easily be pieces of several starships...or one giant one.

“Well, that definitely doesn’t look like a base,” I commented. “I suppose it could be the remains of one, but it’s right out in the open. This isn’t listed in the official Pact star charts?”

Miranda shook her head. “No, Commander. We are only able to detect it thanks to the sensor enhancements from Engineer Vrisk. We will need to get significantly closer for a full analysis.”

“That will slow down the general search,” Hebeska pointed out, sounding a touch unsettled. Perhaps she was annoyed that Miranda had swerved into her lane with the sensors.

“Yes, but I think it’s worth it,” I said. “Even wreckage might tell us something.”

I glanced at Velarys for confirmation, and she nodded her support.

“Helm, set a course,” I ordered. “Let’s see what we found.”

Ten minutes later, we had our answer. And it was not at all what I’d expected.

“Unbelievable,” Olshenko breathed from behind me. “That’s not from an outpost. That’s—”

“A graveyard,” I said as I slowly rose to my feet. “For the largest battle in the Dowd War.”

My mouth went dry as I panned my gaze across the seemingly endless expanse of debris sprawled across the viewport. What we’d first detected had been the barest edge of the field. Most of the flotsam consisted of small pieces of scorched metal left behind after an explosion or decompression, but some of the hull fragments were quite large. I had studied Captain Ellis’s recordings enough times to identify the ship types at a glance. Dowd carriers and frigates, Sillibar battleships and cruisers...and amidst them, the broken wings and burned-out fuselages from the countless starfighters which had engaged between the great fleets.

Beyond the battlefield, floating in the distance like the unfinished background of an otherwise detailed painting, was the flat gray sphere known as Zurix III. After the fabled battle, the Dowd armada had

reduced the original Sillibar homeworld to little more than a desolate, irradiated husk.

With the viewer's magnification on maximum, we had a crystal-clear view of everything. I found myself torn between being haunted and excited. Haunted out of reverence for the sheer number of people who died during the battle; excited because every historian in the Dominion would gladly trade places with me in a heartbeat if they knew what we'd found. For all the stories and legends of the Battle of Zurix, Sillibar space had been closed to outsiders for well over a century. I imagined discovering a recorder on one of those hulks with a complete record of the battle, then being able to watch that long-ago echo of what had happened here. The archivists within the Truth and History Directorate knew as little about this region of the Cluster as Yarasi territory.

But then, not everyone on this bridge was human.

I glanced over my shoulder to Hebeska. "Why isn't this listed on the Pact navigational data?"

"I...I don't know, sir," the Angoth woman said. Her eyes were as firmly glued to the viewscreen as everyone else's.

"Why would there be?" Velarys asked. "The Sillibar do not share information with their subjugant species unless they deem it absolutely necessary."

Hebeska tore her gaze from the screen to glare at the other woman. "The Yarasi do not share information with *anyone*," she replied acidly. "This is hardly—"

"Is there anything in your historical logs?" I interrupted, raising a hand at Velarys but keeping my eyes on Hebeska. I wasn't about to have my officers start bickering on the bridge.

It took longer than I would have thought, but the Angoth eventually dragged her eyes back to her console. "No, Commander. Histor-

ical archives document the Battle of Zurix, but there are no specific details about its location within the system.”

“And no one in the Pact finds that odd?” Miranda asked.

“The coordinates of a specific battle are hardly relevant information,” Hebeska said.

Miranda scoffed. “But—

“Enough,” I warned. “We’re not here to debate Pact policy. I was only curious if you had information to suggest whether or not scanning the field would be a waste of time.”

Again, it took the Angoth woman a while to cool the reflexive anger in her gaze. I sympathized—it was hardly fair that she was all alone up here as the only Pact representative. I needed to make sure she understood that she wasn’t on trial.

“I don’t know what useful information we could find, sir,” she said.

“The wreckage has been here for two hundred years.”

“It’s pretty incredible to behold, though,” Olshenko commented.

“Must have been one hell of a fight.”

“The largest in the war,” I replied soberly. “Thousands of ships. Millions of casualties. A last, desperate defense by the Sillibar to buy their civilians enough time to board transports and evacuate the planet.”

I shivered involuntarily, as if I’d accidentally walked over a grave. I had probably watched Ellis’s abridged recording of this battle a dozen times by now. To this day, it remained the largest combined fleet engagement in the history of the Cluster. The Dowd had committed virtually their entire armada to the battle, and they had ultimately prevailed, destroying most of the Sillibar fleet and dropping countless bombs on the shapeshifters’ homeworld.

Yet at the same time, it had proven to be a pyrrhic victory. The Dowd had sacrificed so many ships in the assault, including on sui-

cide runs, that they hadn't possessed enough strength to fight off the Dominion when the Expeditionary Fleet had unexpectedly arrived here in the Cluster. If the faceless aliens hadn't been so determined to commit outright genocide, it was entirely conceivable that none of us would even be here right now. They could have destroyed or crippled the Expeditionary Fleet before it settled the Golden Worlds, and the Sillibar may have never formed the Pact.

"Let's at least run a few basic scans while we're here," I asked, breaking myself out of my reverie. My voice seemed to do the same to the others, who had been lost in their own thoughts.

"Yes, sir," Hebeska said, turning back to her console. "Initiating sweep."

While she worked, Reyes whistled softly. "Can you even imagine what it must have been like?" he asked. "Three-to-one odds, knowing the fate of your entire species is on the line? It's like something out of a holo-vid."

"If that were the case, the Sillibar would have won," I said. "Instead, millions of people died and an entire people nearly went extinct."

Reyes winced. "I'm sorry, sir, I didn't mean to suggest—"

"You're fine," I soothed. I must have sounded more brusque than I intended. "But it's always worth remembering the costs as well as the drama. This wasn't a victory where the good guys held the line. It was a tragedy on an unthinkable scale."

"Yes, sir," he said.

I felt a little bad about how chastened he sounded, but I knew I shouldn't. It was all too easy to get swept away by the grandeur and romanticism of history without taking the time to appreciate the consequences. Usually, such flights of fancy were harmless enough, but on a large enough scale, they could trick people who should know better about the true costs of war.

That said, it truly *was* an incredible view. And seeing all the floating wreckage and burned-out hulls made it impossible not to imagine what it must have been like to be here two hundred years ago. There really was something riveting about the idea of a valiant last stand against overwhelming odds...

“When the Dowd attacked, they moved so swiftly and decisively that neither we nor the Sillibar were prepared,” Velarys said, her voice distant. “It wasn’t until long after the war that we realized the Dowd incursion into our territory was designed to keep us at bay, not destroy us. They wanted to ensure that we would not come to the Sillibar’s aid when their armada descended upon Zurix.”

“If I’m not mistaken, your empires had been at each other’s throats for generations,” I said. “Would your people have helped the Sillibar regardless?”

“I cannot say,” Velarys said. “But I suspect not. The Dowd must have misunderstood our relationship.”

“Or perhaps they believed in the myth of Yarasi honor,” Hebeska said. “They assumed your warriors would rally to defend a defenseless people from genocide.”

The bridge fell silent. The Angoth woman hadn’t looked away from her console, but the tips of her wings were visibly trembling from what I assumed was pent-up frustration. I knew I couldn’t allow this kind of disrespect on my bridge, but I also didn’t want to step on my first officer’s authority or look like I was giving her preferential treatment...

“The battle took place long before either of us were born, Ensign,” Velarys said. “Speculating on what should or should not have happened may not be the best use of time for either of us.”

All eyes turned to Hebeska. I could feel her frustration, and I feared she might not be willing to let this go so easily. But thankfully she managed to pull herself together.

“Yes, Commander,” she said. “I apologize for the outburst.”

“Everyone’s a little on edge at the moment,” I said. “But let’s save our frustration for the enemy, not ghosts of the past. Now, did your scans find anything?”

Hebeska shook her head. “Nothing noteworthy, sir. But the debris field is vast—it would take hours to properly search all of it.”

“Hours we don’t have,” I said, turning to Miranda. “Go ahead and launch two scanner drones, have them make a sweep while we continue on your search pattern.”

“Yes, sir,” she acknowledged, seeming as relieved as I was that our alien crew members hadn’t come to blows.

“Helm, take us back to—”

“Wait a moment,” Hebeska interrupted, brow ridges furrowing. “Our sensors are detecting something near the edge of the debris field. Bearing zero mark zero-eight-five.”

“Confirmed,” Miranda added. “It appears to be a hyperdrive signature.”

“A *hyperdrive* signature?” I asked. “How old?”

“Recent, sir, a few hours at most.”

My pulse quickened, and I shared a quick glance with Velarys.

“Why would there be a hyperdrive trail?” she asked. “The Dowd possess astral technology.”

“We *are* in Pact space,” Olshenko pointed out. “Maybe they’ve had some survey teams looking over the debris field recently?”

“I am not aware of any such operation,” Hebeska said. “And no military vessels are assigned to this sector.”

“How about non military vessels?” I asked. “Corporate or private?”

The tips of her wings twitched slightly. “That is highly unlikely. Civilian ships are not allowed in this sector without special authorization.”

“Mm,” I mused, thinking it over. That would explain why the Pact charts didn’t have the debris field listed, though it still didn’t rule out the possibility of a secret military operation, perhaps one the Sillibar were keeping to themselves. Though if anyone, civilian or military, were out here surveying the wreckage, it seemed much less likely that the Dowd would have risked putting a base here.

“The wake trail could still be from a Dowd vessel,” Miranda added. “Just because they possess astral technology doesn’t mean they equip one on every vessel. The Dominion doesn’t use astral drives on all of our supply ships. To say nothing of maintenance craft or tug haulers.”

“True,” I said, a spark of hope lighting. “Can we tell where it was headed?”

“I can project the trail on the overlay,” Hebeska said. “Though it is decaying rapidly.”

A tiny blue trail appeared on the tac-holo overlay, showing a path leading toward the fourth planet in the system.

“Interesting,” I murmured. “Can we determine the size of the ship that made the trail?”

“A relatively small vessel, perhaps the size of a light freighter or scrap drone,” Hebeska said. “Given *where* we discovered the trail, I would guess the latter.”

I nodded. “Good enough. But let’s be a little subtle about this. Plot a pursuit course, but reactivate the cloak. No reason to let our prey know we have their scent.”

Velarys reactivated the ship’s cloak while Reyes accelerated through the debris field. I felt an eager flutter in my stomach, and I resisted the

urge to stand up and start pacing around. I could save that for when we actually found something.

“The trail does intersect with some areas on your scanning route,” I said to Miranda, focusing on the display. “What’s your probability profile for us getting lucky?”

I expected a lengthy and amusing explanation, but Miranda’s face didn’t even twitch. “One hundred percent.”

I frowned. “What?”

“Enemy contact ahead,” she said, boosting power to the sensor array to partially compensate for the cloak. “Bringing it up on the viewer now.”

Even after two centuries of drift, most of the hull plates and scattered wreckage were still close enough together to fill the view outside, especially since we were moving through them at such a quick clip. But when Miranda increased the magnification, the sight before us was unmistakable.

Hanging in orbit of the fourth planet, partially concealed by its shadowy umbra, was a massive vessel that looked vaguely like a beetle with both of its wings half open.

A Dowd hive ship.

“Well,” I said, leaning forward. “Looks like we found some old friends after all.”

A stunned silence fell across the bridge as everyone stared at the enemy ship. Even without telepathy, I could feel their inner conflict. On the one hand, it was exhilarating to finally strike paydirt; on the other, the hive ship was far outside the *Renegade’s* weight class. The enemy carrier was about the size of a Dominion battleship, and based on our skirmish with one in the Drift two months ago—and the Pact intel we’d been given by Councilor Vokal—the vessels carried two full wings of starfighter drones.

Our Valkyries may have been the most advanced starfighters in the Cluster, but we only had two of them, and they weren't capable of taking on an entire wing each. To stay nothing of the fact that the hive ship itself probably packed four times our armament.

"Give me some details, people," I said, standing and stepping closer to the viewer. "What are we dealing with?"

"The enemy vessel is operating at full power," Olshenko reported from behind us. "No signs of recent battle damage, though it is difficult to know for certain without dropping the cloak or performing an active scan."

"Which they will likely detect," Miranda added.

"Then let's stay in the bushes for now," I said. "Helm: full stop."

"Full stop, sir," Reyes acknowledged.

We came to a halt near the edge of the debris field, still quite distant from both the hive ship and the planet beyond. I paused for a moment, then glanced back at Hebeska.

"What do you have for us, Ensign?"

The Angoth's brow ridges knit together. "I am detecting a structure situated within the planetary rings. It is slightly larger than the hive ship."

"Can we get a visual?"

"Yes, sir. Though the resolution will be poor."

"I can compensate," Miranda said. "Putting it on the overlay now."

An image appeared over the top right corner of the screen. It was a base all right, nestled neatly between several giant clusters of ice and rock in the planetary rings. The ovoid shape and carapace-like design were reminiscent of other Dowd vessels, suggesting that they, not the insurrectionists, were primarily responsible for its construction.

"Tactical analysis?" I asked.

“There is room for several swarm ships at the base, though none of the docking arms are currently occupied,” Olshenko said. “Based on the size and layout, the facility could easily support a few squadrons of fighter drones and possibly an entire wing. As far as weapons are concerned, the armament is relatively light. One torpedo bay, two medium disruptor cannons, and half a dozen point-defense turrets.”

“Less than a standard frigate, other than the starfighter screen,” I commented.

“But still a significant amount of firepower when combined with the hive ship,” Velarys warned. “I recommend we perform a complete sweep, then withdraw and call for reinforcements.”

I took in a deep breath, my initial rush of excitement suddenly tempered by disappointment. A part of me wanted to fly in there with guns blazing and tear down the enemy we’d been hunting for so long. But that was Kal the Impatient Immortal talking, not Kal the Measured and Responsible Ship Captain. Our mission was to find and expose the Dowd, not necessarily destroy them ourselves. Merely locating this base was a tremendous accomplishment whether we personally vaporized it or not.

“Let’s perform a full sweep and prowl around the perimeter as close as we can get without risking detection,” I said. “Then we’ll back off and fire a data packet at the closest Pact relay.”

“It will take some time before they’ll be able to muster reinforcements, sir,” Olshenko said. “Between the comm delay and the time it takes them to mobilize a task force, we could be waiting several days.”

“At least four, potentially as many as five or six,” Miranda put in. “Without a jump corridor, Zurix is difficult to reach. And we don’t know the status of their fleet at New Krosis.”

"I'm aware," I replied, forcing myself to play the harbinger's advocate here. "But attacking that station on our own would be a suicide mission. We'll have to wait for the cavalry."

Miranda twisted in her chair to face me. "I should note, sir, that the Dowd are almost certain to notice a significant naval redeployment. They will see our reinforcements coming and either abandon the base or summon more ships of their own."

"If they want a full fleet engagement here, I'm sure the Pact will be more than willing to give them one," I said. "And if they decide to run, we'll be in position to—"

"Movement from the enemy vessel!" Olshenko cut in abruptly. "I'm detecting a massive power surge from the hive ship."

I glanced up at the tactical overlay as the Dowd carrier fired its thrusters and began moving away from the base. For a terrifying heartbeat, I thought they might have detected us...but then they veered in nearly the opposite direction. And then, after another few seconds, the ship disappeared altogether.

"Astral shift," Olshenko said. "They're gone, sir."

I leaned forward in my chair, the rush of excitement I'd felt when we'd spotted the wake trail returning. With the hive ship nearby, there was no possible way we could take on the base. But without it...

"Should we pursue?" Velarys asked. "To see if we can track where they are headed?"

It wasn't an unreasonable suggestion, especially if the hive ship was on its way to attack another Pact outpost. If not for the peculiarities of relative distance and direction in astral space, I probably would have agreed in the hopes that we could warn the target ahead of time.

Realistically, though, tracking any ship in astral space was a challenge, and in order to warn their target, we would need to shift back to normal space and likely lose our pursuit vector. On top of that, we

wouldn't be able to continue monitoring the base we'd just discovered.

"No," I said. "Fate handed us an opportunity and I don't want to squander it. We'll wait a few hours and survey the outpost as best we can."

Velarys raised a white eyebrow. "And then?"

"Then," I said, giving her a wolfish smile. "We storm the fortress."

Chapter 7

The Assault

Two hours later, we were still lying in the weeds, and our prey looked as vulnerable as ever. Our slow, prowling survey confirmed our initial analysis of the base's defenses, and I spent most of the time plotting potential avenues of attack with Olshenko and Velarys.

A frontal assault seemed risky but doable. The station's six-to-one advantage in starfighter capability was formidable, but our Valkyries were designed to overcome worse odds against conventional drones that lacked psionic weapons. And while the station possessed vastly superior shielding capabilities to the *Renegade*, our advantage in speed and maneuverability could easily overcome that gap against a stationary target.

The biggest lingering question was how the enemy would react. If the Dowd were able to summon reinforcements quickly—a distinct possibility with their seeming ability to transmit through astral space—then we could end up outgunned reasonably quickly. And if they were prepared to scuttle their base the moment they were overwhelmed, we would lose an immense opportunity to raid their databases and communications logs for information on other bases throughout Pact space.

“The goal is to cripple their comms without causing them to panic,” I said, finishing my strategic explanation. “And I think this is our best bet. Any questions?”

“The station’s static defenses shouldn’t pose a problem,” Olshenko said, tapping his chin in thought as he stared out the conference room window. Not that there was much to see, since we had moved far enough from the base that we could decloak and fire off a transmission to the nearest Pact comm relay. Still, his Praxian features, particularly his round face and high cheekbones, looked especially pronounced with the way the incoming starlight framed his head in the otherwise dim room. “And a prolonged series of hit-and-fade attacks is exactly what modern assault frigates like the *Renegade* were designed for.”

I turned to Velarys. “Do you agree?”

“Yes,” she said, eyeing the sensor readings on her datapad. “We should be able to neutralize their comm station in the opening attack, especially with Valkyrie support. It is the ground phase of your plan I find concerning.”

“Because we don’t have many soldiers?”

“That is one consideration. A facility that size could have hundreds of defenders aboard.”

“I find that unlikely,” I said. “One of the key points Ensign Pierce noticed in the Pact reports is the sheer number of ground drops the Dowd have pulled off since the war started. I find it hard to believe that they’d keep a huge garrison on defense for a base no one is supposed to find. If anything, most of the soldiers probably left with that hive ship.”

“Possibly,” Velarys conceded. “But there is still the matter of their willingness to scuttle their ships. The moment they know that one of our teams is aboard, they could destroy the base. Ensign Pierce’s sensor trick might buy the boarding team a minute of advanced warning at most—not enough time to exfiltrate unless they are already standing by the airlock.”

I nodded. “True, but the potential gains from an information raid are immense—attack plans, supply routes, maybe even the location of more bases. As long as our team can sneak aboard and neutralize the enemy quickly enough, they won’t have time to overload their reactor.”

“I understand the strategy, Commander. But the risk is considerable.”

“She’s right,” Olshenko said. “And there’s no way we’ll be able to help the team from here, not without a team of psychoporters who could get them in and out. The Dowd should loan us a few dozen of those—it’s a hell of a trick.”

“We’ll have to make do with what we have.” I braced myself. “If it makes either of you feel better, I’ll be leading the boarding team myself.”

The instant I spoke the words, I expected pushback. I assumed that one of them—possibly *both* of them—would remind me that Dominion captains weren’t supposed to put their boots on the ground unless the combat zone was clear or they had no other choice. But surprisingly, neither of them even flinched. If anything, they looked like I’d just told them that water was wet.

“No protests?” I asked. “Nothing?”

“Honestly, I assumed you would lead the mission the moment you suggested it,” Olshenko said, a fractional smile on his lips.

I grunted. “That obvious, huh?”

The younger man shrugged. “What can I say? I know how you think, sir.”

“Mm.” I turned to Velarys. “What about you?”

“I have already expressed my concerns,” she replied evenly. “But you have clearly considered and dismissed them. What purpose would it serve for me to vocalize them again?”

I shrugged. "Some first officers like to keep their commander on his toes."

"An odd expression," Velarys said. "I fear you may be underestimating the enemy, but the mission would have virtually no chance of success without you. Let us see it done."

I gave them both a smile as I brought myself to my feet. "Then you have the conn, Commander. I'll get suited up and meet the others at the drop shuttle."

They both nodded, and Olshenko returned to the bridge. I touched Velarys's shoulder to keep her in the room for another moment.

"If anything ugly happens," I said, voice low, "like the facility blowing up the moment we get close, it's your job to get the *Renegade* out of here."

"I understand," Velarys said. "Though I must admit, I would prefer to confront the enemy in battle directly. It has been too long since I fought at your side."

"Someday soon, I'm sure," I said, giving her gray cheek a gentle caress. "The ship is yours."

"*Renegade*; Strike Team," I said into the shuttle's comm. "We're in position. Mission timer at three minutes."

"Copy, strike team," Ensign Mesko's voice came back. "Three minutes: mark."

The comm clicked off, and I gave the drop shuttle pilot an affirming nod. "You ready for this?"

“Yes, sir,” she replied with the confidence of a professional who’d shuttled men in and out of combat zones for almost ten years now. “Valkyries do their job, then we do ours.”

“Almost too easy,” I said, offering her a thin smirk as I shuffled out of the co-pilot’s seat and prepared to head back into the troop hold. Like every other officer on the *Renegade*, I had personally chosen Lieutenant Hann for this post. After the pirate raid she’d survived on Tempi Aranis last year, this should be no trouble at all.

The same was true of the Valkyrie pilots who were maneuvering into position. Captain Novak—callsign Cobra—and his wingman Tsukumo—callsign Spider—were both experienced combat pilots who’d briefly served under Captain Ellis when he’d been in command of the *Alaru*. I knew they’d get the job done, no matter the odds.

The only question, I thought to myself as I moved toward the troop hold, *is whether my mixed squad can handle our end of the bargain.*

The drop shuttle was currently parked behind a massive chunk of ice several thousand clicks from the base. The planetary rings made the Dowd base that much more difficult to find, but it worked both ways—we’d been able to get pretty close without the risk of being spotted. All we needed to do was wait for our cue, then go.

I moved inside as the hatch to the troop hold opened. The small space was even more cramped than normal with Sekvoth and his five Krosian commandos taking up an entire human squad’s worth of space, and the tension in the air between his men and our troopers was palpable. Lieutenant Ackers hadn’t reported any conflicts between the groups on the trip out here, but battle would be the real test.

I should have been at least a little antsy about it. Yet as I put on my helmet, I felt calmer than I had in weeks. Perhaps it was the knowledge that after a long hunt, I was finally going to get to crack some Dowd

skulls. Or perhaps it was merely the comforting weight of my pulse rifle and armor.

I was a soldier, after all. And this felt like I had come home.

“Two minutes,” I said through my helmet, watching the mission timer tick down on the internal HUD while I negotiated my way to the other end of the crowded compartment. I’d already run the standard check and double check on my gear, but I instructed my armor to run a third diagnostic just in case. Watching the results flash across the display was better than staring at a clock any day.

Behind me, the Krosians stirred. I heard one of them say something my translator didn’t pick up, and Sekvoth chuckled softly.

“Problem?” I asked, turning around to face them. While all my soldiers were wearing their black helmets with glowing blue visors, the Krosians didn’t have any headgear. I knew from experience that their armor could project a forcefield over their heads to protect against hazards or vacuum. Standard helmets were a rough fit over their massive tusks.

“Not at all, Commander,” Sekvoth said, the usual semi-sneer on his lipless face. “We are eager for battle.”

“Good, because we have no idea how much resistance we’ll encounter,” I said. “We’ll need to be quick and efficient. I know Ackers has been drilling Dominion combat maneuvers into you—until we get a good scan of the interior and know the layout, this is a basic vanguard support op.”

The First Warrior snorted. “Meaning we cower behind you.”

“Meaning we let the man who can eat pulsefire go first,” Ackers put in hotly. “We fan out and cover our flanks while he takes point.”

“If you can’t handle those orders, tell me right now,” I said, glaring at the Krosian through my visor.

“We will obey, Commander,” Sekvoth promised. Though as usual, he sounded slightly sarcastic.

“Remember, this isn’t some drop on a backwater world against pirates with half-functional equipment. From our engagements so far, as many as a fifth of Dowd soldiers have psionic abilities, maybe more. We can’t afford any fuck-ups.”

His orange eyes seemed to flash, and I wondered if he’d take my comments as an insult. It wasn’t as if he and his men were fresh off the Brood Worlds—they had all survived at least three other engagements with the Dowd. If I were in his place, I would have been annoyed.

But that was all right. This was war, not a fancy dinner party on Kenabrius. Results mattered; injured pride did not.

“Since you’ve all fought them before, you know what to expect,” I said. “The moment we get an internal scan, we’ll split up into our designated teams: one to the command center and the other to the reactor to prevent these fuckers from scuttling the place around us. We lock everything down, mop up any stragglers, and then the tech teams get to have their fun. Any questions?”

“We’re ready, sir,” Ackers said.

I gave them all one last look, then called up the small tac-holo projector between the two groups of soldiers at the center of the hold. We couldn’t see much outside the drop shuttle’s tiny windows with the ice surrounding us on all sides, but the sensors were working well enough to lock onto the base. The Valkyries were behind us in the rings, concealed from both our scanners and the enemy’s. The *Renegade* was out there, too, cloaked and ready to strike.

“Twenty seconds,” I said. “It should be a damn good show.”

I took a deep breath as I watched, wishing I could be in two places at once. The sentiment was undoubtedly common among commanders throughout history, especially ones like me who were used to getting

their hands dirty. I wanted to be there giving the orders on the bridge, but I also wanted to be in that base when the fighting started.

But Velarys knew what she was doing. I may not have been what I'd call a man of faith—the galaxy fucked over the weak and innocent far too often for me to believe that the Seraph was humanity's divine champion. I did believe in people, though, and the *Renegade* was filled with the best.

“Mark,” I said. “Here we go.”

The shuttle's sensors detected the discharge of the *Renegade's* weapons before the ship itself appeared on the tac-holo. The psi-cannons struck first, bombarding the station's shields with a blistering salvo of blue-white bursts. Psionic weaponry had excellent shield penetrating capabilities, and enough of the energy likely bled through to scorch, if not truly damage, the base's hull. But the initial barrage was only meant to soften up the defenses, not overwhelm them.

That was what the Pact plasma cannons were for.

Just before the *Renegade* swept past the base and accelerated out of range, the ship unleashed its second salvo. A green-white barrage burned straight through the weakened shields and the hull beneath, triggering geysers of flame and blasting off huge chunks of superheated metal—including the communications array. The Dowd managed to return fire as the *Renegade* streaked away, but Miranda had perfectly angled the shields for additional protection during their retreat.

The Valkyries came next, igniting their thrusters and surging through the planetary rings with a quick-start maneuver no other starfighters in the galaxy could manage. They were in range before the station's point-defense weaponry could identify them, let alone achieve a firing solution, and I watched in satisfaction as their psi-cannons shredded the turrets, giving us the opening we needed.

But we couldn't launch just yet. Mere seconds after the Valkyries split off in opposite directions, the station launched its own starfighters. Six drones came screaming out of the boxy hangar, and the tiny bug-like ships broke into two teams of three in order to pursue the Valkyries. Watching the tactical reports on my HUD, I mentally counted down the seconds until they were out of range...

"We're on!" I announced, banging the hatch between the troop hold and the cockpit. "Let's do it!"

"Yes, sir," Hann acknowledged. "Launching in three, two, one...now!"

The shuttle lurched slightly before the inertial compensators could kick in, and I kept my eyes fastened on the viewport next to me as we accelerated around the icy asteroid and set a course for the Dowd station. My hands reflexively squeezed the grip of my rifle as we drew closer, bracing for something to go wrong. Inwardly, I knew that this would be the worst part of the mission purely because it was the one where I had the least control. If the Valkyries had missed a point-defense cannon, it could easily lock onto us now that we were exposed...

But no warnings flashed across the tac-holo, and the *Renegade* had already come around for its second attack run. The ship's psi-cannons blazed again, this time focusing on the power and shield generators. The station's heavy disruptor turrets returned fire with brilliant yellowish beams, hoping to pierce the frigate's shields with concentrated, precise salvos. But Velarys was keeping her distance, reducing the effectiveness of her own weapons but the enemy's as well. She knew that her primary goal here was to keep their attention away from us rather than to inflict any more damage. The Dowd needed to believe they could win the fight in order for them to not scuttle our prize.

Cobra and Spider were also playing it safe. The Valkyries had fled several thousand kilometers from the drones before finally coming

about to engage—ensuring that the enemy would be too far out of range to intercept us before we could dock. And with all the point-defense cannons slagged, we were completely in the clear.

“The hangar’s sealing behind those drones, but I think we can make it!” Hann said over the comm.

“Do it,” I said, watching as the hangar doors began to close in front of us like a monster snapping shut its enormous maw. “Forcing a breach will only slow us down.”

“Then hang on!”

The shuttle’s thrusters surged to full power, and we shot forward toward the rapidly narrowing opening. For a few tense heartbeats, I wasn’t sure we were going to make it. But Hann boosted the thrusters with her psionic power, and when that wasn’t enough, she rolled the shuttle on its side to squeeze through the gap.

“First priority, secure the LZ,” I said, turning to my squad. “Scan first, step carefully—be ready for any surprises they might have in store for us. Let’s move!”

I received a round of acknowledgements from my troopers, and Sekvoth shouted commands to his warriors. A small part of me was tempted to keep them here guarding the shuttle just so I didn’t have to worry about them, but that obviously wasn’t an option. We needed the firepower, and this *was* a joint mission.

Besides, if the Krosians were going to be a problem rather than an asset, I would rather know sooner than later.

I stormed out the door the moment the ramp lowered, my rifle at the ready and my helmet’s sensors bristling. Despite the fact that my HUD wasn’t highlighting any hostiles, I still half-expected to walk into a hellstorm of enemy crossfire...

But no one was there waiting for us. The interior of the hangar was small and dark, but the light from my rifle combined with the shuttle’s

running lights were enough to see that the area was almost completely empty but for the skeletal overhead racks that had held fighter drones. The advantage of fully automated starfighters was that they didn't need as much space or as many supporting frills as ours.

"LZ appears clear," I said, moving off the ramp toward the nearest wall. "No static defenses. No lifesigns. Wait one while I confirm."

I continued ahead. I didn't spot anything hiding in the darkness, but I froze when I heard a moist slopping sound beneath my boot. A quick investigation revealed the floor seemed to be covered in some kind of weird semi-translucent goo, almost like someone had blown snot all over everything.

"What the hell is this shit?" Ackers asked from the ramp of the shuttle as he swiveled his own light around.

"I don't know," I said. The bio-analysis readouts in my HUD didn't detect any obvious danger from the substance, but they also couldn't discern its purpose. "Sekvoth: have you encountered this before?"

"No," the First Warrior said as he moved to the edge of the landing ramp. Their plasma weapons didn't have lights—Krosians could see just fine in near-total darkness. "But we have never engaged the enemy in their lair."

"Good point," I said. "The base at Nirivarr was mostly built with Dominion tech, not Dowd tech."

"It's all over the ceiling, too," Ackers said, shining his light upward. "It's like being inside someone's mouth. Or intestines."

I clenched my teeth. Of all the things I'd thought might give us difficulty on this mission, alien snot hadn't been on the list. But if it wasn't dangerous, we couldn't afford to let the mystery slow us down.

"I'm going to check the door," I said, continuing forward.

"What door, sir?" Ackers asked. "I don't see one."

I frowned. He was right—there was no obvious exit anywhere aside from the hangar doors where we'd flown in. But there had to be *some* way for these faceless fuckheads to get in and out of here...

"Stay put," I said, staying low and ready as I moved to the nearest wall. The moment I approached within three meters, there was a disgusting sucking sound...and then an oval-shaped gap appeared in the wall almost like a heart valve sliding open.

"What the hell?" Ackers breathed.

"It's all bio-tech," I reasoned, sweeping my light through the opening. It led into what otherwise would have looked like a normal starship corridor, if not for the goo splattered over everything. "But I'm not detecting any electrical current."

On impulse, I reached out and touched the gooey door frame with my gauntlet. It still seemed like mucus, and I was half tempted to order Ackers to get a flamethrower ready, just in case we needed to burn our way through the base. But then I felt a faint but subtle tingle in the back of my mind...

And I understood.

"It's not carrying electricity," I said. "But it is carrying psionic energy."

"To what end?" Ackers asked.

"I have no idea," I admitted. "But they're blind—maybe it helps with their echolocation. Or maybe it carries vibrations like a spider web."

"We are wasting time," Sekvoth said impatiently. "The enemy knows we are here."

As much as I wanted to argue with him, he was right. We'd taken the enemy by surprise, but that advantage wouldn't last.

“Sekvoth, get your men up here,” I said. “Ackers, have two men secure the hangar and cover our rear. There’s a junction not far ahead—once we get a better scan, we might need to split.”

“You heard him, let’s move!” Ackers said, pointing at two of his men. He and the others stormed off the shuttle and joined me.

We advanced through the corridor at a brisk pace, with me on point, the Krosians in the middle, and Ackers and the other Dominion troopers on rearguard. Tremors periodically shook the station as the *Renegade* continued its hit-and-fade attacks, and I stayed alert for any signs of movement. But this part of the base seemed completely empty, which made me wonder if that was normal or if the Dowd had already fallen back to defend the more sensitive areas.

When the corridor eventually reached a three-way junction, our scanners had finally gathered enough data to extrapolate a rough layout of the base. Despite our initial plans to split, our inability to detect troop movements or life readings was making me reconsider. The more firepower we had when we engaged the enemy, the better.

But the fundamental logic of the mission hadn’t changed: we needed to get control of the facility, and simultaneous assaults on the control center and engineering was still the best way to accomplish that.

I signaled to Ackers at the split, pointing down the corridor that seemed to lead into the bowels of the base. He and his men swept forward calmly and professionally, and I was suddenly reminded just how long it had been since I’d had the privilege of leading Dominion troopers into battle. Most Immortals tended to develop overprotective instincts—it came with the territory. But these men were veterans—they didn’t need me to babysit them.

Three of the Krosians went with them as well, leaving me, Sekvoth, and two of his warriors to take the command center. The uneven split

was based on the assumption that my powers would make up the difference. I was half tempted to send *everyone* with Ackers for that reason, but I couldn't afford to be cocky. The Dowd had too many psychics at their disposal for me to risk a solo op.

I led my squad into the corridor to our right, trusting in the probability assessments of my helmet's computer. With Ackers and the others gone, the only illumination came from my rifle's flashlight, and my instincts were to kill it and put the Krosians' superior nightvision to use. If we'd been storming a pirate or slaver compound in the Traverse, I would have done just that. But considering that the Dowd didn't have eyes, there was no reason to worry about being "spotted." We could have been charging ahead with glittering dance orbs over our heads and it wouldn't have made a difference.

Two twisting corridors later, we finally arrived at what I hoped was the base's command center. The wall blocking the passage opened with another disgusting sucking sound, and I moved into the entryway enough to survey the other side. The circular chamber was about fifty meters across and twenty tall, with an open balcony about halfway up. Above, a gallery hugged the chamber walls, with no one visible at the railing. The layout was roughly similar to a promenade one could find on thousands of mercantile stations across the Cluster. The translucent goo covered everything, including several crate-sized nodules scattered about the floor whose purpose I couldn't even begin to guess. My scanners didn't detect any energy running through them, though, so they couldn't have been power conduits.

So what the hell are they? I thought. *The weirdest furniture in the galaxy?*

"Nothing on life or motion sensors," I said quietly, "but unless the base has been abandoned, this is the best spot for an ambush."

“Agreed,” Sekvoth said as he moved up behind me. His jagged rows of teeth were visibly clenched, and he was clutching his weapon so tightly it was shaking. If he’d been a fresh recruit, I would have assumed he was about to shit his pants in terror. But since he was a Krosian, I had to assume it was simply eagerness to start killing things.

“I’ll check the balcony,” I told him. “Stay back in cover until I know it’s clear.”

“This is no time for caution, Commander,” the First Warrior protested. “We must take the station!”

“We’re not charging into a shooting gallery,” I said icily. “Stay here and wait for my order.”

His orange eyes flashed in frustration, but he kept his mouth shut. I held his gaze for two more seconds to make sure my orders sunk in, then dashed forward into the larger chamber.

Walking into such an obvious kill zone would have been suicide for any normal soldier. An entire squad of Dowd—or even a single sharpshooter—could have popped out from wherever they were hiding and cut me down. But Dominion infantry tactics were completely different when an Immortal was involved. Baiting an enemy into revealing their position was a perfectly valid option when your unit leader could shrug off all but the most intense fire.

No one shot at me, however, and I moved toward the ramp leading up to the balcony. Like everything else, the surface was covered in the strange psionic goo, but it was sticky enough that I didn’t slip despite the incline. I kept my rifle trained on the railing above me, waiting for the inevitable surprise...

And wasn’t disappointed.

I heard the sloshing sound before my eyes or sensors registered the movement, and a brilliant yellow blast of disruptor fire lanced down at me as a Dowd soldier slid up to the railing and took the bait. The

blast scorched through my shoulder, bringing with it a subtle sting and flash of heat. But my Immortal powers were up to the challenge, and I instantly tracked the movement and unleashed a barrage of retaliatory pulsefire, dropping the enemy with two quick shots to the chest.

He wasn't alone. My motion sensors finally triggered as an entire unit of Dowd warriors appeared on the open balcony, their disruptors firing at the human who'd miraculously survived their ambush. They were more of the weird crate-like nodules up here, providing them plenty of cover.

