



Counterpoint

COUNTERPOINT

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&

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CHAPTER ONE

The trio of musicians crafted a sonorous ambiance with effortless movement; their music filtering among restaurant patrons as each table spoke softly among themselves. Either locked in trivial conversation, business discussion or in Damian's case, blatant flirting,

“You often bring your dates here?” Aeryn spoke critically, yet softened the remark with a smile.

Her hazel eyes darted him a look, awaiting his response while placing a serviette across the lap of her remarkable evening dress.

Damian just smiled, offering up a derisive shrug of surrender and flashed a smile,

“The food is great, and I don’t like to eat alone”

“Mmmm” she offered, clearly half convinced, her eyes observing a waiter make his way toward their table.

The man announced himself with careful interruption,

“Evening sir, your menus. I truly recommend the seasonal game bird, the evening special”

The waiter began to offer up more verbal selections, but Damian gave him a purposeful glance.

“Very good, I shall return when you wish to order,” a polite smile and he retreated.

“You eat here often?!” as soon as the waiter was out of earshot, Aeryn let her face show measure of light shock while she reviewed the menu.

“Yes, good food has a price”

“You’re telling me.” she glanced up with a hidden smile, “I now see why you often have company”
Damian’s renewed grin abruptly turned quizzical, the PDA nestled within his evening jacket vibrating for attention. He made an apologetic grimace, then left to take the call outside. Aeryn smiled with a small shrug, aware of the sudden demands of office for her dinner date.

Damian wore a casual grey suit with light blue shirt underneath, tailored to his athletic physique expertly. Each piece had been selected by his aide and pseudo fashion consultant in her efforts to bring out his blue eyes for tonight’s date; his scruff of short brown hair complimented the effect, the cut suggested by his aide also. Stepping outside he paused momentarily to dodge a passer-by, adjusting the jacket against the cool night air, then reviewed the PDA screen– Janice? He tapped the accept call icon.

“Yah, Hi–what’s wrong?” the call was unexpected and on his private line, already he was concerned.

“Damian, another community has been attacked”

“Rebels?” he questioned after a pause.

“Looks like it, the local Militia are heading into the hills already and we’ve,” Janice affected her own sobering pause, “we lost track of Hector and his assistant”

“They’re not in the compound?”

“No, they had several food deliveries in the late afternoon. We thought they had stopped for dinner with the Sheppards’ but they contacted us once news about the attack spread”

Damian considered the situation for a long moment then replied,

“Have Maeter to take a security detail out, I’ll be there in nine hours”

“Look we can handle it Damian, we need you in Capital if this escalates” Janice countered.

“I have people here for that Janice, I’ll be there–” Damian flicked his wrist and read the chrono on the PDA, “just after dawn, eight or so.”

Janice relented with another pause, “Okay.” Damian could picture her lolling into a trademark hand on hip pose as she added,

“Look, make yourself useful then. Lift out some more medical gear, we’re going to get cleaned out tonight” He smiled at her manner; so immediately pragmatic.

“Right, done, see you soon” he replied.

“Okay, see you in the morning”

Damian rapped the edge of the PDA lightly on his lips. This was the fourth community hit during the harvest season; the rebels were definitely getting bolder. A thought dawned and in a moment he was on another call,

“Hello, I’m calling to speak with the Ambassador, ” he requested with authority and obvious familiarity.

“Evening sir, the Ambassador is unavailable tonight” spoke an unfamiliar voice.

Calming himself at being stymied, he pressed on, “Tell him Damian Marshall is calling”

“He has requested not to be disturbed” the operator insisted.

“Damian Marshall, tell him my name”

“Please hold” the operator relented with a curt reply, shortly replaced by irritating muzak.

Damian glanced about himself patiently; thankfully no one seemed interested in his conversation. He spied Aeryn giving him a look from inside the warmly lit restaurant. She frowned at his return gaze, realising something was wrong; abruptly a voice in his ear caused Damian to look away.

“Lord Marshall!” a slightly classical, accented voice erupted from the PDA.

“Ambassador, thank you for answering my call”

“My apologies, my aide has not learned all our private callers yet; he is newly arrived”

“Ah, no matter your Excellency. Look, there’s been another community attacked tonight, mid-afternoon Karapesh time”

“This is no good, your fourth correct?”

“Yes. I need your help. We have people missing on the ground”

“Definitely no good, I will discuss it with my military attaché. Shall I contact you in an hour?”

Damian smiled for the first time since walking out of the restaurant,

“Thank you Ambassador, my family has always found support in your office”

“Think nothing of it between our peoples, Talk with you soon”

“Good, I’m making arrangements to fly there right now, so you will reach me on the move”

“You are your father’s son, not one to wait about”

Damian didn't reply. The evident pause made the Ambassador realised he had erred on a sensitive topic,

"All right Damian, talk soon" the Ambassador added hastily.

"Talk then your Excellency"

Damian quit the call, slipping the PDA into his jacket while reaching for the fob to his coupe.

"What's wrong?" Aeryn asked, coming up behind him as she left the restaurant.

"One of our projects got attacked tonight"

She was taken aback, stopping midway through affixing a shawl about her shoulders.

"You need to go?" she quickly surmised.

"Yes, but first let me—" he made for the door.

"No, I've seen to that" she smiled lightly.

"Thanks Aeryn, sorry about this"

She gave him a look that dismissed his apology as unnecessary, considering.

"Let me drop you off at your flat, it's on my way" he offered.

"Way? You're north side yes?"

Damian nodded, "Yes, but I will be going direct to Capital airfield"

"Oh.." she took that in with a smile, "I'll take you up on that ride then"

Damian smirked then made for the parking bays,

"Come on, let's get you home"

Minutes later he pulled up outside Aeryn's apartment block, easing the coupe to the curb.

He spoke up as she exited,

“Thanks for tonight, even if it was brief”

“You’re welcome and hey, be safe” she smiled bowing to look through the passenger doorframe.

“Of course” he smiled.

“–because you owe me dinner” she winked.

Damian pursed his lips at being had,

“I am now aware of your true desires! Mercenary” he retorted.

Aeryn leaned back with a smile.

“Night Damian” she waved lightly.

“Night”

She turned away seeking a keycard in her small clip purse while Damian looked down the road, checked his mirrors and gave her one last look when she arrived at her doorway. Smiling to himself, he guided the coupe down the street, quickly gathering speed.

“Garmin” he summoned the man via an inbuilt autodial. A couple of chimes later the pilot, who had clearly been woken up, accepted the phone call,

“Yarh?”

“It’s Damian, we need to get to the Projects. There has been another attack”

A sharp intake of breath heralded a rapid rustling of sheets,

“I’ll see you at the jet in twenty minutes?” came a much more lively reply.

“Already on my way”

“Hurmm, Janice request those medical kits we stored?”

“Yah, all of them, just me tonight so load her up”

“Right, see you shortly”

Signing off the call, Damian increased the power band and shot out of the city circuit onto the southern road system, readily ignoring the speed limits while moving between cruising traffic. The ambient roadway lights quickly became a strobing blur as he drove hard for the airfield.

“It’s done, you will have several medical support units from our military join you on the afternoon of your arrival”

“Best news all night Ambassador, thank you” Damian replied, one hand hoisting a med-kit into the slim business jet.

“Think nothing of it, I am of a mind it is high time someone acted on these raiders”

“I agree”

The Ambassador continued,

“Your contact will be an understudy of mine, she will expect your call to initiate our aid officially”

“Superb, well, I have to finish loading here then I’m airborne for the next seven hours”

“Understood,” the Ambassador paused, “Safe flight”

“Are we starting a field hospital down there?” Garmin grunted as he slotted another kit in place, observing Damian put the PDA away.

“Something like that”

“Good, ‘cause we’re set to go, that’s the last one” with a rough shunt, the panel slid back over the loading sleeve, “You ahh.. wearing that all the way?”

The pepper haired and robustly built older man pointed out the rather fashionable manner in which his young baggage handler was dressed.

“I’ll change when I get to the Lodge” Damian grinned with mock appraisal of the worn utility jumpsuit his pilot was wearing.

“hurm, well.. get in”

The last of several hangars on the private airfield birthed a white, slightly bowed nose jet, the craft edging out through sliding doors. When the stabiliser tips of the swept wings were clear, the doors began rolling back.

Air was sucked along scalloped flanks, drawn by engine nacelles that merged into an elongated tail section, their power pushing the jet urgently across the tarmac. Shortly the craft pointed down the runway, beacons pulsing the way into the night sky.

Damian owned the airfield; so dealing with the control tower was mercifully brief. Meanwhile Garmin fussed through a final systems check, then nodded from the co-seat. Renewing his grip on a set of dual controls, Damian eased on the power. Within moments the runway slipped away underside, the jet puncturing the skein of clouds over Capital, to bask in the starlight above.

Tapping across the management display Damian enabled the jet’s party trick. Accelerating rapidly, building upon their current speed, they soon exceeded mach. Nothing remained in the way but time.

Garmin looked over at his life long charge, smiled then unclipped himself. He knew the young man well enough to see that there would be no changeover tonight. He held Damian's shoulder with a reassuring grip as he went aft into the cabin, hopefully to regain a measure of undisturbed sleep.

—

Janice brought her transport to a halt alongside several similar vehicles about the ruined village. Smoke hung lazily in a twilight lit, charred forest of ruined structures. The sombre atmosphere quickly affected the newly arrived rescue party.

"Okay, check for survivors.." shouted Maeter, breaking the spell while jumping down from the cabin of a nearby transport, "Get the seriously wounded aboard the Med transport, any others we make comfortable. They will have to stay here for now" Maeter's order broke any sense of trepidation for Janice, yet several volunteer aid workers nearby were still in shock.

"Move it, this is not the first time!" she shouted with renewed urgency.

Jolted into action, the staffers quickly filtered through the area seeking out survivors.

"You were very lucky Chen, I'm amazed you got away" she addressed the young village boy who had reported the attack; he was lingering close at her side.

"Yes miss- I'm sorry miss" he whimpered, somehow ashamed.

"Chen?"

Janice turned about, frowning as the young local faded back through the line of transports at the run.

“Chen!” she made to rush after him, then paused. He would recover from the shock soon enough she figured, but right now there were people needing immediate help.

“There’s no one here!” a shouted report announced, only moments into the search.

“Nothing south side either, there’s signs of casualties, but no bodies” Maeter muttered as he walked back to Janice, his automatic rifle was held at the ready. Almost as one, the other security men fanned out, protecting the rescue party instinctively. More dismayed shouts came back; strangely the village was vacant.

“This isn’t right” she added when the security man finally drew up next to her, his eyes flicking to hers in agreement.

“Halt!” shouted a guard nearby. Just as everyone spun around to the alarm, the guards' next shout was cut off, his mid-section erupting along the side of a transport; the weapon report was near instant.

“DOWN!” shouted Maeter, pressing the administrator into the ashen earth, his knee already on her back in one fluid movement. Crouched atop her, he tracked then immediately opened fire.

The village erupted into violence, gun flashes strobed the startled aides as the small security team returned fire on their assailants. Everyone dove for what little cover there was.

Janice screamed out when one of her young interns stumbled, stitched by vicious impacts; the volunteer's medical vest ripped into tattered ribbons.

“We’re trapped,” Maeter growled, firing a series of short bursts down the side of their transport, then pivoted above her and fired again “I’m sorry Jani–”

As he spoke, a hot wetness slapped her neck and shoulder, he grunted, then fell atop her.

“..no..no” Janice murmured as the slaughter continued.

In the stillness after, she struggled to push Maeter’s bloodied mass from atop herself, stopping when she heard someone approach.

“...NO!” she pleaded.

The rebel raised a bulky rifle, and fired.

CHAPTER TWO

Adam Devro looked out across the grasslands of Karapesh, it was a mighty view that his Family estate had long held claim. The Devro lineage deeply entwined with the history of the region, his home country.

“Sir, a call for you” politely intruding upon the young Lord, Adam’s head servant kept a respectful distance.

“Put it through to the sun deck” Adam replied without acknowledging the man.

“Sir”

White robed with an early morning brew in hand, he turned away from the vista to walk across the lower garden. Leisurely navigating one of the twin curved stairways to the sundeck of the stone wrought mansion terrace; he spared a glance into the main bedroom. A shock of blonde hair was still buried under the sheets. What a night she had been.

Atop a table, among a collection of sun bleached leisure furnishings, a slim handset awaited him with a call light blinking impatiently. He reached for it, looking into the pool waters lost in thought. Unconsciously he groomed his shock of short black hair, then finally touched the accept icon.

“Devro” he stated.

“Everything?” requested a voice used to being obeyed, but strained at having to do so himself.

“Yes”

“Understood” followed by an abrupt click.

Adam smiled. If only all business could be dealt with in such monosyllabic phrases. Shuffling the handset in his palm, he pressed for the head servant.

“Sir?”

“My guests, are they still here?”

“Yes”

“Have them join me on the deck, full breakfast service”

“Of course sir, fifteen minutes?”

“Yes, and bring me a change of clothes and a towel”

“Your bedroom sir?”

“No, the sundeck, oh and escort the young woman out would you, have her flown home, wherever that is”

“Of course sir”

He tossed the handset onto a nearby daybed, downed his brew and set it aside. Performing a slow stretch followed by practised meditative movements, he began to get ready for the new day. Finishing, he removed his robe to bare a firm softly tanned form and dove into the pool.

Scattering like shoals of fish across a dry grassland sea, local herd beasts fled the keen omnipotent sound rapidly approaching overhead. Flying low and fast the white jet began a lazy elliptical orbit, slowly rolling inwardly during the manoeuvre; the crew aboard eyeballing the field runway for obstacles.