But that would barely even slow me down.

I instinctively tucked into a ball and rolled, more bursts of brilliant yellow fire streaking past me as I sloshed through the goo. I popped up into a crouch when I reached the top of the ramp, gun blazing. The Krosians joined in from below a split second later, showering the balcony railing in an equally brilliant barrage of green plasma bolts.

I didn't have time to count the Dowd shooting at me, but we were definitely outnumbered. Even with the Krosian weapons joining in to keep the enemy pinned behind the railing, there were more than enough of them left to try and kill me. The platform blazed with energy bolts as I rolled forward again, spraying as I moved and dropping several more Dowd with precise blasts—and a few lucky ones. My HUD flashed a system warning as I took several more hits, but I focused on doing what an Immortal did best: getting shot so no one else had to.

It worked flawlessly. Right up until it didn't.

I spotted a flicker of motion in the far left side of my HUD as another Dowd blinked into existence out of the growing clouds of smoke. Before I could snap my rifle around to take him out, a wave of telekinetic energy smashed into me, hurling me backward so violently I slammed into the balcony railing and flipped over it.

I crashed down on the lower levels a few meters from Sekvoth and his men. The force of the impact cracked several armor plates, and my HUD momentarily went dark as my suit tried to reroute power. Somehow, I managed to hang onto my weapon, and I aimed upward and joined the Krosians in spraying the platform.

The effort was futile. Between the terrible firing angle and the cover above, there was no way we could hit anything. This was still a kill zone—without me up there disrupting them, the Dowd would either pick everyone off or force us to retreat back into the corridor. I needed to do *something*...

But the Dowd didn't give me a chance. I heard a scream behind me, and as I turned to look at the Krosians, I saw that one of the warriors now had a glowing psi-blade jutting out of his chest from behind. The glowing sword then sliced upward, searing the Krosian's torso and head in half. The corpse thudded to the ground, revealing a Dowd psychic behind him.

To their credit, Sekvoth and the remaining warrior adjusted quickly, shifting their weapons from the balcony to the monster who had just materialized behind them. But their green bolts didn't vaporize the enemy; they merely impacted upon a shimmering energy shield that hadn't been there before. I joined them in firing, mostly out of reflex, but the barrier continued to hold. I belatedly realized it was psionic in origin, not merely a retractable riot shield, and that our weapons were unlikely to punch through it anytime soon. I reached to my belt to retrieve a grenade instead, betting that the Dowd would have a much harder time mentally repelling hundreds of tiny fragmentation shards rather than a concentrated energy blast.

But the enemy didn't give me a chance to arm the grenade, let alone throw it. The Dowd thrust out its free hand and slammed all of us with another wave of telekinetic force. Bolts of green plasma streaked

wide of their mark, hitting the walls and burning off the strange goo in hissing flashes of flame.

Clenching my teeth, I rolled hard to my left and bounced back to my feet, but the Dowd had already moved. I froze for a precious heartbeat, trying to track the enemy, but then a blue blade swept down in front of me and slicked my rifle cleanly in half.

Son of a fuck.

I whirled around with my gauntlet, hoping to punch the Dowd into oblivion, but it was simply too fast. It evaded my first hook and my followup jab, and with a buzzing hum, it drove its psi-blade straight through my chest.

Had I not encountered the Shadow of the Seraph on Rividian and again on Nirivarr, the Dowd might have killed me right then and there. While the energy from the blade couldn't pierce my Immortal powers any easier than a pulse blast, psionic weapons could strike at the mind as well as the body. The mental assault felt like a hive of angry bees had been released inside my head, threatening to disrupt my concentration. If my guard dropped for even a split second, the blade would roast my guts.

But I'd been training for this eventuality for months now, and I held firm against the assault. The Dowd must have been surprised that I didn't simply keel over...and even more surprised when I snarled and slammed my forehead into its featureless face. I heard a satisfying crunch as it staggered backward, and its blade dissipated like I'd turned off a light switch. Green blasts arced past my shoulders, and for a brief instant, it seemed like the Krosians would finish the Dowd off. But apparently it had one more trick up its sleeve.

I didn't hear any audible rumble over the firefight, but I felt the grip of telekinetic energy squeeze my shoulders. Rather than push me away,

the Dowd yanked me in close, turning me into an Immortal shield as the Krosians inadvertently shot me in the back.

The move was as clever as it was infuriating. Knives of heat stabbed into my back as the plasma bolts connected, searing off even more armor plates. The Dowd's telekinetic grip was unbreakable—I couldn't wiggle free no matter how hard I struggled. Instead, I focused on holding my defenses together, not wanting to be crushed like an aluminum can any more than I'd wanted to be gutted by a psi-blade.

The plasma fire abruptly stopped when the Krosians realized what was happening, and I ground my teeth and renewed my efforts to break free. The Dowd's mental grip finally started to falter...but then it hurled me right back at the Krosians.

My body slammed into Sekvoth, knocking him backward and shattering the crate-like nodules he'd been using as cover. I managed to stop myself from skidding halfway across the chamber by jabbing my gauntlets through the layer of goo and into the metal floor beneath, but I was officially pissed.

And I was done being this faceless asshole's personal ragdoll.

The psi-blade had just reappeared in its hand when I looked back up, and it seemed like it was about to pounce at the other Krosian warrior. But I'd absorbed plenty of kinetic energy by now, and when I clapped my gauntlets together, I unleashed a shockwave as strong as the ones I'd been hit with. The Dowd soared backward and crashed into one of the balcony's narrow support columns.

Yet it still wasn't out of the fight. The Dowd rolled back to its feet almost immediately, and I dove to my right in search of a new weapon. Snatching up the plasma rifle from the fallen Krosian, I took aim—

But Sekvoth beat me to it. The First Warrior came screaming out of the darkness, his rifle blazing as he charged. The Dowd absorbed the blasts with its energy barrier, but Sekvoth closed to melee range with

incredible speed. The Dowd's psi-blade swept at the attacker, narrowly missing the Krosian's neck but slicing off one of his tusks instead.

It was the last chance the Dowd would ever get. Sekvoth grabbed the alien's sword arm and snarled like a beast as he violently twisted the limb. There was a sickening crush as the bone snapped in half, and when Sekvoth grabbed the now-stunned alien's skull I assumed he was about to repeat my headbutt...but instead, he viciously pulled the Dowd's head down, impaling it upon his remaining tusk like a dagger made of bone.

The move was as disgusting as it was effective. As the Dowd's body went limp, Sekvoth pulled the hemorrhaging head away and hoisted the corpse up into his arms. Then, with a triumphant roar, the Krosian threw it up at the balcony and the remaining shooters.

It was easily the most savage maneuver I'd ever seen, like some kind of ritual slaughter on an ancient battlefield where everyone was wielding spears and clubs instead of plasma rifles. Frankly, it made me a little jealous.

"Get down!" I ordered. It would only take the remaining Dowd a few moments to recover, and we were still trapped in a shooting gallery. But I had enough stored-up kinetic energy for another release. Rushing forward, I used the remaining energy to fuel my jump and launch myself upward. I fired in midair once I cleared the lip of the balcony, spraying the platform and dropping two more enemies before I landed. Without any more psionic tricks up their sleeve, the surviving Dowd were no match for an angry Immortal.

Twenty seconds later, it was all over.

Interlude

Malura glared at the report flashing across her console. She'd read the entire document at least a dozen times by now, and each pass infuriated her more than the last.

"We have time to recover," Captain Dykastra said from behind her in that cool, modulated voice the psychogeneticists had woven into the very core of his being. "It will take the Pact several more days to muster a task force and at least a week for any ships to travel through hyperspace any—"

"That isn't the point!" Malura snarled, slamming her fist down on the console hard enough to crack the hardy plastic. "The facility should have self-destructed before the enemy boarded them!"

The rage burned through her as if she were a living plasma conduit. This was unacceptable. It was *unthinkable*. Their technicians had specially programmed every single Dowd outpost in Pact space with a self-destruct contingency. The moment the defenses had been breached, the depot should have detonated.

Instead, Commander Zeris had been given ample time to steal everything of value—computers, data, equipment—and his technicians were undoubtedly working to decrypt their files even now. That particular base shouldn't have had the location of their most important facilities like their shipyard at the edge of the Veil, but the comm logs alone could absolutely lead them to other Dowd bases scattered

across Pact space. They would have to start moving their operations immediately, which would cost precious resources and even more precious time. Worse, it meant that their demoralized enemies would finally achieve significant victories. That threatened to cause more damage than losing the base itself.

“I don’t understand,” Dykastra said, turning and pacing across the observation deck. With the starscape enabled, it looked as if he were about to walk off into deep space. “The contingency was installed less than a month ago. How could it fail?”

“The Dowd must have figured out how to disable it,” Malura snarled.

Slowly, the captain turned back around to face her. “How is that possible?”

“They aren’t mindless idiots,” she snapped. “They must have realized we installed contingencies on their bases and supply depots as well as their ships. And you saw how the Exarch reacted after we scuttled their ship a week ago.”

“True,” Dykastra conceded, his eyes narrowing. “If this happens elsewhere, it could become a significant problem.”

“It’s *already* a significant problem,” Malura said. “And the Exarch must be made to understand that.”

Clenching her teeth, she pulled her hand away from the shattered console. She was bleeding thanks to all the broken plastic, but a few seconds of concentration regenerated the wounded flesh. Once the pain ebbed away, all she could think about was excoriating the Exarch in person.

This was not the first time the Dowd had been disobedient, and Master Foln had never been shy about yanking on their leash when necessary. But before this, their transgressions had mostly been trivial and sometimes even unintentional. This was neither.

Malura took a deep breath and tried to calm down. The Exarch would not have dared pull this stunt if Fohn were still around. She hadn't informed them of his absence—in fact; she had repeatedly assured the Exarch that Fohn was merely occupied elsewhere. But they'd obviously figured out the truth on their own.

She had known all along that the monsters would eventually realize their messiah—the man they believed had given them the ability to hear the “Chorus of the Void”—was no longer present to direct them in person. She had hoped that Fohn would complete his business on the other side of the galaxy before that happened, but yet again, fate had failed to cooperate.

Never rely on fortune to provide what can otherwise be achieved with proper preparation, Fohn's words echoed in her mind. *Just because we are destined to rule does not mean we are slaves to fate.*

“I'll be in the Hive,” Malura said, her voice deathly calm as she strode toward the exit.

“Do you want me to come with you?” Captain Dykastra asked. “And maybe a squad of troopers for good measure?”

“That won't be necessary,” she said as she stepped onto the lift. “I will express the Master's displeasure myself.”

She closed her eyes as the lift carried her through the massive super-dreadnought. It had been months since she had been able to unleash the full fury of her psionic abilities, and she was tempted to storm into the Exarch's chamber and rip the creature apart. Like so many of the Dowd, it had developed impressive powers over the past decade, but it was no match for her or any of her sisters. No alien could ever truly be blessed with a spark of the Seraph's divinity.

Malura had decided on her approach when the lift opened. During the *Fist of the Seraph's* construction, the workers had dubbed this area the “Hive,” and the name had stuck. In order to best simulate

the Dowd's preferred environment, the corridors had been designed to emulate a series of underground tunnels all leading to a central cavern. In principle, the layout wasn't all that different from any other deck on a starship, where various narrow passages would eventually consolidate into a larger command area, but it certainly felt strange.

Mostly because it all seemed *alive*.

Malura grimaced as she walked, trying hard not to be disgusted by the constant squishing sound beneath her boots. The Hive's passages were completely lightless, and while she could have easily conjured her psi-blade or simply turned on a flashlight, she didn't actually *want* to see where she was going. She knew from experience that the walls were covered in a sticky, briny goo the Dowd excreted. The substance covered everything in the Hive, now including the bottom of her boots. It was vile beyond words.

But it was how the Dowd preferred to live. Before the war against the Expansionary Fleet had driven them into the Veil, they had colonized worlds with vast, interlinked networks of caves and filled them with this discharge. The goo carried the vibrations they used for speech and their technology, allowing them to communicate across vast distances long before exposure to the Veil had awakened their psionic abilities.

Malura had no idea what purpose it served now, since their leader could simply communicate with them through the Chorus of the Void, aka telepathy. Perhaps they simply couldn't stop themselves from shitting it out wherever they went.

Whatever the case, she reminded herself that like the Dowd themselves, the Hive was merely a temporary arrangement. By the time this war ended, most of the aliens would be dead, and it would be a trivial matter for the New Dominion to finish off any survivors. The Dowd

were servants, nothing more, and it was time to remind them of their place.

Navigating by memory and a hint of clairsentience, Malura moved through two more dark passages before she reached the central cluster. The chamber was huge, a hundred meters in diameter and fifty high, nearly enough for an entire Dominion frigate to fit inside. A score of small, blinking purple lights were festooned around the room like the glittering eyes of hundreds of spiders. A newcomer never would have guessed the illumination was emanating from telepathic training pods.

Most of the Dowd that were still here on *Fist of the Seraph* were meant to have been transferred back to their facility on Nirivarr by now. But after Commander Zeris had exposed its location, that was no longer an option. It was another on a growing list of reasons Malura couldn't wait to destroy him.

The Exarch was waiting in the center of an elevated circular command area at the center of the cavern. The creature was ringed by three large consoles, all Dowd in design. They were nothing at all like Dominion technology or that of any other species in the Cluster. The interfaces were controlled purely by vibration, not voice commands or touch screens. She couldn't have used any of them if she'd wanted to. Frankly, she didn't even understand how they worked.

Malura squished her way up the ramp to the command center. The Exarch was levitating between the three consoles, and she could feel its alien consciousness reaching across the stars.

[*The Chorus is joined.*]

She managed not to hop in place when his bizarre telepathic voice spoke into her mind, but just barely.

"Your soldiers at Zurix are dead," Malura said flatly. "And they have allowed the enemy to capture your base!"

The Exarch floated in silence, and she gritted her teeth in frustration. She despised dealing with these wretched creatures in person. It was bad enough that they couldn't speak like any normal sapient species, but their lack of eyes and faces also made it nearly impossible to read them. Everything had been so much easier when the Master had commanded them through the sheer force of his will.

But she was not going to fail him. Not now, not ever.

[*The Singers will no longer be silenced,*] the creature said eventually.

Malura took a step closer to him, her fingers eager to feel the buzzing warmth of her psi-blade between them.

"You serve the Master," she said icily. "You owe your survival to him."

Another pause, this one even longer.

[*You have discovered the source of the infestation.*]

Malura blinked. "What?"

[*The source of the infestation. We require its location.*]

She stared at the faceless alien, wondering what in the name of the Seraph it was talking about. Communicating with these monsters was incredibly tiresome. Even with telepathy, it could be difficult to understand what they were trying to say.

But then, instead of words, an image flashed into her mind—a Sillibar.

"What...?" she breathed.

Her throat tightened as the answer belatedly struck her. The Exarch knew. Somehow, it had learned that her operatives had extracted the location of the new Sillibar homeworld from the Kaori Tash prisoner they'd taken to their base on Endikar. But that information was not widely known, even among the senior officers here on the super-dreadnought. She had intended to keep it secret until their scouts had confirmed the location and evaluated the strength of its defenses.

“You mean Exodus?” Malura asked. “If we had the location, we would have already planned an attack.”

[*The source is known,*] the Exarch said. [*The truth echoes in the Void.*]

She grimaced. The Dowd were obsessed with the Sillibar—everyone in the Cluster knew that much. She didn’t understand *why*, but Fohn had warned her to tread carefully around the topic. The fact that the Sillibar mostly concealed their presence among the Pact fleet had proven a boon, because otherwise the Dowd would have insisted on only striking targets where they knew they could kill their ancient enemy.

“We have acquired some leads,” she said. “But we haven’t confirmed them yet. And we aren’t going to act until we do.”

The Exarch fell silent again, and she wondered if it might be worth simply killing the creature after all. If the Dowd were like any other sapient species, then executing their leader for disobedience would terrorize the rest of them into submission.

But the whole problem with the Dowd was that they *weren’t* like any other sapient species. They were alien in the truest sense of the word. The only one who could control them was Fohn. Without him here, killing the Exarch might throw them into disarray.

Or worse, turn them against the New Dominion. And that would be even more disastrous than Zeris and his allies ferreting out the location of a few bases.

“We will attack the Sillibar once we have a proper target,” Malura said. “But we have bigger problems right now—problems caused by your men failing in their duty to the Master.”

Bringing herself up to her full height, she conjured her psi-blade and cast the entire disgusting chamber in its brilliant blue light.

“Disobedience will not be tolerated,” she growled. “Fail us again, and the Master will take the Chorus away from you. You’ll never have

your vengeance on the Sillibar. And you'll rot away in the depths of the Veil where we found you."

The Exarch didn't flinch. She didn't sense any fear from it, either, though its alien emotions were difficult to gauge.

"You're going to make up for this mistake," Malura said icily. "Pull back all your forces from the Angoth colonies. If the Pact does assemble a task force to attack, we'll need your ships to crush them wherever they go. The enemy cannot be allowed to organize and regain their initiative."

The Exarch continued floating there in front of her. [*The dirge will continue.*]

"Yes, it will," she said, raising her blade menacingly. "The Master will be watching you carefully. Do you understand?"

[*The dirge will continue,*] he repeated.

Malura's mouth set. "Send the orders," she said. "Wherever Zeris goes, we'll be there waiting for him."

Chapter 8

Spoils of War

“There is a great deal of equipment and data here we can potentially salvage, Commander,” Vrisk said over the comm in my helmet. “With your permission, I would like to bring over a larger team from the *Renegade*.”

“Of course, anything and anyone you require,” I said, sweeping my gaze around the base again. The smoke had all cleared, and the first tech team had set up lights to properly illuminate the area. The downside was that the darkness had at least concealed the worst of the carnage. There were smoldering bodies everywhere on the balcony and a few below.

The psionic goo also reeked like death, which I hadn’t noticed until I’d taken off my helmet after we’d secured the environmental systems. I’d put it back on almost instantly.

“Any estimate on how long you think you’ll need?”

“It is impossible to say without further investigation,” Vrisk said, “but I understand the danger of lingering too long. We will do our best to retrieve everything we can within the next four hours.”

“Just keep me updated. We’ll get everyone else back on board the ship in case we need to make a quick exit.”

“Understood, Commander.” He paused briefly. “There is something else you should know. During our initial study of the reactor,

we located the self-destruct mechanism. Curiously, the system was designed with Dominion technology.”

“Odd, considering everything else here is clearly Dowd in origin,” I said. “But maybe don’t play around with that until we’re ready to leave.”

“There is no danger, sir. The system was disabled.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“The hardware was destroyed,” Vrisk said. “The lines were cut at the source several days before we arrived. Even if the device was engaged, it would not have been able to cause a reactor overload.”

“What do you think that means?”

“I am uncertain. But it seems noteworthy.”

“Yeah, it does,” I murmured. “We can analyze it later. Get moving on that data recovery.”

“Yes, Commander.”

Letting out a fatigued sigh, I glanced down over the edge of the balcony to where the medics were patching up the wounded Krosians and bagging up the dead one. They had grabbed several of the Dowd corpses as well, including the one with psionic potential. I didn’t know if they’d be useful, but I wanted to let Miranda and Hebeska take a look. In the past, their bodies had disintegrated before we could examine them. This was the first time we’d gotten a chance to study one.

“This is an incredible victory,” Miranda said through her breathing mask from beside me. Like the other medics and techs, she was clad in her form-fitting black skin-suit. “Admiral Lochlan will be ecstatic.”

“I’m not convinced she’s physically capable of that emotion,” I replied dryly. “But one would hope that the Pact’ll be happy as well. Assuming we can pull some data from these computers.”

“Vrisk will succeed,” she said, sounding utterly confident. “This will change the course of the war.”

I smiled thinly as she crouched over another Dowd corpse to run a quick scan. I was trying to contain my excitement until we’d confirmed some actionable data, but she wasn’t wrong—this victory of ours had the potential to cascade into many more. Even if we only pulled the locations of a few other Dowd bases, it could shift Pact morale in no time.

And our casualties were remarkably light. Sekvoth’s warrior was the only fatality, though the First Warrior himself had lost a tusk and suffered some moderate burns. Ackers and his squad had faced only minimal resistance near the reactor—the Dowd had apparently shifted nearly all their defenses here. Two of his men had suffered minor burns, and a third had taken a fairly nasty disruptor hit, but they would all recover.

“I was right before,” I said. “They’re relying on secrecy to defend these bases. If they’d had a few more soldiers here—or one or two more psychics—we wouldn’t have been able to take it without severe losses.”

“This will make them adjust their strategy,” Miranda said. “And pull resources from their attacks.”

“Let’s hope.” I paused and looked at the goo on my gauntlets. “Have you been able to figure out what the hell this stuff is yet?”

“Not precisely. But the compound appears to be psychoreactive, similar to some of chemicals used on the embryos on the mothership.”

My stomach lurched. “Please tell me this isn’t some kind of embryonic fluid.”

“It isn’t,” Miranda said. “Your original supposition could be accurate—it may be related to their echolocation abilities. But I wonder if it is related to their telepathy instead. Perhaps it can carry telepathic signals more easily, particularly to soldiers without psionic abilities.”

“Maybe,” I mused, looking up at the chamber ceiling. “Their tech is definitely more bio-engineered than I realized. The base isn’t alive, but it almost feels like it.”

“Some of the design elements are similar to those used by the Norgon, a species native to the Traverse. But it will require additional study.”

“Maybe the Pact know more,” I said. “Coordinate with Ensign Hebeska when you get back to the ship. I want the two of you working together to analyze the bodies and the goo.”

She paused and looked up at me with those pale blue eyes of hers. “Are you certain you don’t wish me to aid Engineer Vrisk? We have become a very effective team.”

“I know, but he does have other people who can help him. Hebeska has her Angoth scientists, but I’d rather not have them working on this alone.”

Miranda arched a black eyebrow. “You don’t trust them, sir?”

“It’s a joint mission. And both Dominion and Pact interests are at stake.” I paused. “I also happen to think that the two of you need to learn to cooperate. No more stepping on each other’s toes on the bridge.”

Her cheek twitched. “But, sir—”

“I’m serious,” I said, letting my voice turn stern. “It’s a perfect opportunity to work together. Besides, you know Angoth culture—all their engineers and scientists are female. That should make it a little easier for you.”

“Yes, sir.”

I smiled down at her even though she couldn’t see it through my helmet, then turned and headed down the ramp to the lower level. The medical teams were finishing up, and I noticed Sekvoth staring at the bag holding his fallen soldier.

“A regrettable loss,” I said, stepping next to him.

The First Warrior favored me with a strange glance. “Regret?”

“Casualties are always regrettable.”

“We secured a tremendous victory and only lost one warrior,” Sekvoth said. “This is a triumph, Commander, worth the demise of an entire battalion.”

“That’s one way to look at it, I suppose,” I murmured.

“It is the only reasonable analysis. We seized this installation intact. Our forces have not been able to achieve such a victory since the war began.”

I nodded. “Lieutenant Ackers said that your men fought well. And you did, as well.”

The Krosian studied me for a long moment. His remaining tusk was still covered in dried Dowd blood, while the other was so neatly severed it almost looked like it had been surgically cut in half.

“Are you mocking us?” he asked.

“Not at all,” I replied, frowning. “We got the job done with minimal losses.”

“Yet victory had little to do with my soldiers, Commander. Your Immortal powers are even more impressive in person.”

“Less impressive when you get thrown around like a hound’s chew toy for half the battle,” I muttered. “The Dowd appear to have all manner of psionic abilities. That one could have been a Blade of the Seraph.”

“And yet you survived its assault,” Sekvoth said. “It is fortunate that my people outnumber yours so greatly. When we descend upon your Golden Worlds, we will require every warrior to overcome your defenses.”

I looked back into his orange eyes. “I hope that’s a joke.”

He made that growling sound in the back of his throat which I'd decided was a Krosian chuckle.

"I am curious about something, Commander. It must have occurred to you that if you had not involved yourself in the struggles of the Pact, we would suffer greater losses. And your Dominion could exploit that weakness in the future."

"It occurred to me," I confirmed. "And I'd be lying if I said there weren't people back home who would prefer that outcome. Including the insurrectionists who are leading the Dowd."

"Yet you do not share that opinion," Sekvoth said. "Why?"

"Because I don't want a war between our peoples. No one should."

He tilted his head slightly. "Even if we were weakened and you knew you would be victorious?"

"There wouldn't be any victors," I said flatly. "Only countless dead."

Sekvoth's eyes narrowed. "There are those among my people who would consider such an attitude cowardly. And they would question the worthiness of a warrior who spoke such words."

"What do *you* think?"

"I find it strange that a man who so easily defies death still seems to fear it."

"It's not about me. It's about everyone else. A war between our peoples would kill billions." I shook my head. "I didn't join the Dominion to kill and conquer. I joined to protect people who can't protect themselves."

Sekvoth seemed to mull it over. "My people are the defenders of the Pact. But to have lasting peace and security, we must destroy our enemies."

"Or turn them into friends. Though I suppose both options will require a long and brutal fight."

He growl-chuckled again. "Yes. I believe they will."

"Let me ask you something," I said. "If I recall my history lessons, your people left the Dominion because you were treated like expendable soldiers. Well, a hundred years later it seems like the Sillibar treat you exactly the same way."

"The Dominion controlled us," Sekvoth said. "Worse, they did not respect us."

"And the Sillibar do?"

"They allow us to be what we are without apology or guilt. They encourage us to breed and fight and revel in the carnage. And for our sacrifice, we are given our own worlds and ships. We are the masters of our own destiny."

A destiny of nothing but blood and death, I thought darkly.

The idea that the Sillibar were benevolent overlords was so preposterous it was unfathomable that anyone could believe it. They went to great lengths to ensure the loyalty of their servants. According to Ellis, the Kaori Tash eliminated dissidents with ruthless efficiency. Some even took the form of Angoth clerics or Krosian brood mothers to cultivate loyalty among the young.

"You disagree, Commander?" Sekvoth prompted.

"It's not my place to judge what I don't understand," I said. "But the Sillibar are lucky to have you as their defenders."

"Yes, they are."

I grunted softly. "Well, go ahead and take your men back on the next shuttle. I want to be ready to shift out of here if reinforcements show up."

"*Vak'el*, Commander," he said, turning and waving for the rest of his men to follow.

I lingered for a few minutes after they were gone to check in with each of the teams one final time. We had a hell of a prize here, and I

couldn't wait to unwrap it. But my thoughts lingered on what Sekvoth had said about how helping the Pact could easily backfire. If war between the great powers was inevitable, then everyone would be better off if the Dowd severely weakened the Pact. It was a cynical perspective, yes, but that didn't mean it was wrong. The insurrectionists were banking on it.

But Ellis's cautious idealism must have infected me more than I'd realized, because I still believed that this was the path forward. This victory could very well be the start of something important—something that could truly change the fate of the entire Cluster. And if not—well, I couldn't afford to think about that right now. We already had one war to fight.

The next one would just have to wait its turn.

Vrisk and his teams proved even more efficient than I'd hoped. In three hours, well short of the Kali engineer's original estimate, they had extracted everything they could get from the base's computers. Combined with the bits of tech the salvage drones had recovered, we'd earned one hell of a haul.

We couldn't know for certain if any of the information was useful yet, naturally, since it would take the decryption team time to unscramble everything before we could hand it over to Miranda for analysis. But the important part was that we'd gotten the proverbial ball rolling, and for the first time since I'd accepted this mission, we were finally making real progress.

The teams came back aboard in short order, and I recalled the Valkyries to the hangar once everything was secure. As the astral drive

spun up, I kept expecting a fleet of Dowd warships—or maybe even the *Fist of the Seraph* itself—to shift into the system and start firing at us. But fate blessed us once again, and we left the system without any trouble at all.

“I need to prepare a message for Lochlan and the Security Council letting them know we’re back on the trail,” I said to my first officer once we were safe in astral space. “Ideally, the Pact can have a strike force ready to go the moment we get a solid lead.”

“I will inform the Executrix,” Velarys said, “and suggest that she spare a few ships to aid the strike force. That is, assuming the Pact will allow Yarasi ships to participate.”

“I’d be more worried about your people being willing to *send* the ships,” I pointed out. “Your forces must be spread pretty thin defending your own outposts.”

“Yes. But I will make the request nonetheless.”

I would certainly welcome the aid of Yarasi ships—even one or two would make a huge difference in any engagement. And with Lochlan physically stationed at Kenabrius, she might be able to pressure the Yarasi Councilor, Naralys, into providing more aid.

But then again, she might not. The Yarasi were a cautious people by nature; they would defend every outpost and planet in their space with equal vigor. It was an admirable quality, though often a strategically foolish one. Wars required sacrifices, there was simply no way around it.

And on the Pact side...well, old rivalries died hard. I couldn’t exactly blame them for not wanting even more cloaked ships roaming around their space. We just had to hope that the Pact leadership would understand the value of fast, durable Yarasi vessels.

“Do what you can,” I said. “With any luck, the good news will inspire everyone to take action.”

Standing, I panned my gaze across the bridge and gave the crew a long look. Hebeska and Miranda were already down in the science lab, but everyone else was here.

“Excellent job, everyone,” I said, and meant it. “Captain Ellis would be proud. What’s our ETA to New Krosis?”

“Twenty-three hours, sir,” Reyes said.

“Good. You have the bridge, Commander.”

I headed into my office and sat down to record my message for Lochlan. We would reach New Krosis not long after the message reached Kenabrius, assuming the Pact relays were up to Cluster standards, and she’d hopefully be able to respond by the next day. Vrisk and his team would likely need several days to crack the encryption anyway, so we’d have a little downtime before our next fight.

I sat there staring at the computer for several minutes after I queued the message to send the next time we shifted out of astral space for a breather. I would have liked to send Ash a message as well, but I had no idea where she was. The best I could do was leave an encrypted message for her in the Kenabrius relay system for if and when she got close, which I decided was better than nothing. I desperately wanted to know how she was doing...and to get her aboard the *Renegade* as quickly as possible.

The rest of the day passed mostly uneventfully. The science and tech teams continued their work, and I stayed out of their way. When my shift ended, I spent some time with Ackers and his men reviewing their performance—and getting my armor repaired. They were all in good spirits, and while they still weren’t interested in spending their off-time with the Krosians, everyone seemed to have earned each other’s respect. Shedding blood together tended to have that effect.

That night, I returned to my quarters with the intention of lying back and rewatching some of Ellis's battle vids, but Saleya had left a short message for me.

Tonight. Closing time.

I grinned, remembering our conversation during the “get to know the crew” party as we'd left Nirule. Velarys had almost completely monopolized my time since then, and I wasn't the least bit surprised that Saleya would be getting antsy. The fact that she'd waited this long without satisfying her Velothi needs was a little surprising. Then again, she did seem to enjoy pushing boundaries. As she'd whispered into my ear many times, pain could so easily transform into pleasure...

I grabbed some dinner and cleaned up, then killed an hour watching holo-vids before I made my way to the lounge. With the ship running on “night mode” to try and keep the crew sane with semi-normal day/night cycles, the lights were dim and the corridors were nearly empty. The door to the lounge opened when I approached, and I spotted Saleya inside setting some new bottles on the shelves behind the bar.

“We just won a battle, yet no one trashed the joint,” I said, looking around the room. “That's a step up from some of the early nights at the *Second Wind*, before you had decent bouncers.”

Saleya grinned as she tossed a sultry glance over her shoulder. Her backless dress was only a few shades of red darker than her skin.

“Thankfully, I have the best bouncer in this Cluster now,” she said. “Fear of the Immortal Commander's wrath.”

I chuckled. “Good point. Did you have much business?”

“Plenty—the Krosians and the humans. They all behaved quite well. Their only disappointment was when I told them I needed to shut down for the night.”

“You could have stayed open and rescheduled.”

“No,” Saleya said, voice dark and serious as she glided over to me on her elegant heels. Her pink eyes glimmered hungrily as she slid her arms around my neck and pulled our mouths together. “I couldn’t.”

Every woman’s kiss was different—I’d learned to appreciate that fact at a young age. There was nothing in the galaxy like the fiery heat of Ash’s lips, nor the unusual psionic tingle when I touched Velarys.

But the kiss of a Velothi Succubus was something else entirely. Just like Miranda had been genetically engineered to be the perfect fleet officer, Saleya had been designed as the perfect lover. Every movement, every reaction, was both seamlessly natural and ruthlessly calculated. The way she pulled me against her, the way her tongue predicted my movements, the way her tendrils massaged my neck while her tail flicked dangerously across my groin...

A warmth spread through my entire body as we touched. Not raw, tense Kreen heat like Ash, but a soothing wave that threatened to drag me under. Succubi may not have been psychic, but they had a magic of their own. I could so easily lose myself in her touch as if she were consuming my very soul.

Saleya pulled back with a gasp, her breath hot on my chin. “It has been a long time since I felt this...*need*.”

“Not *that* long,” I said, grinning. “You came to my quarters for dinner last week.”

“It might as well be an eternity.”

Her fingers were at my chest now, dexterously popping open the buttons of my uniform. Her hands slipped inside the jacket, and the subtle scratch of her fingernails along my flesh sent a ripple of delight shuddering through me. She always knew exactly where and how to touch every part of my body.

“It is not merely desire now, Kal,” she purred as she nibbled gently at my lips. “I suffer without your touch.”

“You don’t need to,” I said. “I’m right here.”

“I know.” She gave me a dangerous smile. “But the wait is *exquisite*.”

Saleya kissed me again. Her tongue was more aggressive this time, and her hands got the entire flap of my jacket open while her tail fiddled with the buckle of my belt. I started to wonder if she may have been so horny that she’d canceled her plans for a dance routine.

“*Ngnn...*” she moaned as she pulled away again. “I have half a mind to lock the door and have you take me on the counter.”

“You should *definitely* lock the door,” I told her. “Counter, table, chair—it doesn’t matter. I plan to bend you over all three before the night is over.”

Saleya smiled almost giddily. Her behavior around me whenever we were alone had changed since I’d Imprinted upon her. This primal need of hers was one of the few things I’d ever seen that could shatter her cool, collected veneer. In the past, I’d only seen her composure break when I’d been buried deep inside that tight Velothi ass of hers. Now all I needed to do was get close to her.

“You should come to the lounge more often,” she whispered as her fingers traced the back of my ear. Her tail had unbuckled my belt, but it had yet to delve inside. For now, the tip seemed content to flick across the rapidly swelling bulge in the crotch.

“Seems like that could be dangerous,” I said.

Saleya’s smile turned dark. “Scared I might kiss you in front of your soldiers?”

“Or something else.”

“Would that really be so bad?” she asked, snickering as one of her cranial tendrils pressed against my mouth and slithered through my lips. “You don’t think it would improve your clout with the crew if they knew you’d Imprinted on me?”

I paused to suck on the tendril's sensitive tip. She inhaled sharply and bit down on her lip.

"The crew?" I asked. "Maybe. Command? Definitely not."

She moaned softly as I continued sucking, her hands drifting upward to feather through my short hair. "You've come a long way from the man I met on New Praxius. You're so much more...disciplined."

Abruptly, she took a step backward and slid out of my grip. I frowned, wondering what she was up to, but then she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. When they reopened, she looked almost like a different person. Her composed veneer was back, and she was once again Lady Saleya, the unflappable mistress of her domain.

"Come," she said, delicately extending her hand. When I took it, she led me into the lounge and had me sit at the centermost table about five meters from the panoramic viewport that was still shrouded by the crimson mists of astral space.

With my jacket unbuttoned and my belt buckle unfastened, I half expected Saleya to kneel in front of me and give me one of her torturously methodical, hour-long blowjobs. She had been rather fond of the technique in the past, especially after I'd returned to her in the Second Wind after a particularly long and grueling mission. She would keep me on edge as long as possible before finally letting me spill down her throat or desecrate her face.

But Saleya had something else in mind today. She placed one of the other chairs next to mine and took a seat, then casually crossed her legs as she nuzzled up against me.

"Astral space is quite lovely, isn't it?" she asked.

I glanced at the window as the swirling pinkish-red mists enveloped us.

"It is," I agreed.

Her tail curled around my leg like a serpent. “It’s about to get even better.”

Saleya snapped her fingers, and the dim lights in the lounge went completely black. Then, as she slipped her hand back inside my open uniform jacket, I caught a flicker of movement from across the room as if the shadows had come alive. They quickly coalesced into the sleek silhouette of an unmistakably feminine figure with long *veroshi* tendrils and wearing fifteen-centimeter high heels.

I had no idea where Astra had been hiding earlier, but I smiled as she sauntered through the darkness toward our table. Even with the nebula behind her, I couldn’t make out her features until she effortlessly climbed up onto our table. I had seen her perform from a distance, and I knew she had swiftly become Saleya’s most popular performer. But I’d never had the opportunity to enjoy one of her dances up close.

By the Seraph, I can’t fucking wait.

A slow, sensual Neyris melody soon filled the lounge, and Astra’s body began moving with the rhythm. She was always pretty, even in the moments I’d spoken to her in “civilian” clothes without makeup, but she was more arresting than ever tonight with her dark eyeshadow, ruby lips, and metallic bikini. She had also pierced her belly with a dangling emerald ring that echoed the movements of her swaying hips.

“She’s been waiting for this,” Saleya whispered into my ear as her fingernails raked more aggressively over my chest. “Every girl needs someone special to break her in.”

Her tail finally wriggled beneath my belt, and I gasped when it curled around my aching shaft and gently pulled my manhood free. I was already so hard my cock nearly split open the zipper even without her help.

Saleya nibbled at my ear and neck while her tail slowly stroked me, and all the while Astra continued her mesmerizing routine. Her movements became quicker in harmony with the music, and she performed feats of agility that seemed to defy the laws of physics. Spinning, twirling, bending...she even balanced her entire body on a single stiletto heel on more than one occasion. It was like ballet, except interesting.

And then, as the music abruptly slowed, her fingers brushed against the thin, delicate straps holding up the top of her bikini...and pulled.

Given how much time I'd spent in the Second Wind, I was no stranger to a good tease. I'd even seen Astra herself enthrall a table of drunken patrons before. But it was different when the girl was looking at *you* and no one else, especially when you knew that the smolder behind her sensuous gaze wasn't a performance to earn a few credit chits. This was different.

This was foreplay.

Saleya's tail stopped stroking my shaft and squeezed it instead, drawing another pleased gasp from my lips. Astra played with her bikini top, first pulling it tightly and teasingly across her breasts, then finally dragging it aside to reveal her hard brown nipples in all their glory.

I wanted them in my mouth so badly I nearly vaulted to my feet and tackled her right there. They were the kind of wondrous, round squishy breasts that demanded more than a casual grope. They deserved to be licked. And sucked. And squeezed.

And then *fucked*, hard and fast. I could already imagine my cock sliding between them, pushing closer to Astra's lips with every thrust while she waited—no, *begged*—for me to make a mess of her pretty face...

“Ooh,” I moaned as a rush of anticipation shot through me, pushing me toward the edge. I would have easily toppled over it if Saleya’s tail had kept stroking. And that, I imagined, was precisely why she had stopped.

“Not yet, dear,” she teased. Her teeth sank gently into my earlobe while the tip of one of her cranial tendrils slipped back between my lips. Lost in a haze of need, I licked and sucked as tenderly as if it were a nipple, prompting Saleya to let pleased moans and whimpers of her own.

All the while, Astra continued swaying with the rhythm while fondling her bare tits with her hands and occasionally her *veroshi*. Her movements were so sensuous, so natural, I feared I might explode even without Saleya’s tail working my shaft. Especially when Astra’s fingers slid down her slim waist to the thin drawstring of her panties.

She kept up the tease, pulling and half removing them several times, taunting me with brief glimpses of the glory that waited beyond. My cock throbbed in anticipation, and her smoldering gaze turned white hot when she finally pushed them down her slender legs. Her quim was as smooth and hairless and beautiful as the rest of her silky body.

And I’m going to fuck it so hard she’ll forget how to breathe.

Eyes still glued to mine, Astra stepped off the table with her right foot, balancing the towering stiletto heel on the narrow arm of my chair. I held my breath, worried that the slightest motion could knock her over, but I shouldn’t have worried. Her left foot followed to the other arm, and somehow she didn’t even wobble. I suddenly found myself staring up at a bare alien cunt a few centimeters away.

Astra slowly squatted, another astonishing feat of agility with her entire weight braced on two needle-tipped heels. Her hands touched the sides of my head, and she pulled me forward until my lips reached her feminine folds.

Her Neyris nectar was waiting for the tip of my tongue the moment it greeted her eager flesh. She was sweet and savory all at once, and I didn't hesitate to lap up her offering. She yelped in delight when my tongue brushed her clit, and I was once again concerned at how easily she could lose her balance.

But she didn't, no matter how short and haggard her breaths became. I was no stranger to Neyris girls, so I quickly put my experience to work, lashing and licking in response to her gasps and moans. My hands explored her calves and thighs, overwhelmed by their almost painful softness. Just when I was about to bring my fingers to join my lips, Saleya's tail took the initiative instead. The red tip pierced Astra's folds right next to my tongue...and wriggled in deep.

Astra squealed, and this time she lost her balance. Her heels wobbled as an unexpected climax shuddered through her, and she would have fallen right off the chair if my arms hadn't reached out to grab her waist. Yet she barely seemed to notice—her fingers, once delicately cradling my head, got an iron grip on my skull, and she convulsed so hard I would have been concerned if I'd never been with a Neyris girl. They came loud and hard, especially when it snuck up on them.

They also tended to get even hornier after they'd finished once, and from the wild look in Astra's eyes when she came down, I could tell she was no different. The foreplay was over.

With yet another feat of liquid agility, Astra swung her heels off the armrests and straddled me instead. My cock was hard, ready, and willing, and when Saleya's tail helpfully curled back around it to help aim it properly at Astra's sodden folds, I couldn't help but imagine all the ways I was going to use this Neyris body tonight. I was overwhelmed with the impulse to twist her, to bend her.

To *break* her.

Astra's arms fell behind my neck, a shaky breath escaping her as she gradually impaled herself upon me. My throbbing manhood effortlessly slipped inside her, and she closed her eyes and let out a soft whimper as my girth stretched her silken alien folds for the first time.

"That's it, dear," Saleya encouraged, her hands on Astra's side. "Let him split you right open..."

I clenched my teeth as she descended another centimeter, almost wishing that Saleya had helped me get off once first. Neyris girls were as known for their sodden cunts as Kreen were known for their fiery ones, yet despite her natural slickness, Astra was incredibly tight. It took far more effort than I would have thought to get my full length inside her. But Saleya was there to make it happen, gently pushing Astra down and ensuring that any momentary twinge of pain would swiftly be replaced by pleasure.

And then, finally, I was all the way inside. Astra's eyes found mine again, and her hands returned to my hair as she began to churn her hips. I watched in delight as the muscles of her taut stomach flexed, and the swaying movements of her belly jewel were nearly as mesmerizing as when she'd been on the table. Instinctively, I reached out to take her hips and help guide her movements, but Saleya stopped me.

"You know the rules," Saleya said, tongue pressing hard against her lips. "No touching the dancers."

I almost growled at her, but then Astra began moving more quickly, bouncing up and down in my lap while her hands drifted upward and swayed above her as if she were still dancing. The crushing clench of carnal walls pulled me, milked me, and there was no way in hell I'd be able to hold out for long.

Especially when Saleya suddenly leaned forward and brought her lips to Astra's breast. She kissed and fondled the plump yellow globe, her tongue darting across the nipple while her cranial tendrils mas-

saged the silky flesh. Astra cooed in delight, and she churned against me even harder.

I was seriously tempted to grab Saleya by the horns and pull her away so my mouth could take her place, but she had a mischievous look in her eye that told me she wasn't done. But at the rate I was spiraling toward the abyss, she didn't have long to make her move...

Just when I felt like I couldn't hold back any longer, Saleya grabbed Astra's body and held the girl still. Astra paused, panting, nearly ready to finish again herself.

"There's always a risk in toying with a beast," Saleya warned, giving me a permissive wink. "And make no mistake, dear. This one is positively *feral*."

I let myself go. Astra's eyes shot wide when I vaulted upright, and she yelped in surprise when I took hold of her slender waist, hoisted her up with me, and then slammed her down onto the table beneath me.

Pinned, she stared up at me, breathing hard with a mix of shock and excitement in her brown eyes.

"Do it," Saleya commanded, rising up behind me and placing her hand on my back. "Break her."

Shifting my grip to Astra's legs, I hoisted her ankles up onto my shoulders, then ruthlessly drove into her. She squealed in delight and threw back her head, her *veroshi* tendrils freezing on the table as if even they were too stunned to move.

I didn't give her a chance to recover before I began rutting her like an animal; hard, swift strokes driving as deep as it was possible to go while her back arched and her whimpers built. The emerald in her navel bounced with every impact, and the table whined in protest as if it were about to break. But nothing in the galaxy could have stopped me now. In that fog of passion and fury, with her body splayed in

front of me and her heels bobbing beside my ears, Astra was no longer a sweet and delicate dancer. She was just a cunt to be conquered. A pretty face to be desecrated...

“Come on, dear,” Saleya egged me on, her hot breath back at my ear and her tail curling around my leg. “Give her everything you have!”

I clenched my teeth as I plunged toward the abyss and hammered into Astra one last time...

“*Fuck!*”

I roared so loudly I swore the viewport shook, and I pulled out a split second before I burst. My first salvo arced across her entire body, leaving a pearly trail from her forehead to her belly. The next two were nearly as thick; one struck her chin while the next landed between her breasts. Saleya’s fingers were there to help with the rest, taking hold of my cannon and ensuring I didn’t miss a spot before I was spent.

“*Oh...*” I gasped after the last burst, nearly toppling over while I panted for breath. Saleya cooed soothingly into my ear and her tail gave me an approving squeeze while her fingers made sure to milk every last drop out of me.

Below me, Astra was a glorious, giggling mess. She was all breathless smiles as she dragged her fingertips around the pool covering her stomach, and her *veroshi* tendrils had come back alive and resumed flicking across her nipples.

“So, what do you think?” Saleya said, bringing her fingers to her mouth and licking them clean. “Can you make room for more private performances?”

“You know,” I said, squeezing the slender calves still wrapped around me. “I think I will.”

Interlude

Like most star systems in the galaxy, Endikar was big, desolate, and utterly uninteresting. The Dominion star charts in the *Wildcat's* computer described a basic white dwarf star with seven planets, most of which were gas giants and none of which had any raw materials worth the cost of establishing a mining operation in such a remote location. After shifting into the system herself, Ash's quick long range scan confirmed everything she'd read.

"Even more isolated than Kaborra, huh?" she asked. "Guess it makes sense if you're a bunch of crazy insurrectionists who don't want to get caught."

Kalycos didn't respond. He'd been napping in the chair to her right for the better part of an hour now, and shifting out of astral space and heading into potential danger wasn't compelling enough to rouse him.

Venturing into the unknown had made her stomach start fluttering anxiously, though, and she was happier than ever for the *Wildcat's* cloaking device. While it seemed unlikely that the insurrectionists would have a fleet hidden out here, she couldn't dismiss the possibility out of hand, especially after laying eyes on that superdreadnought in the Drift.

"Before you tell me this is crazy, I'll remind you that we've followed thinner leads before," she said. "Remember that kidnapper on Cardai?"

We tracked *him* down and we didn't even know what he looked like. This should be easy."

Kalycos remained silent, but Ash was sure she'd gotten the point across. He was a stubborn boy, but he always came around to her way of thinking eventually.

"I am not familiar with the event you are describing," Zilex put in from the other seat behind her. "But if this reckless activity was commonplace in your past, it is remarkable that you are still alive."

Ash snorted. "Hey, Yarasi Huntresses perform solo ops in ships like this all the time."

"You are not Yarasi," the android pointed out. "You lack both their psionic might and their decades of extensive training."

"Just means I'm a quick learner," she said. "Now, make yourself useful and get on those scanners, okay?"

"Affirmative."

She glanced back over her shoulder as he started working at his console. His mannerisms were so much like a Kali's she was a little surprised that Vrisk hadn't figured out a way to give him shimmering color patterns over his spindly silver chassis. Maybe in a future upgrade if he decided to patent this design.

Firing the thrusters, she nudged the flight stick between her legs and directed the ship onto the search pattern she'd prepared based on available navigational data for the system. And since no other ships seemed to be around, she dropped the cloak to boost the range of her sensors.

The sensor data gradually rolled in across the tactical overlay, but nothing immediately leapt out as interesting. She wasn't surprised. The Angoth had never even staked a claim to this system despite the fact it was less than ten light-years outside their territory.

But the Column had a base here somewhere, and her brother was with them. Or had been, not long ago.

Ash tried to calm her nerves. She'd mostly managed to keep her mind away from the worst-case scenarios during the trip out here, but they had returned with a vengeance in the hours leading up to their arrival. The Column could have easily moved Leenam by now, or even killed him. Or maybe he was alive but guarded by an army of Dowd. There were hundreds of different ways this hunt of hers could end in disaster.

But dwelling on them wasn't going to help anyone, least of all herself. So she did her best to bury the dark thoughts and focus on finding the needle in this proverbial haystack.

For once, fate cooperated without much fuss. Less than an hour after she arrived in the system, her sensors picked up a large object in orbit of the fifth planet. It was too far away to glean many details, so she immediately set a course and recloakd the ship just in case.

Her caution was validated the moment she moved within visual range.

"I'll be damned," she whispered, bringing up the object on the tac-holo. "Looks like an old Krosian destroyer."

"Confirmed," Zilex said. "Logash Class, 2nd Generation. The Pact ceased constructing this model sixty years ago. According to Dominion estimates, only a handful remain in service."

Ash studied the readings. The destroyer didn't have engines or a hyperdrive; the Column appeared to have converted the hull into a modest-sized base, complete with a pair of docking pads that had been welded onto the port and starboard sides. From a certain angle, it was as if someone had tried to add a child's conception of wings to a warship.

“The engines, hyperdrive, and most of the vessel’s weapon systems have been removed,” Zilex added. “However, its point-defense cannons remain in place, as well as two heavy plasma cannons mounted on the dorsal and ventral sides.”

“With that kind of firepower, we can’t afford to get close,” Ash whispered. “Not without Kal boosting the shields, anyway.”

“A vessel is currently docked on the port platform. It appears to be a Dowd drop shuttle.”

She nodded absently as a magnified projection of the ship appeared on the canopy overlay. They’d seen hundreds of these things in HoloSphere news reports these last months, usually while they were unloading troops onto Pact colonies and outposts.

“Could be a supply depot, I suppose,” Ash mused. “Holdin’ weapons for Dowd soldiers before they launch attacks on Angoth targets.”

“That is a possibility,” Zilex said. “With an astral drive, Dowd vessels could reach twelve different Angoth colonies in less than two hours.”

“Engines are still runnin’. Think they’re about to leave?”

“Impossible to speculate without further information.”

She pursed her lips as she brought the *Wildcat* in closer, being careful to keep to passive sensors so they wouldn’t be detected. Unfortunately, that meant she had no way of knowing what was going on inside. Though given the clandestine nature of the station, the hull might have been sensor shielded anyway.

Ash suddenly wished that Kal were here. She *always* wished that Kal were here, actually, unless she was trying to read or watch a holo-vid. Books and dramas weren’t exactly his thing.

But storming compounds filled with idiots was, and she would have loved to have him around to crack some skulls before she went aboard.

She couldn't take out an entire base herself, especially not if there were Dowd psychics on board.

"What do ya think, should we wait a bit?" Ash asked. "Or say fuck it and try to get in there?"

Kalycos didn't express a strong opinion on the matter, though he had woken up. He was intently watching the moving text and numbers on the tactical overlay as if he were considering launching his own attack at any moment. Zilex, for his part, was less enthusiastic.

"It is unclear to me what a delay would accomplish," Zilex said. "Without a proper strike team, we cannot successfully infiltrate a station of that size."

"Well, we didn't come all this way just to sit here."

"Regardless, I see little sense in mounting an assault. Though I admittedly see little sense in most of the decisions you make."

Ash turned to glare at him. "Ya know, Vrisk sent you along to *help* me, not criticize me."

"I am hoping to help you *by* criticizing you," Zilex replied matter-of-factly. "Your genetics are half-human. Your psychological profile should be receptive to shame."

"I have nothin' to be ashamed about!"

"You continue to watch and enjoy Rividian Nights despite the obvious decline in writing quality during later seasons. Prominent Holosphere cultural critics suggest you should indeed feel shame for this behavior."

"I'm not talkin' about holo-vids, you smarmy idiot," Ash said. "I'm talkin' about rescuin' Leenam from the Column!"

"Based on selfish motives."

"He's my brother!" she snarled. "And who knows what kinda intel he could have on the Column and their plans?"

"That is a rationalization to justify reckless behavior."

Had she been wearing her pistol, Ash would have strongly considered shooting him. At the very least, she intended to give Vrisk an earful when she finally got back to the *Renegade*. This design of his definitely wasn't ready for market.

"Well, congratulations," she said, plotting a course to the base. "Because now I'm definitely goin' aboard. And you're comin' with me."

The android may not have had Kali color patterns, but she could still tell he was surprised at her decision. That only made her more determined.

After circling the base a few times to get a nice visual look at everything, she brought the *Wildcat* around to the starboard docking platform. The wing-like addition to the ship was encased inside an environmental shield bubble containing both gravity and oxygen, but the stations' systems might still detect a ship passing through them to land, cloak or not. There was no way to know for certain, but short of blasting her own hole in the hull, it was the only way on board.

Bracing herself for the worst, she set the *Wildcat* down on the platform...and waited. If someone had detected her landing, she assumed they would send soldiers or at least a few maintenance mechs to check it out. But after two minutes, nothing had changed.

"I am not detecting any reaction whatsoever from inside the facility," Zilex commented.

"Maybe they're all takin' a nap," Ash mused. "Or maybe the place is fully automated."

"If it were automated, I would think it *more* likely that security drones would come investigate. The lack of reaction is bizarre."

"Still, it's better than the alternative. I'm going to check it out."

"I strongly recommend you reconsider," Zilex said.

“Keep an eye on things here, and be ready to take off in a hurry if we need to,” Ash said, ignoring him. “I’ll lock the engines on hot standby.”

Dashing into the lounge, she grabbed the rest of her gear. Once she was fully suited up, she made her way to the landing ramp.

The personal cloaking effect of her hologuise matrix was decidedly imperfect—anyone looking at her while she was moving could easily see the blurry distortion. But it was still a hell of a lot better than walking out there in plain sight of everyone, so she toggled it on as she descended the ramp. As she moved forward across the platform, breaths heavy in her rebreather, she once again wished she had access to Dominion equipment like Kal. At the very least, she needed to “borrow” one of their fancy infantry helmets when she got back to the *Renegade*.

“Still no reaction to our presence,” Zilex said into her earpiece. “I will sync with your surveillance drones so they can feed me additional information once you deploy them.”

“Good plan,” she replied, glad that he’d apparently decided to stop fighting her. As irritating as the android could be, it was nice to have some real support. Kalycos was pretty clever, but he didn’t bring the same level of technical skill.

Pistol in hand, Ash made her way across the platform to the entrance hatch that had been built into the old hull. There was no sign of a lockdown or alert, and she was downright flabbergasted when a simple touch of the keypad allowed her access to the airlock chamber on the other side. Granted, the Column probably wasn’t worried about random space thieves showing up to loot their base, but the lack of any security still seemed odd.

She made it through the inner door just as easily, and it was only then, when she stepped into the connecting corridor and nearly

tripped over a body, that she realized the lack of security wasn't the only strange thing going on here.

Shit, Ash hissed inwardly when she looked down at the corpse, a human man in his mid twenties wearing Dominion trooper armor.

"Curious," Zilex said. "It appears to be a Column soldier. And he was killed recently."

Ash swallowed heavily. The still-smoldering hole in the man's chest did indeed suggest he'd been shot recently, and at point-blank range. On instinct, she sank into a crouch and held her breath as she visually surveyed the nearby area. There was nothing else in the corridor to suggest a firefight had taken place, and since the man's pistol was still holstered at his side, she had to assume he'd been ambushed.

After waiting a few seconds to see if anyone else arrived, Ash reached down to the body and placed her hand on the shoulder. The psychometric flash was brief but intense: she felt surprise, then pain...and then nothing. A single image accompanied the wash of emotions, and it took a moment for it to crystalize in her mind's eye. But when it did, it was unmistakable.

"Dowd," she whispered, reopening her eyes and looking around again. "He was ambushed by a Dowd."

"I see," Zilex said in a tone that suggested he didn't.

Neither did she. The Dowd were the Column's attack dogs.

Weren't they?

"Might explain why nobody's paying attention to us," Ash said. "I'm going to check it out."

Swallowing heavily, she moved aft down the corridor, checking her hologuise matrix as she moved. The camouflage was incredibly power-intensive, so she couldn't stay hidden forever. But popping out now seemed like a terrible idea—especially when she heard the familiar

whine of a Dowd disruptor firing several shots somewhere else on the ship.

What the hell is going on here?

Two minutes and three abrupt turns later, she found two more Column soldiers with smoking holes in their torsos. Unlike the first man she'd found, these had fired back, albeit only once, if the scorch mark on the nearby bulkhead was any indication. She considered giving them a reading but decided against it—given the fact this strange attack was still ongoing, she needed to press ahead. Staying concealed had to remain her top priority until she knew what she was dealing with.

Ash didn't hear any other shots while she moved, but she did hear noises coming from within one of the doors she passed on the way. If the schematics in the *Wildcat's* database were accurate—which they might not be—the door should have led to the top level of the engineering deck. It seemed like as good a place to start as any, especially since the sounds seemed like they were several meters away rather than directly on the other side of the door.

"I need you to take a look for me," Ash whispered. "See what we're dealing with."

"Acknowledged. Awaiting the signal."

Taking a deep breath, she pulled one of the tiny scanner drones from her belt and toggled it on, then leaned back against the corridor wall and cracked the hatch. Nothing shot at the drone as it flew inside, so she promptly closed the hatch and looked down at her holopad to watch the camera feed. Just as she'd hoped, the door did indeed lead to the top of the engineering deck, which was effectively a rectangular balcony containing numerous consoles and diagnostic systems overlooking the main level where the ship's power core was located.

The drone spotted three more corpses when it reached the edge of the balcony, all on the lower level. And standing over them, working diligently at the consoles, were four armed Dowd soldiers.

Ash held her breath and stopped the drone mid-flight. The device was small and quiet, and human engineers probably wouldn't notice it unless they happened to look right at it. But Dowd echolocation was completely different, and she didn't want to take the risk of it getting spotted. She perched it at the balcony guard-rail to give her a decent look at the room, then turned off everything but the camera.

"Can you tell what they're doing?" she asked.

"No, but they have attached devices to the engineering consoles," Zilex said. "They appear to be bio-mechanical in nature, but I am not familiar with Dowd technology."

"Data drives? Decryption equipment?"

"It is impossible to say."

Ash had no concept of what Dowd technology even looked like, but it had to be unusual based purely on their physiology. What good were projections and screens to people without eyes?

Before she could waste too much time wondering what they were up to, the Dowd abruptly disconnected the strange devices from the computers...

And headed for the exit. She watched even after they'd left the compartment, giving it to the count of ten before she reactivated the drone and had it fly around scanning.

"Notice anything?" she asked.

"The drone is detecting eight lifeform readings heading through the port corridor in the direction of the docked shuttle," Zilex said. "It would seem that they are planning to depart."

Her hand slowly dropped to her sidearm. Her instincts were telling her to pursue and ambush the Dowd out of principle, but surprise

couldn't make up for eight-to-one odds, especially if any of the faceless monsters had psionic powers of their own. She was a skilled fighter, but she wasn't Kal. One well-placed disruptor shot would put her down for good.

"Did they kill everyone else on board?" she asked.

"Not everyone," Zilex said. "There is one other lifeform nearby. The drone's scanners are not sophisticated enough to discern the species, but the heat signature is high."

Ash froze. "High enough to be Kreen?"

"Yes."

"Then show me where."

She was moving even before the scan results appeared on her holopad. The reading was coming from the aft section of the vessel, and she dropped all pretense of stealth as she dashed through the corridors. Her hologuise cloak faltered halfway, but it didn't seem to matter since the Dowd were on their way out and had apparently disabled all the base's internal security systems. And it wasn't as if there was anyone left alive to care, regardless.

She passed through several hatches without any trouble, and thirty seconds later she arrived at what was obviously the ship's brig. The Dowd had forced this door open—an explosive charge had left behind a scorched opening several meters wide. With her pistol clutched in both hands, Ash peered inside.

There were eight cells arranged in a semicircular pattern along the opposite wall, all completely open since the forcefields had been disabled. Most of them were empty, but the one directly on her right had a smoldering body inside—a Sillibar, by the looks of it, though the upper half of the body had been vaporized.

"A close-range disruptor blast," Zilex said. "Performed recently."

Wincing at the grotesque sight, Ash moved to the other side of the brig. There, in one of the last cells, was the lifesign they'd detected.

Her brother.

"Leenam," she breathed, dashing into the cell. He was restrained on a med-table, and his body convulsed every few seconds as if he were suffering from mild, erratic seizures. His blond hair had been buzzed short, and he had a nasty scar on his left cheek. His skin was eerily pallid, as if he were ill.

Ash had her med scanner out in a heartbeat. She was no doctor—she wasn't even a medic. All she knew were the bits and pieces of first aid Saleya's organization had taught her. But one didn't need formal training to read the scanner's output, and even though Leenam's vitals were worrying, there didn't seem to be anything physically wrong with him.

"What the hell is happening to him?"

"Impossible to diagnose without further analysis," Zilex said.

"Can you guess?"

"Not with statistically sufficient accuracy."

Snarling irritably, Ash placed her hand on her brother's forehead. It was clammy as hell—and cold, too, at least compared to her body temperature.

"He said they put somethin' inside his head. You think they infected him with some virus?"

"If he were infected by a pathogen, it is unlikely he would have been imprisoned without bio-containment measures. Unless it is not contagious."

She swore her heart had stopped beating, and she forced herself to take a calming breath and focus. "We gotta get him outta here. We gotta get him to a real doctor!"

"In his condition, he may not survive the journey."

“Of course he’ll survive!” Ash hissed. “I just need to figure out what they’ve done to him!”

Keeping her hand against his forehead, she stretched out with her psychometric powers. A haunting gallery of memories and images instantly washed over her. She became a piece of flotsam caught in a roaring tide, unable to do anything besides try to stay above water. Waves of anguish and terror and regret pummeled her...

She gasped and pulled away, unable to withstand the torrent. But the last image she saw was Leenam stepping into what looked like a medical pod. She’d seen the same thing when she’d performed a reading on Orophel days ago, but she still didn’t understand.

“I think...I think he might have been inside a stasis pod,” Ash said, blinking and trying to breathe normally. “In the message, he said something about slowing down whatever was wrong with him.”

“That may suggest a pathogen after all,” Zilex said. “Or a degenerative illness. Medical stasis pods are often used to delay such conditions until proper medical treatment is available.”

“Then we gotta get him back into it,” she said. “It must be here some—”

Leenam abruptly stirred. His eyes slowly fluttered open. The shade of green was both piercing and familiar, since she saw it—and the dark, cat-like pupils within—every time she looked into the mirror.

“Ash?” he gasped.

“I’m here!” she said, squeezing his arm. “Stars, what the hell have they done to you?”

Leenam’s eyes continued to flutter as if he could barely muster the strength to keep them open, and his breaths were rough and haggard as if his lungs were on the verge of failure.

“Ash,” he croaked again. “You came...”

“Of course I came!” she said. “Shit, we gotta get you to a doctor!”

Reaching into her cloak, she retrieved her psionic dagger. With a few quick slices, she freed him from the straps retraining him to the table.

“It’s too late for that,” Leenam said, his hand flashing up to snatch her wrist once it was free. “You gotta get out of here. The Dowd...they’re on the ship.”

“They’re leavin’,” Ash told him. “They got whatever they wanted.”

His brow furrowed in confusion. “It doesn’t matter,” he rasped. “It’s...it’s too late.”

Ash shook her head. “Too late for what? What the hell is goin’ on? Why are you here? Why were you in that pod thing?”

Leenam swallowed heavily, and she felt his entire body tremble as if he were about to have another seizure. “The seed,” he managed. “It’s growing. Spreading. I can’t...I can’t stop it!”

“Seed?” she asked. “What seed? What are you talkin’ about?”

He grimaced and drew another labored breath. “They put it inside me. To control...to transform...*agb!*”

Leenam squeezed her arm so tightly it hurt. She held onto him, wishing desperately there was something, *anything*, she could do for him...

“Mindseed,” he croaked when he found his voice again. “They implant it...for control. Can’t stop it. Can’t remove it.”

“But you slowed it down,” Ash reasoned. “Inside a stasis pod.”

Leenam nodded. “I knew the Red Claw used them. I sent you a message...I thought I could last long enough.”

She grimaced. “They sold you out. I saw it—the Column paid big money to get you back.”

His voice failed again, and he didn’t seem to have any strength left. It was like he was slipping away right in front of her, and there was nothing she could do about it.

Nothing...except try to learn the truth.

“If you can’t tell me, then I need you to show me,” Ash said. “Please.”

Focusing on her powers again, she returned her hand to his cheek and allowed the tide to crash over her.

Once again, the images came in an unstoppable torrent that threatened to drown her. Anguish. Fear. Regret. But she forced herself to push through them right to the source.

The memories were all there for her to see, imprinted on his psyche like mental footprints. She saw glimpses of him training with the Column, working with a team of assassins on Kenabrius, capturing Saleya on the mothership...

But there was so much more. Trials. Torture. Experiments.

Commands.

Ash could feel the dark presence in the back of Leenam’s mind, almost as if he were possessed by a vengeful psychic spirit. The presence grew over time, devouring more and more of his thoughts, but it had rapidly metastasized after his failure to kill her and Kal on the mothership. Leenam had run away as far as he could; he had reached out to former allies for help only to realize he was alone. There was no help, no cure, only a last desperate hope that his sister might find him if he could buy her some time.

“When I saw you on Kenabrius, something snapped,” Leenam managed, his eyes closed and his breaths coming even shallower. “And after the mothership...I couldn’t do it anymore. I just...I had to run.”

Ash inhaled sharply as she pulled back from the images. “Why didn’t you come to me? I would have—”

“I couldn’t,” he growled. “I couldn’t face you. Not after what I’d done. Not after what I’d become...”

He convulsed again, and a stream of tears flowed down his cheeks. “Then it was too late. I felt the change comin’, and I knew I couldn’t stop it. But I knew you’d come—I knew you wouldn’t let it go. All I had to do was figure out a way to stall.”

Leenam swallowed so heavily he nearly choked. “I couldn’t go back to the Column, but we’d done business with the Claw before. They stole Succubi from the Borderlands corps that breed ’em. They kept them in stasis tryin’ to figure out how to make their own.”

A fresh sense of horror and revulsion slammed into her. Ash had no idea that the Claw had branched out from kidnapping and trafficking to research...

“I don’t know what the Dowd are doing here, but the Column captured a Sillibar,” Leenam said. “They were interrogating him. Tryin’ to learn something important...”

“Fuck the Dowd, I don’t care about that right now,” Ash said. “We gotta get you outta here. There’s gotta be some way to undo what they did to you.”

“Didn’t you hear me? It’s too late! I can already feel it...it’s changin’ me, Ash. And I can’t stop it!”

Bile rose in her throat. The scanner still wasn’t telling her anything useful. But if she could somehow get him to the *Renegade*, Doctor Trevas might be able to help. Or Miranda—that girl could fix anything.

“Go,” Leenam said, lifting a trembling hand to touch her hair. “Leave while you still can!”

“I will,” Ash promised, brushing his scarred face. “And you’re comin’ with me.”

Chapter 9

Discoveries

A waken.

I inhaled sharply, and my eyes shot open at the mental summons. The telepathic voice was like an alarm sounding inside my skull. I glanced at the nightstand by my bed to check the clock, but it was still the middle of the night—my shift wasn't set to begin for another two hours. I groaned and leaned up on one arm, barely able to see anything with the viewport shutters closed.

I could definitely still feel Astra in the bed with me, though. One of her silky smooth legs was still slung over my back, and I could hear her breathing softly a few centimeters away. I reached out to toggle the lights to minimum luminosity and saw her head mostly on the other pillow, her *veroshi* tendrils spilled around her almost like long braids of hair.

I smiled and gently ran my fingers over her slender shoulders. The poor girl had to be exhausted after the workout Saleya and I had given her last night. I'd bent her nubile body in so many different directions in and off the bed that she had to be sore. Saleya must have scampered off on her own earlier, which was a little disappointing but not surprising. Her unique genetic makeup meant she didn't sleep much, and she often vanished before morning. Sometimes it was to mix drinks and get us something to eat, but other times—like today—she also

liked to give me extra time alone with whatever new girl we'd shared the prior evening.

"The female should leave."

I practically hopped out of bed in shock at the sound of Velarys's voice. To my stunned disbelief, she was standing in the bedroom doorway behind me, arms crossed and face set in stone.

"What the hell?" I croaked out as I flipped over. "When did you—?"

"We need to speak," she said. "Alone."

Before I could say anything, Astra groaned back to consciousness.

"Did you...did you say something, Kal?"

"He did not," Velarys said. "I did."

Astra's eyes finally opened wide enough to see the other woman, and she immediately gasped and pulled up the sheets to cover herself as she jerked upright.

"You could have knocked," I growled at Velarys.

"I alerted you to my presence," she said. "It is time for the female to leave. *Now.*"

"Oh, stars!" Astra gasped, practically vaulting out of the bed in terror. "I-I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"It's all right," I soothed, sitting up and putting a comforting hand on her arm. "You don't need to leave."

"Yes," Velarys said, "she does."

"I'm going!" Astra insisted as she scrambled to retrieve her clothes from the floor. "Just don't hurt me!"

Velarys's expression instantly softened. "Why would I harm you?"

Astra froze, one delicate foot slid halfway back into its heel. "I...I mean, y-you seem upset. Please don't melt my brain!"

"I am not upset." Velarys eyed the other woman for several moments, then uncrossed her arms. "And I would never harm a civilian, especially not a female. I would defend you with my life."

Astra's eyes flicked between Velarys and me, at a loss for words.

"You'll have to forgive her," I said. "Yarasi are very...*direct*. And some of their customs are strange to us."

"*Some?*" Velarys asked.

With a grunt, I stood and gave Astra's shoulders a reassuring squeeze. "You have to remember, Yarasi ships don't have doors, so they aren't accustomed to knocking. Privacy is a rare and usually unwanted thing."

"Oh," Astra said. "Um...I see."

"I apologize if I made you uncomfortable," Velarys said with a contrite nod. "But I do need to speak with the Commander in private."

"Right. Um...okay." Astra swallowed and seemed to relax a little, then retrieved the short, skimpy black dress she'd worn up here and slid it over her yellow skin. "I'll, uh, I'll just get out of your way, then."

I gently took her wrist before she could scurry off. "I really enjoyed your new routine," I said, giving her a warm smile. "If you come up with any more, let me know."

She smiled back, her dark eyes sparkling and her *veroshi* swaying gently. "I will," she promised. "I've never had a night like that before."

I gently brushed one of her *veroshi*, which immediately triggered a gasp. It was a little trick I'd learned during our escapades last night.

"Let Saleya know I'll come speak to her later, all right?"

"I will," Astra said, holding my eyes for another moment, then turning back to Velarys. She moved forward slowly, as if she were still a bit concerned that the Yarasi wouldn't let her pass. And just as Astra started to slide past, Velarys moved to block her.

"Wait," she said, eyeing the Neyris up and down. "You are the lounge dancer, correct?"

"I'm, er, I'm the waitress," Astra said. "Working for Lady Saleya."

Velarys nodded. "Then you are an ally."

“I...yes?”

“Good. Then you shall return here tonight at 2300 hours. The Commander and I will both be off-duty.”

Astra blinked, and she glanced back and forth between us. “I...I beg your pardon?”

“You may entertain us,” Velarys said. “And then we shall pleasure ourselves and the Commander together. Is this acceptable?”

I felt my own jaw drop open, and for a second, I thought Astra might actually faint.

“Are...” Astra stammered. “Are you serious?”

“Yarasi do not waste time with petty deceptions,” Velarys said. “I sense your physical attraction to both of us, so I am offering you a chance to participate. Do you agree?”

“Yes!” Astra said, a tentative smile on her lips. “Yes, that sounds...fun.”

“Excellent. Then make certain to wear clothing which can easily be removed.” Velarys swung her body to the side to open the doorway. “Until then.”

Astra hesitated for another moment, then flashed me an excited smile before she finally scurried away.

“First you scare the hell out of her, then you make her day,” I said, crossing my arms. “For a woman who wears her thoughts on her sleeves, you’re tough to figure out sometimes.”

“I made my intentions quite clear,” she said, taking a step toward me. “I informed you that I would require your full attention during the *jabumir*.”

“I know,” I said. “But—”

Velarys moved so quickly I had no time to react. She lunged forward and tackled me, throwing me back onto the bed. She was straddling

me a heartbeat later, her hips grinding into my waist while her hands pinned my arms above my head.

"I said that your other females would have to wait for your attention until the cycle was complete," Velarys said, eyes flashing in anger. Or maybe arousal. With her, it was often hard to tell.

"I know," I said. "But Saleya *can't* wait that long."

"Saleya was not the one sharing your bed."

"She was earlier," I said. "She, uh...she likes to mix things up."

Velarys brought her lips within a millimeter of mine. "Then you may invite her tonight as well. But she must understand the rules of the *jahumir*. Your seed is mine until the cycle is complete."

Her tongue slid into my mouth, and the comforting buzz of her psychic energy gradually spread through my entire body. My manhood swelled as she began grinding her hips against my naked lap, and I reached up to unfasten her belt and push her pants down over her slender hips.

"I think..." I managed when our lips parted and I felt the heat of her quim hovering over me, "I think she'll be fine with those terms."

"I hope so, because they are not negotiable." She grinned, and there was no mistaking the lust in her eyes. "But you should know that this arrangement may not be to your benefit."

I raised an eyebrow. "Why's that?"

"Because I will bring them pleasure unlike they have ever experienced from a mere male. They may no longer need your services in the future."

I snorted into a smile. "I'll take you up on that bet."

"I thought you might," she said, biting my lip hard enough it hurt. "But for now, I require your full attention. I wish you to inseminate me at least twice before your shift begins."

"Only twice?"

“At a minimum.” Velarys shrugged. “You will have to prove if you are capable of more.”

Smiling, I grabbed a hold of her waist and flipped her over onto her back. She moaned in delight once she was beneath me where she belonged, and again when I brought my swollen tip against the waiting folds of her Yarasi flower.

“Challenge accepted,” I growled as I pushed inside her. “Let’s see if we can break our record.”