“Looks clear to me so far” Garmin commented, scratching his stubble.

“Mmm, I’ll put it down from the north-west end” the pilot agreed.

Damian didn’t let on how tired he was despite a long flight, his eveningwear however, was clearly lived in.

“Okay,” the older man nodded, fussing with the comm-panel, “no word from the lodge yet” he added.

“Probably nothing, most of the team would be busy–”

“Damian.” the older man interjected.

Tracing Garmin’s focus, the Damian saw them too. A pair of stubby transports sat at the southern end of the airstrip. Already men were sprinting for them.

Damian growled, “Dammit, I’m making for the lodge’s entry road”

The jet rolled away hard as he violently reassessed the approach.

In the wake the aircraft’s retreating shadow, the open tray transports gave chase along the runway. The group leader excitedly shouting for his men to open fire, particularly the burly fighter with the newly acquired anti-armour rifle. Their sole reason for watching this airfield had just arrived.

“They know where we’re going” grumbled Garmin, keeping an eye on their pursuers through an aft view port.

“I figure that, we haven’t much time left,” Damian tapped the power monitor, “I’m cutting across the northern end of the airfield, make a run for the lodge, should buy us ten minutes?”

“Do it” Garmin growled, shuffling about the cabin to gather gear he stored for such eventualities.

Damian hailed the lodge again, a short identification burst, without reply. He tried ignoring the growing possibility there would never be one.

Seeing his quarry dive low after completing their S course along the length of the airfield, the rebel leader shouted for the driver to adjust. Their target was making a mad dash across the airfield for the foundation lodge further northeast. Just as they did so the rifle gunner shouted while he tracked the aircraft, despite the dust and terrible suspension of the transport, the anti-armour rifle had locked on, emitting an audible tone above the whining of transport motors.

“Got two automatics here, couple of–“

The first hit ripped through the aft fuselage, sending a whirlwind of shredded med-kits and ruin about the cabin.

“Son of a–!” Garmin shouted, diving toward the cockpit. He reached what he was aiming for just as the next shot took him and the fuselage behind the cabin, out across the right wing. The blast, wreckage and human remains removed the right stabiliser in a single destructive moment.

Despite the sudden attack, the jet remarkably held together. Damian was stunned briefly, before dormant training renewed instincts within. He mashed the rescue beacon key on the console before him.

“M zero one. Read my marker..Hack Hack Hack!”

From the underbelly of the jet, following the parent like a symbiont briefly, the beacon glided free, falling away as it lost

airspeed. Damian kept his mercy chant going, fighting to keep the descent under control.

An engine suddenly roared, the intake immolating itself from scrap spewing out of the cabin. Damian pulled hard to counter the sudden lurch as the remaining engine suicidally attempted to slide the aircraft sideways along its flight path. The turbine stalled and the jet began to plummet. Damian let out a shout of anguish as his gut lurched from the sudden loss of altitude.

Not so far below, the cheering rebels peeled off the runway and drove into the thick bush, pursuing the jet as it fell through the rays of the morning sun.

The impact was brutal and violent, a cacophony of screeching metal, shorting electronics and loosed cargo. Damian had done the only thing he could, keep the nose up, ride it out. Stubby bushland trees abutted the jet, each claiming a chunk of metal from the stricken craft as it slid past. Bobbing harshly, the ruined craft finally pivoted and began to point back along the savaged trench it had created. Finally with a groan, it lulled to a rest.

Nothing Damian Marshall appreciated anymore; his still body held in place by the flight seat as a rivulet of blood coloured his forehead.

CHAPTER THREE

The duty guard lifted his carbine higher, bodily intercepting the man approaching from the Memorial Park end of the inner city gardens, an expansive public zone that surrounded the Embassy compound.

Reviewing a flashcard ID, he glanced over the well-dressed businessman before him. Lyal Ollesan IDC, Capital's Intelligence & Defence Council. A mature, stern face, with onset grey brown hair, hazel eyes looked back impatiently. The guard, satisfied with the genuine article before him, stepped aside with practised ease and offered the ID back, looking dead ahead, ever the professional.

“Good day sir”

Lyal nodded politely, navigating a maze of gates at the security entrance, renewing his pace across an internal esplanade.

Harmoniously landscaped scenery flanked his progress through several adjunct buildings within the high walls of the square compound. Straight ahead in the centre, bustling with military and civilian contractors arriving for their own meetings, stood the Embassy Residence. Reaching the steps, Lyal noted the filled pockmark remains of weapons fire about the grand entrance, harsh etchings from a not so distant past.

Entering the building through automatic doors, he politely offered himself to the scanners within the foyer checkpoint. Lyal slid his ID and slimcase over. Additionally removing a shoulder

holstered sidearm to an awaiting hand. One of the guards indicated for Lyal to enter, gather his belongings and move onward; the weapon would be returned on exit.

“Mister Ollesan?” spoke one of *them*.

Lyal found himself confronted by an unfamiliar staff member. Studying the smooth faced tau female for a moment, a slim and slightly under height humanoid, she was akin to a juvenile human. Besides the obvious grey blue complexion, the lack of ears or a protruding nose, were the first things one noticed. A single, vertical nasal fold, from central brow to above the lip identified males whilst an intersecting Y arrangement was a gender giveaway for her. It was when they walked; one invariably noticed the padded hooves.

“Yes, and you are?” he greeted her.

“Por’vre’Eylo” she responded, offering a handshake which Lyal accepted without hesitation, “this way please, you are expected”

She was curiously pleasing on the eye, with flawless elocution enriched by a seemingly native accent. These factors combined most certainly what marked her as diplomatic material for dealing with humans.

They proceeded down the central hallway while he watched her long solitary scalp lock sway with her movements. Common to all tau he had met, she sported a predominantly bald hairstyle. Eylo seemed to affix her scalp lock with finely wrought binding rings; in fact some displayed engravings of local talent. It worked well with the rather smart human fashions she and fellow staff wore at the embassy, evident as he passed several busy rooms on their

way past. Abruptly a small disc hovered by Eylo, Lyal had seen these often enough, but his natural suspicion kept him watching it flit down the hallway longer than he intended.

“Mister Ollesan..?” Eylo broke his wary regard of the receding device.

He moved into the room indicated, a little sheepish at being caught gawking.

Inside the minimally decorated reception room, awaited the Ambassador, whom stood to his full height as Lyal entered. Like others in the embassy, the alien wore a hybrid of human and tau clothing, mostly statements of office worked into a more contemporary local style. He was very tall by human standards, with an air of calming authority that seemed to permeate all about him, even rendering moot his guest’s natural reaction at being physically overshadowed.

“Good morning Mister Ollesan, your arrival is very precipitous” the tau greeted with trademark accent.

“Yes, quite” Lyal responded, “I heard you had requested for me whilst I was on my way over”

Lyal accepted the Ambassador’s elongated hand, shook firmly, and sat upon a very modern recliner. He found it off centre and at angle to the Ambassador’s reception desk, rather than squared off, like opponents. Lyal watched the lean alien take his seat with a noble grace.

“Jaun’Qoul, we have a problem” Lyal looked calmly into dark almond eyes, “Last night, Capital time, we lost contact with several of our Militia units in the southern region of Karapesh. All with in quick succession of each other”

The signature ridge of bone along the alien's nasal fold caught the light from a nearby window as he nodded solemnly while listening.

"It has made our leadership uneasy to say the least," Lyal continued whilst retrieving a folio from his satchel, "so I'll get right to it"

A long held camaraderie had created an economical ease between the two; the Ambassador not in the least offended by Lyal's directness.

"Parliament is getting nervous, some are even concerned these actions over the last five years with the rebels, might now be linked to your people"

"Lyal, seriously? We would not jeopardise decades of alliance with your world, I mean, really?" Jaun'Qoul was an exhibit of humility as he faced the allegation, effortlessly stinging Lyal with guilt for delivering it.

The man held his gaze regardless,

"Jaun.." the human tested.

"What have you brought with you Lyal?" the Ambassador shifted the topic to the folio in Lyal's hands, not one of the alien's more artful misdirections.

"Photos of advanced weapons in Karapesh"

That got a reaction, Lyal noted.

"Show me please"

"Certainly"

Unlatching the folio, Lyal produced a sleeve of photos for the Ambassador to review; vid card never quite seemed to carry the effectiveness of hardcopy. With a deft grace and a long reach, the tau gathered the paper images from the desk.

“Taken a week ago, in the southern highlands,” Lyal commented, “The spotter remote transmitted the finding, but never returned”

Jaun slid one photo over the other, offering each a measured study. The series contained crisp aerial photography of well organised and disguised camps. Yet one could see a cache of larger weapons that clearly were not Karapeshi design. Let alone the odd vehicular like shapes under cammo-nets.

When the tau was finished he looked at Lyal,

“Interesting,” Jaun’Qoul commented, “they match our images”.

Damian’s head pounded like an all drum divisional band. He brought a sticky hand away from his forehead, inspecting the crimson smear across it. Still wet, so he hadn’t been unconscious long.

His body was unhindered, but a protest from the left side of his ribcage caused concern as he moved. The cabin was also orientated at a near vertical angle. Damian released himself carefully, fumbling with the flightseat belt release, propping his legs against the console.

“Garmin!” he shouted, without reply.

Stumbling out of the cockpit against savaged medical kits and internal fittings, Damian looked about for the wily old pilot. Finally he spied the bloodied, ragged hole at one side of the ruined fuselage behind the cabin. A cold dread washed through him, followed by a flush of loss, it seemed to have been instant.

The approach of combustion engines outside made him freeze. Quickly priorities shifted as the vehicles he had attempted to escape earlier drew up nearby. A stab of pain from his chest awoke Damian to action. His heart beat faster than he could hope to control, but he forced himself to calm. Looking for options he quickly found one,

“Garmin..” he smiled with a hint of pride.

A satchel and one of the stowed carbines hung oddly from a cargo belt latch, directly behind the cockpit cabin.

Quickly grappling over toppled and ruined cargo to the treasure he had unwittingly passed, his hand slipped over the cool metal of the automatic. Inspecting it with familiarity, only a large dent in the stock marred the weapon. Damian worked the action several times then checked a magazine; removing then replacing it to make sure the feed was unhindered. Searching through the satchel revealed several cold orbs, the straps of a combat rig and another two magazines.

Pulling out the rig, Damian quickly affixed the stun grenades and magazines then found himself staring at the bloodied hole for a long moment; he wrenched the final rig strap tight.

Quietly picking a path through the strewn interior, Damian took position obliquely to the most obvious entry point, it was as far from the cockpit as he could get, overlooking a large section torn from the fuselage. Finally he rested, forehead against the cool barrel of the carbine and thought of his parents. How his father must have felt that night when Damian had lost them both.

Voices could be heard outside, men were carefully navigating the wreckage outside. Feeling a pulse of adrenalin invigorate his ailing body Damian readied the weapon, aiming toward the ragged metal hole.

—

It took a moment for the intelligence man to realise he had heard correctly,

“Match?”

Jaun spoke to an unseen desk communicator, “Por’vre, have our advisor join us please”

The Ambassador returned his gaze to the human,

“Lyal, we have also been monitoring these rebel bases and we have no idea where they are getting these weapons systems either”

He handed the photos back, but retained what Lyal knew was the best one.

“I assure you, we are making every effort to find out ourselves, so in a roundabout manner, I admit, our units are in the region”

“Have you..?”

“No,” the tau lulled his head to one side, bemused at the unnecessary question, “of course not”

“It wouldn’t be taken well,” Lyal reaffirmed the cautious attitudes in parliament, “the idea of your people dealing with these rebels, despite our need for stability since the Rising, has the potential to go badly”

“I know, we are well aware of how tenuous our welcome here is; it is also why I had requested you earlier. We intended to show your Government our surveillance imagery before someone made incorrect assumptions”

The adroit implication was not lost on Lyal.

The two were interrupted when the reception room was filled with near six foot of brawn. The figure was without a doubt, one of the toughest tau Lyal had ever seen. He wore hardened combat armour in segmented sections along his limbs, broader plates about the torso and a small dress version of the broad blast plate that usually adorned the left shoulder. Patterned in the unmistakable hues of the bushland that predominated the southern continent; camouflaged fatigues underneath softened the monochromatic dark earthen tones of the armour.

The etched face of an alien fighter regarded the human with equal measure. Lyal noted the officer's scalp lock sported heavily wrought rings, similar to the Por'vere, but more obviously tied to rank.

“Shas'El, please come in” Jaun'Qoul requested.

The warrior jabbed a ‘that there’ motion, aimed at the human, muttering in fluidic tau as he entered.

The Ambassador talked right over the warrior's question,

“Lyal Ollesan, may I introduce our military attache, Shas'el Elan'Jhin”

“Delighted” the human offered out his hand.

Blackmailing the handshake for information, the shas'el questioned again. Jaun'Qoul broke into his native tongue with speed and gusto. It didn't seem like he admonished the officer,

but certainly within a couple of nods that only tau do, the shas'el had heard what he wanted to know.

“Problem?” Lyal asked, having given up on the handshake.

“No, my attaché was concerned as to who you were, he did not expect to discuss this matter openly as yet”

A slight tableau occurred among the trio,

“Hurlo ..Misda Orhsan” the shas'El spoke finally, if somewhat heavily accented, offering a handshake.

Lyal took the immensely firm grip.

“Shas'el Elan” he nodded back.

“Jhin” the warrior corrected by addition.