With our combined dedication—and Velarys’s psychometabolic abilities—we thoroughly demolished our previous record. And even after I’d spilled inside her a fourth time in just over an hour, it was difficult to let her go so I could clean up and prepare for duty. Her *jabumir* sex drive was almost terrifying. It was like Ash on stims.

But while Velarys could seemingly restore me forever, she couldn’t do the same for herself, and she eventually snuggled into the sheets to sleep while I took a shower. Between this and last night with Astra and Saleya, I was going to need a *lot* of coffee, especially since we’d be idle in astral space most of the day.

Velarys was asleep when I got out of the shower, and she didn’t stir even when I planted a kiss on her shoulder. I spent a few moments appreciating the curves of her naked gray flesh, then finally put on my uniform and started the day.

We had about nine hours left until we arrived at New Krosis, and I spent the first part of my shift reviewing after-action reports from all the ship’s department heads. With a few exceptions, everyone had performed almost flawlessly, so there wasn’t all that much to discuss.

But it was still nice to see the effects of high morale all throughout the ship, particularly among our Pact crew members. I could have been imagining it, but it certainly felt like the Angoth engineers and technicians had some extra bounce in their strides.

I briefly checked in with Vrisk later in the day, and my chief engineer informed me that his decryption teams were working as hard and fast as they could. I had no interest in getting in their way, but I had a feeling they were missing Miranda's presence even if they didn't say as much. To that end, I decided to check up on how she and Hebeska were faring with their alien autopsies.

An assault frigate like the *Renegade* didn't have the space for one of the enormous, state-of-the-art science labs on Dominion capital ships, but the designers had built in a more modest version on the middeck. The lab was about the size of my quarters, with the computers and equipment taking up about a third of that space. I had only the vaguest notion of what most of the devices did, but thankfully my science and operations officers knew what they were doing.

When I entered, Hebeska and Miranda were gathered around a bio-analysis table at the center of the room. They had secured one of the Dowd corpses upon it, and two tiny scanning drones floated overhead. A holographic medical readout with images and text floated between them.

With me joining them in the room, there wasn't a great deal of open floor space left. A team of three people seemed like the room's realistic capacity, especially if one of them had wings like Hebeska.

"Commander," Miranda said, though she didn't look up from the display. "We discovered a few anomalies you should know about."

"Not sure I like the sound of that," I muttered, my eyes flicking between the corpse and the display. The readouts were only a step above complete gibberish.

“Nor am I,” Miranda agreed, lowering her hand from the display where it had been scrolling through data. “As you know, we haven’t had the opportunity to scan one of the psionically gifted Dowd before. The results have been...illuminating.”

“Go on,” I prompted.

Miranda opened her mouth as if she were about to continue, but then she paused and looked at her Angoth partner instead. Hebeska took the cue.

“The Pact has recovered several other corpses from raids across our space,” the Angoth woman said, her leathery wings stretching up a bit in a gesture that seemed like the human equivalent of bracing oneself. “None of them possessed psionic abilities, but they provided a useful basis for comparison.”

“Makes sense,” I said, nodding. “Are there differences?”

“Many,” she said, touching the controls on the bio-bed and shifting the hologram to project a comparative scan of two Dowd brains. “As you can see, the differences are significant.”

I glanced between the two readouts. “Neuroscience isn’t my specialty. Can you give me a summary?”

Hebeska’s ridged brow furrowed. “I was under the impression that all human fleet officers were provided with significant training in the sciences.”

“I wasn’t born a fleet officer,” I told her, wondering idly how much the Pact knew about the variance between jennies and natties. “So why don’t you humor me?”

“Erm,” Hebeska stuttered. “Well...”

“The short version is that the differences between the Dowd appear to be the result of environmental factors rather than direct genetic manipulation,” Miranda piped in.

“Interesting,” I mused. “So in other words, their psychics weren’t created in a lab.”

“Correct. Our fears that the insurrectionists had learned to psychogenetically engineer Dowd psychics appears to be unfounded.”

“Thank the Seraph for that,” I murmured. “Do you know anything about these ‘environmental factors?’ I assume we’re not talking about something simple like radiation.”

“No,” Miranda said, sharing another look with Hebeska. “But we do have a working theory.”

The Angoth woman nodded. “We believe the changes are the result of long-term exposure to the energies of the Tartaran Veil.”

“Really,” I said, eyes narrowing at the readouts. “I thought that kind of long-term exposure was supposed to drive people mad. Almost like the Koro Effect from lingering in astral space too long.”

“There is considerable documented evidence of the effect of the Veil on all known sentient species in the Cluster,” Hebeska said. “But the sample sizes are relatively small. It is also possible that the Dowd react differently than anyone else.”

“Or that the way they were exposed was different,” Miranda added. “Perhaps it was only a specific region of the Veil. Or perhaps they harnessed the energies somehow to create a means of artificial exposure. We don’t have sufficient data to speculate further.”

“Seems like a hell of a discovery regardless,” I said, shifting my gaze to the lifeless body. “There have always been rumors about them retreating into the Veil after the last war. Maybe they actually did. It would...”

I trailed off when a second thought belatedly struck me. “Wait a minute,” I said. “Would this also explain what’s been happening in the Driftward Worlds with nonhumans starting to develop psionic abilities?”

An instant after speaking the words, I feared I'd made a mistake. The Dominion had been trying to keep that development under wraps, though I couldn't imagine we'd succeeded. And when Hebeska didn't react strongly to the comment, I knew my concern was unwarranted.

Of course they already knew about it. The Kaori Tash surely had agents spread throughout Dominion space.

"It is an interesting hypothesis," Hebeska said. "But without more data, all we can do is speculate."

I tried to imagine how the Science Directorate would react to this information. This was a monumental discovery, to put it lightly. If there was a way for the Veil to give people psionic powers—people who weren't human or Yarasi—it would change everything. The long-term implications were staggering, especially if it could be harnessed somehow for controlled exposure—almost like a pathogen. A Psychophage bringing the Seraph's power to aliens across the galaxy.

Many people on the mothership would balk at that prospect. Fleet Command would consider it an enormous threat to Dominion sovereignty. In time, it could prove as monumental as rebuilding the Straw and giving humanity the means to escape the Cluster.

"We also don't yet have a working theory about why some Dowd may have been exposed but not others," Miranda added. "It's possible there were multiple groups, or that the environmental changes only affect a percentage."

"It still explains why they have powers and why the Column was so eager to teach them," I said. "Vrisk said he believes that *thousands* of Dowd had been through that facility at Nirivarr."

"A terrifying prospect," Hebeska whispered. "Shak'Ath preserve us."

"Indeed," I said grimly. "Anything else?"

“Not at the moment, Commander,” Miranda said. “I don’t believe there’s much else we can learn from this body.”

“Fair enough,” I said, noting the twinkle in her blue eyes. There *was* something else she wanted to tell me...but not in front of our Pact guest.

“Ensign, go ahead and return to the bridge,” I said to Hebeska. “I’ll get Ensign Pierce here to help out the decryption team.”

“Yes, sir,” the Angoth woman said. She offered Miranda a cordial nod, then picked up her holopad and left the lab.

“Trouble?” I asked Miranda once we were alone.

“Perhaps,” she said, eyeing the door. “I made several other discoveries during our analysis. They are...concerning.”

I frowned. “Concerning how?”

“I mentioned that we were comparing the scans of this body to those the Pact had taken of other Dowd from the various raids across their space.”

“Right...” I prompted.

Miranda took a deep breath and returned her gaze to the corpse. “My concern is that the Pact data has been altered. Subtly...but undeniably.”

The back of my neck started tingling. “Altered how?”

“Some of the base genetic markers were changed. The differences are small enough that a casual perusal might not reveal anything, but—”

“You don’t do anything casually,” I said.

She smiled tightly. “No, sir. But neither does Hebeska. She is highly knowledgeable—she should have recognized the anomalies. When she didn’t, I became...suspicious.”

“Are you accusing her of falsifying the data?”

“No, I believe the data was falsified before it was provided to us,” Miranda said. “In fact, after running my own analysis, I would not be surprised if the data was altered by the Governing Authority before it was provided to the Pact scientists.”

I shook my head. “Why? What are they hiding?”

Miranda took in another breath. “I will show you.”

Touching the console, she changed the display to a report on cell structure and DNA sequences. Which I only knew because the floating text readout was nicely labeled.

“When Ensign Hebeska went off-duty yesterday, I stayed behind to attempt to reconstruct the anomalies myself,” Miranda said. “It was more difficult than I anticipated, but I eventually succeeded.”

I placed my hands on her shoulders and gave them a squeeze. “What is ‘eventually’ by your standards? Ten minutes?”

“Almost an hour.”

“Ah,” I said, snickering as I planted a kiss on the top of her head. “Go on.”

“This is a comparison of my reconstructed non-psionic Dowd specimen compared to the psionic Dowd specimen. The anomalies I found didn’t change the results here—everything we discovered about the Veil exposure remains the same.”

“Okay,” I said, confused. “Then what’s the problem?”

She called up a different scan. “This is my reconstructed Dowd specimen compared to the Science Directorate’s Sillibar bio-scan.”

I frowned. For a heartbeat, I thought she might have called up the wrong scan. They looked virtually identical...

But then I noticed a handful of small differences. Very small. I wasn’t any more versed in genetic analysis than I was in comparative brain scans, I knew that two species shouldn’t be this alike.

“Am I crazy, or are these unusually similar?” I asked, a tingle in my neck worming its way down my spine.

Miranda glanced back at me and nodded, a faint spark of approval in her eye. She’d probably wondered if my simple natty brain could figure it out.

“*Very* similar,” she said.

“Shouldn’t species from different worlds have completely different genetics?” I asked.

“Yes,” Miranda said. “And with the alterations in the Pact dataset, those differences would have seemed appropriately vast.”

“They’re hiding the similarities?” I asked. “Are you telling me that the Dowd and the Sillibar are the same race?”

Miranda shook her head. “No, not precisely. But the similarities are too numerous to explain by random chance.”

I slowly shook my head as the implications washed over me. How could a race of shapeshifters possibly be related to the Dowd? The only thing they had in common visually was a vaguely similar body structure and the lack of a mouth.

“I assume you have a theory,” I said.

“There are many potential explanations,” Miranda said. “Like the Yarasi, the Sillibar are an ancient race who colonized the stars long before humanity, possibly even before the Tarreen. It’s conceivable that a series of mutations many generations ago split one race into two.”

I pressed my tongue hard into the back of my teeth as I paced around the table. “You don’t seem confident about that.”

“I’m not. But I am only speculating.”

“I’ll take your speculation over most people’s facts,” I said. “So what is your real theory?”

Miranda paused for a long moment, her eyes lost in the scans. “Based on some of these genetic markers, I believe the Dowd may actually be an older species than the Sillibar. And given the nature of the Sillibar’s genetic structure and their unique powers...”

“What?” I prompted.

She swallowed. “Sir, I think the Sillibar may not have evolved naturally.”

“You mean...you think they were *created*?”

Miranda nodded. “By the Dowd.”

I froze, feeling as if someone had just punched me in the gut. “That’s...” I trailed off. “How sure are you?”

“Not sure at all,” she said.

“Give me a number.”

Miranda paused. “Seventy percent, give or take.”

“Unbelievable,” I breathed. “I mean that literally, I’m not sure I believe it.”

“It may explain their animosity toward one another. If the Sillibar were an experiment—and if those experiments eventually became more powerful than their creators...”

My mouth went dry. Even after Captain Ellis—specifically, Razel—had finally explained his Dowd obsession to me, he had never mentioned anything like this. His fear and hatred were born out of surviving a genocidal war two centuries earlier. He had never said specifically *why* the Dowd had wanted to wipe the Sillibar out, but I’d never really thought that much about it. History was littered with empires trying to kill each other for all kinds of reasons, some more understandable than others.

Was it possible that Razel hadn’t known this himself? My gut told me that was unlikely, but I couldn’t rule out the possibility. Now, I’d never get the chance to find out.

“No one in the Pact has any clue about this, do they?” I asked.

“Unlikely, sir,” Miranda said. “Otherwise the secret would have leaked by now. That must be why the Dowd scans were altered—the Sillibar knew they wouldn’t be able to conceal this from the Angoth once they started getting their hands on Dowd bodies. But with these scans, autopsies might not seem as useful or relevant. Though if the war drags on, it seems more and more likely that someone else will figure this out.”

“I’m not sure what to do with this information. If we pass it along to the Science Directorate, the Sillibar will eventually learn that we know the truth—we have no idea how many of their operatives are in Dominion space.”

I took a deep breath. This was going to require some thought—a *lot* of thought. But Miranda was right that this might very well explain the Dowd obsession with the Sillibar, and vice versa.

“You did well, Ensign,” I said. “Very well.”

“Thank you, sir,” she replied. She smiled, but it only lasted a heartbeat. “I’m not certain how to deal with Hebeska now.”

“If you’re right, she’s not the one who altered the data. She doesn’t know the truth. And now probably isn’t the time to bring it up, especially since it’s still speculative.”

I pursed my lips. “For now, I think the two of you have accomplished what I wanted. I’ll have her draft a report on your findings about the Veil exposure so she can submit it to the Authority. We’ll do the same with our report to the DSD.”

“Yes, sir.”

“In the meantime, why don’t you head down to engineering and help Vrisk with the decryption? They seem lost without you.”

“I doubt that, sir,” Miranda said. “But I’ll gladly help.”

She closed down the projection and began to head for the door, but I intercepted her on the way. Taking her by the shoulders, I leaned down and gave her a kiss. It was long and deep, the kind where she naturally stretched up on her tiptoes to try and make herself taller.

“I couldn’t do this without you,” I said when I finally pulled away.

“I know,” Miranda replied with a smile. “You *are* just a natty.”

I snorted, suddenly tempted to bend her over the console and put her jenny body in its place. But that would have to wait for another day.

“Get moving, Ensign,” I said. “I’ll check up on you later.”

Interlude

“He appears to be stable for now,” Zilex said. “Though without psionic abilities, I cannot determine the condition of his thoughts, only his body.”

Ash nodded and crossed her arms. They were standing in the *Wildcat*'s small cargo hold, where they'd hauled the stasis pod off the Column base and put Leenam inside. He'd been inside that thing for almost thirty-six hours now, and his vitals had remained stable so far. But she had no way of knowing how much longer it would be until they could get him help.

It would take days at a minimum before Kal got her message. And it could easily be a week or more before she'd be able to rendezvous with the *Renegade*, wherever it was.

“You think it will slow down the seed?” she asked.

“As I've said the other times you've asked, I cannot speculate,” Zilex replied. “Neither the Dominion nor the Yarasi readily share information about the nature of the powers.”

“Right,” Ash murmured, stepping up to the pod and looking at her reflection on the transparent surface. She glared at the bags under her eyes in the hopes she could will them out of existence but sadly, it had no effect. The only cure—a long, uninterrupted night's sleep—had remained elusive ever since she'd left Endikar.

Bad enough not knowin' where Kal is, she thought to herself. It's downright torture havin' no idea when he'll actually get the message and send one back.

She had known this would be an issue when they'd split up, of course—he was flying around Pact space in a cloaked ship without an itinerary. He could have been almost anywhere, and it wasn't as if she could just contact the authorities here in the Angoth Colonies and ask for his location. Frankly, they might not even know.

Things wouldn't have been so bad if she'd been here alone without any time constraints. Angoth planets were supposed to be quite beautiful if you got used to the low gravity. She'd always wanted to see their floating island cities in person.

Unfortunately, *she* did have time constraints—for every hour that passed, more of her brother's mind got gobbled up by that psionic seed. She didn't know how long it would take to germinate, but Leenam had been convinced that even cryostasis might not stop it completely. She had to get him to the *Renegade* as soon as possible.

"Any luck on figurin' out what the Dowd were lookin' for in the computers?" Ash asked.

"Not yet," Zilex lamented. "The system's security protocols are quite advanced. The data on the drives we recovered deleted itself when it detected a breach."

Her mouth twisted. "So we have nothin'. Great."

The android shook his silver serpentine head. "That is not entirely true. While I cannot reconstruct the data, I believe there is a way for me to recover the queries the Dowd made. It might be possible to learn what they were searching for even if the information itself has been deleted."

Ash sighed. "Well, do whatever you can. The more info we can give Kal when we get back, the better."

“Agreed.” Zilex paused briefly. “In the meantime, you should get some sleep. There is little for us to do now but wait until Commander Zeris is near a Pact relay where he can respond to your message.”

“I know. Just...just keep an eye on Leenam, all right?”

“Of course,” the android said, sounding about as comforting as she’d ever heard. Though that was admittedly a very low bar.

With a sigh, she left the cargo hold and made her way to the washroom on the opposite side of the rear corridor. Looking at herself in the mirror, the bags under her eyes were even worse than she’d thought. She was usually pretty good at dealing with anxiety, but this was tearing her up inside. She *hated* feeling powerless, and it was starting to take its toll. Her skin seemed paler than normal, and even her lips seemed like they’d lost a bit of color overnight.

But then, that was probably to be expected. She’d been so stressed she’d woken up and puked the last two mornings. And she was still nauseous now.

Gritting her teeth, Ash reached into the sink and splashed some cold water on her face. It made her feel a little better, but the nausea remained. It was beyond irritating.

Doing her best to ignore the sensation, she stepped out of the washroom and into her quarters where Kalycos was waiting for her on the bed. Stripping out of her clothes, she laid down next to him and scratched his chin the way he liked so much.

“What do ya think?” she asked. “Will Velarys be able to help him with those fancy Yarasi mind powers of hers?”

Kalycos responded with a deep, rumbling purr that seemed to vibrate the whole bed.

“Glad you’re so confident. Then again, you always did seem to like her better than the others.”

Ash smiled. Maybe Miranda could help, too—that girl was even more of a walking database than Zilex. And a hell of a lot cuter.

The thought brought a wry grin to Ash's lips. As much as she wished Kal were here, she wouldn't have minded having a bit of time alone with Miranda, either. That girl was a hell of a kisser, and her jenny body was something special. Ash had spent so many years living vicariously through Kal's seemingly endless conquests that it had been amazing to finally touch one of his other girls herself. She and Miranda had almost nothing in common, but Ash had come to love hanging out with her anyway. It had been a long, long time since she'd had a girlfriend to watch trashy holo-vids with.

Besides, Ash still owed her for all her help with the fertility injections. Miranda was basically a savior who—

Ash froze, her eyes flicking up to the nightstand where she was keeping Miranda's injections. And all of a sudden, her anxiety and nausea burned away in a surge of excitement.

She dashed to the *Wildcat's* infirmary in record time, and she had the bioscanner in hand a split second later. It was a far cry from the sophisticated medical devices one could find on any military starship, but it was powerful enough to tell her what she wanted to know. Namely, if there was *another* reason she'd been feeling so ill the last two mornings since they'd left Endikar. Ash held her breath, waiting for the results...

And when they finally appeared, all she could do was stare down at the screen. Her hand began to tremble until she nearly dropped the device, and tears began streaking down her cheeks. She read over the results again and again, constantly expecting them to change.

But they didn't. The analysis was as clear as a sunrise on the plains of Nirivarr where she'd grown up. Ash wasn't ill.

She was pregnant.

Chapter 10

Reconnection

Like the Gateway World of Nirule, New Krosis was a massive Pact military hub filled with soldiers, starships, and everything needed to support them. But unlike Nirule, it was normally off-limits to outsiders. No Dominion vessel had entered this system in decades, and when the *Renegade* approached the massive shipyard at the center of the system, I half expected the automated defenses to cut us to ribbons.

But they didn't, of course. Today, we were the triumphant heroes returning from a glorious battle on their behalf. If anyone could appreciate that, it was the Krosians.

This system—New Krosis—was the effective capital of this part of Pact space. The sector defense fleet was here, as were millions of troops garrisoned on the second planet and upon other facilities scattered throughout the system. The Dowd hadn't been bold enough to strike here yet, but that didn't mean there were no signs of the continuing war. Freighters, troop transports, and the warships escorting them were constantly leaving through and emerging from the half a dozen jump corridors.

And there was the shipyard itself, which looked like some kind of monstrous creature with all the docking arms stretching out in seemingly random directions from the kilometer-wide central hub. The gangly appearance was undoubtedly the result of decades worth

of additions built to meet the increasing demands of the military. The whole apparatus was a stark contrast to the meticulously planned and organized Dominion versions on Eladrell Prime and New Praxius.

“That’s a *lot* of damaged ships,” Reyes commented once the shipyard and its myriad platforms and docking arms filled the viewer. “Where are they all coming from?”

“All across this region, I would think,” I said, glancing at the read-outs on my own console. “The Dowd have been hitting the shipping lanes along the Conduit harder than most places, and this is the biggest shipyard within a thousand light-years.”

“Lots of half-constructed ships, too,” Olshenko added from behind me. “Some of those frames look like they’ve been there a long time.”

I had thoughts on that as well, but I decided not to express them with Hebeska back at her station. Frankly, it seemed crass—and awkward as hell—to speculate about a long-time adversary’s economic woes right in front of them, especially since it wasn’t directly relevant to the task at hand. Inwardly, though, the sight confirmed the intelligence reports Lochlan had been feeding me since this mission began.

Namely, that the Pact’s economic problems weren’t exclusively a result of the Dowd incursion. Their long-term military buildup was rotting their empire from the inside.

“Comms, ask the controller if they want us to come aboard or hang back,” I said. “I still haven’t received—”

“Sir, incoming transmission,” Ensign Mesko interrupted. “It is from Councilor Vokal. He’s requesting to speak with you on a private channel as soon as possible.”

“Well, I suppose that clears it up,” I replied mildly as I rose from my chair. “Helm, go ahead and park wherever they want us for now. We’ll put everything else on hold until I hear what the Councilor has to say.”

“Yes, sir,” Reyes acknowledged.

I glanced down at Velarys. “You have the bridge, Commander.”

I headed into my office, a little surprised to be contacted by Vokal instead of a direct Governing Authority official. But perhaps they were content to make the Sillibar Councilor my official liaison to their government. If so, I didn’t mind; he was the one who’d been willing to trust us with that data packet. Hopefully he hadn’t gotten in trouble with the Authority for handing it over.

But how is he going to react when I bring up what we discovered about the Sillibar and the Dowd?

The thought raced through my head as I poured myself some fresh coffee, then sat down and prepared to open my private comm channel. It had been hours since Miranda had dropped that revelation in my lap, and I still wasn’t sure what, if anything, to do about it. Demanding an explanation from Vokal didn’t seem like a great way to further build our relationship. I probably just needed to sit on it until I had a chance to talk to Admiral Lochlan again...

Setting the thought aside, I opened the channel. The upper half of Advisor Golma’s elderly Angoth body appeared on the projection, but surprisingly, Vokal didn’t seem to be with him.

“Commander, good,” Golma said. “I’ve been looking forward to speaking with you ever since we received your report.”

“Councilor,” I said with a nod, noting the unexpected use of “I” rather than “we” in his response.

“Just Advisor, for the moment,” Golma corrected. “Councilor Vokal is otherwise occupied with the Governing Authority. But he is as pleased as I am about your recent success.”

My chest tightened in concern. I had never seen the two of them separated before—I assumed they were practically joined at the hip—and my suspicion level instantly rose a few notches. It was probably nothing; this was the proper channel cleared with all the proper

codes, and Golma had the same clearance as his boss as far as the Assembly was concerned.

But still...

"I'm glad to hear that," I said as smoothly as I could. "I know I took a risk heading so deep into your space, but thankfully it seems to have paid off."

"An understatement on both counts," Golma said. "If the Sillibar had known you planned to travel to Zurix...well, it would have gone over poorly."

"I didn't realize how protective they were of the system. The Pact crewmembers didn't seem to know much about it at all."

"The Authority and the Kaori Tash have both gone to great lengths to ensure that the site of the genocide is not disturbed. Perhaps it shouldn't be surprising that the Dowd were willing to use that against us."

"Perhaps not. Hopefully the fact that we exposed them will smooth over any potential diplomatic problems the mission may have caused."

Golma chuckled. "I don't think you have anything to worry about, Commander. We've desperately needed a victory, and you've given us one—and potentially the pathway to many more. The Sillibar can't be upset even if they want to be."

I nodded in quiet and belated understanding. So *that* was why Golma was speaking with me alone. He wasn't disparaging his boss specifically, but he wouldn't have said anything remotely critical of his shapeshifting masters if Vokal had been here with him. On his own, the old Angoth almost seemed like an entirely different person than the one I'd met on Kenabrius. Even the deepest creases on his leathery face appeared smoother, though that could have been a result of the holo-projection.

“My decryption team is working as hard as they can,” I said. “As you know, they had some success after Nirivarr, so odds are they’ll have something for us in the near future.”

“We all hope so, Commander,” Golma said. “If you require any additional resources, now is the time to ask.”

“I think we have everything they need, but I want to be ready to move the instant they find anything.” I held up a datapad where he could see it. “I put together a request for a task force, one that’s reasonably quick and lean but has enough punch to hammer through a more entrenched facility if we get lucky enough to find one.”

“Mm,” the old man murmured, his brow ridges tightening. “The Authority will need to look it over, of course. But I suspect they’ll agree, especially with the recent spate of attacks we suffered over the past week.”

“We were out of contact until we arrived here,” I said. “Anything I should be aware of?”

“I will send you the details, but the Dowd launched half a dozen simultaneous raids on various facilities over the past four days,” Golma said, voice tightening. “Most of them were well-defended, but their psionic abilities allowed them to bypass many of our defenses.”

I nodded soberly. It was yet another reminder that despite the Pact’s enormous military, numbers couldn’t always overcome technology and psionics. They were vulnerable in ways that the Dominion and Yarasi were not.

“Do you know what they were after?” I asked.

Golma’s face twisted in disgust. “Nothing in particular, only chaos and destruction.”

I could feel his professional embarrassment through the projection. Admitting such failures to a Dominion soldier and potential adversary

was obviously uncomfortable. I didn't see a need to dwell on it and make things worse.

"Get me those ships and we'll happily return the favor," I told him. "I'll pass along my request now."

I sent the file over the link, hoping he wouldn't look at it right away. I'd asked for a lot, far more than I expected to get. As thrilled as I would be if the Pact decided to give me a dozen starships and a few thousand ground troops, I would settle for whatever they could manage.

"I will bring this to Councilor Vokal's attention as soon as I can," Golma promised. "In the meantime, feel free to have your quartermaster send us any resupply requests you may have."

"I will, thank you."

The Angoth paused for a moment. "You should also know that I intend to speak with the Assembly Security Council about the potential of more joint operations. If you are able to locate more Dowd bases, it will help my case."

I chuckled. "It would help a lot of things, Advisor. But whatever you do, make sure to coordinate with Admiral Lochlan. Any support she can get from the Assembly will make a tremendous difference with Fleet Command back home. She's out on a limb here."

"Aren't we all these days?" Golma murmured, his dark, alien eyes gleaming. "We'll speak with you again soon, Commander."

The projection faded. I sat there in silence for a minute, taking gentle sips of my still-searing coffee and appreciating the immense difference a few short days could make. When we'd arrived in Zurix, it had seemed like the entire mission was on the edge of a knife, but now there was a very real possibility I'd be leading a task force in surgical strikes across Pact space. It reminded me of a lesson I'd learned from sports at a very young age: winning solved all problems.

I stood and walked over to the narrow window in the back of my office. There was a flash from a jump corridor as another Pact convoy entered the system, three cargo freighters protected by a destroyer. The warship looked like it had seen battle recently, and I wondered idly if it had been part of a larger escort. Pact forces really had been taking it on the chin, far more than anyone realized. Though I doubted anyone in Fleet Command would shed tears over it.

But maybe it was all about to change. Maybe Captain Ellis's dream of a lasting peace and a better future weren't just fevered fantasies.

Or maybe I was reading too much into a single victory. Either way, I'd find out soon enough.

I was about to head back to the bridge when the comm pinged. "Bridge to Commander Zeris," Ensign Mesko's voice said.

"Go ahead," I prompted.

"Another incoming transmission for you, sir, this one over the system comm relay. The message is encrypted, but it's marked with the high priority tag you set up a month ago."

I inhaled sharply. *Ash...*

"Put it through to me," I said.

"Transferring now, sir."

I sat back down at my desk and keyed in the private decryption cipher Vrisk had set up for us. A few seconds later, a small, ten-centimeter holo of the prettiest face in the galaxy appeared above the projector.

"Kal, I hope you get this soon," Ash said. "I don't know where you are, but we gotta talk. I don't wanna share what I've learned even with encrypt, but the Dowd are plannin' an attack—a big one. I've also got some very important and time-sensitive cargo here. I've attached my coordinates—set up a rendezvous as quick as you can, all right? I love you, baby."

The transmission ended. An anxious flutter bounced around my stomach as I reviewed the location data on the transmission. She was halfway across Pact space near the Angoth colonies, the more or less centralized rendezvous we'd set up since we had no idea where the *Renegade* would be once she'd finished her hunt. It would take several days for her to get here even with the *Wildcat's* newly functional astral drive...but it didn't sound like she had that kind of time.

"Bridge, this is Zeri," I said, reopening the com.

"Bridge," Velarys answered. "Is something wrong?"

"Probably not, but we need to take a quick detour. I'll send you the coordinates. Get our resupply efforts moving—I want to be back in astral space within the hour."

"Commander?"

"It's Ash," I said. "She finished her hunt...and apparently, she caught something big."

All told, it took twenty-seven hours to rendezvous with the *Wildcat*. I was there with Miranda waiting in the hangar when Ash carefully maneuvered her ship into the limited available space. I'd dismissed everyone else to ensure we had a few minutes of privacy, leaving us alone with the two parked Valkyries, the drop shuttle, and a swarm of busy maintenance drones.

My hands were twitching anxiously at my sides as the landing ramp lowered. After finally living together again following the destruction of the Yarasi outpost in the Ketule Nebula, it was hard to fathom how we'd spent years enduring much longer gaps between visits. We'd only

been apart for a couple of weeks this time, yet I was ready to sweep her up in my arms the instant I saw her.

And that was exactly what I did.

I didn't even wait for the ramp to touch the deck of the hangar before I vaulted up onto it and charged into the ship. Ash was standing in the wrap-around airlock, as perfect and beautiful as ever in her green fatigues. I had her in my arms and pressed against the bulkhead before she could even say hello. Her irresistible Kreen heat suffused every part of my body as I kissed her, and it took all my willpower not to carry her right into her bedroom.

"I missed you, too, baby," she gasped around my tongue. "It's been...*oh!*"

Her psychometry could already taste Miranda, Velarys, Saleya, and Astra all over me, and this was only the barest glimpse of everything I had to show her. The moment she finished telling me everything about her hunt, I planned to take her into my quarters and pound the rest of those memories straight into her so she could enjoy them as much as I had.

"Baby...we gotta...*mmm...*" Ash moaned. "We gotta talk!"

The intense heat building between us turned out to be a blessing, since it at least gave me the excuse I needed to force myself to stop devouring her.

"Right," I said, pulling back and setting her back down on the deck. She looked up at me, her green, cat-like eyes as hungry as I'd ever seen them. And they stayed just as hungry when they focused on Miranda.

"Hey, girl!" Ash said.

"Welcome back," Miranda said, her cheeks slightly flushed from the inevitable embarrassment of watching two people make out right in front of you. "Perhaps I should have waited in the conferen—"

"Oh, hell, no!" Ash interrupted. "You belong here, too."

She rushed forward and embraced Miranda, then planted a kiss right on her lips. Miranda's blue eyes shot open in surprise, but it only took a heartbeat before they fluttered shut. She melted into the other woman's embrace, and I could practically feel her toes curling inside her boots.

"Sorry!" Ash said, pulling back and licking her lips. "Don't wanna burn you up. Not *yet*, anyway."

Miranda smiled and touched her lips, looking embarrassed and unsure and aroused all at once. She immediately fixed her hair and glanced around as if to make sure no one had seen us, even though we were alone in the wrap-around.

"Damn, I wish we had a few hours to mess around," Ash said, turning back to me. "But we have a big problem, Kal. Two of them, actually."

"You said you thought the Dowd were planning a major attack," I reminded her.

"I am, and I think I know where," she said gravely. "But first...you gotta come see this."

She turned and waved us into the ship. I shared a glance with Miranda, then followed into the winding corridor that led into the *Wildcat's* lounge. Kalycos was currently perched atop the holo-projector between the couches, his green eyes giving me one of his vast assortment of judgmental looks he reserved for whenever I'd been away. Behind me, I could practically feel Miranda shuddering at the prospect of having cat hair on the sensitive equipment.

Ash led us through the lounge, into the aft corridor, and straight into the small cargo bay. Zilex, the prototype android Vrisk had built to act as her assistant, was waiting inside. But next to him...

"I found him, Kal," Ash said, voice wavering. "But he's not gonna make it much longer."

My eyebrows lifted in surprise when I saw the stasis pod, and my mouth dropped open when I saw the familiar man inside it.

“Stars...” I whispered, moving forward to peer inside the transparent glass. The sight of her brother’s face instantly conjured up a hundred memories, but not just from our skirmish on the mother-ship. Mostly, I thought of being back home on Nirivarr and how I’d had to prove myself to Ash’s family. Her brothers had both been the old-fashioned colonial types who would happily beat down any man who looked at their sister the wrong way. It was one of the reasons I respected them so much.

“Commander,” Zilex greeted in his Kali-sounding voice. “As you can see, his vital signs remain reasonably strong, but Lady Ash believes that his mind is decaying rapidly.”

“I know it is,” Ash said, swallowing heavily. “The Column put somethin’ in his brain, Kal. He called it a ‘mindseed.’ Said it was about to germinate, and that’s why he froze himself.”

“Mindseed? What the hell is that?” I asked, looking at Miranda. She had already stepped up to the pod and started looking over the readouts.

“A powerful telepathic technique,” she said. “Banned by the Seraphim Council even before the Expansionary Fleet came out to the Cluster.”

“What does it do?”

Miranda didn’t reply immediately. But from the way her brow creased in concentration, she must have been reaching out with her telepathy.

“In theory, the technique allows a telepath to implant a portion of their personality inside another sapient mind,” she explained. “Over time, the seed grows. When it finally germinates, it effectively transforms the victim’s consciousness.”

I shook my head. “Into what?”

“A loyal drone,” Ash whispered.

“Not always,” Miranda corrected. “From what I understand, the technique could be used to ‘hollow out’ a mind, for lack of a better term. But the more potent use would be to create something like a mental clone, replacing another being’s consciousness with a lesser version of your own.”

I felt sick. “Is that possible?”

“I’m not certain. As I said, the technique has been banned for many generations of Seraphim. But it isn’t completely dissimilar from some of the telepathic teaching techniques used by the fleet now. Except instead of implanting knowledge gained over a lifetime, you implant an entire consciousness.”

“He said he was about to transform,” Ash said, voice wavering. “That the stasis was helpin’, but that it couldn’t completely stop it.”

Miranda nodded. “Medical stasis doesn’t *completely* stop brain functions—otherwise the patient would die. A telepathic seed would continue to grow, albeit more slowly.”

I hissed softly. I had expected the news about her brother to be disturbing and vile from the moment she’d set out after him. The Mire—human supremacists who had now merged with the Rividian Column—had killed her parents and stolen away her brothers. The fact that Leenam was still alive meant they’d had plenty of opportunity to perform all kinds of twisted experiments on him. Abuse, brain-washing, even full-on torture—I hadn’t ruled anything out.

But planting a telepathic seed in someone’s mind to literally eradicate their personality? I hadn’t even known that was an option.

“Is this the reason he was helping them?” I asked.

“I...I don’t think so,” Ash said. “Seraph knows what else they did to him over the years, Kal. But this...this almost seems like a kind of

failsafe or killswitch. From what I saw in impressions, the pain only started when he got his head back on straight and realized what he was doin’.”

“So instead of ‘obey or we kill you,’ it’s ‘obey or we’ll turn you into one of us anyway’.”

I balled my hand into a fist at my side. As if we needed a reminder that our human adversaries in this conflict may have even been more perverse than the fucking Dowd.

“Can you stop it from growin’?” Ash asked Miranda. “Or undo the damage?”

“I...I don’t know,” Miranda admitted. “I’ve never encountered anything like this.”

“Well, you gotta try, all right?” she pleaded. “Because he ain’t got much time left!”

I put my hand on Ash’s shoulder. “We can have the doctor look at him. And Velarys, too. The Yarasi are the strongest telepaths in the galaxy—surely they’ll know something about this.”

“Someone’s gotta help him,” Ash said, eyes wet with tears. “I talked to him, Kal! He’s still in there! We just gotta help him find a way out.”

“We’ll do everything we can,” I promised, squeezing her arm. “Velarys and Miranda can have a look at him on our way back to New Krosis.”

Nodding, she buried herself in my embrace. I held her tightly and kissed the crown of her head even while my eyes lingered on the pod. I didn’t mention that even if Velarys and the Yarasi knew something about this condition, that was no guarantee they would be able to stop it. And if they couldn’t...

“You said something about a Dowd attack,” I said. “What is it?”

Ash swallowed heavily, and I could feel her pulling herself out of the abyss of despair where she’d fallen.

“The Dowd were there in the Column base in the Endikar System where I found Leenam,” Ash said. “We just assumed they were resupplyin’ or something, but when I boarded the station, I realized they’d taken it over. They shot everyone onboard.”

“What?” Miranda gasped. “They killed the Column soldiers?”

“Yeah. They took ‘em completely by surprise.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stood upright. If the Dowd were rebelling...

“Do you know why?” I asked.