Eylo brought a third seat into the room, more a stool than a recliner. The warrior sat upon it straight backed, with legs wide; placing a hand upon his right thigh, thumb inward. The other nursed the handle of a small dirk, the ornate sheath of which protruded out behind the officer's left hip. Jaun'Qoul handed the officer the prize photo.

“Hurhmm” was all it evoked from the tau, who jabbed it toward Lyal.

“Thoughts?” Lyal asked the Ambassador, darting a look between the two as he took the photo back.

“Max” added Elan'Jhin with some difficulty; to the weapons in the photo held between them.

“Macks?” Lyal questioned.

“No, M..A..C..” offered Eylo who had remained as interpreter for the officer.

The tau warrior looked to the aide then waved at their guest for her to continue,

“Magnetically Accelerated Cannons, quite advanced. We don’t recognise the fashioning, but the correct elements are there in the design” the junior added.

“I see, is it true that some of your military hardware is like this?” Lyal fixed his gaze on Jaun’Qoul.

The Ambassador nodded, then answered the question,

“We have similar weapons but these examples are very functional, manually guided. Quite a rough design in essence.”

Jaun’s remarks were almost that of an art critic.

“Deadly?” Lyal followed.

Eylo spoke again, “Very much so, but these cannot be utilised by infantry, you need larger vehicles to serve as a platform”

“You’re suggesting the Karapeshi rebels are building an army?” Lyal ventured.

Elan’Jhin made a gruff comment.

Lyal glanced at the warrior, “Sorry?”

Eylo translated, “The shas’el is certain they are not for hunting local game”

The two guests regarded each other coolly for a long moment.

Jaun’Qoul was about to break yet another uncomfortable tableau when the shas’el looked toward Lyal’s feet, as if listening to a distant sound. Only then did Lyal notice a metal bead inside the officer’s aural cavity.

Elan’Jhin grunted, relaying whatever he was being told in fluidic tau.

Lyal arched his brow, looking toward Jaun’Qoul.

“A moment please Mister Ollesan”

After a minute of alien conversation, the Ambassador turned back to Lyal,

“Do you know the Marshall family?”

“Ahh yes, in fact one of their Karapesh projects was attacked yesterday,” he offered.

That and they’re one of the several most influential Families this society had remaining since the Rising, Lyal thought to himself.

The Ambassador took on a slight veil of contrition,

“I was going to support Damian Marshall in a mercy mission to help in that tragedy later today, something I am aware we cannot necessarily perform without official request”

“Yes..” Lyal didn’t like where this was leading.

“We have not met up with him yet, but recon units we have in the area just received a distress call from M Zero One..”

“That’s a Marshall jet, if not *The Jet*” Lyal spoke his thoughts aloud.

“What does the term ‘hack’ mean to you?” Jaun queried. Lyal felt that familiar drained feeling when things were about to go sour.

“Hostile Action Crash. It’s an acronym not a word.” Jaun’Qoul gave an alien grimace, glancing at his attaché. He spoke further, but in tau. The shas’el replied smartly. Lyal braced himself when the Ambassador looked back.

“Lyal, we are in a position to help, may we launch a search for the aircraft?”

Lyal Ollesan looked at the gathered aliens awaiting his response. Jaun’Qoul had him in a corner by design or fate, the tau knew exactly where Damian Marshall was and the fact they could

mount an operation on the fly left him wondering just how many happy snapper tau surveillance units were in Karapesh. More than a few folks had become suspicious of the tau presence in recent years, having them at the center of open hostilities within the poorest region still recovering since the Rising was a recipe for diplomatic disaster. Even worse, this could goad the seasonally bullish Karapeshi Rebels into all out war, tossing all their chips in when realising the Tau might be siding overtly with Capital.

Then there is Jaun'Qoul, concerned over an unknown benefactor to the Rebels. Someone is possibly trying to usurp their (not unwelcome, yet) superiority on this world and they don't like it. A few minutes ago he walked in here with some photos and the sole mission of a 'Please Explain', now he was probably facing an extra-planetary, diplomatic and political snowball.

"You have a team already in position don't you?"

Jaun'Qoul remained quiet, but slowly nodded when faced with that firm gaze the human intelligence officer could bring to bear. Only one thing Lyal could control right now; the Marshall family had powerful friends and with Damian Marshall alive, it could be spun as a coincidental chance for the tau to rescue a favoured son of Capital from a threat everyone agrees needs to be stopped. That would have to do for now.

"Here on in, we share mutual information on the Karapeshi Rebels, I'll crack open everything we have, but I want to see what you have discovered. Understood?"

The shas'el made to say something, but the Ambassador cut him off, the Ambassador shared a similar line of thought,

“Agreed” the alien replied.

“Good, now get him out of there”.

CHAPTER FOUR

Lowering the glass of juice, Adam observed his guests quietly enjoying their breakfast as morning sunlight refracted about the sundeck pool. The pair wore field dress, of a colouration that was perfectly suited for the Karapesh region, including the usual military accoutrements that befitted soldiers of their rank.

Directly across from him was the cropped silver-haired leader, tanned from months in action. The veteran's fatigues barely contained the raw muscle of a seasoned fighter. The officer's attaché was a remarkably appealing woman of similar complexion, her cropped brunette hair unable to hide a sharp eyed return appraisal of Adam. He thought about meetings with her in another environment for a moment, then dismissed the reverie with a smirk,

"So Captain, as I was saying," Adam wiped his lips with cultured ease, "my efforts in Karapesh should be concluded fairly soon. About this time Capital expects the seasonal insurgency to ebb, which leads me to one final operation. I have removed a particularly stubborn obstacle"

The steel-eyed captain froze with cutlery poised above his meal, gazing across the table toward the smug industrial magnate; jaw clenching. After a cold pause, he offered up a rather terse,

"Oh?"

"Yes, consider it a gift to our joint efforts"

"This wouldn't happen to involve one of the rifles we loaned you?" queried the woman.

The captain interjected before Devro could answer, “More importantly, was the situation contained?”

“Of course, with items like that, how could they not?” Adam gave a slightly amused huff, covering a white lie.

“Please remember Lord Devro,” the officer leaned in closer without even moving, “your efforts are to increase the level at which people perceive the threat generated by these so called Rebels,” he pinned the overly wealthy man with a stare, “Any extra actions, even remotely out of sync with their usual operations, may cause undue attention”

Adam made to reply, but was uncharacteristically cut off,

“I remove obstacles that cause our mission undue attention”

“Captain, I assure you, the Rebel movement has a history and rationale for this action. It would create a destabilised environment for them to better enact their policies”

The two officers exchanged unconvinced glances,

“Okay Lord Devro, my thanks for your hospitality” the captain stood, “but we have a schedule to keep. I insist you send a report about your operation so I can review it”

“Of course, of course,” Adam offered his hand whilst getting up himself, “It was a pleasure”

“It was business” stated his guest, the handshake was solid and quick.

“Good day” added the woman as she fell in behind her senior.

Adam nodded politely, waving for the head servant to guide the duo down to the lower garden, quietly thankful he was rid of the

captain. This continual checking upon his affairs by these people was becoming, well frankly, tiresome.

Briskly navigating the flight of stone stairs down into the gardens, the attaché spoke into a small PDA. Moments later, appearing from behind a low ridgeline nearby, a brutal looking VTOL transport approached. Heavily camouflaged, angular without disturbing the flight dynamics, it carried rocket pods and a nose mounted cannon openly. It never failed to impress Adam with such purpose of design.

Jet engines sent grass cuttings and dust across the manicured landing lawn as it touched down, the rear gangway lowering just in time for the Captain's arrival. The woman paused before boarding, chancing a glance across the gardens and up to the sun deck balustrade, fixing on Adam Devro. He looked back at her as she entered the craft; then finished a final mouthful of his juice. It was handy to have people on the inside like her, he thought, particularly among 'friends'.

Four rotaa in the field, completing an unsanctioned recon, was definitely pushing their operational limits. Power management and judicious use of their full stealth capabilities was beginning to make it quite an effort for him to skulk about the bushland undetected, reminding Kunas'Ka Ulo of his early training days. Certainly solid experience for the stealth la'rua he reflected. La'Eyto interrupted his thoughts, over a direct beam comm-link, from his position on point,

“Shas’ui, I’ve found the beacon. No sign of the craft, but I have an energy signature about one point four tor’kan ahead”

“From the craft itself?” Ulo queried as five other stealth suits halted alongside him in unison, each scanning the surrounds both visually and electronically.

“No, smaller, almost as if– I think it’s a weapon system”
Energy weapon? That was new,

“Follow the debris trail, we will move up behind you Eyto”

“Understood”

Through sheer mass, a fully enclosed stealth battlesuit doubled the size of a tau warrior, covering the user in highly advanced, segmented and streamlined armour. The most notable feature a large fixed helm that covered the chest, head and swept over the shoulders toward the intake of a compact, dorsal jump pack. The key ability was surprise through sensory and electronic stealth enabled combat. Which on Ulo’s final command, the tau insurgents would merge into the bushland,

“M’yen’Ka pattern, converge on point, sensors passive at full spectra denial.” Ulo ordered.

Quickly the team broke into pairs, leaving him to move on alone. The armoured figures became a series of blurred heat waves that pushed through the long grass, then nothing.

“Eleven gue’la ahead, two modified civilian transports,” remarked Eyto a few raik’or later, “four are on the ground moving toward the main wreckage”

“Any sign of that energy emitter?” Ulo asked, while he motivated forward at an enhanced jogging pace, reviewing data that slid across his vision.

“Yes, second vehicle, it’s a magnetic accelerator”

“Eyto, align yourself to engage that weapon”

“Understood”

The tau closed rapidly on the crash site, their quarry having no idea the kind of mont’ka they were about to experience if Ulo had his way. It had been several raik’or since the la’rua had picked up a distress call on gue’la channels. The vocal pattern and callsign a match for Damian Marshall, a High Value Civilian according to the didactic operations package all tau units used.

Ulo had been leading a wide-ranging recon of the gue’la Rebel faction hideouts, the circuitous route purposely placed them only a few tor’kan from the aid base the gue’la operated here. A location they could quietly observe, without threat, before extraction. Luckily for this important civilian, it allowed the tau to be near enough to hopefully save him from these insurgents.

“Eas’Tau Shas Ar’Tol” the shas’ui voiced clearly over a rarely used channel.

“Ar’Tol” replied the orbiting missions operator, her screens showing all active Tau units planet side, across topography known to the gue’la as Karapesh.

From her vantage point, high in polar orbit aboard the tau security waystation, she monitored and co-ordinated six recon teams. Right now, every ability of her equipment observed just Recon Four as it moved in on the crash site.

“Advise, HVC located, hostile units sighted with intent, permission to engage?” Ulo continued.

“Recon Four, hold position. Your HVC is flagged”

“Understood”

The stealth la'rua kept moving through the long grass like a shimmering breeze. Soon the low trees became thicker, forcing them to pick their path more carefully, however they maintained their pace and unified formation. It began to take an unusual amount of time for the controller to confirm the request and Ulo had almost considered enquiring again when,

“Recon Four, extract HVC. You are authorised to engage”

A moment later the master arm icon blinked on. No tau military unit on this world had seen that symbol in near fifty cyr. The reality was not lost on the unit leader,

“Shas'la! Weapons free. Check.” the la'rua closed rank to form a firing line on the move.

Multiple response icons winked, all were ready. An uncommon silence fell over the tau, the poignant nature of the situation focussing their sense of purpose. They arrived line abreast with their invisible point man, only they could see. Holding in place, the tau observed the unfolding tableau about the downed craft. Ulo raised his right arm, bringing to bear an integrated rotary burst cannon,

“HVC is priority.”

At that exact moment, Damian Marshall opened fire.

—

Each morning had been a painfully slow crawl to the unmarked observation spot only twenty metres from a fortuitously placed cave the two men had discovered. Air dropped only four days ago, three of those being the most

intense infiltration the pair had done since basic, Lieutenant Kaero Rales and Sargent Jeno Gullen now lay ensconced under an artfully crafted bivouac. Each was a purposeful, shaggy mess; much like the camouflaged hide. Their field craft ensuring the observers had become just another unremarkable bush about the peaks of the dry Karapeshi Ranges.

“That one” Jeno continued.

“The smoker?”

“Yah“

“Now up about two metres”

“Damn..” Kaero chuckled, “he does look like that punk back in supplies”

The two smirked behind their observation scopes, still watching the coming and goings of what was believed to be one of the more important logistic bases of the Rebellion in Karapesh, burrowed deep inside a large network of alpine caverns.

It had long been nigh impossible to spy on locations such as these from above. The problem only recently solved by several teams such as theirs on the ground, eyes forward, taking notes and laser transmitting their findings to passing satellites during the night. The clandestine effort was key to figuring the next offensive the rebels might perform. However, judging by the amount of materiel coming in and the few things going out, the Rebels were winding down their operations for this season; by any reasoning, it would appear the conflict was destined to drag on for another year.

Casually at first, Jeno noted a new arrival, an overly large double tray transport that slowly wound a course along the cut roadway.

But something was amiss; the guards on duty became nervous, despite recognising the vehicle. It occurred to both hidden observers that this hauler was unexpected. A guard walked over to the vehicle as it drew up after passing through the compound gates. Clearly annoyed and lashing out his surprise with a slice of anger he railed at the driver, who dropped down from the cabin and casually and shot the man through the head, then executed his gate partner similarly.

In that instant the cargo canopy was shredded by weapons fire from within, cutting down anyone caught about the cave entrance. Hidden within the second trailer, a fully armoured assault platoon leapt out, quickly charging into the cave firing another fusillade. The attackers disappeared down into the dark recesses accompanied flashes, shouts and weapons firing.

The two ensconced observers stunned at the carnage across the valley, lay quiet for several moments. Distant gunfire, crackling and popping, an explosion finally caused them to react,

“I’ve never seen that uniform before” mumbled Jenö.

Kaero was already shuffling away, “We’re calling this one in now!” his voice terse.

The two shimmied backward down the slope, covering the ground as quickly as they dared. All the while explosions, screams and gunfire echoed about the mountains. Someone else had decided to eradicate the Rebels here and their efficacy was deeply disturbing.

Holding his aim a fraction longer, Marshall let the man take a good look inside the ruined fuselage, then fired. Two shots, in the chest and shoulder, spun the rebel away and into the savage edge of the opening. In one movement the lone crash survivor pulled a stun grenade and dove across the open hole, tossing the metal orb outward while landing atop the dead man. Damian braced against the sonic detonation as shouts of surprise erupted outside, cut short by a blast of pressure and noise.

Another figure staggered forward through the dust; Damian fired again, three shots, pitching the disorientated man backwards to reveal another. The man spied him, hurriedly aiming an automatic rifle, Damian fired first. The remaining rebels opened fire, systematically shredding what was left of the ruined aircraft.

Their firepower was checked by a fusillade of pulsing snaps, unlike anything Marshall had heard before. Men shouted in alarm, a sickening detonation occurred, followed by the buckling of tortured metal. Abruptly the violence ended and Damian realised he was still alive, largely unharmed. Pushing aside pieces of the aircraft that had fallen atop of him, he chanced a quick look at the surrounds. Dropping down to check the carbine, he replaced the clip.

Rising up, he slowly edged out, weapon at the ready. Smartly checking the flanks while approaching the dead. Eventually he stood over the first man he had not been responsible for. The rebel was cut in half, flesh savaged and charred. So immediate had death struck, it left the man wide eyed and mouth agape.

Damian cursed, looking up from the disturbingly ruined man, onto the shredded vehicles beyond. One had been flipped over crushing any occupants aboard, the other looked like it had been attacked with armour piercing hot pokers, a residual glow still visible.

Sensing something behind, Damian spun about and dropped to the ground, sighting the carbine from a prone position toward a line of low scrubland trees nearby. His chest lanced with pain at the quick motion,

“Show yourself!” he grimaced through a wave of pain induced nausea.

Then his head injury seemed chose now to add to his ailments, his vision blurring when something moved toward him.

“Halt!” he readjusted his aim.

The area of distortion stopped. Increasing in clarity until six humanoid forms in highly advanced yet familiar battle armour appeared.

The central figure hailed him, “Greetings, please remain calm.” the voice lacked any tonality.

In the same moment, the group lowered their multi-barrelled cannons in unison. Within the swept helm each wore, embedded sensor clusters furtively eyed Damian and the macabre scene. Lowering his carbine, Damian leaned back against the wreckage, nodding thanks to his rescuers.

Observing the human relax, the tau fanned out quietly to secure the area while Damian looked back at the savaged jet. Garmin had often said it seemed Karapesh guided the Marshall Family,

pushing them onward and at times even burying them here. Alone in the ruin with only aliens for solace, Damian recalled all the work his family had wrought in these lands through war and peace over generations. Now as the last of the line, orphaned by the decades of hate that embattled Karapesh, he felt that his late friend was right, this land had decided to push him into the fray despite his every effort to heal it.

The PDA flew across the hold of the VTOL, ushered by a sharp curse,

“Stupid arrogant bast–“

“What happened!?” questioned the attaché in surprise at her superior.

The captain had been on a heated call for sure, but the outburst was unexpected. Despite the odd glance, the surrounding honour guard remained remarkably calm despite being seated nearby.

“Devro has assassinated Damian Marshall” the man spat, head bowed between his arms as he seemingly sought to tear a beam from the interior cabin.

“That was his gift?” she made the connection but remained confused.

“Pilot!” the enraged captain barked, loosing his grip on the beam, he calmed himself, “bring us around, back to the Devro mansion, be quick about it!”

“Sir!”

Moving closer to within personal earshot within the confined fuselage, the attaché spoke quietly.

“What’s going on Peitre?”

The captain’s involvement with the Mission was one of the greatest coups her work had achieved. He knew all the Rebel leadership and possessed an extensive knowledge of Capital positions about Karapesh, through years of supporting the insurgency. It had allowed the Mission to set up in areas where discovery was unlikely then strengthen ties with the Rebellion as a front for their operations. His ‘death’ in the field was easy to stage once they were ready for him to cross over, it further helped that his personal beliefs aligned with the Mission’s goals perfectly.

“The Marshall’s are one of the key Rebuilder families since the Rising,” he began once his ire had subsided, “they’ve been looking out for the people here through education and civic construction while the Devro and his late father focussed solely on industrial reconstruction.”

Pietre settled into the nearby seat webbing,

“The adoration the Marshall’s received is deserved certainly, but they made many enemies. I thought, well we all thought, we could play one power base off the other. But all we did was give Adam Devro and his Ego an opportunity to take a shot” he added a pistol hand action.

“This Damian Marshall, he is that well liked?”

“You have no idea, they may as well have assassinated the Regional Minister. That kid is a humanitarian hero, just like his parents before him. This will bring a heavy Capital presence down on Karapesh in a matter of days,” he glanced at the ruined

PDA nearby, “Mission found out about the assassination this morning, through our own operatives in the Rebellion and they agree with my summation. We’re ending our association with the Rebels effective immediately, the fight will be coming to us now, we had best prepare”

“About time” she ratified, settling back against the webbing herself.

“I didn’t think I would live to see my chance this soon..” he looked at the young woman with a more introspective gaze, “overthrow these alien sympathising fools and serve the forefathers in returning my world to His Light”

“Yes in His Name” she supported.

CHAPTER FIVE

Motioning for the human to raise an arm, the alien medic eased a slick black film across Damian's upper torso. The region prickled slightly, warming as the film hardened. Watching with curiosity, Damian allowed the tau to work the film further until the alien seemed satisfied with the application. Rearing his large armoured mass upright, the pseudo-medic stepped away from the tray of the upright transport the patient was perched upon.

"Thanks.." Damian complimented, testing the patch with a few arm movements and torso twists, exotic painkillers already dulling any discomfort.

This seemed to satisfy the tau further; who gave a quick hail with a free armoured hand,

"You are welcome" the standard monotone voice they all used replied.

Touching a patch across his forehead experimentally, Damian found it had set similarly. He saw the team leader approach,

"I need to check my people" Damian said.

Turning from surveying the wreckage, the leader regarded the human directly. The response, a full arm indication east. Damian looked about himself, then pointed northwest,

"My people, I have to check on them"

This time, a very definite, East. Indicated with an encased rotary cannon.

"You will follow me" the leader responded.

"Okay, okay" Damian acquiesced, hands out placating the leader.

Strong willed, as Damian could be, the tau warriors were here to evacuate him, not become a personal bodyguard. He would have to come back with Capital support as soon as possible.

Ulo watched the shirtless gue'la shuffle off the transport cargo tray, glad the medical film had succeeded; they could move on unhindered.

“Eyto, you have point”

The impromptu medic, still fussing one handed with his open medical vendor panel, acknowledged with an icon wink.

“Standard escort, security spread, I’m with the gue'la” Ulo readied his la'rua for departure.

Several more confirmation icons flickered across his vision while he watched the HVC slip on a tattered shirt. Collecting a carbine next, the gue'la checked it with experience, giving a not too subtle stare toward Ulo; upset but compliant. There was no need to translate; the fate of the commune to the northwest was clearly on the mind of this gue'la. Regardless, they were in no condition to wander about hostile territory further; reaching the evacuation point was the primary goal.

“Proceed” Ulo ordered internally to his shas'la.

Ushering the gue'la ahead, Ulo picked up the remains of the recovered energy weapon on passing. From a suspicion of how truly civilian this gue'la was and an exotic weapon, the shas'ui resisted a myriad of questions already trying to distract him from the task at hand.

In the wake of a brief exchange with the Ambassador, Elan'Jhin left the room with a curt nod to the both his superior and Lyal,

"It is done" the Ambassador confirmed for his guest, whom had been waiting for the news within the Ambassadors office.

"Marshall?" Lyal queried.

"Injured but making his way on foot with our recovery team, he appears to be the only survivor" the Ambassador rose up, "we will evacuate him to our operations base south of Capital"

"Unfortunate if there were others, however it is good news" Lyal commented getting up himself, his legs slightly cramped from the tense morning.

He supped the last of a recently provided brew, setting the cup down. A lot had been going on in the past hour but at least one surprise component of the machine that bore down on his conscience had been removed.

"I am going to debrief my people, then compile a packet for yours" he added, shaking the Ambassadors' proffered hand.

"Excellent, I will instruct the same of the Shas'el" he indicated the doorway with a polite guiding wave, "speak soon Mister Ollesan"

"Ambassador" Lyal replied with finality and a nod.

Exiting the Embassy quickly, Lyal walked with PDA in hand.

"Yes, I mean all of it," he spoke to the device, glancing at the duty officer as he passed through the security gate, "they knew before us and in fact he was about to brief me this morning"

“How convenient” replied his office administrator, her tone still sceptical.

“Look Jaida, they’re just as upset as us. Someone is infiltrating the rebellion, and with advanced weapons. The fact that both of us spotted the same mistake the rebels made in not concealing those munitions means two things. For one, they’re actively interested in the ongoing dispute in Karapesh, enough to visit the region and take holiday photos. Then second, they’re polite enough not to do something about it without bringing it to our attention.”

“Alright,” she conceded with one of her soft exasperated sighs, “what’s our next move?”

“Get a good team together, a lot more happened that we need to go over”

“Okay, done,” she paused, “how long will you be?”

“I would say fifteen, but...” he trailed off in thought while considering the scene now confronting him.

The arranged collection spot in Memorial Park now had an additional limousine, accompanied by two armoured security trucks blocking opposite ends of the internal park laneway. Several heavily armed men set up a cordon about the government vehicles, one watching his approach.

“I might be a bit longer” he finished.

“Trouble?”

“Of a kind, it’s the Prime Minister”

Lyal slipped the PDA away, flicked his ID at the security, then kept walking straight over to the Government limousine.

“Sir?” he queried, bending down level to a rear window that lowered on his arrival.

“Lyal, get in” the Prime Minister ordered with a casual manner.

The Intelligence officer long knew there was nothing relaxing about this man.

“Certainly” he replied opening the door, slipping into the plush interior, to find the reek of leather almost overpowering. Inside the two regarded each other a moment, the sounds of curious commuters and park life filling the void for a time.

“Lyal, what the hell is going on?” the seasoned grey haired politician questioned him with vibrant brown eyes that easily swayed the female vote or be used to pin the loudest critic to a wall during debate.

“So far–” Lyal began but was cut short.

“First advanced weapons in the hands of the Karapeshi extremists,” the politician leaned across the interior, “and now my generals are saying someone is culling the rebels as we speak?”

Lyal was annoyed at being cut off but the last piece of news drowned his ire in cold water. Something big was going on and if today could be written as a menu, it looked like they were nibbling on the entree whilst unknown table guests were ready to review the victor’s dessert cart.

“Sir, I believe our aerial photos of the weapons were a fluke given our constant surveillance, whoever is behind it has gone to great lengths for them not to be seen. Our friends here in the Park are of a similar mind”

“Yes, and..” the prime minister encouraged.

“The rebels have been bolder this season judging by their usual activities and the increased attacks on the farming

communities. I believe these can be traced to opportunistic raiders mostly, the rest are scare tactics on the locals to keep them from sensitive rebel locations, but our latest losses are most likely connected to them being emboldened by unknown benefactors. Up until then, the status quo could easily be considered the same as last year, but they made a mistake this morning”

“Oh?”

“They attempted to assassinate Damian Marshall”

It’s not often you get to surprise a person of such power, but Lyal was a fortunate man. Through several terms during the Rebuilder era, he had seen it all before while rising through the Intelligence community and knew just how to capitalise on it.

“Thankfully the tau have rescued him just now on my authority” he dropped the volatile fact like a cherry on top.

That got an eyebrow raise,

“How did they react so fast?”

“They have covert missions in the area, trying to figure out the same problems as us”

“Military operations in Karapesh!?” the prime minister was incredulous.

“Frankly sir, do you think we can argue with them over it? They are just keeping an eye out for trouble and as I discovered this morning, they were willing to tell us about it. In fact, their covert operations saved one of our largest supporters”

Poetry. A borderline diplomatic bomb, covered with a rational explanation while the man in charge gathered his composure.

The current administration still owed a lot to the Marshall Foundation whom had constructed free of strings, many of the

civic promises the administration had made this term when fact was, Capital government really couldn't afford any. Sugary truths always made sour facts taste better.

"So they're willing to help our investigation?" an obvious follow on question came from a man trying to get a handle on what he was being told.

"Yes, in fact I am assembling my team to create a exploratory package, then later this evening compare notes as it were" let alone research up on the information he had just learned.

"Good, good.. so then who is attacking the rebels?"

"That is a question I do not have a definitive answer for" he eyed the leader a moment gauging his reaction.

"Okay Ollesan," the prime minister accepted, "keep me appraised, I don't like being startled in the morning by my generals" he admitted with some casual exaggeration.

"Certainly sir, I had best be going" Lyal made to open the door, "Sir..?" he paused before leaving.

"Yes?"

"Don't make a habit of following your Director of Intelligence, its poor form"

He shut the door on the return look and strode through the security cordon to his own vehicle at a pace. Smug arrogant prick, he thought, last thing this still young united government needed was a leadership making half baked decisions from incomplete reports. It was how we all got into this mess in the first place years ago.