“We found ‘em pokin’ around the facility’s computer system. They got what they wanted pretty quick and left right away. I didn’t have to fight them at all.” Ash turned to Zilex. “We didn’t want to stick around long, but he took a look to see if he could figure out what they were after.”

“Whatever backdoor the Dowd used to access the system was not available to me, and the file architecture was designed to be self-deleting in the event of a breach,” Zilex said. “However, I was able to partially reconstruct their queries, if not the actual information in the database.”

“So you do know what they were looking for,” Miranda reasoned.

“Yes. They were attempting to access interrogation reports from a Sillibar operative the Column captured some time ago. In particular, they were looking for what their interrogators pulled from his mind—coordinates.”

“Coordinates to what?” I asked.

“Exodus,” Ash answered.

My jaw and my stomach sank straight to the deck. Images of the starship graveyard and the ruined planet we’d found at Zurix blazed in my memory. The Patheon Genocide, the near extinction of an entire people.

“They know where it is, Kal,” Ash said, voice hollow. “And I think they’re going to try and blow it up.”

Interlude

The lift slid open, and Malura strode onto the bridge.

The surprisingly *economical* bridge, given the *Fist of the Seraph's* immense bulk. The wide, semicircular space was the same size as the bridge of a Dominion battleship despite being an order of magnitude larger. The engineers had opted against the massive crew pits present on standard dreadnoughts, not out of a desire to save space, but because they believed in the abilities and training of the ship's superior crew. There was simply no need for thirty officers and crewers on the bridge when ten of the Gen-63s could do the job just fine.

The lift was in its standard position in the rear port section, and most of the other stations were also traditionally placed. The main exception was the tactical console to the captain's left rather than behind him, which Malura considered a virtue. She would have gone mad feeling as though someone were looking over her shoulder in the command chair. Not that she was ever likely to sit in one.

She always felt a bit out of place here, partially because she wasn't wearing one of the bright blue and gold uniforms but mostly because her skill set was much more specialized than the fleet officers. She vastly preferred to be alone on the observation deck where she could meditate or train in peace.

“There you are,” Captain Dykastra said. “I was about to send for you.”

He was leaning over one of the consoles on the starboard side of the bridge rather than sitting in his chair. The comm officer next to him—a thin wisp of a girl with curly black hair—appeared to be sifting through transmissions on her console.

“Is there a problem?” Malura asked.

“Possibly,” he said, picking a pad off the console and handing it to her. “But I’m sure you’re here for the scouting report. It came in a few minutes ago.”

Taking the pad, Malura thumbed through the report. Their stealth-shielded Valkyries had only recently emerged from their trip into the Cocytus Nebula, a long and perilous journey for starfighters without any carrier support. But Malura couldn’t help but smile when she looked over what they’d found.

“It’s real,” she said. “Exodus is actually real.”

“Real, but not quite ripe for the taking,” Dykastra said. “Thirty ships, orbital defenses, a planetary shield...”

“All surmountable, given sufficient resources and firepower,” Malura replied. “If we hadn’t already introduced the Cluster to the might of this ship in the Drift, it would have made for a perfect debut.”

Dykastra snorted softly. “Personally, I would have preferred a more visible target, like Oscura.”

A slight frown creased Malura’s forehead when she read the tactical assessment. “I notice that all the ships are Sillibar, some quite old.”

“Possibly from the last war, though I’d assume they’ve undergone significant refits. The Valkyries couldn’t risk getting that close.”

Malura copied the data to her own pad, then returned his. “Without a jump corridor, they can’t easily reinforce the system. Another

critical vulnerability. Not that the Sillibar would risk telling their pet Krosians the location. They don't trust their own servants."

"Do we?" Dykastra asked pointedly.

Malura arched an eyebrow at him. She sensed something darker in his tone. "You mentioned there might be a problem?"

"Yes. We just received a report from our operatives in the Angoth Colonies," he said, frowning. "They still haven't been able to reestablish contact with the supply facility on Endikar."

"How long has it been?"

"Twenty-seven hours since their last transmission." Dykastra paused. "The *Heliod* is stationed nearby, coordinating efforts in the region. I'll order them to send a team to investigate."

She inspected the starmap floating above his console marking their various ships and assets scattered across the vast sector that comprised Angoth space. Thus far, most of their efforts had been dedicated to infiltration and subversion, with Dowd attacks focusing on outlying colonies and shipping lanes. Endikar was one of their few permanent bases in the region.

"That facility has had issues with comms before, due to localized interference," she pointed out.

"Not since we installed the signal buoy near the edge of the system," Dykastra pointed out. "We need to consider the possibility that the enemy located the facility. The Sillibar could have attempted to retrieve their operative."

Malura considered for a moment but ultimately shook her head. "I don't see how. Our agents haven't reported any signs of movement or alert, and Endikar's location wasn't listed in the files Commander Zeris looted at Zurix."

“No, but it would be folly to underestimate the Kaori Tash. We caught them unawares, but it’s only a matter of time before they wage a serious counterinsurgency campaign.”

“True,” she conceded. “The *Heliad* should be able to get a team there within six hours.”

Dykastra nodded. “In the meantime, I’m more concerned about the news from Lohiri and L’shaa. The Holosphere should be filled with reports about the attacks by now. The destruction of the fuel depot on Lohiri alone should have sent the sector markets into freefall.”

Malura frowned. He wasn’t wrong—they were well inside the window where they’d expected to receive some initial reports on enemy activity. Though it was always possible that the Pact defenders had put up a better fight than anticipated.

She turned and looked at the forward viewscreen. Centered almost directly ahead of them, framed by the various sensor and tactical overlays in the corners of the display, was one of the Dowd leviathans they had recalled from the front lines. For all its power, the ruddy brown dreadnought looked like an enormous tadpole complete with odd, tentacle-like feelers thanks to the length of the long-range psionic cannons they had just mounted on the dorsal side.

A sea of other vessels floated nearby—almost half of the Dowd’s combined armada—all waiting for the call to intercept whatever fleet the Pact assembled to attack their bases. It was an impressive force, though it also reminded her how they’d been cut off from their reinforcements when the jump gate in the Drift had been destroyed.

“Perhaps it’s time for another visit to the Exarch,” Malura said. “I’ll be in the Hive if—”

“The Exarch isn’t in the Hive,” Dykastra interrupted with a nod toward the viewscreen. “It went over to the leviathan two hours ago.”

“What? Why?”

“To oversee the final stages of the weapon testing for those cannons. It’s the first Dowd vessel armed with psionic weapons.”

“Those tests concluded an hour ago.”

“Yes, but—”

“Sir!” the operations officer blurted out, his round face alight with surprise. “We’re detecting a power surge in the Dowd dreadnought.”

Malura froze. “Another weapon’s test?”

“No, ma’am.” The officer’s hands flashed across his console, and he suddenly looked worried. “They appear to be preparing for an astral shift!”

“*What?*” Dykastra said.

“It’s not just the dreadnought, sir,” the tactical officer warned. “It’s the entire Dowd fleet.”

Malura whipped her head around to look at the tactical overlay...and felt a fist of dread close around her heart as the armada began moving as one. Hundreds of ships—swarmers, carriers, and the dreadnought—all surged away from the *Fist of the Seraph* and the rest of the New Dominion fleet in perfect unison.

“Hail the dreadnought,” Dykastra ordered. “Now!”

The comm officer scrambled at her console. “No response, sir!”

“Full alert. Arm weapons and—”

“Belay that!” Malura said, striding closer to the viewer.

She could hear the captain speaking to her, clearly annoyed that she had dared to question his authority on the bridge of his ship. But as she reached out with her telepathy, Dykastra’s voice faded into the background.

Malura could feel the chorus of sapient minds on the dreadnought, thousands and thousands of them all at once. But amidst the discordant chaos of their alien thoughts, she focused on the driving beat that held the rest together.

The Exarch's mind reacted to her presence. Not with surprise—the creature had been expecting this, and it was ready for her.

What do you think you're doing? she projected across the stars.

[The infestation must be cleansed.]

She felt its rage, its power, and its unshakeable, murderous determination.

You are servants of the Master! If you betray him, the Chorus of the Void will fade to silence. You will be weak and powerless again.

Malura had hoped to cause a ripple of hesitation in his thoughts. But all she sensed was a pure, pristine clarity of purpose.

[The infestation must be cleansed] the Exarch said. *[Only then may the song continue.]*

The connection between them broke, and Malura inhaled sharply. She was back on the bridge, and flashes of light cascaded across the viewer. When they faded, the Dowd armada was gone.

“No...” Dykastra growled deep in his throat.

Malura took a deep breath. Rage boiled inside her, born of betrayal and frustration. A few short months ago, the New Dominion's victory had seemed all but assured. But a seemingly endless series of setbacks—some minor, some nearly catastrophic—had almost completely undone their carefully-laid plans. The Exarch's willful disobedience may have destroyed them altogether.

...or perhaps not.

She closed her eyes. Master Foln had taught her to *analyze* every situation, not panic or overreact. And this was no different.

“We need to stop them!” Dykastra snarled.

“And how do you intend to do that?” Malura asked, turning and raising an eyebrow at him.

“We'll send the fleet,” he said as if it were obvious.

“To do what?” she asked pointedly. “Half the ships we’ve constructed still don’t have crews.”

“Then I’ll take the *Fist of the Seraph* if I have to! We have enough firepower to crush them.”

“Not without suffering tremendous losses in the process.” Malura shook her head. “Take a breath and *think*, Captain. This is inconvenient. It’s downright infuriating, in fact. But we’ve known from the very beginning that our Dowd leash would only stretch so far before it finally snapped.”

Dykastra’s cheek twitched. “You want us to allow these alien monsters to go free?”

“I want us to face reality,” she said. “And that reality is that if the Dowd somehow manage to destroy Exodus, the Pact will die with it. They’ll lose ships—potentially many ships—but they’ll perish achieving a tremendous victory. Just imagine the havoc it will wreak across Pact space.”

“The Master would never tolerate such disobedience,” the captain bit out through clenched teeth.

“I didn’t say we were going to tolerate it,” Malura replied, offering him a thin smile. “Only that if the Dowd wish to destroy the Sillibar for us, we shouldn’t get in their way. But afterward...”

She pivoted back to the viewer, her eyes narrowing dangerously. “Afterward,” she said, “we will show the Exarch the price of betraying the Seraph’s will.”

Chapter 11

Aid and Solace

“Do you think the Pact will be able to muster a fleet in time?”
Miranda asked.

I leaned back against the wall of the *Wildcat*'s cargo hold and rubbed my hands over my eyes. It was an excellent question, and one that had been burning up my brain ever since Ash had dropped her revelation on us. I had already instructed Reyes to turn around and get us back to New Krosis, and I'd fired off a transmission to both Advisor Golma and Admiral Lochlan before I'd done so. But during that hour or so of scrambling around the ship, I still hadn't been able to come up with a decisive answer.

“I don't know,” I admitted. “There are too many variables. We don't know how well the planet is defended, and we've no idea if they have any ships standing by. We also don't know how scattered the Dowd fleet is or how long it would take them to mobilize an attack force.”

“Considering how frequently they have been attacking vulnerable targets all across the Cluster, it stands to reason that their forces are spread thin,” Zilex said. “Especially since you were able to prevent their reinforcements from coming through the Straw.”

“Unless they have far more ships than we realize. Though even if they don't, with astral drives they could assemble a force relatively quickly. And since I doubt the Sillibar tunneled a jump corridor

to their secret homeworld, any Pact forces will practically be flying through mud. They may not be able to get there in time.”

I sighed and glanced over at the stasis pod. Velarys appeared as though she was still probing Leenam with her telepathy, and Ash was nervously pacing beside her.

“I wonder how many people in the Pact government even know the location themselves,” Miranda mused. “Or in the military. If more than a handful of people possess that information, it surely would have come to light by now.”

“The Sillibar would never trust their subjugant races with such vital information,” Velarys said as she abruptly leaned away from the pod.

“Maybe not,” I replied, frowning. “What did you learn? Can you help him?”

The Yarasi paused as if to gather herself. “The mindseed has been growing for some time. Without the stasis pod, it would have germinated several weeks ago. With it, it will still germinate soon. Perhaps within days.”

“Stars...” Ash breathed. “But you can save him, right? You can get it outta there?”

Velarys turned to face her. “The seed has progressed to the point that it has damaged significant portions of your brother’s psyche. I am not certain it can be removed.”

Ash’s face went white, and I stepped over to hold onto her.

“But hope remains,” Velarys added. “It may be possible for me to prevent the seed from growing any further. He could then be taken to Oscura where one of our elders could evaluate him. They have much more experience than I.”

Ash squeezed my arm. “Then stop it if you can! Please.”

“I will try. But I will require the aid of Ensign Pierce.”

Miranda frowned. "I told you that I don't know how to remove a mindseed."

"I can share the knowledge you require," Velarys said. "Without your aid, this will not be possible."

Ash gave Miranda a pleading look.

"I'm willing to try, but..." She paused. "*How* do you intend to share this knowledge with me?"

"You will need to open your mind," Velarys said. "But you will not be harmed."

Miranda hesitated for several heartbeats, eyes locked on the Yarasi woman. They had learned to get along well enough in a professional setting, and Miranda was fully aware of our growing relationship. She still didn't completely trust Velarys, though, if for no other reason than she was an alien soldier of a Dominion adversary.

But thankfully, all it took was another look at Ash to convince her that this was worth the discomfort...and potential risk.

"Very well," Miranda said, stepping toward the pod. "Then let's get this over with."

"Is there anything we can do?" I asked, still holding Ash against me. Her Kreen heat had gone from soothing to uncomfortable, but there was no way I was going to let her go right now, even if I had to sweat through my uniform.

"No," Velarys said, reaching out her hands and placing them on Miranda's face. "Let us begin."

She closed her eyes, and Miranda did the same. For several long, awkward seconds, there was no indication that they were actually doing anything. But then Miranda inhaled sharply, and she stood rigidly in place for at least a minute before Velarys broke her hold.

"By the Seraph," Miranda breathed. "I..."

“You understand what is required,” Velarys finished, locking eyes with the other woman.

“Yes...” Miranda swallowed heavily and nodded. “Yes, I think so.”

“Good. Then let us do what we can.”

The Yarasi shifted her attention to the pod. The glow in her blue-violet eyes seemed to intensify, and she went completely stiff again. Miranda needed another moment to gather herself from the telepathic data transfer, and I gave her an affirming nod when she looked at me for confirmation.

She joined Velarys, though she closed her eyes. Even though there was no other sound or movement, I could see the extent of her exertion in the subtle twitches of her cheek and furrows of her brow. Velarys, by contrast, seemed completely tranquil.

It was maddening to feel so helpless. It felt like I was standing outside the infirmary waiting for the doctors to tell me if the soldier who'd taken a pulse round to the chest was going to pull through. I'd lived through enough similar experiences in my life to understand how awful it was. But for Ash...

I squeezed her shoulders again. For her, this would be so much worse.

I didn't check the time to know precisely how long we stood there, but since it felt like an hour, it was probably only a few minutes. Miranda broke her trance first, gasping and then slumping against the pod. Velarys moved several seconds later, and she turned to look at her partner.

“Did it work?” Ash asked.

The longer the other two women continued silently staring into each other's eyes, the more I feared the worst. But Velarys finally closed her eyes and nodded.

“Yes,” she said quietly. “I believe we have neutralized it for the time being.”

Ash let out a relieved sigh. I did as well, though I tempered my expectations with the implication that this still wasn't over.

“Only for the time being?” I asked.

“I will need to check on the seed periodically,” Velarys said. “Since we cannot remove it, caution seems like the most prudent course of action. I would also recommend we leave him in medical stasis for the foreseeable future. That way, if the seed attempts to germinate again, we will have more time to stop it.”

I nodded. It wasn't great news, but it was certainly better than nothing. The mere thought of a psychic technique like the mind-seed still made my stomach turn. I needed to ask Lochlan about the technique the next time we spoke. I doubted that she would know anything about it, but she could contact people who did. If nothing else, the Intelligence Directorate needed to be aware that the enemy was using this technique.

Though for all I know, they've been using it themselves, I thought grimly. Maybe transforming their own intelligence operatives or hatching unwitting double agents. The possibilities are practically endless. And horrifying.

Ash finally pulled away from me and moved over to the girls. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the rush of cool air on my skin again, wiping the beads of sweat on my forehead. I was going to need to change sooner rather than later.

“An unexpected outcome,” Zilex commented, his metallic Kali face turning to Miranda. “I assumed that our extraordinary effort to retrieve this pod would prove futile.”

“And I told you I’d turn you to scrap if you kept talkin’ like that,” Ash said, flashing the android a dirty look before she took Velarys’s arm. “I can’t thank you enough. If you hadn’t been here...”

“I only wish we could do more,” Velarys lamented. “But I will send a message to my people and see if there is anything else they can tell me.”

Ash smiled tiredly. “To think, a few months ago you were in the one in the infirmary. And we weren’t sure you’d wake up.”

“A debt I have yet to fully repay. Though I am not alone in that regard.”

Ash frowned. “What do ya mean?”

“The entire Cluster owes you a debt of gratitude,” Velarys said. “Without you, the Dowd plot to start a war between my people and the Pact would not have been exposed. And now, you have provided the Sillibar with a warning that their home will soon be under threat. You have done honor to this vessel and its purpose—you truly are a Huntress.”

I had seen Ash’s face light up in joy many times, but I wasn’t sure I had ever seen her smile so radiantly. Her mouth fell open, and she looked up at the Yarasi woman with a lifetime’s worth of pent-up awe and reverence.

“I...” she managed. “I don’t even know what to say.”

“You do not need to say anything,” Velarys replied. “It is my privilege to fight at your side, Huntress.” She smiled and looked at Miranda. “And to share a mate with such worthy females.”

Miranda still seemed drained from their psychic adventure, but she did manage a weary but earnest smile. I made a mental note to ask her what all she’d shared during their link. It had to have gone far beyond surface thoughts. “I should return to the bridge,” Velarys said, looking back at me. “I shall take the rest of your shift and then my own.”

I grinned and nodded. “Thank you. We have a lot of catching up to do.”

“Yes.” She started to leave, but then touched Ash’s arm. “He is yours tonight, Huntress. Perhaps later we shall share him.”

Velarys held Ash’s gaze for a minute, her luminescent eyes flashing, before she continued out the door.

“I can leave you as well,” Miranda said. “I’ll check in with Engineer Vrisk and—”

“You ain’t goin’ anywhere, girl,” Ash interrupted with a waggle of her finger. “But you,” she added, turning to Zilex, “should go help your maker. Right now.”

The android glanced between her and the pod. “Do you not wish me to—?”

“Go!” Ash said. “But, uh...thanks for all your help. Really. Kalycos would’a been lonely without ya.”

“Of course,” Zilex said, moving toward the door. “While I would not go so far as to say that it was a pleasure to serve, the experience was less painful than I anticipated.”

Ash snorted once he was gone. “We gotta talk to Vrisk about him. I think I’d rather have a Krosian personality profile...”

I chuckled. “You say that now...”

“Honestly, he was a big help,” Ash admitted. Her eyes went distant as she glanced back at the pod, but after a few heartbeats, she took a deep breath and waved us out of the cargo hold. “There’s something else I needed to tell both of you. Something that has nothin’ to do with mindseeds or the Dowd or anythin’ like that.”

“All right,” I said, eyes narrowing suspiciously. “What is it?”

Ash visibly braced herself. “Not here.”

With a gesture, she led us through the aft corridor and into her quarters. I swore I saw Miranda flinch at the sight of the unmade bed when we reached the doorway.

“All right,” Ash said. “This is harder than I thought...”

She swallowed heavily and glanced between me and Miranda. I understood Ash better than I understood myself, yet I had absolutely no idea what was on her mind. She looked nervous—worried, even—as if she couldn’t find her voice. Her green eyes had started to water, and I found myself holding my breath in anticipation.

After a few more seconds, she reached out and took my hand and Miranda’s, too. Then, she gently placed them both atop her taut bare stomach.

“It worked,” she said, her voice soft and trembling. “It actually worked.”

My heart stopped. “You mean...?”

Ash nodded, and the tears began to stream down her cheeks. “I’m pregnant,” she said. “We’re gonna have a baby!”

I gasped, mouth falling open. Even when Miranda had created the treatment, I hadn’t allowed myself to believe it would work...

I swept Ash up into my arms and kissed her. She locked her arms and legs around me as she kissed back, a decade of pent-up disappointment and frustration rushing out of her. As much as Ash loved being a pilot and a bounty huntress, she would have gladly traded it all in an instant to become a mother. Fate—and her unique half-Kreen genetics—had just never wanted to cooperate. Until now.

When she pulled back, the smile on her face was so bright it shined through the tears staining her cheeks. She was the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen. I wanted to hold her and kiss her and make long, sweet love to her until the end of time. And I would have beaten the

entire galaxy into submission if that was what it took to make her happy.

“It’s really happening,” Ash said, squeezing me with her entire body. She turned to look at Miranda...and to my complete and utter amazement, I saw tears on the young ensign’s face as well.

“I’m so happy it worked,” Miranda managed, wiping at her cheek. “I...um...”

“We owe you so much!” Ash said, sliding out of my grip so she could rush over to embrace Miranda as well. Both women sobbed in joy, and it didn’t take long for their hug to turn into a long passionate kiss.

“Oh!” Miranda gasped, pulling back when the heat got too intense.

“I’m sorry, honey, I don’t wanna burn you up,” Ash said, taking a step back. “Unless you can come up with a miracle jenny cure for that, too.”

Miranda smiled as she ran her tongue over her lips as if to taste the heat. “I am eager to try.”

“Then I know you’ll figure it out,” Ash said, still beaming. Her hands were trembling at her sides as if it was taking all her self-control not to tackle the other woman. “And when you do, I’ll be all over you. I promise.”

Miranda beamed back. I didn’t doubt for a moment that she’d try to find a solution. The three of us had spent many hours in bed together before Ash had left on the *Wildcat*, but the heat remained a serious barrier between them. They could only embrace and kiss in short bursts. They couldn’t even snuggle up while watching trashy holo-vids without Miranda ending up soaked.

“I’ll do everything I can,” Miranda said, reaching out and sliding her hand across Ash’s belly. “But Doctor Trevas should be able to extract the fertilized embryo whenever you like.”

“Extract?” Ash looked mortified. “You crazy? I’m keeping this baby inside me where it belongs!”

Miranda frowned. “But the child will make you feel ill.”

“It already has. It’s supposed to!”

“But...” Miranda shook her head and briefly glanced at me for support. “Carrying the child will impede your physical abilities.”

“So?” Ash said. “That’s what Kal is for!”

Miranda remained confused, as if it had never occurred to her that a woman would want to carry a child to term the old-fashioned way. Maybe it hadn’t—her entire life had been spent on the mothership surrounded by other women who never even considered that choice.

“It’s gonna be incredible,” Ash said, turning back to me. “One after the other, just like we talked about!”

I pulled her back into my arms. “As many as you want,” I promised.

“You might regret sayin’ that...”

She giggled and kissed me again, deeper and harder this time. She began pawing at my uniform, and I was about to pick her up and tear off her clothes before she suddenly pulled away and turned to Miranda again.

“Wait!” she said, eyeing the other woman. “Did he shoot another one into you again already or not?”

“Um,” Miranda paused to process what Ash was asking. “No, not yet.”

“Why not?” Ash asked, sounding almost annoyed as she glanced between us. “You had weeks! Could’a stuffed her every night while I was gone!”

“We’ve been a little busy,” I said.

She snorted. “Well, then we need to make up for lost time. You’re gonna spend all night fillin’ her up.”

Miranda started to speak, but Ash didn't give her a chance. She practically pounced on the other woman, pulling her in for another scorching kiss. Miranda moaned and cupped Ash's cheeks in her hands despite the heat.

While they kissed, I made the most of the opportunity by unfastening my belt and hastily stripping off my uniform jacket. I shifted behind Ash and slipped my arms around her waist. As my hands settled upon the hottest midriff in the galaxy, I found myself imagining how much sexier it would be when it finally began to swell with our child. We had been trying for so long...

Nudging through her blond mane with my nose, I kissed the back of her neck and felt a ripple of delight shudder through her. My fingers drifted down her belly to her belt, which I unfastened with practiced ease. A single sinuous movement pushed her pants and panties over her slender hips and down to the floor.

"Oh!" Miranda gasped, abruptly pulling away before she burned up. Her tongue flashed across her lips, and sweat streaked her brow.

"Get yourself a pack to cool off, honey," Ash said, helping me unstrap her top and pull it over her head. "I wanna taste you another way."

She turned around as she tossed her top into the corner of the room. Her green eyes flashed hungrily and she stretched up to give me another kiss, but she didn't hold it—after a quick peck, she grinned and dropped to her knees like the good girl she was.

"You'll need to pace yourself," I said, smiling down at her. "I have a lot of memories for you."

"I thought you said you were busy!" she said as her fingers curled around my rapidly stiffening stem. "Too many girls and not enough time. I can't wait to taste them all..."

Ash kissed the tip with her lavaborn lips, and her eyes fluttered shut as she began to meticulously drag her tongue across the swollen head. I groaned in delight at the subtle tickle and intense heat, and I whispered a silent thanks to the Seraph for granting me the ability to endure her touch.

Miranda wasn't so lucky, but she was doing her best. She rapidly stripped out of her own uniform and underwear to shed heat, then telekinetically reached out to retrieve one of the ice packs from the cooler on the other side of the room. She placed it on her forehead as she knelt behind Ash, then surreptitiously ran it over her plump jenny breasts. She inhaled sharply when the cold instantly hardened her nipples...but then she leaned forward and pressed them into Ash's back.

Ash gasped, then giggled, her tongue still licking over my tip. "I can taste you all over him, honey," she purred. "Right over his desk? Stars, that's so good..."

Ash took me deeper. As always, she didn't have the slightest trouble handling my length, since we'd properly broken in her throat a long time ago. I grabbed a clump of her silky hair and squeezed while she worked, basking in the heat and suction while enjoying the sight of Miranda nibbling at her neck and fondling her breasts from behind.

"Mmm..." Ash moaned when she finally pulled back. "Oh, honey, you taste so good on him!"

Miranda beamed even as sweat streaked her brow. "We taste even better together."

Giggling, Ash kept her left hand curled around my stem while her right cupped over Miranda's to hold it against her breast, guiding her in kneading it. "You know it," she whispered. "But he's fallin' behind! Can't wait for him to shoot another natty baby inside you!"

“Neither can I,” Miranda said huskily, her blue eyes lifting to meet mine.

“Well, we’re gonna have to fix that right quick.” Ash paused. “But I gotta see what else he has for me first...”

Her sweltering lips enveloped my cock again, but this time she didn’t wait to take me deep. She had my entire length down her throat in an instant, and Miranda helpfully put a hand on the back of Ash’s skull, holding her firmly in place as she enjoyed her psychometric feast. The heat built with each passing second, pushing me closer to the edge...

Miranda finally had to lean away to cool herself off, and there was a satisfying gurgle from Ash as she pulled back and gasped for air. She looked up at me, lips soaked and eyeliner running from her earlier tears.

“Baby,” she breathed, shaking her head. “I had no idea Yarasi could get so horny!”

I smiled and enjoyed the brief cooling respite. “Neither did I.”

“Well, you filled her up good, didn’t ya? She’d better have a little one inside her after all that!”

“I’m willing to keep trying if not,” I said. “And now that you’re back, you can help.”

Ash grinned giddily. “You sure she’s ready for the heat?”

“She’s a Yarasi warrior. She’ll endure.” Chuckling, I took hold of my manhood and playfully smacked it against her lips. “But there’s more for you in there.”

“Oh, I know,” Ash said, opening her mouth for me. “Give it to me, baby...”

I eased my cock back through her lips, and she kept her eyes locked on mine as long as she could. But they inevitably fluttered shut when I pushed past her tonsils, not because she was choking but because

the psychometric currents overwhelmed her. Miranda helped again, putting a hand on Ash's head to hold her in place while I rolled my hips and started to fuck her mouth as if it were a cunt.

I could feel her body quiver when she finally tasted Saleya, and she seized up in a sudden, almost violent climax when she felt Astra, too. The sight of her cumming beneath me—and the intensity of the inferno on my cock—sent me careening toward the edge. Stars, I'd missed her...

"Shit!" I warned. "I can't hold!"

I was fully prepared to fire my entire load straight down Ash's throat, but she wanted to share. A split second before I popped, she pulled away and yanked Miranda's head next to hers—

And I exploded all over them. Rope after rope of my thick, creamy seed splashed over their joined faces. Foreheads, noses, lips, even eyes—I thoroughly glazed them all.

"Oh!" Miranda stammered. She froze in place, her painted eyelids so thoroughly caked in my release she couldn't even open them. "So much..."

"*Always*," Ash said, giggling as she helpfully wiped a glob from the other woman's eyes. "But he'll have more, don't worry. And we'll make sure he puts it in the right place this time."

She gently slid her fingertips into Miranda's mouth, allowing her to give them a long, sensuous lick. I braced my hand against the low ceiling to help hold myself upright, perfectly content to enjoy the view while I recovered. They had gotten damn good at cleaning each other off no matter where I finished. Ash was fueled by raw enthusiasm, delighted to finally share me with another girl in person. Miranda, for her part, was relentlessly efficient. She made absolutely certain to get every single drop, and during her periodic breaks to cool off, her fingers coiled around my manhood to help stroke me back to life.

“You’re so damn pretty,” Ash breathed, kissing the tip of Miranda’s nose. “I’m gonna eat you up, jenny girl!”

Taking Miranda by the arm, Ash helped her up onto the edge of the bed. The ensign was thoroughly soaked—not just her glistening quim, but her entire body. She telekinetically pulled the cooling pack from the floor to her forehead, and then did the same with a bottle of water from the minifridge.

But Ash was impatient; she only let Miranda chug about half the bottle before she pushed apart the ensign’s thighs and dove in for a feast.

Miranda squealed in delight, her normally unflappable poise shattering at the attention from Ash’s molten tongue. I had to dive forward to grab the water bottle before it spilled on the bed, and I helped her lean back on the mattress as an early climax gripped her body. She really was beautiful right now with her black hair matted against her forehead and her makeup thoroughly ruined by her sweat and my seed.

Stars, I thought, I need to taste her as badly as Ash.

I almost joined her on the floor, but I knew that Miranda didn’t need the extra heat. What she needed was balance...and there was a way I could provide it.

Grinning, I picked up the cooling pack and leaned over her on the bed. As she moaned, lost in the bliss of Ash’s tender ministrations, I gently placed the pack atop her heaving breasts. She seized up immediately, torn between hot and cold.

“Oh!” Miranda cried out. “That...*ngn*...!”

Her nipples both turned rock hard, and I gently sucked one through my lips while I kept the pack on the other. I rotated every few seconds, fondling and licking one glorious jenny tit while freezing the other. I doubted it would actually help her vent heat, but it definitely

drove her wild. She spent with a full-body climax, her hands grabbing the sheets and her thighs crushing Ash's blond head.

"*Nn...ooo...obbb!*" she squealed before she collapsed, panting.

Ash pulled away quickly, though she clearly wasn't happy about it. From the juices on her mouth and the feral glint in her eye, she would have happily kept going, but she never would have forgiven herself if her heat harmed Miranda. She looked at me instead, her wet lips curling into a lascivious grin.

"Got her ready for ya, baby," she said. "You gotta finish her off!"

Miranda was still scrambling to catch her breath when I shuffled between her legs and hoisted her calves up onto my shoulders. She was so delirious from the pleasure and the heat that she didn't even seem to know I was there until Ash's fiery fingers started guiding me to her slit. Miranda moaned again when my turgid tip slipped inside her tight entrance, and she threw her arms around my neck to pull me close.

"Fuck me!" she begged, her rich, cultured voice having lost all composure. "Please, as hard as—*ngn!!*"

She yelped as I thrust in deep, hilding myself without the slightest hesitation. She pulled me closer with her hands until I could feel the puff of her rapid breaths on my face.

"That's it, baby," Ash egged me on, sliding up behind me and pressing her torrid tits into my back. "Stretch that jenny slut! Give her everything you've got!"

I didn't hold back. Growling in the back of my throat, I got a firm hold of Miranda's bouncing calves and began taking her fast and hard. Every smack of our flesh summoned a new whimper from her lips, and just like when I fucked her over my desk, I couldn't help but imagine how the rest of the crew would react if they saw their poised, put-together operations officer get so thoroughly ruined.

“Come on!” Ash said, leering down at the other woman from over my shoulder. “Tell him you want it hard!”

“I want...*ngn*...I want it hard!”

“Tell him you want it deep!”

“I want it deep!”

“Tell him you want him to breed ya,” Ash said, nails digging into my back. “Like the filthy slut you are.”

“Breed me again, Kal,” Miranda screamed. “Please!”

Being the proper gentleman I was, I gave my girls what they wanted. I burst deep inside her, flooding her fertile jenny womb with the natty seed it so desperately craved. And as the psychometric ripples of Miranda’s joy cascaded through me, I felt Ash finish too, her arms clutching me tightly as if they never planned to let go.

Because they never would.

Chapter 12

Rallying Cry

Thanks to my emergency message, the Governing Authority and the Pact military had been given about twenty hours to react to the news about the Dowd and Exodus before we returned to the shipyard on New Krosis. As we shifted back into normal space, I prepared myself for any conceivable reaction to the news, from orderly preparation to outright bedlam and everything in between.

The reality, to the Authority's credit, was much closer to the former than the latter. Most of the sector defense fleet that patrolled the system had already been redeployed, and the remaining ships had been repositioned to defend key facilities. There was no discernible change in the flow of civilian traffic near any of the colonies in the system, which presumably—and unsurprisingly—meant that the news had been kept within the ranks of the Authority and not shared with the public.

Though that obviously wouldn't last. Despite the Authority's near-total control over the local media, no amount of censorship and suppression could hide the redeployment of hundreds or even thousands of vessels.

"Helm, take us in," I said, standing from the command chair as we maneuvered back toward the massive shipyard. "Comms, get me a private channel to Advisor Golma."

I received the proper acknowledgements, then went into my office to wait. Golma and Vokal were obviously busy men, though I still expected them to answer me fairly quickly. Yet I sat there in silence for several minutes, fingers tapping on my desk and wondering if I might have underestimated just *how* chaotic things were in the halls of power right now.

“Commander,” Golma greeted me when his projection finally appeared above my desk. Two days ago, I’d thought he might have seemed a bit younger, but that trend had now completely reversed. If anything, the old Angoth suddenly looked downright ancient.

“Advisor,” I replied with a nod. “I apologize for being the bearer of such unfortunate news.”

“Yes,” he said, his voice almost hollow. “The Authority continues to deliberate on the matter.”

“Understandable,” I said, trying to be diplomatic despite my distaste for politics. “I didn’t want to send our full analysis over the relays, but I’ll forward everything we have to you now. But I should note that I had my best people review everything multiple times, and they agree with the initial findings. The Dowd were definitely looking for Exodus...and there’s a good chance they found it.”

Golma looked down at his console as I sent him the files. I didn’t know how much difference it would make that I’d had Vrisk add his approval to the report, but everyone in the Cluster respected the scientific and technical prowess of the Kali.

“It’s difficult to fathom,” Golma whispered. “If they’re able to reach the planet before us...”

“I know,” I replied gravely, thinking back to what Miranda had told me about the true nature of the Dowd and Sillibar. “You need to prepare for the worst. I assume it will take some time for the Dowd to muster their fleet, but given their advantage in speed, they could have

an armada heading to those coordinates soon. You need to scramble your own fleet as soon as possible.”

I hadn't spent enough time around Angoth in my life to have memorized all the nuances in their facial expressions or body language, but the haunted look on the old man's face seemed nearly universal.

“As bad as this is, there is *some* good news,” I added. “I didn't mention it in the original message, but it appears there may be division in the enemy ranks. The Dowd team that recovered this information killed every Column soldier on the base. We can only speculate what that might mean, but it certainly seems like the Column leadership hadn't planned on sharing this intel with their attack hounds just yet. If I had to guess, they probably knew how single-mindedly the Dowd would go after the Sillibar.”

“There have been no attacks in Pact space for over eighty hours,” Golma said, his gaze turning thoughtful.

“Which suggests they could already be gathering their forces,” I said. “All the more reason for you to scramble a fleet of your own as quickly as possible. I don't know what kind of static defenses you have protecting the planet, but my ship and crew are at your disposal if you need us.”

Golma's eyes abruptly refocused. “I appreciate your concern, Commander, but this is now an official matter for the Pact Governing Authority. Your assistance in this matter is no longer required.”

I blinked. “With all due respect, Advisor, I don't think you can afford to turn away the help,” I said, trying not to sound annoyed or impatient and not completely succeeding at either. “The *Renegade* may not possess the firepower of a Krosian battleship, but we're fast enough to beat the Dowd to their target. If you give us the coordinates, we can set out immed—”

“That won’t be necessary,” Golma interrupted. He seemed to be looking at someone off camera rather than me. “Please, continue your efforts to decrypt the data you recovered from Zurix. Contact us again when you find something so that we can discuss the details of your next assignment.”

My jaw opened in disbelief. “What are you—?”

“Good day, Commander.”

The image vanished. I stared at the projector for several seconds before I finally summoned Velarys to come join me.

“It is widely believed that even the Angoth and Krosian leadership do not know the location of Exodus, and this is a Dominion vessel with a Yarasi soldier on board,” Velarys said after I’d told her what happened. “Did you truly expect the Sillibar to welcome outsiders to their hidden homeworld?”

“I expect them to be reasonable in the face of annihilation,” I growled. “Especially after everything we’ve done for them.”