Karapesh was where the Rising had started, but the war was so long and brutal, few remembered where it really began. After victory important decisions had been made on incomplete information that had led to the most deserving being left behind. Nowadays aid was pouring in from nations across the globe, guilty consciences made aware who ultimately was responsible for their freedom. But it was too late, for everyone it seemed, because whoever supported the growth of this new disaffected faction had not only twisted that prideful sense of injustice the Karapeshi possessed, but suddenly decided today the Rebellion's usefulness was at an end.

Lyal sat deliberating this, while being driven back to his office, idly watching Capital folk go about their day. Yes, he decided, whoever had brought low the very people this world owed its freedom will be reminded of the history they trespassed upon.

—

"They've broken into the main shafts, we can't hold them off sir!"

Vaguely detached as he considered the events playing out, Adam Devro listened to the rising panic in the base commander's voice,

"That's terrible Commander, wait a moment,' he feigned, "they've arrived here also! We've been betrayed!"

"Bast—" a firefight broke out near the commander, "We're going to evacuate to the rally point... I hope you make it Devro!" encroaching weapons fire causing the rebel to shout.

Adam played on, "I'm outnumbered commander, my men and I shall hold them here for as long as we can!"

“A true leader of our cause, good luck to you!”

“And to –“ Adam switched off the receiver for dramatic effect.

Speaking to the only other person in his office, he looked for some feedback half-heartedly,

“How do you think that went?”

“I found it, very believable sir” critiqued the Master at Arms. An immensely built officer, Kade Emmers was the dark skinned envy of any recruiting poster. With shaven head and piercing grey eyes, he stood nearby in full combat armour and fatigues. An intimidating sight who possessed the cunning and skill equal to the visage.

But Adam Devro wasn't looking toward the officer anymore; he was deep in thought, replaying all the moves that had brought him here so far unsullied. He knew the relationship with these Imperialists would sour soon enough, just... not so quickly. However, removing Marshall among all this buffoonery was a pleasure he had to admit, and it had clearly tested the patience of the Rebellion's benefactors. Whilst these people lacked a sense of humour, at least they made a great job at cleaning up loose ends.

“Orders?” Kade enquired, feeling the energy of impending action that seemed to surround Adam Devro at these times.

“Yes,” Adam smirked with an index finger upon his lips, the other hand drumming a solo tattoo on the armrest. He rocked back in the study chair, swivelling to regard the warrior before him,

“Prepare the guard, I suspect with little doubt, we will shortly have guests again”

“Standard gear or full gear, Sir?” the query was accompanied by a single raised eyebrow on the latter.

“Oh its too late in the dance to play coy now Kade, lets show a bit of leg no?”

“Of course sir” the wolfish grin could not have been wider.

—

Approaching rapidly in the distance, as bushland whipped underneath their low level approach, the Devro Mansion and surrounds rose up from between familiar ridge lines. Despite the man who owned it, the residence was one of the few untouched pre-Rising structures left in the world and Captain Peitre had to admit to himself, it was a pity they were going to level it.

“Landing in ten” announced the pilot, bringing the VTOL in lower.

Waving to his squad, Peitre joined them in readying their rifles and checking their body armour with a determination set about their features. Then just as quickly the loadmaster shouted for disembarkation as the VTOL dragged the rear ramp across a manicured lawn.

“Go go go..”

Drawing their high-powered sidearms, both the captain and his attaché dashed out across the ruined turf behind the assault line, the raiders sprinting through the gardens toward the terrace stairway ahead.

Almost instantly the raid came under energy weapon fire. It seared through garden plants, armour and flesh alike. Peitre mouthed several curses as he dove behind a garden statue and blindly returned fire. His aide was down, left crawling behind an expertly nurtured hedge line, trying her best to stay alive. The raiders spread out, returning fire, two more of their number barely getting a shot off in anger. The few who made it to cover hunkered down and weathered the lethal storm.

“Cease fire! Cease Fire!” bellowed someone in authority above the gardens.

After a smoke and seared flesh scented silence, Adam Devro calmly greeted his returned guests, “Please, stand up and drop your weapons”

The manor Lord looked quite the military type in ornate personal body armour,

“I assure you, we can keep this up all day” Adam added. Peitre growled behind his cover, arrogant ass, the raid was not finished yet. Looking to the skies he signalled for support.

Adam spied the VTOL come about, quickly lining up for an attack run that would devastate the sundeck, his pool and with it, a majority of the house guards; not to mention himself if left unchecked.

“Rid us of that please Kade..” he commented over his shoulder, as if requesting an unsightly ornament be removed.

“Sir!” the man spun about, glaring at a row of heavy weapon specialists, “Engage that bastard flyer!”

Four crewed las-cannons, braced along the terrace balustrade, lanced out, beams spearing the flyer. Amidst all the impacts onboard munitions were struck, immolating the craft mid-air. Adam watched the shattered flyer scatter about the outer lawns with some distaste; it would take months for the vegetation to recover.

“As I was saying” he resumed once the rain of ruined metal subsided.

Slowly, the captain who had so readily threatened him stepped out. His remaining soldiers stood also, dropping their assorted equipment as they did.

“Ah good” Adam remarked, he made a slight hand signal and they were killed to a man.

When the fusillade ended, Devro looked for the woman who had not joined her colleagues, he smiled slightly on seeing her still crawling away. Signalling a general advance down into the gardens, a platoon of household guard spread out like a bow wave before him, checking on the fallen.

Finally he caught up to her; nursing a leg wound behind a row of hedges. She glared back while several lasgun muzzles encircled her,

“I guess you will execute me now?” she answered finally, full of venom.

“No no, I wounded you on purpose” Adam looked down at her, admiring his marksmanship, “You are far too useful to me alive, besides,” he pulled his ornate laspistol out and shot a nearby raider through the back of the helmet, the annoying

whimpering ceased, "you deserved it, the lower garden is ruined" he casually trained the weapon on her.

She spat in his direction, but fell back in pain as her leg wound protested.

"By His Name you will regret this!" she hexed him.

"Oh please..," he glanced at the dead Imperialists about the scorched vegetation, "from them I could believe such vehemence, but you? You my dear are not even remotely associated with the Imperium"

She went quiet then, but not from succumbing to her wound.

"I was amazed your people thought there would be no one about to remember the days before the Rising, to know when one met a true Imperial. But judging by the uniforms and weapons you supplied these poor deluded fools, I've come to the conclusion, you never have"

"And I suppose you are?"

"Me?" he laughed with a measure of distaste, "hardly, my grandfather was making steel to stab into their guts long before I was born."

Adam lowered himself till they were face to face,

"But make no mistake," his gaze caused a chill to pass through her, "If you decide not to cooperate," he pointed with his pistol at a nearby corpse, "you'll be treated as one of them."

CHAPTER SIX

Walking through the entrance, Lyal made an investigative glance about the room as he put his satchel down, the door automatically sealing behind. At the centre of the was a low half circle platform nicknamed the Stage, with a large billboard sized display behind it still warming up. Two elevated workstation tiers expanded out in concentric rows, humming with media equipment. Each device introduced by Tau redevelopment initiatives to restart the technology sector in recent years. He made a beeline for the administrator in charge, while the gathered team continued preparations.

“Jaida, hi..” he gave the woman a quick hug in greeting. Through sharply fashioned lenses, her eyes regarded his dishevelled state.

Lyal kept moving ignoring her amused smile, “So, who have we got onboard this afternoon?”

She quickly introduced Meirin, the audio specialist and his database profiler Hanell, the two waved politely. Then turned to a young woman who was still unpacking some data cards,

“This is Asra, she’s our contact from Karapesh; we pulled her out only two days ago”

The young brunette gave a nod to the Director, her dark eyes flitting between the senior members then resumed organising her station.

“Good, good.” Lyal nodded, “glad we got this rolling so fast”

Quickly he stepped onto the stage, everyone stopping as Lyal turned about with a pensive look,

“You are some of the first to hear this, hence the secure room. But an attempt was made on Damian Marshall’s life and we think it is connected with a massacre of his Family’s humanitarian interests in Karapesh late last night Capital time. Our friends from the Park have rescued him thankfully, which was understandably fortunate”

The director didn’t care to comment further on how interesting that morning fiasco really was. Meanwhile everyone reacted in varying degrees, most notable was Asra, who looked away as Lyal continued,

“Additionally and possibly linked, a large scale coup has begun between the Rebels and an unknown faction operating in Karapesh, this is possibly tied to a recent surge in attacks on our Militia units near the foothills of southern Karapesh, losses have been high”

The agenda shaping before them was fairly obvious,

“I think we’re all clear that someone is making a bold move and doing it fast. It has been calculated, taken time to prepare and they got the drop on the Rebels in a manner we haven’t for the last few years,” Lyal fished out the hardcopy images from earlier that day, “these are all we have to go on that something is not as it seems in the Rebel camps”

He passed the images over to Jaida, who quickly slid them through a scanner to populate the Stage screen while Lyal continued.

“This has a timeline, and therefore a trail of relationships since probably the first emergence of the Rebel faction. So, I

want files put into the Stage database covering all we have on sympathisers and detractors, additionally everything we have on the Families all the way back to the Rising. They're powerful enough to sponsor big initiatives, and think long term," he flicked a look toward his second, "Jaida has organised open information channels to our Militia friends and the agency database, so be about it"

Stepping down, Lyal made a direct line for the refreshment bar and a much-needed herbal tea, Jaida intercepted him on his way over,

"That's quite a start"

He grimaced slightly,

"I'm afraid Jaida, the race is hours old"

Ollesan's investigative sessions were the stuff of legend within the Intelligence community. Each of the team was a little nervous, if not pensive about the afternoon that lay ahead, his revelations left them with no doubt as to why. On the huge display, snippets and links across decades of field reports and investigations appeared as the team scoured their research. Lyal reviewed imagery, text information and a few sound clips that caught his attention, otherwise left his people to their work. Passing into a second hour, the busy chamber was interrupted by a Militia courier, who entered through the security screen outside,

"Director, hard copy communiqué for you" the man smartly handed it to Lyal, interrupting the Director's conversation with Jaida atop the Stage.

Nodding his thanks, Lyal signed off for it. With the courier gone, he slipped out the letter and reviewed the text.

“Recon by Militia command has just filed their report, we’re part of the first to know”

Everyone paused for a moment.

“At seventeen hundred local time, the Karapeshi Rebellion has been rendered ineffective. All key bases are under unknown control. Current estimates are eighty five percent loss of personnel, negligible materiel losses and it goes on..”

Lyal let that sink in then spoke up,

“Thoughts?” he ventured.

“Most effective takeover I’ve ever heard of,” Jaida answered checking her chrono, she mouthed a curse, “they took less than eight hours”

He nodded, “It also means the Rebellion was very intimate with these people, they trusted this group and they paid for it in full, within one day. We’re well behind whatever schedule they’re keeping”

Lyal turned about, looking at what had been populating the large display, viewing the information over his second cup of brew. Highlighted trends winked softly.

“Okay, advance from the Rising, through the war to now” Nearly a hundred years began to filter by; names, places and organised structures faded and died out. The Rising war had been devastating; preliminary strikes crippled power grids, battle had demolished industrial bases and finally, the brightest began to die out and with them much of the technology to wage war. By this period both sides would have been using swords and bows within a couple of years. The information on some skipped out, as archives were lost to the fighting. It was sketchy information

at first, but at least it would get better, they didn't call it the post war Rebuilder era for nothing.

Lyal studied the fluctuating lists, leaning back on the first row of benches.

“Advance through to the Arrival” he continued undeterred. Quickly Tau names and related events appeared, within three years of their overt support, the Imperials were wiped out. Displayed in such a bleak timescale, a lot of associations appeared solid but dissolved in moments. Nations and people benefited, others did not.

“Okay, hold the general information, advance all those who held high positions through the Epilogue and into the Rebuilder era”

Hanell nodded behind Ollesan, a few keystrokes and the Stage began monitoring a more concise search of linked information and catchwords.

“Running it now sir”

The information flowed across the display, thick and fast.

“Highlight the Karapesh list and any other regional notes” Lyal could see it; a pattern was forming among the Families that survived the Rising. Admittedly what was going on in Karapesh required power and resources, maybe not involving any one Family, but sure as anything, power players bump into each other and someone was going to give them the break they need.

“It's definitely tied into the Families..” he murmured.

“Sir?” Jaida questioned.

“The Families..” he spoke up, “there, there and there” he crossed the Stage and stabbed the display with forceful

indications; the abused fluid underneath radiated outward in rings at each point across the touch-film.

He was impressed, taking this tour of recent history. Everyone could see some had died out, where others kept going through military venture or support for the Rising in other forms. Even a few had crossed over to the Imperials, which understandably ended badly. Ultimately, only five well-known Families remained to make a difference well into the Rebuilder era.

“Cumenre, Devro, Kullen, Marshall, Merton..” Lyal read aloud, “they’re the only originals to have survived from before the Rising with any manner of influence, if someone is stirring the pot, one of them likely knows the chef”

Knowing the Families that survived was not new information, but with an entire time line trailing each, they could begin scanning known associations they had formed throughout the years of the war and since. Most had been heavily militaristic in their involvement towards the latter stages, but one Family had been involved from the beginning. Two key points in the known history of the Rising, when everything was at stake, they had stepped up. The day the Imperial Guard landed, units under this Family’s control had captured missile bases and brought low the orbiting transports and their tenders in a devastating surprise strike. Years later, when the Tau arrived the same group had brokered the first treaties. Each instance, it was the Marshall family.