“Then you vastly overestimate them,” she said pointedly. “I still find it difficult to believe they ever agreed to allow us to prowl their territory with a cloaking device. The Sillibar are a paranoid people.”

As always, I was tempted to remind her how ironic that proclamation was coming from a Yarasi, but I stopped myself. The long-standing rivalry between the Cluster’s “elder races” wasn’t the problem on the table today. Or at least, not the *main* problem.

“I understand the location is a state secret,” I said. “And before this, I didn’t blame them in the least for being protective about it. But if the Dowd have the coordinates, then the jig is up. Even if the Pact defends the planet without our help, it’s only a matter of time before the location gets out to everyone else.”

“Perhaps, but it will take time for them to accept that. Would your people be any different?”

“Probably not,” I muttered. Inertia was the second most powerful force in politics, right there behind denial. The Authority was debating this behind closed doors right now, and I didn’t have to be in the room to guess the nature of those arguments. They would be near-exact copies of the same ones that had taken place in Fleet Command after we’d revealed the nature of the Dowd incursion months ago. Some of the admirals had outright refused to believe it, while others had urged caution that bordered on paralysis. And a few had completely overreacted.

“You are not aware of this, but some Yarasi commanders contend that the Sillibar never resettled a new world after the fall of Zurix,” Velarys said into the pause. “They believe that Exodus is a myth designed to waste the resources of their enemies searching for an imaginary planet. Others believe it is more likely the Sillibar settled on multiple worlds somewhere in the unexplored depths of Pact space.”

“Under different circumstances, I could accept either of those theories,” I said. “But the Dowd seem to think they’ve located it.”

“They could be mistaken,” Velarys suggested. “And regardless, one ship cannot stop a war fleet. The *Renegade’s* impact in a large fleet engagement would be negligible.”

“This is the most advanced assault frigate in the Cluster,” I said, sounding more defensive than I intended. “We’re fast, heavily armed, and we have a Yarasi cloak. I’m not saying we can single-handedly win a battle, but we could tip the scales and save lives.”

Sighing, I stood and wandered over to the room-length window. A damaged Pact cruiser was heading toward the shipyard, though the battle damage on its angular hull was difficult to see with its dark gray paint and sleek profile. Distantly, I wondered where it had engaged the Dowd...and if its crew or any of the others in this system even knew about the bombshell information I’d provided their leadership.

My thoughts shifted to Captain Ellis—or more specifically, to Razael. Despite all our conversations about the first Dowd War and the attempted genocide against his people, we had barely spoken about Exodus. I had always assumed that he knew where it was, but I'd never known for certain. Did every Sillibar who traveled the galaxy know, or only a few? And what about the ones who actually lived on the planet?

Did they ever leave? Were they *allowed* to leave? I had so many questions about how their society worked. All anyone knew for certain was that they were the glue holding the Pact together.

"I can't even begin to fathom the chaos the destruction of Exodus would unleash," I whispered, looking at Velarys's reflection in the window. "The Angoth and the Krosians don't particularly like each other, and neither do any of the smaller client races in their territory as far as I know."

"Yet they have all sided with the shapechangers," Velarys said.

"Most of them didn't feel like they had a choice. Captain Ellis liked to say that you only needed to know two major things to understand the Pact. The first is that the one thing all the races have in common is fear of the Sillibar, specifically the Kaori Tash. Get a little too seditious with your neighbor, and you might find out he's a shapeshifting spy."

I turned around to face her. "The second is that they all joined the Pact because it was the best of bad options. They all feared being assimilated by other empires if they weren't part of a larger coalition."

"The Yarasi have never been interested in conquest," Velarys said. "They had nothing to fear from us."

"Maybe not. But the Dominion had just shown up and finished off the Dowd. Everyone was scared they'd be next."

"Especially after the Coperos Incident. Some would argue that your people are responsible for driving the Krosians into the arms of the Sillibar."

I winced despite myself. Again, she wasn't wrong. Astropolitics wasn't for the faint of heart, that much was for certain. The smallest decisions of an interstellar empire could change the course of entire civilizations halfway across the galaxy. The Dominion's early days of colonization in the Cluster had been necessary to secure the future of humanity in this part of the galaxy, but the early abuse of the Krosians had ultimately sent ripples across the stars—ripples that had shaped the behavior of people even now. Many in the Cluster had viewed an alliance with a flawed but known quantity like the Sillibar as a safer bet than waiting around to see if the human newcomers would squash them under their boot.

In context, decisions that seemed irrational today sometimes made perfect sense a century ago. And we were all living in that reality now, whether we wanted to or not.

"If the Authority falls apart, everyone in the Cluster will suffer for it," I said. "Power grabs from sector leaders, planetary secessions, who knows. If it comes to that, the Dominion will have no choice but to get involved. Fleet Command won't sit back while rogue Pact warlords start stockpiling weapons and ships. And we're not even talking about disruptions to intergalactic trade."

I shook my head. "The Column wants the Dominion to 'live up to the original mission' and take over the Cluster. If Exodus falls, we'll be one step closer to that reality. It sometimes feels like they have so many paths to victory while we have so few."

Velarys considered my words. "If the Sillibar do not wish us to help them, there is little we can do."

"Maybe not," I said. "But we can't ignore this."

"We may have to."

I grimaced, suddenly annoyed at her seeming ambivalence.

“Set aside the astropolitics for a moment,” I said. “We’re talking about *genocide*. We can’t allow one species to wipe out another.”

“If Miranda’s analysis is correct, the Dowd may have created the Sillibar.”

“That doesn’t change anything,” I snapped. “It’s still genocide!”

Velarys regarded me coolly. “Few in the Cluster think fondly of the Sillibar. If humanity were under threat, do you believe they would come to your aid?”

Or perhaps they believed in the myth of Yarasi honor, Hebeska’s earlier words popped into my head. *They assumed your warriors would rally to defend a defenseless people from genocide.*

Velarys had admitted that she wasn’t sure if her people would have helped even if they’d known the truth back during the first Dowd War. And I wasn’t a fool—I had no illusions that the Sillibar would help humans defend New Keledon if the situation were reversed.

But maybe that didn’t matter. Maybe that *shouldn’t* matter.

“For what it is worth, I am in complete agreement with you,” Velarys said, her tone warming. “But it is my duty to challenge the ship’s commander to ensure he makes the correct decisions.”

I gave her a tight smile. “And you’re really good at it. Maybe a little *too* good.”

“Would you prefer to replace me with a spineless sycophant?”

“It’s tempting sometimes.”

“No, it is not,” Velarys said. “You prefer to be challenged by a worthy adversary. It is why you are an excellent mate.”

I snorted into a chuckle, and was happy to see her return the smile.

“On that note,” I said, leaning back and trying to let some of the tension drain out of me, “I was a little distracted last night. I hope you told Astra she should reschedule.”

“I did no such thing. I invited her to my quarters instead.”

I blinked. “Are you serious?”

“I am Yarasi,” Velarys replied mildly. “She is a skilled dancer. And quite entertaining.”

Somehow, I still couldn’t tell if she was telling the truth. She had an uncharacteristically impish glimmer in her glowing eyes...

“I should return to the bridge,” she said, standing. “You sent a message to Admiral Lochlan—do you know when she will respond?”

I dragged my eyes back to the chrono on my desk. “Probably within the next few hours. I’m curious what she’ll have to say.”

Velarys nodded. “As am I.”

Admiral Lochlan’s transmission came in from Kenabrius just over an hour later, suggesting that she had replied to my report instantly without consulting with the rest of the Admiralty first. I couldn’t help but grin at the thought as I put the message through the decryption sequence. Lochlan may have loved her rules and protocol, but she had also grown to enjoy her distance from Fleet Command. In practice, the time delay afforded her—and *me*—significant operational independence. She could give me whatever orders she wanted before her contemporaries could do anything about it.

I hadn’t told her anything about Leenam or about Miranda’s theory about the origin of the Sillibar, since those weren’t technically mission-critical problems, but I had told her about Exodus and about the Dowd seemingly turning on the Column. I genuinely had no idea how she’d respond, and I invited Velarys back into my office to find out.

“Commander, I’ve read over your report half a dozen times, and I’m still not sure I believe it,” Lochlan’s small, half-body projection said from the center of my desk. “Frankly, I don’t *want* to believe it. But I will trust the expertise of your crew, and I’ll pass this along to Fleet Command shortly.

“I’m sure I don’t need to explain to you how much of a disaster it would be if the Dowd destroyed the Sillibar,” she continued. “No one in their right mind has any sympathy for the Authority, and deposing them and installing a more friendly government has been a fevered dream of the DID for almost a century now. But the hard truth is that as ruthless and manipulative as the Authority can be, the alternative is even worse.

“Without the Sillibar holding the reins, we’re looking at a complete breakdown of the balance of power in the Cluster. Instead of the Authority and the Kaori Tash, we’d find ourselves dealing with dozens of local warlords who have enough firepower and troops to threaten entire sectors. Fleet Command will never tolerate that, and Seraph knows the Yarasi Executrix won’t, either. The Dowd and the Column could completely disappear afterward and the damage would still be done. We’d end up at war with everyone over the corpse of the Pact.”

Her hand clenched and unclenched in front of her. “You’re all alone out there, Commander. By the time the rest of the Admiralty learns about this and makes a decision, the battle could already be over. You’re the only one in position to represent Dominion interests. And right now, our interest is stability. You have to stop the Dowd, whatever it takes.”

She paused for a moment and seemed to look right at me. “I’ll be in contact again soon. Lochlan out.”

I leaned back in my chair when the transmission finished. “Well, I suppose that settles it.”

“I do not see how,” Velarys said. “What does she expect you to do?”

“Continue pestering Golma to give us the coordinates. Maybe try and get in contact with members of the Authority and plead our case to them.”

“That will not work. Surely you are aware of that fact.”

“I am,” I said. “Which is why we aren’t going to waste time trying. But thankfully, there is another way for us to get the coordinates.”

“How? Engineer Vrisk said that the deleted data in the Column files cannot be recovered.”

“I know.”

Her gray brow furrowed. “How else could we acquire the coordinates?”

“You said that only the Sillibar—specifically, Kaori Tash agents—likely know the location of Exodus. So it seems to me like we need to ask one of them for help.”

Velarys’s confusion only grew. “Where do you expect to find one?”

“We don’t have to go far,” I said. “There’s one on the ship right now.”

Grinning, I activated the comm. “Zeris to Ensign Mesko.”

“Yes, Commander?” the young man’s voice came back.

“I need you to contact Ensign Hebeska and First Warrior Sekvoth,” I said. “Have them meet me in the conference room right away.”

Our two highest-ranking Pact emissaries arrived quickly, and they both seemed surprised by the other’s presence. Had the situation not been so time-sensitive, I wouldn’t have had them sit next to each other, if for no other reason than the Pact science and warrior castes rarely

got along. I also wouldn't have wanted them to feel like this was an inquisition.

But since we *were* staring at a countdown clock to genocide, I put aside the niceties and seated them both on the far side of the long conference table while Velarys and I stood in front of the viewport.

"By now, you've both surely heard the news," I said. "The Dowd have found Exodus, and we have to assume an assault fleet is already on its way."

"It is unthinkable," Hebeska breathed. "How could they—?"

"The how isn't important right now," I interrupted, holding up a hand and watching their reactions carefully. "What matters is that your people may not be able to get a proper defense force out there in time. The closest jump corridor is hundreds of light-years away, and your fleets are spread out trying to defend your colonies and locate the Dowd."

"The sector fleet near Usade should be moving into position," Sekvoth said. "Fifty Krosian warships should be more than sufficient to destroy the Dowd."

"I certainly hope so, but there's no guarantee," I told him. "We stopped their reinforcements from coming through the jump gate in the Drift, but we have no idea how many ships they have in reserve."

"Based on the Pact reports Councilor Vokal gave us," Velarys put in, "Ensign Pierce estimates the enemy would need several hundred ships at a minimum to organize the attacks across your space."

Nodding, I put my palms on the edge of the table. "I called you in here because I'm under orders to help your people however I can," I said. "Though frankly, I'd do this even if I weren't. I have no intention of sitting on my hands while the Dowd attempt another genocide. Unfortunately, neither Council Vokal nor the Governing Authority seems interested in giving us the coordinates."

Sekvoth and Hebeska gave each other a look.

“The Authority is reluctant to trust outsiders,” Hebeska said. “Especially with information this critical.”

“The fact that it’s critical makes this even more important,” I countered. “The *Renegade* is the only ship in three sectors fast enough to reach Exodus in time. We may be small, but we pack a punch. And I’ve no doubt that both of you would prefer to fight, given the chance.”

“We would,” Sekvoth said. “But we cannot tell you what we do not know, Commander. The location of Exodus has long been a secret, even from the Angoth and the Krosians.”

“But not anymore, if the Authority summoned reinforcements,” Velarys pointed out. “It is only a matter of time before everyone in the Cluster knows where the planet is.”

“I also have to assume that the Sillibar are planning an evacuation,” I said. “Regardless, leaving us in the dark accomplishes nothing.”

I eyed them both again, then took a deep breath and leaned upright. “Thankfully, there’s someone on this ship who can help.”

Sekvoth’s eyes narrowed fractionally. “Who?”

“This is the first joint mission between the three major powers of the Cluster in a very long time, possibly ever,” I said. “The Kaori Tash would never let that happen without at least one observer on board the ship. Someone to monitor the upstart Dominion commander...and to ensure that the Pact crew members didn’t betray the Authority by leaking state secrets. And as a bonus, it would give them a rare opportunity to get a good look at some Dominion and Yarasi tech up close.”

I smiled. “If this were a Pact ship, you can be damn sure that the Dominion would put an agent on board. Why wouldn’t they? Frankly, it would be negligent not to. It’s just the way things work.

“So I’m going to plead my case,” I went on. “You’ve both been on the *Renegade* for a while now, long enough to get to know me. We’ve fought together. We’ve bled together. And the Dominion obviously didn’t send me here to spy on you or sabotage your society. I’m here to win the war against the Dowd and keep the peace between our people. That’s it.”

I took another deep breath and swept my gaze between them.

“One ship may not make a difference,” I admitted. “But then again, it *might*. And considering the stakes, it seems foolish to take that risk.”

They both appeared more confused than anything, though that wasn’t unexpected. A Kaori Tash agent assigned to this mission wouldn’t give away the game with an obvious tell, and they would be mentally tough enough to handle the occasional telepathic peek into their thoughts as well.

But I didn’t need a tell or telepathy to figure out the truth, not after spending so many years with Razael wearing the face of Captain Ellis. I’d had suspicions from the start, but it had never been worth exploring them until now.

I focused on Sekvoth, meeting his gaze warrior to warrior. But then, with a hard look, I turned to Hebeska instead.

“So, Ensign,” I said, “What’s it going to be?”

For a long, awkward moment, it seemed as though she might keep up the charade. If she did, there was nothing I could really do about it. I wasn’t going to order Velarys or Miranda to bore into her mind or anything so barbaric. The whole point of this gambit was to reach out to a former adversary in the spirit of cooperation. It was up to Hebeska to slap away my hand...or to take it.

“There are those in the Authority who remain suspicious of your motives, Commander,” Hebeska said. Her voice was the same as before, but the sharp, clear tone was completely different. “Despite

everything that has happened, they still believe that you and Admiral Lochlan are assets of your Intelligence Directorate. And they insist that the presence of a Yarasi warrior on your ship heralds a future alliance between your empires—an alliance meant to destroy my people.”

Sekvoth’s huge green brow furrowed as he twisted to look at the small Angoth woman in consternation.

“You’ve served on this ship for almost two months now,” I said to her. “What do *you* think?”

Hebeska considered in silence for several more heartbeats. “I believe that no one in the Cluster has been a greater adversary of the Dowd than you,” she said. “And that foolishly or not, you truly wish to keep the peace, even if that means fighting against your own people.”

I nodded. “Then I suppose the question is whether you trust me enough to tell me what I need to know.”

Hebeska’s dark eyes seemed to get even darker, as if they were swirling pools of pure void. But then, in an instant, her scaly matte flesh turned a glossy gray, and her black eyes became milky white orbs. Her wings seemed to melt into her back, and as her forehead ridges disappeared, so did her nose and mouth.

“*Gork’ulash*,” Sekvoth gasped, standing from his chair and taking a step back. Hebeska didn’t even look at him.

“Preparations for evacuation will have already begun,” she said in an artificial, mechanical voice. It was only then I noticed the tiny metal vocal implants on her otherwise smooth throat. “The planet might be evacuated before the Dowd arrive.”

“I hope so,” I said. “But if not, they’re going to need all the help they can get to buy time. I have to imagine it will take a while to organize the population and prepare sufficient transports.”

“It will.” She paused again, then slowly rose to her feet. “The Dowd will stop at nothing to destroy us, Commander. It has been the sole focus of their existence for generations.”

I nodded in grim understanding. When this was over, I planned to ask her—and possibly Golma and Vokal—about the true nature of the relationship between their species. Had the Dowd actually created them in the distant past? To what purpose? And why were they now obsessed with destroying their own experiment?

But pragmatically, none of that mattered right now. Not until the Dowd could be stopped.

“We’re ready to go,” I said. “I just need to know where.”

Hebeska shifted her milky eyes to Velarys. “And what of your people? Will they answer the call to prevent a genocide?”

“I do not know,” Velarys admitted. “Nor do I know the location of all our vessels. They may be too far away.”

She paused. “But if you wish, I will send a call to arms.”

Hebeska studied the Yarasi woman. I remembered the bitterness they’d expressed when we’d been exploring Zurix, and I wondered if the echo might still linger between them.

“I will provide you with the coordinates,” Hebeska said. “And place the future of my people in your hands.”

“We’ll leave at once,” I told her. “And I promise, we’ll do everything we can.”

“I know you will, Commander.”

Her bizarre alien gaze lingered on me for another heartbeat before she turned to the Krosian man next to her. Sekvoth, still clearly shaken, dropped to a knee.

“You honor us with your presence, Elder One,” he said, lowering his eyes. “I pledge my life and those of my warriors to your service.”

“Rise,” Hebeska said, somehow managing to sound regal despite the mechanized voice. “Summon the others to my quarters. There is much we need to discuss.”

Sekvoth nodded hastily, then rose and strode out of the room. I wasn't sure I'd ever seen a Krosian move so quickly...or with such obvious fear.

“One last thing, Commander,” Hebeska said, turning to face me. “How did you know?”

I smiled. “I didn't.”

Chapter 13

Into the Fray

From the moment we shifted away from New Krosis, I knew that the next several days were going to be rough on the crew. The trip was about fifty hours shorter than our jaunt from the Borderlands to Zurix, but the stakes were so much higher. We were no longer prowling the stars in search of the enemy—we were heading straight at them, and we had no idea what we would ultimately face when we got there.

Hebeska's transformation had also sent ripples across the ship, to the point I'd briefly wondered if it might be easier for her to pretend to be an Angoth for the rest of the mission. But I quickly dismissed that notion as foolish. The jig was up; the change in behavior from the rest of the Pact crew members around her was so obvious that everyone would notice no matter what form she was wearing. And this way, everyone would have just over four days to get used to the new normal before we arrived. After that...

Well, the future was very uncertain. The first time we shifted out of astral space for a respite, the comm was already lighting up with messages from the Governing Authority demanding we return to New Krosis. I didn't bother to respond—I left that to Hebeska. The messages had stopped by our second respite, and she assured me that she'd informed her Kaori Tash brethren that she had taken it upon herself to guide us to Exodus.

Whether they approved of that choice or not was a separate question. I feared that the fallout for her personally would be quite severe. Intelligence agencies weren't exactly known for their merciful attitudes toward operatives who revealed critical state secrets. But then, this wasn't exactly a normal situation, and if we were able to contribute to the battle as much as I hoped, then perhaps she'd be vindicated in the end.

I focused my efforts on getting the ship and crew as ready for battle as I could. We performed daily combat drills while in astral space, primarily focusing on large fleet tactics since the crew was more accustomed to small one-on-one engagements. The role of an assault frigate was a combination of traditional anti-fighter support screen and aggressive hit-and-fade strikes on targets of opportunity. I wanted us ready for both.

Four days into the journey, we took our last respite in normal space before traveling into and through the Cocytus Nebula. That morning, I called my senior staff into the conference room for a final briefing.

"First things first," I said from the head of the table. "Last night, the decryption team had a breakthrough with the data we recovered from Zurix."

"We were able to access most of the facility's communication logs," Vrisk said, a cool wave of thoughtful black rippling across his neck. "Our initial analysis suggested several likely locations for either additional Dowd bases or hidden communications relays. We passed that information along to the Pact Governing Authority."

"Hopefully they'll be able to put it to use once the current crisis is over. And work continues to see if there's anything we can find in their files."

I looked around the table to wait for any commentary. Not long ago, this discovery would have been all anyone could talk about—Ol-

shenko in particular would be scrambling through the data to try and get us a new target. But given the gravity of the new mission ahead of us, blowing up a few Dowd bases seemed almost like an afterthought.

“The Authority will act on any additional data you can provide,” Hebeska put in from across the table, her computerized voice still sounding strange after several days. “Your efforts are greatly appreciated.”

Vrisk gave her a slight nod, and his scales turned a cool gray. Unsurprisingly, he had handled her transformation from Angoth engineer to Sillibar spy more smoothly than most of the crew. I could feel the tension and distrust from the others, and it wasn't as if I didn't understand where they were coming from. We'd been deceived by the very people we'd been sent here to help, and now we were about to risk our lives on their behalf.

“You had a final report for us, Ensign,” I prompted. The rank sounded strange given Hebeska's new identity, but I wanted to try to keep some continuity until the mission was over.

“Yes,” she said, her unblinking milky eyes seemingly looking everywhere at once. “Fourteen hours ago, our listening post near Usade detected a large fleet gathering outside the system. The enemy disappeared before a probe could be sent to learn any additional details, but it is clear that a Dowd attack is imminent.”

“What additional defenses do you have in place?” Velarys asked from my right.

Hebeska touched the panel in front of her and called up a detailed holo-projection of a planet at the center of the table, complete with ships and static defensive emplacements,

“We have gathered as many vessels as we could scramble in the time available. More warships are on the way, but they are unlikely to arrive

in time. Fortunately, the planet is also protected by a shield generator and four orbital defense platforms.”

Olshenko whistled. “That’s enough to repel a sizable fleet. Do the Dowd even have enough ships to break through?”

“Impossible to say, since we don’t know the full extent of their forces,” I said. “But there is good news. Since the Dowd clashed with Column forces to get this information, it seems unlikely there will be any human ships with them.”

“Thank the Seraph for small favors,” Olshenko said. “I’d rather not tangle with that superdreadnought again anytime soon. Or ever.”

“As a precautionary measure, planetary evacuation has already begun,” Hebeska said. “The first transports will be loaded and leaving shortly, but the bulk of the planet’s population will need more time. Ten more transports are scheduled to leave within the next day.”

“A dozen transports?” Miranda asked. “For the entire population?”

Hebeska’s unblinking eyes focused on her. “It is all the space we require.”

I frowned, trying to imagine the Dominion evacuating one of the Golden Worlds. Realistically, it wouldn’t be possible—there simply weren’t enough transports in the Dominion to move billions of people at the same time. The Sillibar population must have been much smaller than anyone realized. Even if they could shapeshift into smaller creatures, a dozen transports couldn’t possibly move more than a few million individuals at most.

“The transports will travel deeper into the nebula where sensor range is dramatically limited,” Hebeska added. “They will then meet up with the incoming armada from New Krosis, where they can be escorted to safety.”

“Let us hope the Dowd can be defeated so that your people may return to their homes,” Vrisk said.

“There will be no return,” Hebeska said. “Only the search for a new sanctuary.”

A hollow stillness settled over the room, but no one pressed the issue further.

“More tactical information will be provided once we arrive,” Hebeska said. “We hold out hope that the evacuation can be completed before the enemy attacks.”

“If not, we’ll buy them the time they need,” I said, standing. “We’ll shift back into astral space within the hour. Until then, dismissed.”

The room cleared out quickly, though Hebeska stayed behind. I waited, unsurprised that she wanted to have a last word with me in private.

“Commander,” she said once we were alone. “I wish to once again express my appreciation at your government’s willingness to aid us in this dark hour.”

“I just wish we had time to muster more ships,” I said, wondering if the Admiralty would have sent them. I was almost glad I’d never learn the answer.

“The enemy expected to surprise us, but you have given us a fighting chance,” Hebeska said. “For that, the Authority is in your debt.”

I almost pointed out that I hadn’t done anything—Ash was the one who had learned about the attack, and then only out of sheer happenstance. But it usually wasn’t a good idea to correct someone when they were giving you credit, especially if you might need that leverage later.

“Unfortunately, I can make no promises about the future of this joint operation between our peoples,” she added. “While there are those within the Authority who will appreciate your aid, I am concerned that fear and desperation may cause others to behave...irrationally. This war was never supposed to come to Exodus.”

I nodded somberly. It would have been nice if I could have told her about Razael, if only to help her understand that I likely knew more about her people's history and plight than any other officer in the Dominion. He and Ellis were the ones who'd spent years convincing me how important keeping the peace was for the future of the Cluster.

But that was another secret I'd have to keep a bit longer. Even with everything that had happened so far, I couldn't imagine how the Kaori Tash would react upon learning that one of their operatives had defected to the Dominion. Especially since Razael and Ellis had gone out of their way to make sure the Pact believed he was dead.

"Did your people believe they could keep the location secret forever?" I asked instead.

"Long enough," Hebeska said. "Only a handful of individuals know the location, and before this crisis, few who live on the planet ever expected to leave."

"Being trapped in a nebula forever...that's not much of a way to live."

"It was the only way to *survive*," Hebeska countered. Her milky eyes lingered on me. "Your species has never been hunted to extinction, Commander. I cannot expect you to understand."

"I suppose not," I conceded. "Since you brought it up, there was something I wanted to share with you—something we learned after you performed that autopsy on the Dowd from Zurix."

She didn't visibly react. Though without a mouth or nose, I didn't have much to read anyway.

"Ensign Pierce noticed that the samples your government provided us had been tampered with," I continued. "Specifically, to prevent us from realizing that your people and the Dowd have a similar genetic structure. She speculates that your people may have shared a planet at some point in the distant past."

This time, there was definitely a reaction. Even without pupils, I could see her eyes move.

“That is baseless speculation,” she said. Sadly, her mechanized voice wasn’t built to convey changes in mood.

“Maybe,” I said casually, debating if I should add that Miranda also thought the Sillibar were an artificial creation. But I decided to keep that in my pocket for now. “But if it’s true, it might provide some valuable context and insights into our common enemy.”

“The only insight you require is that when the Dowd have destroyed us, they will come for you,” Hebeska said. “I do not understand why they have allied with others of your kind, but it will not last. They will not forgive the destruction humanity wrought upon them.”

“The Column may have just learned that firsthand,” I said.

“Perhaps.” Hebeska paused again. “Regardless, Commander, I strongly suggest that you do not share these findings with the Authority or any other Pact representative.”

“I wasn’t planning on it.”

“Good. Because others may not respond as cordially as I.”

She turned to leave but then abruptly looked back at me, her unblinking stare as enigmatic as always.

“Consider this, Commander,” she said. “How would your people react if one day your Seraph returned to your Golden Worlds and declared her own children unworthy of existence?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted, taken aback. “It would be...troubling.”

“Yes,” she said pointedly. “It was.”

Hebeska held my gaze for another moment, then left the room.

I was riding the lift a minute later mulling over what Hebeska had said. But we had given our minds enough time to recover from the Koro Effect, and we were scheduled to shift back into astral space soon. The Dowd could literally be at Exodus at any moment.

But I had one final thing I needed to do before we set out. And it wasn't going to be easy.

Or pleasant.

I arrived at the ship's lounge shortly thereafter. It was closed for business at this early morning hour, though Saleya was inside organizing some bottles on the shelves. She was still wearing one of her sleek black dresses as if she were expecting the evening rush at any moment.

"You're supposed to be packed by now," I said, striding toward the bar as the doors slid shut behind me.

"I moved everything to the *Wildcat*," Saleya replied coolly. "But I wanted to make sure the stock was secure. These anti-grav restraints should keep everything from spilling no matter how many times your pilot rolls the ship."

I grunted softly. "Don't worry, I'll make sure Reyes keeps it nice and steady to save the booze."

"I'll hold you to that," she said, grabbing a bottle of red liquor from the shelf. "You should have been here last night. The place was quite raucous."

"The final reprieve before a battle," I said, sliding onto the bar stool across from her. "Though everyone was *supposed* to tuck in early to get some sleep."

"Don't worry, I didn't let them overstay their welcome," she assured me with a wink. "Though I wish you would have stopped by."

"It would be poor form," I said. "We've been running drills for days. The crew deserved a break from their hardass commander. Here, they can complain about me in peace."

Saleya grinned and set two glasses in front of me, then began to pour some liquor into each. “That’s a very mature attitude. I’ve met plenty of officers who would lose their heads if they knew what their subordinates said about them when they weren’t around.”

“Everyone needs to blow off steam now and then,” I said. “I don’t care if people say stupid shit when it doesn’t matter.”

“Would you believe me if I told you that I’ve never heard a disparaging word about you?”

“No.”

“Good.”

Saleya snickered as she set down the bottle and lifted her glass. I did the same but shook my head.

“Drinking before battle,” I mused. “Not exactly wise.”

“Don’t worry, dear, it’s just mulberry juice.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Really?”

“No. But that’s what you can tell anyone who asks.”

Saleya flashed me a sly grin, then took a sip and waited for me to do the same. The liquor was sweet and citrusy, with a tart aftertaste and pleasant burn in the throat.

“Whiskey from Thatania,” she said, eyeing her glass. The liquid picked up the faint glow from her luminescent eyes, making it seem like it was sparkling. “I purchased it from the quartermaster on New Krosis.”

“Not bad,” I said, gulping down the rest of the glass.

“Evidently, this was the last shipment before the Dowd raid three weeks ago.”

My lip twisted, and not because of the tart aftertaste. All these months of attacks on vulnerable targets, and now here we were at what would amount to the first major battle of the war. And potentially the last, depending how things went.

"I'm sure you spent plenty of time chatting with everyone last night," I said. "How is morale overall?"

"Good," Saleya said, refilling our glasses. "They're nervous but confident. Despite what they say about their brusque natty Commander when they don't think anyone is listening, they trust him implicitly."

"Well, that's something."

"It's *everything*," she corrected. "Though more than a few of them are rattled about the Sillibar crew member. They don't realize how much time they've already spent around one."

"Very true."

Some of the officers on this ship, like Olshenko and Novak, had served with Captain Ellis for years. And almost everyone on board had served on the *Stormrider*, with a few exceptions like Ensign Mesko and Lieutenant Ackers. I still didn't know when or if I'd ever be able to tell them the truth about his identity.

"Honestly, I think this will affect the Pact crew most of all," I murmured. "Speaking of badmouthing your commanders in private, I wonder if any of them said something nasty about the Authority without realizing they were being watched by a Kaori Tash operative."

"Difficult to say," Saleya said, sliding the refilled glass back to me. "Most of them have spent their entire lives assuming they were being watched at all times by their unknowable protectors."

I scoffed in disgust. "Terrible way to run a society."

She leaned her arms on the bar and brought her face within a few centimeters of mine. "I spent years on New Praxius and on the mothership avoiding the watchful eyes of the DID. It's not as different as you might think."

I picked up the glass and looked into her eyes. She was right, of course. But then, the entire purpose of the organization she'd built

was to one day change all of that. She believed—*we* believed—that the Dominion could be saved. As for the Pact...

“When people learn what happened out here, some of them will wonder why we bothered,” I said. “The Authority has a lot of blood on their hands. And in their paranoia, the Sillibar brought the Cluster to the brink of war long before the Dowd ever returned.”

“It’s comforting to see everything as black and white rather than shades of gray,” Saleya said. “And it’s easy to believe that everything will be better if you just kill the right people. But those who embrace chaos have rarely had to suffer its wrath.”

I nodded soberly. As badly as the Dowd raids had disrupted trade across the Pact, a total unraveling of the Authority could starve billions of people across thousands of light-years. And famine would only be the beginning.

Taking another sip of the whiskey, I glanced back over my shoulder to the viewport where the bluish expanse of the Cocytus Nebula was barely visible amidst the otherwise black abyss.

“Do you ever wonder if Razael knew where Exodus was?” I asked.

“I honestly don’t know,” Saleya admitted. “But it’s certainly possible.”

“I suppose he had no reason to tell anyone. I know he technically turned against the Pact, but he did it to help his people, not sell them out.”

My mind’s eye flashed with the memory of the Dowd psychoporting onto the *Stormrider*’s bridge. I’d tried to save everyone, but I hadn’t been fast enough to save Razael. Two hundred years after the first genocide, the war had finally caught up with him.

“It makes me wonder what he’d say if he were here now,” I said.

“He’d be immensely proud of what you’ve accomplished in a short time,” Saleya said.

Sighing, I finished off the rest of the glass and set it down. “What I’ve accomplished won’t matter if the Dowd finish the job they started two centuries ago.”

She put her hand on my wrist. “That’s exactly why you’re going to stop them. I don’t doubt it for a minute.”

From someone else, the words might have sounded empty or even patronizing, but not from Saleya. Whether because of her Succubus charms or pure natural ability, she had always been able to inspire me in ways no one else could.

“If I’m going to stop them, then you need to get going,” I said. “Is Astra already in the hangar?”

“She should be. Of the three of us, she’s the only one who actually wants to leave.”

I chuckled softly. “Then she’s the only one with any sense.”

“She’d stay in heartbeat if you asked,” Saleya replied as she put the bottle and glasses beneath the counter. “The girl’s obsessed with you, dear. You might have broken her in a little too well.”

I smiled as I imagined her flexible Neyris body wrapping around me again. And I’d had to postpone my joint session with her and Velarys...

“Mm,” I murmured, rising from the stool. “Come on, let’s get you to the hangar.”

Ash was waiting for us on the *Wildcat*’s landing ramp when we arrived, looking about as annoyed as I’d expected. I’d had to constantly debate this plan with her during our trip, settling for incremental gains every night—and only *after* I’d made her finish at least once.

It hadn’t mattered to her that the *Wildcat* would be mostly useless in a major fleet engagement, especially without extra psionic crew members to help her give the ship power. What eventually sold my point was the fact that Velarys had been able to get a message to the Yarasi Councilor on Kenabrius in regards to Leenam’s condition. She

agreed to try and find help for him, which was the best chance he was likely to get.

After that news, Ash had finally accepted that someone also needed to get Astra and Saleya to safety. Keeping civilians on board while we were hunting behind enemy lines had been dubious enough, but entering a potentially massive battle took the risk to an entirely unacceptable level.

“Sorry she’s late,” I said, helping Saleya onto the ramp. “She wanted to lock up the bar.”

“And here I thought maybe you’d come to your senses and decided to keep us around,” Ash said, arms crossed sourly over her chest.

I sighed. “You know this is for the best. It’s not like we can drop them off at a cozy outpost nearby—we’re in the middle of nowhere. And besides—”

“I know, I know,” Ash said. “Just because it makes sense doesn’t mean I gotta like it.”

“We’ll have much more fun anyway, dear,” Saleya promised. “I had Astra pack up two bottles of Drellian port.”

“Three,” the Neyris woman put in as she appeared inside the wrap-around airlock at the top of the ramp. It still took me a little by surprise every time I saw her in civilian clothing instead of...well, almost nothing. Though her black heels still seemed like a tripping hazard. “And everything fun I could download off the ’Sphere during one of our stops.”

“At least *someone* will finally watch the Rividian Nights spinoff with me,” Ash said. “Though I can tell you right now it’s gonna be awful. That dumb bitch Crissy got dumped months ago and still hasn’t found a new boyfriend.”

“Please, don’t spoil it for me,” I said in a voice so deadpan it could have come from a mech. “I’m dying to watch it when we meet back up.”

Saleya chuckled softly and took Astra’s hand. “Come along, dear. Let’s give them a moment.”

They disappeared inside the ship, leaving Ash and I alone on the ramp. She looked ever-so-slightly less annoyed than she had a moment earlier.

“This better not become a habit,” she warned, finally uncrossing her arms as she shuffled up to slide them around me.

“Next time, we’ll probably be close enough to a decent planet where they can—”

“I mean leavin’ me behind because I’m pregnant!”

I blinked. “What?”

“Don’t pretend that has nothin’ to do with it.”

“But...it doesn’t,” I stammered, completely blindsided. “I wasn’t even thinking about it.”

Her expression hardened. “Wait, you mean you *aren’t* gonna treat me special now that you finally knocked me up?”

I froze for a solid ten seconds before she snorted into an impish giggle, then jumped up into my embrace.

“I’m just messin’ with you, baby,” she teased, brushing her nose against mine. “Gotta do it while I still can.”

“Right,” I muttered.

Ash leaned in and gave me a long, molten kiss. She was still smiling when she eventually pulled back.

“Honestly, I’m lookin’ forward to you gettin’ all overprotective,” she said. “You’ll be fussin’ all over me once I finally start showin’, won’t ya?”

“Probably,” I admitted.

“Stars, I can’t wait. I’m gonna be pumpin’ ’em out for us non-stop!”

I smiled and kissed her again. The heat between us continued to build, and I probably should have been worried about sweating through my uniform jacket before the battle. But I couldn’t bring myself to put her down.

Ash held my cheeks tight when she leaned away. “Still gonna expect you to fuck me every night, though, you know that?”

“I do,” I said. “And I will.”

She smiled and pecked the tip of my nose. “I’ll see you on Kenabrius in a few days, baby. Please don’t get yourself killed.”

“I’ll be there,” I assured her, brushing a lock of golden hair from her eyes. “I promise.”

Once the *Wildcat* had shifted into astral space, I returned to the bridge and ordered Reyes to do the same. I had organized the duty roster to make sure everyone was fresh and rested, and I expected them all to be sharp. Still, I could feel their anticipation—and anxiety—as we spent the next few hours traveling deeper into the Cocytus Nebula.

But then, finally, the moment of truth was upon us.

“Coming up on the designated coordinates, sir,” Reyes announced.

“Good,” I said, resisting the urge to stand and nestling deeper into my chair instead. “Bring us out of astral space.”

When the crimson swirls outside the viewer rolled away, they weren’t replaced by the usual inky blackness, but rather by a thick bluish cloud. The Dominion possessed virtually no navigational or

scientific data on the Cocytus Nebula, so aside from Hebeska's warnings about the effects on our sensors, I had no idea what to expect.

"Let's open our eyes, shall we?" I said. "Sensors to full power, basic navigational sweep."

"There are no stellar markers to pinpoint our position relative to our planned shift coordinates," Miranda said, scowling at her instruments. "We could be millions of kilometers from the intended target."

"With your permission, Commander, I can adjust the sensors to compensate," Hebeska said, the computerized voice of her speech apparatus still sounding strange to my ears.

"Go ahead," I said.

I watched the navigational overlay on the viewer as she manually calibrated the sensors, and it wasn't long before the computer calculated our position. We hadn't missed the mark by all that much in navigational terms, especially given the limited data Reyes had to work with before the final shift of the journey. In theory, Exodus was only twenty minutes away.

"Adjust our heading, Ensign," I said. "Half speed—we don't want to come flying out of the bushes and get ourselves shot."

"Yes, sir," Reyes said. "Sublight drive to one-half power."

I did my best to stay calm and still as we accelerated through the nebula. The collective tension level on the bridge was slowly rising around me, even from the normally unflappable officers like Miranda. It almost felt like we were sneaking around outside a neighbor's house without knowing if they were home.

Or if the building was on fire. While Hebeska had technically checked in with a comm signal when we were outside the nebula, the Dowd could have easily arrived in the interim. For all we knew, they had already been defeated...or obliterated everyone and everything in their path.

“Sensors are detecting a large object at the functional edge of our range,” Miranda said, frowning.

“The planet?” I asked.

“We are still well out of range,” Hebeska said, checking her own instruments. “The nebula is making it difficult to...”

She trailed off, and I was about to press her on it when I saw the large black blot appear outside the viewport. With the blue mists enveloping us, it was almost like we were a submersible deep beneath an ocean approaching a massive sea creature.

“What the hell is that thing?” Olshenko asked. “A Sillibar ship?”

“No,” I said as the blot began to take a more precise shape. “That’s a Dowd leviathan.”

The vessel really did look like an enormous whale with a wide, sloping midsection that gradually tapered off into a narrower stern almost like a tail. It was well over a kilometer in length, not quite twice the size of a Dominion battleship. I didn’t need to see the tactical reports to know it was bristling with weapons. This ship was virtually identical to the Dowd dreadnoughts I’d seen in Captain Ellis’s old battle vids but for strange, thin protrusions on its dorsal hull.

“Activate the cloak,” I said, voice hoarse. “Now!”

Velarys immediately touched the crystal capacitor on her armrest, and the bridge lights dimmed as the Yarasi cloaking device shrouded us from enemy sensors.

“Helm, prepare for evasive maneuvers,” I warned. “Any sign they spotted us?”

“None yet, sir,” Olshenko said. “But our scanners are limited while cloaked.”

“I’ll take that trade. We can see them just fine.”

I held my breath as the dreadnought grew larger, and it only took a few moments to see that it wasn't alone. A flurry of starfighter drones buzzed around it like plankton, as did at least a dozen swarm ships.

"I do not recommend getting any closer, sir," Velarys said. "The enemy may be able to track our position as we displace dust and gasses in the nebula."

"Right," I said, leaning forward. "Helm, take us in a wide arc around them. And give us more power—we need to get to the planet right away."

"Yes, sir," Reyes said, rolling the ship to starboard.

I felt more than heard Olshenko stir behind me. "If they're already here, I wonder what they're waiting for. They don't appear to be moving."

"Not yet, anyway," I said. "They might have sent out scouts to evaluate the planet's defenses."

"The Dowd will not hesitate," Hebeska said, her white eyes still staring at the viewport. "They will attack. And they will not relent until every Sillibar is dead."

A dark silence descended over the bridge, as thick as the nebula outside. Her dread was apparent even with her flat mechanical voice.

"They might not have found the planet," I said. "Or their other ships could have gotten lost in the nebula thanks to astral drift. Whatever the case, they haven't attacked yet, and that's what counts."

No one responded, and the tension level remained high. But I didn't sense any panic, and I knew that once the fighting actually started, their training and combat instincts would take over.

A few minutes later, the leviathan had disappeared from the tac-holo, and another dark blot had appeared in the distance. But this one was perfectly round, and it only took half a minute for the familiar outline of a planet to take shape.

“Approaching a planetary body, sir,” Miranda reported. “Though between the nebula and the cloaking device, our scanning range is too limited to provide any details.”

“The automated defense systems will fire upon us when we drop the cloak,” Hebeska said. “I need to submit the proper codes first.”

“By all means,” I prompted.

Hebeska sent her codes, and once she received the proper confirmation, Velarys dropped the cloak. The tactical overlay gradually began to update as our sensors detected the four mighty orbital installations around the planet as well as a ring of defending ships. It was a sizable force, as far as planetary defense fleets went: about fifty ships, including one old Sillibar battlecruiser, four Krosian battleships, and eight cruisers. About half of the vessels were modern Pact design, but the rest were practically museum pieces. While they still possessed the sleek, black-gray aesthetic common to modern vessels, the ovoid shapes were more reminiscent of the Sillibar warships from Captain Ellis’s old holo-vids...and the debris field we’d found at Zurix.

“I hope those old boats have been refitted,” Reyes commented.

“They appear to have modern Pact plasma weapons,” Olshenko said. “And those platforms pack a punch. Easily the armament of a battleship each. The Dowd will be in for a surprise if they think that whale ship of theirs can blast its way through.”

“It will have friends,” I said. “Go ahead and hail their command ship.”

“Yes, sir,” Mesko said. Like everyone else, he sounded a bit less nervous now that he realized the planet was far from defenseless. “Incoming transmission from the lead Sillibar ship, sir, identified as the *Melanchrus*.”

I nodded at Hebeska, and the two of us rose to our feet to stand at the center of the bridge. “On viewer.”

The oversized image of a Sillibar appeared at the center of the viewscreen. His glossy dark gray skin and milky white eyes looked nearly as alien as the Dowd, and since the shapeshifters didn't typically wear any head adornments while in their natural form, it was difficult for my human eyes to discern any difference between this individual and the one standing at my side.

"Prelate Arduul," Hebeska greeted. "I have brought the human vessel to aid the defense."

The Sillibar stayed silent for a moment before I realized he wasn't wearing a vocal apparatus like Hebeska. And while it was challenging to read his alien face, it certainly seemed as though he was scowling at her.

"You were not tasked to bring him here," Arduul said in a deep, resonating voice, though I had no idea where it was coming from. "You have violated the Concord."

"Yes, I have," Hebeska said. "And I will submit myself for punishment once the evacuation is complete. But until then, the humans are here to help."

She paused for a few heartbeats, and when there was no response, she turned to me.

"Greetings, Prelate," I said. "I'm Commander Zeris of the Dominion starship *Renegade*. Admiral Lochlan tasked me to aid you however I can."

I couldn't quite tell if Arduul was looking at me or Hebeska, but he eventually spoke again.

"Commander," he said. "Your service to the Pact is noted. We welcome whatever aid you can provide."

I nodded, surprised at the cool, diplomatic answer. But he was probably just saving his wrath for the Kaori Tash agent who had brought us here.

“What is the status of the evacuation?” Hebeska asked.

“Ongoing,” Arduul said. “The transports will be ready to launch in less than five hours.”

“I’m afraid they don’t have five hours,” I said darkly. “The Dowd armada is right behind us. We spotted several of their ships in the nebula on our way in.”

Even without a mouth or nose, I could see the reaction on Arduul’s face. “What?”

“They will be here any moment, Prelate,” Hebeska said. “Scramble all available starfighters and prepare for battle. We must accelerate the evacuation.”

“It has already been accelerated,” Arduul said. “They cannot be loaded any faster.”

“We’ll do whatever we can to help buy you the time you need,” I told him. “But we should—”

“Enemy contacts, sir!” Olshenko blurted out. “Dowd ships emerging from the nebula bearing zero-four-nine mark two-six-four.”

I grimaced. “How many?”

“A dozen, sir. Correction, *several* dozen. Wait...”

I glanced over my shoulder. “Spit it out, Lieutenant. How many are there?”

The younger man’s face had turned so pale I feared he might pass out. “Three hundred and twelve, sir.”

My stomach folded in half. “Put them on the overlay,” I managed, turning back to the tactical display floating to the left of the comm display with Arduul’s head. Swarms of tiny blips began to appear at the edge of our sensor range...and they never seemed to stop.

“Forty hive ships,” Miranda whispered. “And the dreadnought.”

Almost seven-to-one odds, I thought grimly. *Seraph save us.*

“Prelate, you have to accelerate the evacuation,” I said, keeping my voice as calm as I could.

For several long, aching moments, Arduul remained stiff and silent. But then there was a flicker of activity in the projection behind him.

“Come within the protective cordon, Commander,” the Prelate said. “We must prepare our defense.”

The image vanished, leaving behind only the growing planet in front of us and the vast armada of ships behind us.

“Defense?” Olshenko breathed. “What kind of defense can they possibly mount against this!”

“The best one we can,” I said. “Helm, full power to the drive. Get us inside that cordon.”

Taking a deep breath, I returned to my command chair and sat down. It was so deathly quiet the squeak of cushions was practically an explosion in my ears.

“All hands, this is Commander Zeris,” I said, opening the comm on my seat. “Battle stations.”

Chapter 14

Battle Lines

As we joined the other vessels in the defense fleet, I had never been more aware of the *Renegade's* modest size. We almost seemed like a starfighter compared to the mighty battleships at the center of the Pact lines. Even the old Sillibar cruisers seemed enormous as we settled into position guarding their flank.

At least until I looked at the tac-holo and saw the Dowd leviathan. The enemy fleet had come to a halt well outside firing range, and they had yet to advance any further. So far, the Dowd seemed content to simply stare us down from a distance, which made me wonder what they were planning. The aliens had never hesitated in the past—they were the personification of relentless aggression.

“Tactical report,” I prompted. “What are they doing out there, Lieutenant?”

“Not much yet, surprisingly,” Olshenko said, voice tense but professional. “I would have thought they’d charge right at us, but they seem to be forming up into surprisingly organized battle lines.”

“Faster ships protecting their flanks, with the leviathan and hive ships providing overlapping fire coverage in the center,” Velarys added. “They are approximating a Dominion battle formation.”

I examined the tac-holo. She was right: this was a traditional Dominion battle fleet arrangement, albeit one that hadn’t been used on this scale since...

Well, since the original Dowd War. The Expansionary Fleet's well-executed line formation had countered the enemy's aggressive tendencies and eventually made the aliens so desperate they'd resorted to suicide attacks—attacks that proved less effective against psionic shields.

There were weaknesses to such a formation, of course. The fleet sacrificed mobility for overlapping fire coverage, and an enemy with exceptional speed or superior starfighter support could outflank them and cause problems. But since Valkyries were the strongest starfighters in the Cluster, the formation remained a simple but powerful tool for our fleet.

"Looks like they picked up a few things from their insurrectionist allies," I said. "First psionic powers, now fleet tactics."

"I'm still waiting for that superdreadnought of theirs to show up," Reyes grumbled. "Damn thing might be able to take our whole fleet by itself."

"If we're lucky, we'll never see them fighting on the same side again. But that's tomorrow's problem." I leaned forward and rubbed my hands together. "Right now, we need to buy those transports more time, and that's exactly what we're going to do. What's the ship's status?"

"All systems green, sir," Miranda reported. Like the others, her voice was as calm and professional as ever, but from how tightly her legs were crossed beneath her console, I could tell she was anxious as everyone else on the bridge. "Valkyries are on hot standby."

"Good," I said, opening the comm. "Ackers, this is Bridge. Report."

"All troopers are ready, Commander," the lieutenant's voice came back. "I stationed Sekvoth and his warriors outside engineering. Mine have taken up positions in other vulnerable areas throughout the ship.

If the Dowd try one of their fancy boarding techniques, we'll be ready for them."

"Acknowledged."

I was half-tempted to assign one of the troopers up here in case, but it seemed like a waste with both me and Velarys up here already. I doubted it would matter anyway—if we lost our shields, we were almost certainly dead anyway.

Pushing the thought aside, I turned to Hebeska. "Any updates from the planet?"

"Nothing yet, Commander," she replied. "The transports are still loading."

I nodded grimly. I'd seen minor evacuations from colonial settlements before, especially in the Borderlands, and they were inevitably chaotic, ugly affairs. But I knew so little about how the Sillibar lived I couldn't even visualize what must have been going on down there.

"Perhaps the Dowd are unaware of the ongoing evacuation," Velarys suggested. "Otherwise they would be more aggressive."

"Or they learned from history," I said. "They were so aggressive at Zurix it ended up costing them the war."

"I'm surprised they aren't attempting to blockade the planet," Miranda said. "They would have to spread themselves thin, but they would force the defenders to do the same. It suggests they *don't* know about the evac."

I tapped the side of my cheek. "Or they have something else planned. We could—"

"Sir, movement from the enemy fleet," Olshenko announced. "The hive ships are launching a wave of starfighters."

I looked at the tac-holo as a swarm of drones spewed out of the Dowd carriers. Dozens of wings, nearly a thousand fighters in total. Yet likely less than half the number they had available.

“Still playing it safe,” I murmured. “Their ships are staying well out of range of the orbital platforms.”

“Their caution will work to our advantage,” Velarys said.

“Maybe. My guess is that they want to probe our defenses before committing, maybe get a better idea of what the platforms and the old Sillibar ships are capable of.” I paused as an idea suddenly struck me. “This might be a good chance for us to probe back.”

“Sir?”

“Just a thought,” I mused. “We could stick close to the battleships to provide some additional anti-fighter support, but there is another option.”

I examined the display, drawing upon all the hours I’d spent studying fleet tactics with Captain Ellis. By any objective metric, starship combat was an entirely different beast compared to ground combat. But all theaters of war shared a few basic principles, and one I’d always been rather fond of was the importance of throwing the first punch. Even if you were outmanned and outgunned, it was often worth rattling an enemy’s cage before they could put their carefully laid plans into motion.

“Tactical, can you give us a best-guess overlay of the enemy fleet’s overlapping fire vectors?” I asked.

“Erm...yes, sir,” Olshenko said. “Here.”

The dots scattered across the overlay projected cones for their potential lines of fire. Visually, it made the projection a mess, even with the cones at low opacity relative to the ships. But it confirmed what my eyes had already been telling me.

“Their formation is too wide to cover the picket ships at the edges of the formation,” I said, pointing at the clusters of swarmers. “Which makes sense, because there’s no way any of the Sillibar ships would dare leave the defense grid and try to outflank them.”

“What are you suggesting, Commander?” Velarys asked.

Grinning, I turned back to face the crew. “We’re going to give them a bloody nose.”

The looks I received from my officers ranged from confusion to disbelief. But that was all right. They were nervous, and sitting here waiting for the enemy to charge would only make that tension grow.

“Helm, plot an attack vector toward grid fifteen while avoiding that fire cone,” I said. “And then plot us a way out.”

Velarys looked at me. “You want to *attack* them?”

“We’re just going to get their attention. Trust me.”

Both her white eyebrows lifted this time.

“Bridge to Cobra,” I said, holding down the comm. “Status report.”

“Still on hot standby, sir,” the pilot, Captain Novak, replied.

“Prepare to launch,” I said. “I want you and Spider to stick by the Pact command ship. Only engage enemy fighters that slip through the perimeter, bombers first.”

“Understood, sir. On your order.”

“Consider it given. All fighters: launch.”

I cut the comm and watched the overlay cameras as the two Valkyrie shot out of the hangar and joined the defensive screen in front of the *Melanchrus*. An entire wing of Pact starfighters had taken position in front of the old Sillibar battlecruiser.

“Let’s do this,” I said, leaning forward. “Activate the cloak.”

Velarys hesitated a heartbeat, then placed her hand on the capacitor crystal on her armrest. The bridge lights turned a dim blue in response.

“Ensign, let your people know we’ll be right back,” I told Hebeska. “Wouldn’t want them to think we’re planning to tuck and run.”

“Yes, sir,” she replied uneasily. “Though I doubt Prelate Arduul will approve.”

“He’ll get over it,” I said. “Helm: take us in.”

“Aye, sir,” Reyes replied. “Starting attack run.”

The *Renegade’s* thrusters fired, and we surged toward the encroaching line of ships. Even from this distance, the enemy armada was still an intimidating sight. I felt rather like a single man on horseback charging toward a wall of enemy archers. Without the cloak, we’d be ripped to shreds in no time, clever approach vector or not.

But with it, those picket ships wouldn’t see us coming until it was too late.

“The enemy fighters have reached the defense perimeter,” Olshenko said. “They appear to be ignoring the static emplacements and heading for the planetary shield generators.”

“Not surprising,” I said. Bursts of green and yellow fire flashed in the distance as a thousand drones streaked toward the defending ships like a swarm of locusts. The orbital platforms fired, mostly in vain at this range. Once the drones got closer, the point-defense turrets and friendly fighters would hopefully keep them at bay. At least until the actual armada moved close enough to join in.

“No signs that the enemy has detected us,” Velarys said, eyes narrowed in concentration. The cloaking device didn’t need to draw power from her directly except in an emergency, but she was watching the energy levels closely regardless.

“Good,” I said, calling up my tactical board and inputting commands. “We’re going to use a Yarasi attack pattern, the Raking Huntress. Not a perfect translation, but you get the idea.”

My first officer blinked in surprise. “That maneuver is intended for small attack ships like the *Wildcat*.”

“I know. But we’re almost as mobile, and Reyes is always looking for a challenge.”

The younger man looked back over his shoulder. “I am?”

“We aren’t going to decloak until we’re right in their face,” I said. “I want full power to the plasma weapons—we won’t have time to transfer power to the psi-cannons before we’re flying away and prepping to recloak. Tactical, focus on hitting them as hard as possible wherever you can, don’t worry about hitting a particular system. Remember, we’re just trying to piss them off.”

“Yes, sir,” Olshenko confirmed, starting to sound a little more excited.

“At that range, the heat from the plasma batteries could damage our hull,” Miranda warned.

“Could but won’t,” I said, activating my own crystal capacitor. “I’ll connect to the shields personally to give them a boost. Commander Velarys will give the thrusters a bit of extra juice, then switch back to the cloak. Questions?”

No one voiced any concerns, but I could feel them nonetheless. Hebeska probably thought I was being downright reckless. But I’d apparently earned her trust enough that she wasn’t willing to protest, and everyone else knew me well enough to assume I knew what I was doing.

All I needed to do was prove them right.

“Ten seconds to weapons range,” Reyes said as our target swarm ship grew larger and larger in the viewport. We were coming right up from under it like a shark about to snatch swimming prey.

“Steady,” I said, gripping the capacitor crystal. “Steady...now!”

The lights shifted back to normal as the ship decloaked, and I willed the ship’s psionic core to draw as much energy from me as it needed to get the shields at full power. The *Renegade* didn’t need the encouragement—I instantly felt the mental drain, and it took all my willpower to stay focused on the battle.

“Fire!” I called out.

The viewport erupted with blazing green bolts of plasma as Olshenko let loose with our Pact cannons. At this distance, the swarm ship's defenses didn't stand a chance; the energy blasts ripped through the shields and scorched the underside of the hull. With my mind connected to the ship, I could actually feel the waves of heat battering against us as we soared past.

"Incoming fire!" Miranda warned.

The Dowd were quick—the other nearby swarm ships blasted us with their disruptors within seconds of our appearance. I felt more flashes of heat on my body like someone was stabbing me with flaming needles, but Reyes had picked our escape vector perfectly. None of the larger ships could get a firing solution fast enough, especially not with Velarys shunting her own power into the thrusters. In the span of a few frantic heartbeats, we were clear of immediate danger.

"Reengage the cloak," I ordered through clenched teeth. "And get us back inside the perimeter. Enemy status?"

"Massive hull damage to the target," Olshenko said. "They're trying to contain multiple breaches—I think they're out of the fight."

"Sounds like a bloody nose to me," I said, releasing my hand from the capacitor crystal. My palm felt like it was sizzling, yet the skin wasn't even red. "How about us?"

"No damage, sir," Miranda reported with a grin. "The shields held. But I would not recommend attempting that maneuver again."

"Noted."

I grinned and leaned back in my chair. Disabling one swarm ship out of a vast armada wouldn't change the course of the battle by itself, but the mood on the bridge had already shifted dramatically. Anxiety had given way to the rush of combat...and the satisfaction of scoring a quick—if small—victory.

“Well done,” Velarys said with a thin smile. “But we need to pace ourselves.”

After a week of trying to sate the carnal needs of her *jahumir* cycle, a dozen possible comebacks popped into my head. But none were appropriate for the bridge.

“The enemy fleet is readjusting their lines, sir,” Olshenko said, highlighting several of the blips on the tactical overlay. “They’re pulling in their flanks.”

“Don’t want to get caught with their pants down twice,” I replied. If we had a Dominion task force with us, we could exploit the tighter formation with a concentrated torpedo barrage. Sadly, that wasn’t an option.

“The enemy fighter waves are meeting stiff resistance in the defense perimeter,” Olshenko went on. “Our Valkyries have engaged a squadron heading for the planetary shield generators. Sixty drones have been destroyed compared to ten friendly ones.”

“Helm, bring us back into position near the *Melanchrus*,” I said. “And drop the cloak again.”

I received more acknowledgements, but Olshenko stirred behind me.

“Sir, one of the Pact cruisers has suffered heavy damage,” he said. “They are disengaging and moving closer to the planet.”

I frowned at the display as we continued back toward the defensive line. The cruiser must have been caught unaware by a bomber run, and its guns would be missed if and when the enemy line finally advanced.

“They’re trying to open a gap in the lines by drawing those two destroyers in to compensate for the missing cruiser,” I said, drawing a highlighted line on the overlay. “Hebeska, you might want to let your people know that—”

“Sir, the enemy fleet is moving again,” Olshenko interrupted. “But only the dreadnought.”

I frowned at the display as the massive, whale-like ship crept toward the edge of the defense perimeter...and then stopped again.

“They are still out of firing range,” Velarys commented. “And their movement has opened a gap in their own formation.”

“Are they trying to bait us?” Olshenko asked.

“They’d have to be insane to think we’d charge at them when they outgun so badly,” I said. “No, they must have something else in mind.”

I frowned, searching my memories of the old vids for anything relevant. But the Dowd leviathans hadn’t done anything particularly out of the ordinary during the Battle of Zurix or when they’d engaged the Expansionary Fleet later.

“I am detecting a psionic power surge from the leviathan,” Hebeska said.

“An astral shift?” I asked.

“No. I believe they are powering their weapons.”

“She’s right,” Olshenko said. “We didn’t have a chance to run a scan earlier, but that ship is equipped with heavy psi-cannons in addition to dozens of disruptors and torpedo launchers.”

I pursed my lips. “I suppose it was only a matter of time before the Column showed them how to mount psionic weapons. We’ll need to—”

“The dreadnought is firing!” Olshenko warned.

I watched the overlay as the massive Dowd ship unleashed two linked beams of brilliant blue energy. The shots streaked well wide of the defense fleet...

And struck one of the shield generators floating over Exodus instead.

My mouth fell open. The circular, destroyer-sized generator had its own defensive shields, of course, and I watched as the incoming beams created an intense ripple across the translucent dome. When the beams stopped, an angry orange splotch lingered on the barrier for several seconds before fading.

“Damage report?” I asked, suddenly hoarse.

“Moderate damage to the generator,” Miranda said, sounding just as stunned. “It won’t be able to repel another—”

She cut off when the leviathan fired again. This time, the generator’s shields flashed orange immediately...and then the entire installation vaporized in a short-lived cloud of flaming gas and metal.

Someone swore. The rest of us stared at the fiery debris in the viewer as we rejoined the rest of the defense fleet.

“Status of the planetary shields?” I asked.

“Mm,” Miranda stumbled as she returned her attention to her console. “The other generators have compensated for the gap.”

“It will not last,” Hebeska said grimly. “The shield has weakened. If they destroy two more of the generators, it will open a gap.”

I hissed softly. Protecting the generators from fighters was one thing—the installations were equipped with point-defense cannons specifically for that purpose—but the mighty beam weapons of a capital ship were another. The defense platforms were deliberately positioned where they could engage an incoming enemy fleet long before those vessels could fire at the generators themselves. It was a basic, multi-level defense posture common on many civilized worlds.

But this tossed it right in the garbage.

Olshenko banged his fist against his console.

“How in the Seraph’s name can they maintain cohesion from that distance?” he breathed.

"I don't know, but it's a major problem," I said. "They're already readjusting their position to fire at another one. And once there's a gap, their entire fleet can advance and open fire at the planet. To say nothing of the drone bombers."

Swallowing heavily, I turned to Mesko. "Comms, hail the *Melanchrus*."

"They are responding, sir," he said.

Prelate Arduul's head reappeared on the viewer. His Sillibar face may not have carried the same emotion as a human, but I swore I could see the lines of tension in his otherwise glossy skin.

"It seems we have a new problem, Prelate," I said. "How much longer do your transports need?"

"Extreme measures have been taken," Arduul said. "The last civilians are loading now, but they still require more time."

I nodded soberly. "Then it looks like we don't have any choice. We need to attack that dreadnought."

The Sillibar's milky eyes narrowed. "Commander—"

"Unless your transports will be ready to fly in the next few minutes, we're out of time. We need to engage the dreadnought and give it something else to shoot at."

"Without support from the orbital platforms, the Dowd will rip us apart. The entire defense fleet will be destroyed!"

"Not necessarily," I said, rising to my feet. "If we can neutralize their psi-cannons, we can force them to advance into the range of your platforms again."

"And how do you intend to do that?"

"It won't be easy," I admitted. "But I have an idea."

“Pact ships are in position, sir,” Olshenko reported. “They are awaiting our signal.”

Nodding, I touched the comm on my chair. “Valkyries: check in.”

“Cobra here, sir,” Novak said.

“Spider here, sir,” Tsukumo echoed. “Weapons hot, torpedoes primed.”

“Good,” I said, taking a calming breath before turning to Mesko. “Give the signal, Ensign. It’s time to move.”

Ahead of us, the *Melanchrus* and the rest of the Pact forces began their advance. The surviving enemy starfighters that had been hounding the defense fleet had been withdrawn once the Dowd realized we were about to engage. Once again, I was surprised by the patient, tactical behavior of an enemy previously known only for ruthless aggression. If Ash hadn’t been there when the Dowd had attacked the Column on Endikar, I would have assumed that a human officer was guiding them now.

“There is a presence,” Velarys whispered next to me, her glowing eyes narrowed. “A powerful psionic force on the dreadnought.”

“Do you know what it is?”

She shook her head. “No. It is unlike anything I have ever sensed. Even in Yarasi collectives linked in telepathic concert, it is still possible to distinguish individual beings. But here it is as if many minds have become one. A single presence...a single chorus of thought.”

“Do you think it has anything to do with how they were able to fire at such an extreme range?”

“I do not believe so. The presence has only strengthened since the firing stopped.”

I pursed my lips. As if we needed another reason to be concerned about charging into the enemy lines...

“Helm, keep us tucked in tight behind the *Melanchrus*,” I said, forcing my thoughts back to the task at hand. “As close as you can without scratching the paint.”

“Yes, sir,” Reyes acknowledged.

“Weapons?”

“Attack pattern locked in and ready to go, sir,” Olshenko said. “Let’s hope this works.”

“It’ll work,” I assured them. *It has to.*

An atmosphere of wary anticipation settled over the bridge as we advanced right behind the Pact fleet, effectively hiding in the shadow of the old battlecruiser. We weren’t actually trying to confuse the enemy sensors. They knew we were here, and after our earlier hit-and-fade attack on their picket lines, they knew our capabilities. The point was simply to shield us from incoming fire long enough for us to strike directly at the dreadnought’s psi-cannons.

On the tactical overlay, our fleet of fifty ships—impressive by any reasonable standard—looked pitifully small as we approached the Dowd formation. Earlier during our nose-bloodying gambit, I’d conjured up the mental image of a single warrior charging a wall of archers. This time, it was more like a last, desperate cavalry charge against an endless wall of pikemen. We’d inflict some damage, to be sure, but there was no way we could punch through. At best, the fleet would survive long enough to cripple the enemy guns, then limp back into the protection of the orbital platforms. At worst...

Well, nothing would be helped by thinking about that.

“Entering enemy weapon range in twenty seconds,” Olshenko said.

“Hebeska, tell those destroyers in grid seven to watch the swarmers at the enemy flank,” I said. “If they aren’t careful, they’ll sweep around behind us the moment we engage.”

“Yes, sir,” she acknowledged.

“Ten seconds,” Olshenko said.

I rested both arms on their rests and resisted the urge to stand. “Here we go...”

The overlay lit up the moment our fleet moved into range. It was a truly awesome display of firepower, with thousands of beams of yellow and green energy carving through the blackness of the void. While the Pact battleships concentrated their fire on the dreadnought, the smaller cruisers moved in to engage the nearest hive ships. And all the while, the faster destroyers and frigates swept around the edges of the formation to clash with the seemingly countless swarm ships.

Amidst the buckling shields and burning hull plates, thousands of starfighter drones buzzed furiously across the battlefield, locking into tight engagements with one another or raking fire across vulnerable components on the capital ships. Several took potshots at us as they streaked by, chased by bolts of energy from our point-defense cannons.

“Valkyries, go!” I ordered.

“Engaging!” Cobra said.

Just ahead of us, tucked even tighter in the shadow of the battlecruiser, Cobra and Spider fired their thrusters and shot out of cover toward the Dowd leviathan. I watched as the overlay counted down the mission timer...

“Helm, follow them in,” I said. “All power to forward shields.”

“Yes, sir!” Reyes acknowledged.

The *Renegade* repeated the Valkyries’ maneuver, dropping out of the *Melanchrus*’ shadow and surging forward at the massive, whale-like dreadnought now filling over half the viewport. The sheer amount of firepower being unleashed in every direction was practically impossible to believe; without the optical filters, the flashes and explosions in every direction would have been blindingly bright.

Highlighted by the viewer, our Valkyries accelerated ahead of us, their wing-tip cannons blasting uselessly into the dreadnought's shields. The point-defense cannons pumped bolts of yellow fire just as uselessly into their psionic shields, though they wouldn't hold forever. I held my breath as they moved, waiting for their defenses to crumble...

But Cobra and Spider knew what they were doing. The instant they were in the target zone, they fired their torpedoes and spiraled away in wide corkscrews back toward the Pact lines. Launched at such close range, the torpedoes slammed into the dreadnought's shields before they could be shot down, weakening the grid above the heavy psi-cannons.

And now it was our turn.

"Helm, begin the attack run," I said. "Weapons, fire at will!"

Yet again, we mimicked the movement of the Valkyries almost flawlessly. Our psi-cannons pounded the weakened shields, hoping enough energy would bleed through to damage the leviathan's guns. And when we drew closer, our plasma cannons joined in the assault, raking flaming death in their wake.

"Break off!" I ordered, grabbing the capacitor on my chair to aid the shields. "Get us out of here!"

The ship lurched as the dreadnought's smaller disruptor cannons retaliated, and I instantly felt the drain of the psionic drive on my mind as it thirsted for more power. But Reyes was getting damn good at this, and the *Melanchrus* provided us with excellent covering fire as we swept back around the battlecruiser's hull just like a trooper diving into cover.

"How'd we do?" I asked, allowing myself a second to breathe once we were clear.

"Moderate damage to the enemy cannon," Olshenko reported. "It can still fire, but its power and accuracy should be greatly reduced."

“That will have to be good enough. Helm, come about for a run at the other side. Valkyries, you ready for round two?”

“Yes, sir,” Cobra confirmed, voice tinged with the confident yet manic excitement I’d only ever heard in the voices of the best starfighter pilots. “Torpedoes prepared and ready.”

“They’ll be onto us this time, so break off earlier if you need to,” I warned. “Hebeska, tell the *Melanchrus* we’re about to head in again.”

“Yes, sir,” she replied. I might have been imagining it, but her mechanical voice might have sounded encouraged.

I felt the same, at least until I looked more closely at the tac-holo. Three of the Pact cruisers had already been destroyed, and one of the battleships had suffered heavy damage. The fleet needed to get out of here soon or this would all be for nothing.

“One more time, people,” I said, leaning forward. “Valkyries, go!”

Cobra and Spider repeated their earlier maneuver, but this time they surged up and over the dreadnought’s bulk to try and strike at the remaining dorsal cannon. We followed in their wake, but I found myself surprised that the leviathan didn’t seem to be directing any additional fire in our direction. Not from the disruptors, not from the point-defense cannons, not even from the countless starfighters they could order to harass us.

“Something is wrong,” Velarys warned.

“What?” I asked. “Do you—?”

[*Child of the Seraph.*]

A powerful alien voice thrust into my mind. I clutched my head as an intense pressure built inside my skull, and I saw everyone else on the bridge—with the exception of Hebeska—doing the same.

“What the hell?” I blurted out, but I couldn’t hear my own voice over the thundering chorus inside my head.

The pressure built and built as if my brain were to explode, and an image seared into my mind: a single Dowd inside a massive cavernous chamber, his slender body floating a few centimeters above the bizarre alien goo covering the floor. The faceless monster didn't have eyes, yet I swore it was looking right at me...

[*The infestation must be cleansed. The Dirge has begun.*]

The pressure released and the voice went silent...and then the bridge went completely dark.

The *Renegade* lurched so violently I would have flown out of my seat without the restraints. The emergency lights kicked on, casting the bridge in an eerie red gloom. But the overlays on the viewer were gone, leaving behind only the physical viewport itself.

"Sir, we've lost power!" Miranda called out, mashing at her console. "The psionic core is offline!"

"How?" I gasped, looking up at the viewport as we continued barreling over the dreadnought. Directly ahead of us, the blue glow of the Valkyries' engines extinguished, and the starfighters began to drift.

"I-I don't know!" Miranda stammered. "The auxiliary generators are online, but we have no psionic power whatsoever. Engines, shields, and weapons are down. We can't—"

"*Renegade*, we're in trouble here!" Cobra's voice screamed over the crackling comm. "We've lost power. We can't—*argh!*"

I reflexively squinted to shield my eyes from the flash as the dreadnought's point-defense cannons fired at the helpless Valkyries, obliterating them both in a single salvo.

"By the Seraph," Olshenko gasped.

I gripped my armrests, bracing myself for the next volley to come our way...

But nothing happened. We continued drifting uselessly past the massive vessel deeper into the enemy lines, but none of the other ships fired at us, either.

“Report!” I barked.

“S-still nothing, sir!” Miranda said. “I’m trying to contact engineering, but internal comms aren’t working. Attempting to reroute auxiliary power!”

“We have to get those shields up!” I snarled, vaulting out of my chair. “We’re sitting—”

There was the faintest flicker of movement to my left, and a squad of four Dowd soldiers materialized on the bridge. My heart stopped in my chest as I remembered my last moments aboard the *Stormrider*. The Dowd ambush, the flurry of pulsefire...

The death of Captain Ellis.

I was diving at the enemy before my mind consciously knew what was happening. Their disruptors were already firing beams of yellow energy across the bridge, and the Dowd at the center thrust out its hand as if to slam me with a wave of telekinetic force. But I was too quick—I slammed into them like a human bullet, throwing them against the bulkhead and to the deck.

In the mad scramble that followed, I wrenched one of the rifles from the enemy, then bashed in its faceless skull with a swift crack from the stock. I shot another one, vaporizing most of its body and leaving naught by a pile of dust on the floor. Flashes of blue pulsefire erupted behind me as my crew shot back...

And it was over as quickly as it had begun.

I set my jaw, still crouched and aiming my disruptor at the corpses. Once I was sure they were dead, I looked behind me to check on the others. The Dowd had only gotten off a few shots, and the damage

to the bridge seemed minimal. Olshenko, Mesko, and Miranda all seemed fine. But Velarys...

I heard her hiss in pain before I swiveled to look at the science station. My first officer was lying there clutching at a nasty disruptor burn on her side. Beneath her on the floor was Hebeska, who Velarys must have shielded from the blast.

“Shit!” I hissed, diving over to the Yarasi. “Are you—?”

“I will be fine,” Velarys insisted through clenched teeth. “But more could come at any moment.”

I grimaced, torn between my duty to the ship and my duty to her. I felt a stirring of psychic energy as she placed a hand on her wound, and I watched in amazement as the scorched gray flesh began to heal. Her psychometabolic abilities were nothing short of extraordinary...

“She’s right,” I said, whirling around to the others. “Unless we can get the shields up, there’s nothing to stop them from sending more.”

Olshenko, still holding his sidearm, shook himself out of stasis. “Why don’t they just destroy us? We’re completely helpless!”