Ollesan had grown up around the stories of great deeds, but it was based on generals and captains, only now did he make the

connections. In each endeavour a Marshall was the driving force of the spear tip.

“They don’t sit about do they” Jaida half-joked, reviewing the records.

Hanell quietly muttered something quite profound, “Or self promote much”

Suddenly becoming the focus of Ollesan and the team, the young man realised he had to explain himself,

“I know each Family member who has done something significant but half of the Marshall story I never really knew till just now. Even then I needed the access we have today”

Lyal nodded quietly. The Marshalls were quiet achievers, and they definitely would have quiet enemies.

Everyone became tense as the Director kept reading the display. He physically went down the list of associations, new businesses, national interests and global interests. There was only a pair of naturalised players in Karapesh, each a giant power base in it’s own right, Lyal swiped the other Families off screen. They showed no stake in undermining the Karapeshi houses.

“Hanell, run this as a filter” Lyal stepped back, “link all business ventures for both the Marshall and Devro families before, during and since the Rising, listed for industrial, humanitarian and military purposes. Retain any that have associations with known Rebel sympathisers within their homelands on the same timescale among their own networks” Quietly he began eyeing the information as it appeared. Soon enough the one revealing fact he was hoping for appeared.

“I’ll be damned...” muttered Lyal.

The Marshall Family Estate, Karapesh.

Twenty-four years ago. The First Rebel Insurgency, post Rising.

“Now! Downstairs!” shouted a voice borne to authority, one hand thrusting open a panic room access way, the other clutching an assassin’s rifle, “do not stop, proceed through the southern tunnel until everyone is in the main chamber, then wait for further orders”

Loran Marshall looked to the leader of the escort team who was protectively clutching a wide-eyed toddler, his son, Damian. The young officer nodded and slipped through the exit without question, pistol in hand, covered by a team of bodyguards. Abruptly the power died, women wailed and others forced down their own panic. Servants and guests were ushered forwards, house guards urging them on.

An officer of the house came up next to Loran,

“Sir, the gatehouse has been overrun, they’re inside the grounds”

Leaving the doorway ajar for one of the escorts to take, Loran looked squarely upon his Master at Arms.

“No one and I mean no one, steps a foot inside this house”

“Sir.” the man turned about, issuing orders like a machine. Checking his acquired weapon, Loran scanned the remains of the dining hall. Several of his men were laid out, the heavy weapons the rebels brought, cutting them down the moment they had formed up to cover the escape. These attackers were organised

and came prepared, Loran thought. It reeked of something carefully calculated.

Suddenly an alarmed shout preceded a cacophony of weapons fire. Before he could ascertain the direction it had come from within the house, a heavily armoured figure confronted him. Loran shot the man through the faceplate, tracing a full burst across two more men before they even realised they had stumbled upon the escapees.

Checking over the bodies he exchanged his empty weapon for a loaded heavy calibre automatic the closest attacker carried. Ripping off the man's body armour, Loran began fitting it about his chest while several guards charged through the breached door to counter further intrusion. Another firefight started from a room in the same direction but he ignored the exchange, quickly rummaging over the bodies, seeking clues but finding none. One thing was for sure; they were definitely not the ragtag, rebel extremists the village folk had been whispering about.

"Garmin!" Loran shouted when he spotted a trusted face move past seeking out the wicked.

"Sar!" gruffed the unshaven young man as he turned about with shotgun at the ready.

The man was slightly drawn, a well-dragged cigarette hanging treacherously off his lower lip. Garmin was billeted in the barracks; he had to have fought his way to the main house from across the Estate.

"Get my son from his escort, tell them to continue on and then, get him out of here. Take my personal jet."

"..sir?"

“Just do it man!” Loran roared, losing his controlled demeanour.

The pilot almost tripped over backwards from the verbal outburst. Apologetic, Loran grabbed Garmin’s shoulder.

“Sorry, just– just hurry Garmin” the look in a father’s eyes caused Garmin to feel real fear for the first time since the gates were demolished. Spitting the cigarette onto one of the dead intruders, Garmin slung the shotgun over his shoulder and steeled himself,

“It would be my honour” he accepted, holding Loran’s gaze for a moment.

The pilot charged through the panic room entrance seeking out the boy’s bodyguard. Loran quickly closed it and shoved the usual art piece back in place.

Looking into the dining hall one last time, Loran’s gaze fell upon his wife. A determined, strong willed woman, she had shouted down her attackers but succeeded only in being shot in front of everyone. Her face now marred by dust and debris, a limp form dressed in an evening gown he so loved. Maybe it was her last defiant act, giving him that precious chance to react. Years of training and campaigning with his late father had honed an ability to do what was needed when given but a moment. Using a dinner knife at first, then finally one of their assailant’s own weapons, he had shot the remaining assassins as they aimed to murder his son. It was the only time he was proud to have killed. Now with clarity of purpose, he set about ensuring no more would get the chance.

Slipping through the ruins of the lower floor, he met up with his Master at Arms, the man sat back against a window ledge dying, several marks across his chest armour. Still, he manned his heavy rifle and fired shots into the grounds outside.

“Give me your radio Ferra”

“Sir? You should be gone”

He stopped questioning when he saw the return glance. Loran lifted the device to speak,

“Guard, this is Loran Marshall. Clear the channel”

He waited a moment amidst the ongoing combat chatter.

“I am ordering you to fight your way out where you can, they only want me and my family. But, I ask for volunteers, to hold the house so that the women, children and our guests may escape. Then I intend to set about reminding these bastards just who they decided to try and assassinate tonight”

He let go the transmit tab for a moment when he saw movement he recognised. He watched Garmin escape across the household wall that led to the hangars, along the far side of the family estate. That man had chosen his moment well, skulking past several advancing shadows without being seen. But Loran’s gaze was no longer on Garmin but the young boy he carried, the child’s eyes rounded with fright, mouth masked by the pilot’s broad hand.

A figure touched Loran’s shoulder in the darkness, thankfully Loran recognised Kellar before he struck him. The man was a veteran in the Family regiment like every one of the House Guard, each having fought alongside Loran and his father, through the Epilogue period of skirmishes against roaming bands of Imperial Guard after the Rising. On seeing the familiar

silhouettes and shadowed faces about him, he realised none of the House Guard had sought their own fate.

“Sir, this is everyone. We’re ready” Kellar stated when Loran’s eyes returned to his.

—

The fighting about the estate had lulled for a time, sporadic sniper fire being traded between the assault line and occupants in the main household of the Estate; it seemed resistance elsewhere either vanished or had been overrun. Suddenly, heralded by a brace of grenades exploding in their midst, the attackers found themselves faced with an under strength platoon assault that sallied out from the ruin of the main household. Caught out of position, first one transport perished from acquired friendly charges, then anti-armour grenades took out the next. The supporting assault teams were shot or run through with dress swords among the gardens, dying between hedge groves or cut down atop crushed flowerbeds. The counter attacking madmen struggled with several opponents at a time, their experience proving over a lack in numbers with no quarter given. It was manic, vicious, unadulterated butchery.

When he came to rest, lightly wounded and near spent, Loran could see only a few of those familiar faces left. They were in as much the same or worse condition than he, but their eyes looked forward. Kellar, who had kept at his side despite it all, was breathing heavily. He evinced a bloodied grin, then like Loran, looked at the entrance where a knot of insurgents had fallen back too, rallying about the ruined gatehouse.

“Think they’ll come to their senses and quit Sir?” the veteran asked, coughing abruptly.

“Unfortunately for us, I’m still alive” Loran replied sardonically as he stole another look over the low wall. Kellar chuckled, fumbling his increasingly heavy rifle. An engine whined into earshot and soon all of them saw another combat transport arrive through the ruined entrance, followed by two more.

“May I have that...?” Loran asked for the man’s rifle, as if requesting a grocery item. Kellar offered up the weapon, his greying face flashing a knowing glance, the underslung launcher still pregnant with the last anti-armour grenade.

Loran sighted the lead machine, just as his guards opened fire. The shot was true and in the ensuing explosion, whilst the new arrivals reeled from the shock of it, he charged. Without hesitation, Loran’s men followed him one last time.

—

Kicking open the side door into the hangar, Garmin found two figures waiting for him. Turning about they couldn’t believe their luck upon seeing a stoutly built punk appear with Loran Marshall’s kid held close,

“I see you brought us the brat” sneered one. Garmin didn’t take note who spoke, for in one fluid motion he revealed his shotgun from behind his back, braced his arm against the doorframe, and fired. Set to full automatic, at such close range, there was little reason to aim.

“Brought this as well” he finally replied with a dark grin. Twisting the weapon back behind his shoulder, he stepped over the shattered bodies.

The Family’s sleek white jet awaited just ahead. Punching the hangar door button on his way past, a sudden explosion near the gatehouse urged Garmin on. Shoving Damian into the co-seat roughly, he went back through the cabin and manually pulled up the hatchway then returned. Just as the gunfire his efforts had been accompanied by petered out, the turbines ignited. He knew he had been given all the time he would get.

—

Pain faded from Loran, his punctured body draining over the ground of the family estate. He wished for just enough energy to despise the man standing over him, even a brief flush of rage at this betrayal.

“We were going to rebuild Karapesh..together” Loran reminded the man, with disappointment instead.

“I must admit to a flaw Loran, I enjoy adulation too much” the figure drew an ornate laspistol from his holster, “and you my friend and your whole overly long-lived family have taken exceedingly more than you are due of late. I’m here to even my chances” he finished by levelling the muzzle at Loran’s head.

A sudden rolling thunder occurred overhead, two small points of blue light burned bright through the night sky, then sharply angled for northern stars. The leader gripped his pistol even tighter,

“You bloody heroic son of a..” he began to abuse his defeated rival, but on looking down to the man at his feet, Loran Marshall had died. His still face a picture of effort rewarded.

Seeing their leader denied, the gathered strike team avoided him for several moments. But the lack of action began to impede a timetable already grossly affected by their appalling losses.

“Sir...?” pressed one particularly brave soul.

“Yes?” the Lord replied, quite distant.

“Do we continue?”

“Yes, ..proceed” he replied, as if the fun had faded from a favoured play thing, “replace the bodies then burn it all, finish it” he waved the man away.

“Yes sir”

The remaining men moved out across the shattered grounds to perform their allotted tasks. Come morning, the newly formed Karapesh Rebellion would be found responsible and the Devro family would have tragically suffered also.

High above, Garmin rubbed his eyes again. Never one to cry, he felt embarrassed even now as he tried to avoid eye contact with the little kid in the co-seat. He had seen Damian’s father sprawled out in the firelight of the gateway, ringed by assassins, a solitary figure standing over him in victory. There was only one other man he knew who could command such power and show such a personal interest in Loran Marshall’s death. He would find a way to repay that killer, and ultimately protect Damian as Loran had asked.

Turning from such thoughts he spied the boy quietly looking at dark maroon patches on his clothes.

“Hey kid,” Garmin smiled, rubbing his moustache and eyes dry, “your dad ever teach you to fly this thing?” he cleared his tight throat.

“..no” came a quiet, frankly disinterested reply.

“Yarh?.. that’s too bad..” he pointed out the energy meters and other power gauges a big central screen monitored, “for a start this ain’t one of your display games”

The kid looked over solemnly.

“Grab those controls” he guided a pair of small hands with his, onto the set before the child, “now wiggle it a little. Like that, yarh, perfect” he bumped the kid with a grin.

Damian, gripped the controls more firmly.

Interest soon lost out to exhaustion and the boy fell asleep while Garmin flew on. The aide’s thoughts quickly filled with calculated revenge as he flew the orphan toward the newly established Capital city.

Situation Room “The Stage”

Present Day.

Everyone was still quiet, waiting for an explanation from Lyal after his declaration,

“They both know exactly the same people” Jaida spoke up for him, “throughout it all, they’re like partners”

It glared back stark and uncaring. The Marshall Regiments fought; the Devro Family provided them with the equipment. The

Karapesh people had been led by two Families, both of the same country.

“Actually no, the time the Devro complex threw in their lot with the Rising at the beginning, sure at first it looks like the next day, but in fact it’s almost a year later” Lyal waved to Hanell,

“Let any other Rising sympathiser Families appear in this time period”

None. Only one remained and then suddenly, as if the rest had sat back and watched the outcome, at least a dozen Families rallied to the flag of the Marshall Regiments. Only then, did the Devro Family back their fellow countrymen.

“So the Marshall’s took the fight to the Imperials at the very beginning, alone?” Jaida ventured.

“Yup..” confirmed Hanell, rapping a lightpen atop his display frame,

“That leaves two massively powerful Families in the same backyard,” Jaida was a little perplexed, “I thought Damian Marshall was from Capital?”

“No, pure blood Karapeshi” Asra spoke up suddenly, “His parents and cousins were all killed in the first major attack by the newly formed Karapesh Rebellion twenty odd years ago. It’s there just off center on the Stage” she pointed out her digitised notes.

“The rebels cited betrayal by the Marshall Family, whom grew wealthy during the Rebuilder period whilst Karapesh floundered despite their promises. Frankly, anyone could have said anything about half century ago. We barely have any records as it is in our profession from that period”

“Asra,” Ollesan had a thought, “how soon did the extremists attack again after the Marshall Estate got ransacked?”

“Over the next four months, a few times, mostly scare mongering. I’m guessing they waited on Capital’s response”

“It doesn’t make sense” Lyal considered, “we’re talking about a group of extremists who brought down an Estate filled with hardened Rising and Epilogue period soldiers; in later skirmishes the Capital Militia only encountered lightly trained guerrilla fighters. If they were ready they would have just kept on going. Why wait for your enemy to seek you out?”