“They want this ship,” Hebeska said softly, her milky eyes looking up in awe at Velarys. “That is the only explanation.”

“Then they must have sent other teams,” I said, glancing out the viewport. We were still drifting deeper into the enemy formation, but I couldn’t see much of anything aside from the dark hull of the leviathan and the occasional flash of disruptor fire. “Do we have internal sensors?”

“Yes, but they are being jammed,” Miranda said. “Other Dowd strike teams must have brought one of their scrambling devices with them.”

“So we have no idea how many of them there are or where they are. What about comms?”

“They’re being jammed as well.”

“Dammit. I have to get to engineering. Our only chance is for Vrisk to get the power back up and restore the shields.”

Squeezing Velarys’s shoulder supportively, I rose back to my feet and swept my eyes over the others. I didn’t want to leave them—there was nothing to stop another team of Dowd from psychoporting in. But without engineering, we were dead regardless. Hopefully Ackers and Sekvoth were holding the line.

“Everyone have your weapons ready in case they warp more troops in,” I said. “Shoot anything that moves. I’m heading to engineering.”

“Sir, the lifts don’t have power,” Miranda warned.

Of course they don’t.

“Then I’ll take the maintenance shafts,” I told her, moving to the emergency panel in the rear of the bridge. “Try and figure out a way to get through that jamming. Comms and internal sensors are your top priority. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” she said.

I paused as the narrow panel slid open to reveal the even narrower access shaft inside. “I’ll be back as soon as I can,” I told them. “I promise: we’re not out of this fight yet.”

Chapter 15

The Core

The *Renegade's* maintenance shafts were hot, cramped, and uncomfortable, which was precisely why drones were the only things who moved through them with any frequency. They were supposed to be large enough to comfortably accommodate a human, but the engineers had apparently never considered the possibility that anyone could weigh more than seventy kilos. If I'd been wearing my armor, I wouldn't have been able to move at all.

But I made quick progress nonetheless, fueled almost exclusively by rage at the thought of the Dowd rampaging through *my* ship and harming *my* crew. If nothing else, it kept me from dwelling on the fact that a single errant shot in the battle raging outside could easily breach the hull and suck me out into the vacuum.

Repel the Dowd, restore power, then get the hell out of here, I told myself. *It's almost too easy.*

It only took me another minute or so before I reached engineering. Punching my security code into the wall panel with one hand, I drew my sidearm with the other. Then, taking a final deep breath, I hit the release.

When the panel slid open, I was immediately greeted by a rush of cool air—

And a barrage of disruptor fire.

The first incoming blast struck the panel right next to me, vaporizing the metal, while the second struck me in the right shoulder. There was a brief but intense flash of pain all the way down my arm, but I ignored it as I reflexively dropped into a crouch and fired back. A half dozen quick shots of my own silenced one of the guns, and I rolled out of the cramped shaft as the second weapon tracked me.

Without the enhanced vision and sensors of my helmet, I could barely see anything through the red emergency lighting and drifting clouds of smoke. All I knew was that Vrisk's office was a few meters to my left, and that a lot of the consoles had already been damaged from an earlier firefight. I nearly tripped over the corpse of another Dowd...and the Krosian warrior who had died jabbing his knife through the alien's gut.

Holding still, I waited for the enemy to fire in order to track its position. It popped up a heartbeat later, firing a sizzling shot right past my head. I instantly returned fire, but I was a hair too slow. The Dowd ducked back into cover, forcing me to wait for another chance.

Before it reemerged, a third much larger figure appeared from within the smoke near the back of the room. I instantly recognized the outline of a Krosian warrior, but he didn't open fire. When the Dowd eventually popped up, the Krosian charged it instead, grabbing the alien's skinny head and twisting it violently, snapping its neck with a sickening crunch.

"Commander," Sekvoth said, his entire body heaving from his loud, heavy breaths. The plates of his armor were scorched in several places, and his left arm was so badly burned it hung limply at his side.

"Any other hostiles?" I asked, once again wishing I was wearing my helmet. My eyes were starting to sting from the smoke.

"That was the last one," the Krosian said. "Two boarding teams attacked, one here and one outside in the corridor.

I nodded, rubbing at my eyes as I swept my gaze over the area to evaluate the damage. There had definitely been an intense fire-fight—several other Dowd bodies were on the floor along with two more of the Krosian warriors. But I didn't see a single dead engineer or technician anywhere.

"I ordered Vrisk and his crew to take shelter in his office while we secured the area," Sekvoth said, pointing to the side where Vrisk's office was sealed. "They are unharmed."

"Good work," I said, and meant it. "What about you?"

"I will endure," Sekvoth replied, leaning down to retrieve a plasma rifle from one of his fallen soldiers. "But I have not been able to make contact with Lieutenant Ackers or the other troopers."

"They're jamming comms," I said, looking around for any signs of the jamming devices we'd seen in the past. "Ensign Pierce is trying to cut through and get us internal sensors. There could be more teams on the ship."

Racing over to the door, I punched in the override code to get it open. Vrisk was inside along with his android and six other engineers. There wasn't nearly enough space for them all, especially with the wings of the three Angoth women.

"Commander," the Kali said, lowering his sidearm, the frightened yellowish ripple in his scales giving way to a relieved gray.

"We've secured the area for now," I said, waving them out. "But we have to get power back online. Do you have any idea what the hell happened?"

"I know *what* happened—the psionic power core was destabilized," Vrisk said. "What I do not know is *how*. There is no record of such a weapon on file."

I grimaced, thinking back to the floating Dowd I'd seen in my mind as it screamed into my head.

“We’ll have to worry about the details later,” I said, burying the thought. “Can you fix it?”

A patch of anxious yellow smeared across his neck. “Possibly. I do not believe that the core was damaged. My engineers could attempt to use their powers to recalibrate the matrix, but it will require a full restart.”

“How long?” I asked, dreading the answer.

“With the compartment clear, it should only take a few minutes,” Vrisk said, gesturing for his people to return to their consoles. Thankfully not all of them looked damaged. “Theoretically, we should be able to restore the ship to full power.”

I hoped like hell he was right. He usually was, but we were living on borrowed time.

“Shields are the first priority,” I said. “They could blast us to dust at any moment.”

“They could have done that already,” Vrisk pointed out. “They must want the vessel itself.”

“That was my assumption, but we repelled their teams on the bridge and engineering. So they’re either going to send more or just say fuck it and blow us to pieces. We should—”

“—ommander?” Miranda’s voice crackled over the com.

“Zeris here,” I replied. “What’s your status?”

“I’ve managed [...] through [...] jamming,” she said, voice breaking up but still somewhat understandable. “[...]ternal sensors online.”

I grinned. I knew she’d figure it out somehow.

“We’ve secured engineering,” I said. “Vrisk is going to attempt to restart the power core. But if the Dowd want to take the ship, they’ll send more soldiers. Be ready.”

“Sir, there’s still [...] active team aboard [...],” Miranda warned. “They are [...] capacitor chamber [...] you.”

My stomach clenched, and an alert orange ripple streaked across Vrisk's scales. "The capacitor chamber?" I breathed. "They can't take control of the ship from there."

"They could sabotage the drive and prevent us from restoring power," the Kali pointed out.

"Sure, but they've basically already done that. Why would they—"

I paused halfway to the shaft as an idea belatedly struck me. We had been assuming that the Dowd were trying to take the ship, since the *Renegade* was a state-of-the-art Dominion frigate. It seemed like the only explanation for why they hadn't simply destroyed us.

But they could have also been looking for something *on* the ship. Something that, if they got their hands on it, would completely change the course of the war in an instant.

"The cloaking device," I rasped. "They're after the Yarasi cloaking device!"

I turned on a heel and rushed back to the maintenance shaft. "Restart the core as soon as you can!" I called out. "And get those damn shields back up!"

"Commander, you must be careful," Vrisk said. "Any weapon discharge in the capacitor chamber could easily damage or destroy sensitive components, including the core crystal itself."

"Right," I said, glancing down at my pistol and sliding it back into my holster. "Should have borrowed Velarys's *falquan*. Too bad it probably wouldn't fit in the shaft."

"Here," Sekvoth said, reaching into his armor and handing me a curved, wicked-looking knife. "May it serve you well."

I took the blade. It was a nasty piece of work, sharp and serrated to ensure a maximally vicious wound. Krosians did have their charming qualities sometimes.

"Stay here in case anyone else warps in," I told him.

“The engineers *will* complete their work,” Sekvoth assured me.

I nodded. And to my surprise, I found myself believing him.

“When the core is restarted, the psionic energy in the chamber will be dangerous, even to you,” Vrisk warned.

“Well,” I said, moving into the shaft, “then I’ll just have to kill them before you finish.”

The maintenance shaft was every bit as hot and cramped as before, but at least this time I only needed to descend a single deck. I’d only been down in the capacitor chamber a handful of times, mostly during the initial inspection tour before we’d left the drydock on Rividian, but it was little more than a narrow series of catwalks surrounding the immense crystal that served as the ship’s main source of power. While it didn’t generate dangerous levels of heat or radiation like a traditional core, the raw psionic energy generated during operation could still be dangerous to the body and the mind. No one was intended to be down here except during maintenance.

The cloaking device had been installed several meters away from the core on the left and about ten meters from where this shaft would open. Having seen how delicate the device was—and how much the techs had struggled to install it properly even with Yarasi supervision—I held out hope that the Dowd would need time to properly disconnect it without ruining their prize. Because if not, they might already be on their way out.

In which case we’d be dead and billions more would follow when the monsters figured out how to replicate the tech on their own ships.

I slid down the ladder to make up time, Sekvoth's knife gripped in my teeth. I accessed the security console the instant I reached the correct level, then opened the door.

Once again, a barrage of disruptor fire greeted me as I rolled inside, but I made no effort to get out of the way. The blasts stung like hell, and there was even a chance their weapons could inflict real damage from point-blank range. But missing me was actually more dangerous—a single errant shot could jeopardize the safety of the entire ship by destroying one of the psionic relays along the walls and preventing Vrisk from getting power back online.

Making myself as big of a target as possible, I rushed forward and played goalkeeper even as the disruptors burned through my uniform and sent hot coals of pain across my skin. The Dowd were exactly where I'd expected them to be, about ten meters away to the left-hand side of the massive dormant crystal occupying over a third of the available space in the chamber. There were three of the aliens in total, two of whom had turned to shoot the intruder while the other crouched over the panel where the cloak was installed. The device had been removed, and I only spotted a single lead still connecting it to the ship.

Just in time.

I dropped the first one with a violent stab with Sekvoth's dagger, while I slashed the second open with a backward slice across its featureless face. Brackish blood splattered across the catwalk as their bodies thrashed, then fell motionless. Out of sheer habit, I almost grabbed one of their rifles, but instead I readied the knife and pounced at the remaining Dowd.

This one had to be the psychic who had psychoported them over in the first place. I braced myself for all manner of potential counterattack—a telepathic mind blast, a sweep of a psi-blade, a wall of telekinetic force...I didn't even rule out the possibility of magno-

or pyrokinesis. Anything and everything seemed possible with these monsters.

But amazingly, the Dowd didn't react at all. It allowed me to run all the way up and stab it in the back—

Where Sekvoth's knife burrowed into its black armor but glanced harmlessly off its ebony skin.

Well, shit I thought darkly. *It's a fucking Immortal.*

I stumbled back, reconsidering my choice not to pick up one of the disruptors and blast it at point-blank range, when the Dowd finally moved. Whirling around with surprising speed, the creature punched me squarely in the chest, and the immense force of the impact sent me flying backward across the capacitor chamber.

I crashed into the far wall hard enough to dent the metal bulkhead, then collapsed to the catwalk with a wheezing thud as the air rushed out of my lungs. I'd never been hit so hard in my life, not even by a grav-hammer. I could still feel the reverberation in my bones, and from the throbbing ache in my chest, I was reasonably sure I'd bruised some ribs. I hadn't even been able to absorb any of the kinetic energy.

How is this possible? I thought.

Even if the monster had learned to use its fortification abilities to absorb kinetic energy like I had, my one knife stab couldn't have provided anywhere near that much power. Was this pure psychometabolic strength, like Velarys times ten?

My vision was blurry when I leaned up, and I whispered a silent thanks to the Seraph that I hadn't crashed into anything important. The Dowd didn't seem to care about me at all—it was already disconnecting the last lead linking the device to the ship.

I sprinted forward again, ignoring the pain and trying to come up with my own strategy on the fly. I reached the monster the moment it pulled off the last lead, but instead of pounding it uselessly, I grabbed

it by the shoulders and threw it back across the room where I'd just come from.

The Dowd crashed into the bulkhead like I had, though with only a fraction of the force. But that was all right—the important thing was that I'd gotten it away from the damn cloaking device, at least for a few precious seconds.

“Vrisk, how long on that restart?” I barked into my comm.

“Soon, Commander.”

“Make it sooner!”

I rushed back toward it, fists up and ready as if we were about to have a throw-boxing match. It had been a while since I'd faced another Immortal in the ring. I remembered my bouts with Arneson and how much I'd hated him at the time...but also how he'd ultimately died a hero fighting these same faceless fuckers. The memory of his death triggered a burst of rage deep inside me, and I used it as fuel to unleash a powerful right hook.

Which the Dowd blocked with ease. I hesitated for a fraction of a second, surprised at how easily it had predicted my movements. The delay cost me dearly—it used the opportunity to slam its fist into my gut. The force of the impact lifted me off the ground a whole meter, and the air once again deserted my lungs. I also heard a crack—at least one of my ribs was definitely more than bruised now, and the pain was so intense I almost blacked out.

But this time I'd at least been ready for it, allowing me to absorb most of the energy from the punch. I managed to dodge the Dowd's followup hook, and I used the momentum to pivot on my back foot and rotate my hips to slam his head with an old-fashioned cross.

I'd gotten into plenty of fistfights in my life even before I'd learned throw-boxing, and it never got old watching a man crumple when you clocked him as hard as you could, especially when he'd just sassed your

girl or threatened your friends. And when you sent him flying through the air, it was even more satisfying.

Unfortunately, it wasn't nearly as thrilling when he got back up a second after you popped him. My throw-boxing bouts with other Immortals on the fleet had largely been pointless, too, but at least we'd occasionally learned some new moves or impressed some girls.

Still, I had finally gained the Dowd's full attention. I pounded its head with a quick and simple one-two, then bounced back a few steps and raised my guard while making sure not to slip on the blood-splattered catwalk. The Dowd hummed as it struck back, which I hoped was some kind of frustrated curse in its strange language. Because for all its strength, I did seem to be slightly quicker.

Leveraging that to my advantage, I adopted a defensive posture, striking only with quick jabs and crosses while evading everything it threw back at me. I kept a mental count of the time, hoping that Vrisk's "soon" would become "now" any moment. All I needed to do was keep the Dowd's attention on me while the engineers got the core restarted...

Then, in the middle of a punch, a voice exploded inside my skull.

[Child of the Seraph.]

The telepathic assault left me as reeling as when I'd been punched across the room. My vision was replaced with an image of the lone floating Dowd I'd seen before on the bridge. Psionic power crackled around it like a tempest, more felt than seen, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't block it out.

[The infestation must be cleansed.]

A deluge of other images flooded into my brain. Dowd. Sillibar. A great war across the stars...

A planet consumed in a ball of nuclear fire.

[*And then,*] the Dowd thundered, as if a million other voices were repeating its words in a perfect chorus, [*the reckoning of the Void.*]

The images shifted. Instead of Dowd and Sillibar, I could see starships—Dominion starships—engulfed in flame. Beyond them were more planets, once golden but now brought to ruin. New Praxius, Eladrell Prime, New Keledon...

The Dowd's grip on my mind vanished, and I was once again standing in the capacitor chamber. Barely a second had passed, but it was more than enough to leave me vulnerable. My Dowd opponent grabbed hold of my arm and twisted, and as I heard the sickening crunch of bone and felt the excruciating fire of agony searing through my arm, I realized my defenses were gone.

And I was in deep trouble.

I screamed as my arm shattered, and before I could even clutch my wound, my opponent threw me back at the dented bulkhead. Between the pain in my arm and confusion from the Dowd leader's telepathic assault, I barely managed to fortify my body again before I slammed into the wall. But from the loud pop in my ears, I knew the impact had still dislocated my shoulder.

The pain was so intense I couldn't breathe or think. And the Dowd was mere instants away from getting its hands on the cloaking device and warping out of here.

"Commander, the core will restart in thirty seconds," Vrisk said over the com. "You need to leave the capacitor chamber."

"I'm a little busy here!" I wheezed as I leaned up. The Dowd was already halfway back to the cloaking device.

"I can delay the restart sequence."

"No!" I shouted through clenched teeth. "Do it now, don't worry about me!"

There was a faint rumble in the chamber, and the myriad crystals inset across the ceiling began to glow like hundreds of Yarasi eyes opening simultaneously. The core remained dormant, but I could feel a growing tingle in the back of my mind.

My opponent noticed it as well, and it immediately began to dash for the cloak. It knew what was coming, and it knew it needed to get out of here.

And I knew that no matter what, I couldn't let it happen.

Snarling under my breath, summoning my last reserves of strength, I dragged myself back to my feet and charged. I caught up with the Dowd the moment it started to lean over to pick up the cloak, and I dove onto its back and tackled it against the catwalk. There was no way I could hold it for long, but I managed to kick the cloaking device and scoot it another half meter away as I rolled back and leveraged my superior weight to pull the Dowd with me.

"Fifteen seconds, Commander," Vrisk warned.

The Dowd should have overpowered me in an instant, but for a few precious moments, my experience with throw-boxing and good, old-fashioned wrestling gave me the advantage. Despite the fact I only had one working arm—despite the fact I was so riddled with pain—I managed to evade his strikes and mostly keep him locked in a wild scrum on the floor.

"Five seconds."

The tingle in my mind turned into a loud buzz as the capacitors built strength, and the massive drive core a meter behind us finally began to glow. The Dowd, sensing its opportunity slipping away, pounded me with an elbow and knocked me flat onto my back as it stood and turned toward the cloaking device—

But it never had the chance to move. Pulling my legs all the way up to my chest, I kicked out as hard as I could, slamming into the Dowd's side and sending it stumbling toward the power core.

"Restarting...now!"

The Dowd never stood a chance. The instant its body touched the core, a flash of brilliant light exploded from inside the crystal. Its entire body was vaporized in an instant.

But I wouldn't be far behind. Grabbing the spindles of the catwalk's railing with my good hand, I scrambled toward the open maintenance shaft as quickly as I could. The buzzing in my mind became a discordant assault, and I swore I could almost feel my brain threatening to leak out my ears.

"Power is back online, Commander!" Miranda's voice shouted into my ear.

"Get us out here!" I screamed. "Now!"

Throwing myself into the maintenance shaft, I slapped the control panel and sealed myself inside. The ship lurched, possibly from Reyes firing the thrusters but just as likely from the enemy finally deciding to try and blow us out of the stars.

We weren't out of this yet.

My third trip through the goddamn maintenance shaft was far worse than the previous two. Trying to ignore the pain shooting through every part of my body was hard enough, and climbing a ladder with one good arm didn't make it any easier, especially when the ship kept rumbling around me. But I eventually made it to the bridge, and I practically fell forward out of the shaft next to Olshenko.

“Holy shit!” the younger man blurted out when I appeared behind him. “Sir, are you—”

“I’m fine,” I said, gritting my teeth and rounding the tactical console to return to my command chair.

Other glances came my way, expressions ranging from concern to disbelief. I had to imagine I wasn’t exactly the picture of health, what with half my uniform burned away and my left arm hanging limply at my side. I could taste blood, too, so my mouth probably wasn’t in much better shape.

“Commander!” Velarys said, immediately rising and reaching out to me. “You are in need of—”

“I said I’m fine,” I told her, waving her away as I moved to my chair. “Status report!”

It took a moment for Miranda to turn away from my grim visage back to her console. “We’re back at full power, sir. Shields are at seventy percent, and we’ve moved back within range of the orbital platforms. No enemy ships in pursuit.”

A wave of relief crashed over me, but I knew it would be short-lived. “What about the transports?”

“They have all launched, sir,” Hebeska said. “They will be leaving the protection of the shields in approximately five minutes. After that, they will require several more before they’re far enough from the planet’s gravity to jump into hyperspace.”

“Ten minutes,” I whispered, shifting my attention to the tac-holo.

The viewer changed from a forward perspective to the rear where the fleets were still clashing. To say that all hell had broken loose would have been grievous understatement. Engaging the dreadnought had prevented it from destroying the planetary shield generators, but it had also doomed the Pact defenders. More than half the defense fleet had either been destroyed or disabled, and the *Melanchrus* and the other

capital ships were now being hammered on all sides. In any practical sense, this battle was over.

But that didn't mean our job was done, not yet.

"Hebeska, get a message to the *Melanchrus*," I said. "If they can, have them send the surviving Krosian battleship to grid seventy-four to engage that carrier before it can get in position to threaten the transports. And have the destroyer wing in grid five try to delay those swarm ships sweeping around to the far side of the planet."

"Yes, sir," she acknowledged.

There was nothing I could do to make them listen to me, of course, especially since those maneuvers would expose the remaining ships to even more fire. But they had to know that they were already doomed. And at least this might buy those transports the few extra minutes they needed to escape.

"See if they can get their surviving starfighter drones to break off and help us," I said. "We'll try to provide the transports cover until they can jump."

Taking a deep breath, ignoring the stabbing pain in my lungs and cold numbness in my limp arm, I finally sat back down in my chair.

"Helm, set a course for those transports," I said. "We're going in."

Interlude

“Dammit,” Ash hissed at the tac-holo. “There are too many of them!”

Another of the friendly blips on the overlay winked out as a Krosian destroyer was ripped in half by a disruptor blast from the massive Dowd leviathan. Ash was glad they were far enough away from the battle that they couldn’t physically see the ship explode. Her stomach was already tight enough knowing Kal was out there in the thick of it without witnessing the carnage up close.

“What are they going to do?” Astra asked from the seat behind her left shoulder.

Ash had thought *she* sounded tense, but the poor Neyris girl was a damn wreck. Her *veroshi* tendrils had been trembling the whole time they’d been out here.

Not that Ash could blame her in the slightest. Kal had good reasons for wanting them to stay as far away from this battle as they could. They should have been halfway to the Span by now on their way to Kenabrius. But just like when he’d told her to stay put on Sykaris months ago, Ash hadn’t been willing to leave him alone. That time, her stubborn disobedience had saved his life—and Miranda’s, too.

That seemed unlikely to be the case today.

“The fleet is lost,” Saleya said in her smooth, rich voice. “But the transports can still escape.”

Ash swiveled her head to look over her right shoulder. The Velothi woman was sitting calmly in the other seat with Kalycos in her lap as if the future of an entire race—and perhaps the Cluster itself—wasn't at stake.

“Kal's doin' what he can!” Ash said. “Idiot is gonna get himself killed tryin' to save everyone.”

Saleya's pink eyes narrowed at the overlay. Technically, coming out here had actually been her idea. Ash had just gone along with it without making a fuss, since it was what she'd wanted to do anyway.

“We need to help,” Saleya whispered.

“I'd love to,” Ash said, “but we'll get torn apart in an instant out there!”

“That squadron of fighter drones is going to make a run for the far transport on the edge of the group,” Saleya went on as if she hadn't heard. “The *Renegade* won't be able to defend them all, not with all those swarm ships closing in.”

Ash sighed. “We can't take on a whole squadron, not without getting ourselves blasted into dust.”

Saleya finally looked at her. “This is a Yarasi interceptor. It is more than a match for simple starfighter drones.”

“If we had a Yarasi pilot with one of their big psionic brains, then sure,” Ash said. “With me as the only power source, we're at maybe half potential. If I give us enough juice to keep the shields up against that much incoming fire, the cannons will be shootin' blanks.”

“You underestimate yourself, my dear. Your family's psychometric powers are a rare gift.”

“Maybe, but they aren't gonna help us out there.”

Saleya took a deep breath and gently set Little Kal down on the deck. He seemed a little annoyed about the abrupt abandonment, but he promptly jumped up onto Astra's lap instead.

“Head for the closest transport,” Saleya said, leaning forward in her chair.

Ash blinked. “Didn’t you hear me? I said we won’t have enough juice!”

“Yes, we will.”

Reaching out to the console in front of her, Saleya placed her red hand against one of the Yarasi glyphs—

And the *Wildcat* shuddered as a fresh surge of energy rippled through its systems. Ash’s mouth fell open as her head whipped around to study the diagnostic readouts. The ship suddenly had as much power as when she, Miranda, *and* Kal had been feeding it juice during their scrap with the Column cruiser outside the Ketule Nebula.

“What the hell?” Ash blurted out.

“We have all the power we need,” Saleya said, the faintest trace of a smile on her lips. “Now fly.”

Chapter 16

Doomsday

The *Renegade* lurched as another volley of disruptor fire splashed across the aft shields, but Reyes didn't lose focus. While banking the ship hard to starboard, he fired the thrusters and sent us into a spiraling roll around one Dowd swarmer and toward another. Our target was trying to make a break for one of the Sillibar transports, but I had no intention of allowing them to get within firing range.

"Lock weapons," I said. "Fire!"

Our psi-cannons unloaded, battering the Dowd ship with bursts of brilliant blue energy. The enemy tried to evade by veering quickly to port, but their refusal to abandon their attack run led them straight back into our firing arc a few heartbeats later. Olshenko unleashed another burst, this time piercing the swarmer's weakened shields and carving blistering lines of scorched metal across its hull.

Next to me, I heard Velarys groan in exertion, and I turned to see her clenching her teeth as she clutched her capacitor crystal. Her gray forehead had been covered in sweat for several minutes now, but her willpower and Yarasi pride compelled her to stay connected and give our weapons as much juice as possible.

I was in the same position, having physically lifted the hand of my limp arm onto my own capacitor a few moments earlier. Despite the numbness in my bad arm, I could feel the ship's unquenchable thirst for power both in my mind and as a persistent tickle on my fingertips.

“Direct hit!” Olshenko called out. “Enemy vessel has suffered heavy damage!”

Outside the viewer, our target reeled from internal explosions as our cannons finally breached the hull. Its engines flashed, and it began listing for a fraction of a second before the entire craft detonated in a cloud of dazzling but short-lived flame. But we didn’t have time to celebrate before the *Renegade* lurched violently from another hit.

“Shields at thirty percent,” Miranda called out. “Moderate damage to our forward psi-cannons, and we’ve lost power to the plasma cannons altogether.”

“The other swarmer is breaking pursuit and going for the transports again,” Olshenko said. “They’ll be within range soon.”

I grimaced. “Helm, don’t let them get away.”

“On it, sir!” Reyes said as he slammed the thrusters again. Despite being larger, the *Renegade* was still faster than the swarm ships, though not by much. And with the angle of our approach, it was going to take precious seconds to get back into range—seconds the Sillibar transport might not have.

And it was only one of many vulnerable targets. The transports had all emerged from the shields, but rather than sticking together like a traditional convoy, they had fanned out in different directions. Normally, such a strategy would have been absolutely insane, since it would have made it impossible for an escort to defend them all. But since they barely *had* an escort here, it actually made sense. Their best—and perhaps *only*—chance of escape was to scatter in the hopes of preventing the enemy from destroying more than one at a time. That way, at least a few of the ships would likely escape.

A few ships, I thought darkly, each carrying half a million people. Each carrying a significant fraction of an entire species.

Sacrificing some to save others was a bleak calculation indeed. The Dowd hadn't taken any of them out yet, but it was only a matter of time.

"Thirty seconds to range," Reyes called out. "They're pushing it hard, sir. They'll be able to fire at the transport before we intercept them."

"Its shields are strong enough to survive a hit," Hebeska said. "Perhaps two."

I clenched my teeth so hard my jaw hurt. The Pact defense fleet had done a heroic job providing an effective screen near the planet. They had heeded my suggestions, allowing the final Krosian battleship and their last surviving destroyer wing to cut off the enemy and slow down pursuit. Unfortunately, a squadron of fighter drones was now barreling toward the farthest transport from us, and we still hadn't neutralized the swarm ship in front of us. We were in a race against time...and we were losing.

"Five seconds, sir," Olshenko said. "The swarmer is firing!"

Outside the viewer, the Dowd ship unleashed its disruptors. The transport's shields flashed an angry red, but they seemed to hold.

"Target their engines," I said. "Fire!"

Two beams of blue lanced out from the *Renegade* and slammed into the swarmer's shields, but when the firing cycle had completed, there was no visible damage.

"Enemy shields at seventy percent," Olshenko said. "No significant damage."

"Transfer power from the shields," I said, feeling the drain of the capacitor again. "We need to—"

"It's not a matter of power, sir," Miranda said, shaking her head. "With the focusing emitters damaged, the beams can't maintain co-

hesion. Even if we doubled the power, we'd lose eighty percent of it before it ever hit the target."

"What if we got closer?"

"It won't be enough. Not in time to—"

"Enemy is firing!" Olshenko warned as the swarmer unleashed an assault of its own. The yellow disruptor beams splattered across the transport's aft shields, this time blasting apart a section of the hull. But the transport kept barreling away...for now.

"Their shields are still holding," Miranda said. "But they won't take another hit, and the swarmer will recharge before they can jump."

A lump of bile rose in my throat. Half a million defenseless people, all about to die in the next ten seconds if we couldn't save them. And for once, I couldn't dive onto the grenade rolling toward them or even throw myself in front of them. I was helpless, and they were doomed.

Unless...

"Transfer all available weapon power to the engines," I ordered. "And put all shield power into the forward array. Helm, full thrusters...set a collision course."

An inexperienced crew would have balked at the order; a crew that didn't completely trust their commander would have hesitated so long it would have cost us our only chance to save the transport.

But my crew did their jobs. Velarys refocused her mind on the capacitor, Miranda shunted energy from the weapons to the engines, and Reyes sent us surging forward like a bat out of hell. The swarmer grew larger in the viewer as we closed the gap, and I held my breath as I watched the energy surge on the tac-holo as they prepared to fire—

We got there first. Just as their disruptors flashed, I clutched my own capacitor and gave the kinetic shielding every spark of my Immortal strength. The *Renegade* became as much a bullet as a starship, crashing

into the swarmer's starboard flank and giving the Dowd a taste of their own insanity.

Alarms wailed. People screamed. The ship shuddered. And all the while, pain seared through me as if a psychic scythe had cleaved through my brain. Blackness claimed my vision, and for a terrifying instant, I feared that both my mind and the ship would come apart.

But then I heard Olshenko shouting behind me.

"Heavy damage to the enemy vessel!" he called out. "Sir, they're losing power. The transport is clear!"

Grinning in satisfaction, I peeled my limp hand off the capacitor to give my mind a respite. "Damage report."

"Shields at ten percent, sir," Miranda said. "Heavy damage to the forward hull, but the emergency forcefields are containing the breaches at the moment."

"Lay in a course for the incoming fighters," I said grimly. "Transfer everything to the thrusters."

The ship lurched as the thrusters fired, a sign that the internal compensators had probably taken a beating in the impact. Though, looking down at my own diagnostic display, almost *everything* had taken a beating. We'd probably need to spend several weeks in drydock when this was over.

But that was tomorrow, and today wasn't over yet. The transports were still burning hard for safety, at least two minutes from being able to jump. And as for the enemy...

"Shit," Olshenko cursed. "Sir, the Pact command ship has been destroyed. Enemy forces are advancing on the orbital platforms and firing at the planetary shield generators."

I shifted my attention to the overlay to see the final death throes of the *Melanchrus*. The Dowd armada was now storming through the debris that had once been dozens of ships crewed by tens of thousands

of brave people. The orbital platforms were firing again, but even with all their impressive weaponry, they were no match for the sheer size of the force sweeping toward them like a black cloud of hungry vultures.

But the fleet hadn't died in vain. As estimates scrolled across the display, it was clear that no other Dowd ships would be able to intercept the transports before they could jump...except for the fighter squadron already on its way.

"One minute to intercept," Reyes said. "Sir, we're not going to make it. Those bombers will be in torpedo range soon."

"Do everything you can," I told him, feeling a claw of cold dread creep up my back. This was exactly why the transports had scattered—one would die so that the others could live. It was brutal but pragmatic. But that wasn't going to make the result any less horrific.

"Bombers are approaching torpedo range," Olshenko said. "They're...wait, I'm picking up another signal. Sir, another ship is decloaking!"

I vaulted out of my chair as the viewer zoomed in on a small ship materializing out of nowhere between the fighter drones and the transport. My heart froze at the sight of the familiar sleek curves of a *Vanu'ryth*-class interceptor, the vessel of choice for Yarasi Huntresses across the galaxy.

And one half-Kreen bounty huntress who was supposed to be hundreds of light-years away by now.

"By the stars," Miranda gasped. "What is she doing?"

"Being Ash," I whispered.

The *Wildcat* unleashed a salvo of fire as it decloaked, obliterating one of the bombers outright and forcing the rest of the formation to scatter. Ash didn't relent; she immediately pursued the surviving bombers even while their escorting fighters came around to blast her. Soon they were swarming over the *Wildcat*, furiously pounding away

at its shields. But all the while, the transport continued clawing for deep space.

“She’s taking heavy fire,” Olshenko said. “But her shields are holding.”

“How?” Miranda breathed. “She can’t generate that much power herself.”

“She is a Huntress,” Velarys said with a note of pride. “She will do whatever is required to complete her mission.”

Another of the bombers exploded in a ball of flame, and Ash threw the Wildcat into a dizzying corkscrew as the fighters continued chasing her. The last bomber was still trying to get back into position to make its attack run...

But it was too late.

“We’re coming into range,” Olshenko said.

“Let Ash handle that bomber,” I said. “Get those fighters off her.”

“Yes, sir!”

Our psi-cannons opened up the instant we were within range. Even with the focusing emitters damaged, they had more than enough power to rip apart the drones; Olshenko picked off two in the first volley, forcing the rest to scatter. Ash, now free to focus all her attention on offense, chased down the last bomber and blew it apart.

“Commander, the transports are about to jump!” Hebeska announced.

I slowly sat back down as the Sillibar ships accelerated into hyperspace one by one. The nebula shrouded them almost immediately, which would hopefully give them all a chance to hide long enough for Pact reinforcements to find them.

“Thank the Seraph,” Miranda whispered.

“Sir,” Mesko said, “the *Wildcat* is hailing us.”

“Put her on,” I said as Ash’s face appeared on the viewer.

“Fancy meetin’ you here, Commander,” she said. “We, uh, we must’a taken a wrong turn somewhere.”

“So it would seem,” I replied, trying and probably failing to appear annoyed.

She frowned. “You look like hell, Kal!”

“You need to get out of here,” I told her, ignoring the comment. “Recloak and shift right away—we’ll meet you at the original rendezvous.”

“Right,” Ash said, still looking concerned at my haggard appearance. “See ya there.”

The channel closed, and I let myself breathe again. “Helm, spin up the astral drive. It’s time to go.”

“On it, sir,” Reyes said.

I shifted my attention back to the overlay. In another minute, we’d have dozens of swarmers and hundreds of fighters all over us. But back near the planet, the Dowd dreadnought and hive ships had destroyed the last orbital platforms and shield generators. The tac-holo lit up with hundreds of tiny blips as the warships unleashed salvo after salvo of torpedoes directly into the planet’s atmosphere.

Despite all the combat and devastation I’d witnessed during my life as a soldier, I had mercifully never experienced the death of an entire planet. But as the roiling clouds of nuclear fire consumed Exodus, boiling away the atmosphere and scourging the seas, I felt a sickness deep in the pit of my stomach unlike anything I’d known before.

I remembered Zurix, the dead planet behind a graveyard of ships...and then I remembered Captain Ellis dying in my arms. At the time, I’d thought that the Dowd War had finally inflicted its last casualty...but now, watching an entire world be consumed in flames, I realized just how wrong I had been.

Eladrell Prime, Praxius, New Keledon...the Dowd leader had shown them all burning. Whatever the Rividian Column had hoped to accomplish, whatever future Soren Foln and his insurrectionist allies had hoped to build, the monsters they had resurrected were no longer under their control. And the Dominion would no longer be able to sit back and wait while the other powers in the Cluster were slowly whittled down.

Because the Dowd would soon be coming for us.

“The drive is ready, sir,” Reyes reported.

“Good,” I said heavily. “Let’s go home.”

To Be Concluded

The story of *The Lost Fleet* will conclude in 2024! In the meantime, I will be dropping a new fantasy story before the end of the year – ***Dread Knight***, the story of an “oathbreaker paladin” seeking redemption set in a completely new fantasy setting with post-apocalyptic vibes. In 2024, I will also be finishing the *Dragon Sovereign* with book 3, ***Godsworn***.

If you enjoyed this book, please, please consider leaving a **review** or even just a **quick rating**. I hate begging for reviews more than anyone, but they really are important for independent authors.

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Older/Non-Canon Novels

Elf Slave Collection (5 novellas)

Wrath of the Spider Queen (4 novellas)

About the Author

Sarah Hawke is a prolific writer of male-oriented fantasy and space opera harems, including her best-selling “Seraph Universe” series *Wings of the Seraph*, *Shadow of the Seraph*, and *The Lost Fleet*.

Her older books include several sub-genres, including fantasy erotica (*The Amazon’s Pledge*, *The Amazon’s Vengeance*, and the *Blade of Highwind*), darker bondage fantasies featuring drow elves (*Web of the Spider Queen*, *Wrath of the Spider Queen*), and more traditional epic fantasy with adult scenes (*War of the White Throne*).

Sarah lives in New England with her three cats and a display case filled with dragons and Star Trek ship ornaments.