“Okay, what was the Devro Family involved in during all this?” Jaida put forward

“Not much, Benir Devro died in an aviation accident between Karapesh and Bargenda about five months after the Marshall Estate was torched, he was survived by one son, Adam Devro”

Lyal’s suspicions were irked while he listened to Asra.

“Focus on the last thirty years, known associations and dealings between the Devro and Marshall Families and rebel sympathisers, even hard liners”

Hanell quickly obliged, reorganising everyone’s submissions. Lyal watched as a tapestry spun before his eyes.

Loran Marshall was divesting himself of every activist, but pulling in ties with groups focussed on stability and reconstruction. He laid the groundwork that his son, Damian, now headed. All the while Benir Devro had strengthened his ties. But on his death the contacts understandably went quiet. Recently his own son, Adam had been associated with a few sympathisers.

“Something going on there” grumbled Lyal, “Benir just smacks of doing the dirty on Loran”

“People said so, but his own estate was attacked, he lost a lot of people too.” mentioned Asra.

“Same night?” Lyal enquired.

Asra surprised herself when she reviewed the workstation before her,

“Actually, yes”

Lyal was onto something.

“When did the Capital troops declare they had quelled the rebels?”

“About a year later”

“Jaida, put in the military combat records for that year, with reference the first engagements with the rebels”

The woman fussed through some files then stabbed a small memory chit into her display. The information filled the main screen then whittled away. No one spoke; they almost expected the result. Jaida looked up,

“Within weeks of Benir’s death, most patrols report nothing”

Hanell swore to himself.

“All the activists went to ground also,” added Asra, reading her files with new eyes.

Lyal wandered about, bowed in thought,

“Benir was kick starting a revolution he knew would be crushed by Capital. Being the surviving power in the region he would recoup all the infrastructure projects and just like that, he’s the sole power broker in the region”

It was an unsettling hypothesis.

“So then how does he stage the attack?” Hanell tested the theory.

“Possibly take casualties from killing Loran, and add them as ‘Rebels’ about his lawn. I just don’t think he expected such high casualties. The Marshall’s fought hard.”

Jaida followed the train of thought,

“So he looks like he takes a pasting by the Rebels, exonerating him of connections to the growing uprising”.

“Until a friend of the late Loran Marshall dealt with Benir privately I’m guessing,” Hanell interjected, “a lot of suspicious conjecture here in the articles” he pursed his lips and raised his eyebrows.

“End result, the Devro Family does not become Lords of Karapesh after a near century playing counterpoint to the Marshalls” Jaida concluded.

Ollesan’s eyes lit up.

“History is repeating itself. The two Families are reset, Loran has left his legacy for Damian, Benir just the family industrial empire. Its cyclic.”

Lyal turned directly to Hanell, “Keep what we have up then populate with the past five years activity in Karapesh” his eyes barely contained the energy of a new idea.

“Damian has virtually the same contacts as his father. Adam fills Dad’s shoes, and is faced with the same dilemma, but now the Marshall name is rebounded from tragedy while his fortunes wallow, a father’s plans unfulfilled after a mere accident”

“You don’t think” Jaida tilted her head, scepticism dying before the screen Lyal was filling.

“I do.. Hanell?”

“Adam Devro was definitely rebuilding those old ties. His agents and even he himself have been spotted and linked to known activists in the recent Karapeshi Rebel movement. Nothing alarming at his level of power, but when presented with this compounded background, it reflects poorly on even honest motives”

“The timing is out” Meirin added, breaking his silence, “the Rebels re-emerge on their own, right up until the attack on the Marshall redevelopment centre now”

Lyal considered this,

“Devro is doing what his family has always done, to follow the strong runner, be it the Rebels we see, or their backers. They needed Benir the first time, it’s someone else now”

Meirin looked puzzled, “You’re saying Devro might be the one to know the people who just wiped out the rebels he was in bed with?”

“I think he started backing the rebels to finish his father’s work after seeing their strength grow without his input. Surely that deep in he has discovered where their resurgence is really coming from”

“If not, he’s just found out. They may have tried to liquidate him, being a Rebel sympathiser”

Everyone went quiet on Jaida’s comment.

Those gathered realised something was going down and even big players were not immune, yet nobody had filled in the blank.

“Who’s been missing for the last thirty odd years?” Lyal questioned his team, shaking them out of their miasma.

“Imperialists” he finally added.

“You can’t be serious..” Jaida scoffed.

“Hanell, show Imperial sympathisers and cells we know of to date, but run them until they drop off the grid from the end of the war to present”

Sporadically at first, arrests here and disbanded groups there, from Epilogue through to more recent times. The Imperialist movement faded. But it did so with an odd regularity in the last fifteen years.

Asra considered the implications as the photos and information dried up,

“They’ve all gone underground whilst we’ve been chasing the rebels and saving the derelict states, it hasn’t been organic through pressure, it’s almost a progression”

“Exactly” Lyal moved across the Stage, “they’re in Karapesh, they’ve sponsored the revival of the Rebels in one of the most perverse unions you can imagine. Those deluded fools, they may even think the Imperialist ideal is better than being supposedly persecuted by the wealthy states”

Lyal couldn’t believe hardline Karapeshi fighters would get involved with Imperialists, but the profile fitted.

“They’re organised, they’re motivated and they have the old doctrines and knowledge from the Imperial Guard soldiers who went underground all those years ago,” Lyal turned on his heel, surveying a gob smacked team of top rate analysts, “with that kind of background, you can be organised enough to wipe out your friends in under eight hours. Waiting carefully until the Families you despise are at their weakest. I’d take a shot myself in the process of revealing the real intention for the Rebellion”

Hanell whistled low, “Sweet mother and they just captured all the vehicles and equipment the rebels possess”

Lyal followed on Hanell's point, "Which includes the advanced weapons we and the tau spotted; gifts that enticed the Rebellion to sign on their new benefactors, are really the Imperialists feathering their nests beforehand"

Everyone went very quiet. Mierin sat at the back murmuring implications that just didn't pan out,

"Hang on," he announced, "so they dredged up technology from the Rising, but really, even with that advantage the Capital Militia would win out on sheer numbers alone, why remove the Rebel cover?"

"Unless.." Lyal began to play with fire, "they're being supported from off world, and they know reinforcement is coming. They cleaned house to ensure there would be no disruptive turncoats once the real plan came into action, an Imperial invasion."

—

The petite kor'vesa messenger chirped once, then twice. Suitably disturbed Aun Jaun'Qoul waved for it to put the call through.

"Ambassador" spoke that unmistakable gue'la bass tone.

"Ahh Mister Ollesan, I was hoping you would call for our meeting this evening" the tau rocked back into his chair, the pleasing aura of twilight in the park playing through his office window.

"That's going to have to be postponed"

"Unfortunate, you sound tense Lyal" he became personal for a moment.

Lyal let out a slight huff, bemused, “You could say that,” the gue’la paused, “Damian Marshall, has he arrived?”

“He will be fine, our medical staff discharged him a short while ago, on his request we are delivering him to the Marshall residence in northern Capital”

Lyal uttered one of those harsh curse words the gue’la seemed to use in moments of annoyance.

“Was I remiss in releasing him?”

“No no..” the gue’la was summing up a thought, “Jaun, we believe the Imperials are back, he could be in danger still, even in Capital”

“How so, this is a revelation to me?” he shrilled, sitting upright in his chair.

“We just ran a full gamut of our history, thanks to your recent data gifts. We learned a lot we would have otherwise never looked at without purposeful context. This problem we’re having is an old one. Rivalry and some seriously overgrown egos, that have provided a situation for the Imperials to exploit” he paused, “In essence, the first Karapesh attacks which killed the Marshalls can be linked to some underhand dealings by Benir Devro”

“Seriously? This is a mighty accusation” the Ambassador trailed off, reflecting briefly on the mass funeral, the shocked media reports and a very young, very scared Damian. Jaun’Qoul missed Loran and Erin greatly. He had to admit, he never did like Benir Devro’s company.

“There’s more” Lyal didn’t let up.

“Please, continue” the tau encouraged, intent on Lyal’s interpretation of recent history.

“The rebels faded under Capital presence then, resurging only a decade ago, but not backed by the Devro Family, Adam

Devro has merely joined the ride this time but I don't think he realises who his partners really are yet. In filling that gap, we've found out that every major Imperialist cell we know has just dropped off the grid in the last two decades. Right about the time both of our most renowned and powerful Families get laid low by Benir's greed. They're out for revenge Jaun'Qoul, emboldening the present Rebellion and I believe they may have gotten in touch with friends to take over once established"

"Quite plausible, our polar station can focus very well on one area of the globe, but we have many blind spots when we do. Any manner of communication traffic or extra planetary insurgency can get by if sent from the more remote regions of this planet"

"I was hoping you wouldn't say that" Lyal's voiced panned out, classically intoned with gue'la disappointment.

Por'la Elyo politely came into the Aun's office, a small chit in her hand, clearly important. She nodded smoothly and approached the Ambassador, offering the small object over. The Aun took it and made a thanking gesture to the departing aide.

"Lyal, we have been pondering the same thoughts about extra planetary insurgency since we spied the weapon cache"

"And..?"

"Well, we had not thought of such a clandestine operation on the part of a defeated underground movement for one matter, or such a dark history in the region"

The tau paused considering what Lyal Ollesan was saying to him,

"Your theory is sound for this Imperialist movement, if you believe it as a threat, I believe it too. The possibility of them

rebuilding advanced weapons from your Rising war period is also possible or..”

“Off world support?” Lyal offered.

“Very plausible also, as I said we simply do not have the resources to monitor all regions of your world. Even energy weapon signatures on the ground need a well deployed observational array”

Jaun’Qoul eyed the chit that he still held in his fingers, resting it on the centre of his desk after a moment’s inspection. The information within illuminated beneath the polished surface of the desk while Lyal spoke further,

“Then we’re agreed on how serious this could be? We should present this to the United Government first thing in the morning, I’ll notify the Master of the Hall immediately”

Jaun’Qoul’s almond eyes pinched slightly as he read Elan’Jhin’s findings about the recovered weapon,

“Yes that would be wise Lyal Ollesan, I look forward to this meeting tomorrow,” the tau answered distantly.

“Good, see you at Parliament, first session, till then Jaun’Qoul”

“Till then Mister Ollesan”

The gue’la disconnected, and the Ambassador began to recline thoughtfully.

Jaun’Qoul had entertained suspicions long before the reconnaissance imagery Lyal had presented. Elan’Jhin’s covert recon missions had spied much that was beyond the means of a localised uprising, even an Imperial backed one. With the recovered rifle, a final piece of evidence the tau needed to discover who was behind the unrest and exactly what must be

done next was settled. He leaned forward and activated a communication line,

“la’Eylo, a secure beam to the Orbital please.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Devro shifted slightly in the plush leather chair, it had been quite an afternoon, and this conversation was becoming even more tiresome. Across from him, the injured Imperialist attaché remained quiet, bound by cuffs and medical bandages. She sat in a similarly ornate chair, still holding her silent course since being removed from the gardens.

“You’re an off-worlder, that much I am sure of. Certain traits, they’re,” he chuckled, “well, they are not local by any manner”

She looked aside in distaste.

“Definitely not a true blood Imperial either” Adam rounded as he made himself comfortable, taking a sip of the herbal brew newly refreshed by one of the staff.

Sighing he looked at her again, “You enjoy your work?” he smiled slowly, “I’m sure it wasn’t all that hard at times” She looked at him darkly, but the fire was fading, a determination replacing it.

“What could you possibly hope to learn from me now?” she finally questioned back, “you seem to be convinced of your own assumptions well enough”

“Confirmation” he paused, “such as your name” The supposed Imperialist officer sat silent for a time, then relented,

“Renaë”

“Much better, Elsa just didn’t work for me” Adam theatrically waved it away.

“Renaë,” he tested the noun, “do you work for the Tau?”

Her stare answered in the negative.

“You don’t much care about the Karapeshi Rebels do you?” she fired back to offset him.

“Anarchistic folk are great for making noise to hide what is really happening; something your Imperialist friends needed at the time. This afternoon, those same Imperialists helped me liquidate my ties to the Rebellion. I am on one level grateful, despite their attempt to kill me. But their low budget portrayal of Imperial tact has left me, well frankly unconvinced they’re legitimate. So I ask, whom are you really working for?”

He leaned back into his chair, mug in hand while awaiting her reply. He did not wait long,

“The Mission is all I know, we were never going to negotiate, you were just another Rebel element to cleanse come the time”

“Badly informed notion don’t you think?” he looked at her with a sudden darkness, “I doubt they will be lenient on the person who misrepresented just how much of a threat I am to their cause if crossed.”

She went quiet in thought.

“Renae,” he leaned in, “be smart, tell me who I am really dealing with, my hospitality lasts only so long”

After a pause, she looked up, “I am just hired help. An operative like myself recruited me off world.”

The medical team monitoring her signs deliberated a moment then spoke to Adam via his earpiece. She was definitely speaking the truth. He indicated for her to continue,

“I have no idea who sponsors the Mission. I interact with the local Rebels, support the Imperialist movement along the

guidelines I've been provided, give them some focus and motivation. I'm pretty convinced this is an effort by the Imperium, not well funded, but still, you're the local expert" she added the last part with a slight sneer.

Adam regarded his guest for a moment, ignoring the petty inflection. He had learned many of her tell-signs, and none had surfaced during that candid moment, she was being remarkably truthful.

"You should rest," he announced after a brief pause. She flinched from her guards, glared at Adam, finally relenting as they picked her up bodily.

Watching the woman being wheeled out in a medical stroller, Devro remained ill at ease. He had always been suspicious of that woman, and the Imperialists, but now? It's one thing to hire whatever was available off world to run a covert operation with a para-military faction to develop a local uprising; but why would an Imperial operation use unaligned mercenaries to support fanatical devotees when genuine operatives would be the obvious choice? Why run it at odds to recognisable Imperial trademarks? Surely that would cause consternation when actual Imperial support arrived. He remained in his study, brooding darkly as he rolled the mug between his hands in thought.

"Please, pull over just here.." Damian requested, already shifting himself closer to the automatic door.

“Certainly sir” from above the route selection console within the plush cabin, a holo-projected human avatar nodded acknowledgment.

The tau had provided the secure dignitary hovercar to see him home, but as it eased closer to the pavement allowing Damian to alight, he was glad to be underway on foot finally. Despite the best medical care on this world, he needed to walk out the aches of his recent experiences. The tau could do nothing for genuine fatigue or the dull headache from a newly healed head injury. Ignoring these as best he could, Marshall forced a good pace, paying no mind to the transport hovering a few feet behind in escort.

Damian had long thought about Garmin and the fate of Janice and her staff during the flight back to Capital. His alien rescuers had been little comfort, yet he was grateful for the silence onboard. It left him to recover in his own way from the shock of losing Garmin so suddenly. Much further back in his life he had learned to deal with the concept of sudden brutal loss. It allowed him a grace to calculate events and particularly now, to focus on finding those responsible.

Moving off the walkway, he wandered across the road to a corner restaurant. The patrons sitting about external tables idly regarded the tau contractor uniform he wore, then got a start when they realised whom was wearing it; but with polite aplomb they affected feigned ignorance. The hover vehicle meanwhile, eased up to the curb nearby and waited with the patience of a machine. The vehicle drew little attention by comparison; tau

civilian transports were a common sight along the main roads around the government district.

Damian ordered a small herbal infusion from a youthful waitress and sat at a window table, keeping an eye on the hovercar. Relishing the clarity of distracting his mind with simple matters such as ordering a drink, he began to watch a video screen in the bar area for a time. News articles, imaging clips of Political types debating the violence erupting in the south, experts offering armchair opinions. No news of his near demise, or the fate of his people as yet. That would be a sensitive political matter in of itself and he expected the report to be groomed and handled, possibly delivered late tomorrow. The Foundation's own mechanisations would speak of the attacks soon enough, news he grimly foresaw would be tragic.

Accompanied by a curt smile, the ordered drink deftly appeared before him, he thumbed the proffered credit pad and the waitress was gone. Damian realised with a glance, everyone in here knew who he was, but thankfully they were polite enough to leave him be. He deeply appreciated this tonight while he drew a sample of the brew.

Abruptly a harried man barrelled in, the model of distracted purpose. The new arrival quickly scanned the food kiosk, clearly in a rush. Suddenly Damian realised why his curiosity was piqued, the man was familiar; it was Lyal Ollesan.

Turning to regard the person staring at him, Lyal evinced a poorly disguised wave of surprise on seeing Damian Marshall.

The desire for takeaway smashed aside by naked opportunism, he moved through the restaurant; spearing in to speak with the Lord. The younger man raised his hand with a sign to be left alone, but it was too late.

“Marshall!” the older man’s eyes were still filled with awe at their chance meeting, “you and I need to talk.”

Damian paused and then twisted his halting hand into an indication to sit on the other side of the booth.

“No, in my offices,” Lyal exuded a sudden aura of mild paranoia, “with regard recent events”

They had met only a few times at political gatherings, but never so informally let alone for such reasons. Damian eyed the IDC agent; clearly Fate wasn’t finished with him today. Buying some time to think, he sipped the brew again.

“Alright.” he agreed.

Aun Jaun’Qoul eyed the transmitted scene with concern,

“That was, ..unexpected” he commented in his native tongue.

“I had suggested a full escort, your Excellency, until he had been delivered to his personal residence in the north” reminded the Shas’el, his almond eyes fixed on the two gue’la leaving the food vendor.

“Whilst we are bound by protocols, I agree, it would have been preferable in hindsight” sighed the Ambassador, “I was hoping Ollesan wouldn’t have such early access to Marshall. Chance reveals another path for us.”

“Would you like the recon al’vesa to monitor their discussion within the gue’la Intelligence offices?”

“Please, and are the other individuals still there?”

“Yes, they are reviewing everything they have on the Devro Family line” with a wave toward duplicated data scrolling over nearby screens.

Elan’Jhin indicated a group of Fio analysts deliberating over conclusions based on the diligent findings of the gue’la investigation. The locals could make native connections they had little notion of and the last few hours, it had been very enlightening about this world’s history. One of several reasons the tau had instigated such clandestine technology tapping within the very equipment they had gifted to the gue’la.

Seeing an indication to approach, a por’la stepped forward from a polite distance away,

“My Aun?”

“Finalise our selected information for tomorrow’s meeting with Capital government”

“Immediately” she replied, leaving quickly.

Jaun’Qoul turned to his second, “Shas’el, I would like to know what they discuss further and inform me in the morning”

“Of course my Aun, but of our new neighbours?” Elan Jhin queried politely, the MAC rifle nearby.

“An appropriate response has been requested, for now Shas’el ensure your Cadre is at full readiness for an evacuation”

“Are we to engage?”

“No, the gue’la stand little chance even with our help if we make a move now” the Aun paced across the operations centre which secretly lay beneath the Diplomatic residence, “best we remain seemingly unaware of their activities. With the orbital sensor array being reconfigured, we will soon know enough to act when the time comes.”

The tau officer nodded in agreement; even now several dozen remote satellites were filtering across orbit to set up a monitoring net. A move Jaun'Qoul was certain he could gain retroactive agreement from parliament tomorrow.

“For now we let our visitors manoeuvre this Imperialist screen of theirs about, then catch them with their hand in the burrow,” quoting a long held idiom, the Ambassador stopped at the secure lift, “only then, if they refuse to leave on being revealed, do we provide them with an imperative”

Elan'Jhin bowed before the retiring Aun, “It would be my pleasure to provide such encouragement.”

Jaun'Qoul regarded the warrior silently then gave a deft nod,

“Of that Shas'el, I have no doubt”.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kade adjusted the transmission slate in his hand as if willing it to present different information, something more.. positive. The communication clerk who stood before him remained nervous since arriving,

“This is full and complete?” the Master at Arms queried with deliberate elocution.

“Yes.” the younger man replied, eager to be elsewhere.

“Good, I’ll deliver it personally”

Kade turned about whilst the relieved clerk departed. Gathering his duty cap, he adjusted the fit snugly, rapping on the internal doorway into the secure study of his Lord.

“Enter.” Adam replied from inside.

It was a detached comment, the younger man buried in maps and intelligence surviving Rebel spies had given to him about the Imperialist cleansing operations.

“Yes Kade?” Adam looked up as his second came to a stop nearby, “What is it?”

“Sir.. “

“Marshall?” Devro stopped, drawing up his posture, expectantly. Curiously Kade had stopped halfway across the length of the study.

“The Marshall operation has failed, Sir.”

On hearing this, Adam’s contained anger at being denied seemed to bend the shadows in the study. Kade felt a need to back up, but held his ground and composure.

“Those fu...” Adam fought to withhold an outburst, putting both hands on the map table, he questioned afresh without looking at Kade, “..how?”

“Sir, it appears a tau recovery team intercepted our agents and rescued Marshall. I suspect he is already back in Capital” Devro had crossed to his armchair during the reply, one hand rubbing his forehead methodically.

“Why this delay? You organised a review patrol yesterday no?”

“Capital units have been peppered about the Marshall Foundation communities since the renewed attacks, our team only just delivered the tight band transmission after nearly running into a Capital force investigating the redevelopment massacre”

Devro cursed,

“I ordered those rebel idiots to scare off the villagers, not shoot the entire Marshall Foundation staff, a few would have sufficed to lure him down” he sat incredulous at the over zealous results, which still failed in their primary objective.

Kade continued, “Unfortunately I can only assume all those original parties had returned to their respective Op bases where I do not expect to hear anything, considering recent events. So, for now we have none of the rifles either,” the man at arms paused then added, “this tau intervention was entirely unexpected, if they found evidence of the new Imperialist weapons, they’re going to encourage Capital to move in sooner”

“A certainty now, I expected them here soon enough if Marshall had died,” Devro considered.

There was no direct threat in failing to assassinate his main rival in Karapesh, but failing and having the man find out it was him? That was another problem entirely. The Imperialists had cleaned house a lot quicker than expected admittedly, so in reality, Capital will be here regardless. He wasn't entirely sure, but trying to assassinate Marshall probably isn't the only excuse the Imperialists had for annihilating the rebels and him, perhaps their schedule was changing. Something was amiss, something he could exploit perhaps?

Kade felt that ever-familiar vibe occur; he met his lord's eyes when Devro looked up,

“Double the roster, forget our ruse and equip everyone from the armoury”

“Sir.”

“And Kade,” Devro held the attention of the departing officer, “wake up our contacts in Capital, lets see if we can support our friends from the North when they arrive. A show of solidarity at these times often smoothes over rumours.”

Whilst Lyal summarised the team's findings, their guest grew quiet, questions turning to nods then soon the young Lord simply listened.

“You are right in that assumption Ollesan,” Damian finally spoke up as Lyal finished covering more recent connections, “but my father was renewing some ties to try and turn even the extremists back to redevelopment, something I would take up when I was of age. However he and my mother were killed soon

after.” Damian had no need to comment how similar his fate might have been.

Asra watched Lyal nodding slightly in thought,

“You do realise Lord Marshall” she interjected.

“Damian please”

“Damian,” she corrected then continued, “a lot of this is circumstantial presently, but with the power available to Benir, most other explanations wash out”

The young Lord sat quietly, eyes fixed on the Stage and the large screen behind it. He traced the digital tree of business and familial ancestry realising the same implications as Lyal Ollesan and his people.

“Are you going to act on this?” he inquired, his eyes on Ollesan.

“Right now, it’s a theory, which is eerily standing up to all of our cross checking tonight. In a few hours,” Lyal glanced at his chrono, slumping slightly on realising the time, “I have to present this to the central committee and the Prime Minister”

“With the Ambassador?”

“Yes, the tau have had similar findings that support our more recent discoveries about an Imperialist movement supporting the Rebels”

Damian made a terse hum, slowly nodding,

“And you feel these Imperials are upping their timetable?”

“Yes”

“If you garner the right reaction in parliament,” Damian’s eyes flicked from the screen to Lyal’s, “how long till we see more Capital Militia in Karapesh?”

“Week at best,” Ollesan then paused, “this could start an all out war in your homeland”

“I know.” Damian agreed with a measure of one presented with an inevitable truth.

“Your line is a deep part of Karapesh Damian, it would be remiss of me not to appraise you as a significant member of their regional governance, but I cannot actually offer you direct evidential help, officially”

The insinuation was not lost on anyone, Lyal continued to speak certain all were agreed in what he was going to reveal,

“You are looking at five key bases from which the Imperialist tenants now operate. Capital assets still monitor them and so far they’re quiet despite today’s events. Other smaller operation bases were simply eradicated. No one has entered or departed from these larger sites. Personally, I suspect these two bases would comprise our first strike missions,”

Ollesan pointed out locations across cartography images on the Stage wall, familiar mountain country to Damian,

“We are bound to find something interesting there. Our tau friends either haven’t sneaked a look yet or won’t admit to it. Either way, I do believe they would help us when we make a move. Even if it is liable to fire up all the Imperialists, once that sort of action confirms direct tau intervention.”

Damian listened intently, then leaned forward,

“So, Karapesh is being left on it’s own, a possible Imperial invasion beachhead being forced in mere days and you have to convince Parliament of the need for urgent action whilst the people of Karapesh remain unaware?”

“Essentially”.

The team darted looks between Lyal and the Family Lord, Asra seemed particularly cautious.

“I should remind you, your businesses and people are under direct threat since the assassination attempt. You had best remain low for now and await our effort”

The warning seemed futile; Lyal’s advice appeared to wash over the younger man.

Damian leaned back, a sense of fatalism emanating from him,
“Ollesan, do you have a secure line?”

—

“Morning your Excellency” Por’la Eylo chimed a local phrase when the Aun entered his Embassy office.

Jaun’Qoul affected a slow acknowledging nod while rounding his desk,

“The report?” he added when he sat down.

“Awaiting you in the transport when you are ready to depart”

“Good, thank you” he dipped his head with another sign of gratitude, turning his gaze upon the Shas’el who had sat quietly awaiting the Aun’s arrival.

Eylo politely exited the room, sealing the door behind her.

Elan’Jhin sat atop his preferred stool in the shadows of the office, one hand on his leg the other gripping the hilt of his dirk, ever the warrior even in repose. He showed no outward sign of being awake nearly two rotaa.

“My Aun..” he began with a deep nod, “The sensor net is operational, consequently we have fixed locations of every unit under this Imperialist faction’s command, unfortunately our

scans are not sophisticated enough to penetrate the mountain complexes at this time”

“Understandable”

“Yes, but we have noted significant and regular energy spikes within one of four main bases. We are unsure the cause but the output has unsettled the Fio research team, we haven’t encountered this before when dealing with them. I will keep you apprised”

The Aun nodded slowly, “what of Damian Marshall?”

“As requested we continued our surveillance and observed Lyal Ollesan speaking of his investigation findings for a full dec to Marshall, nothing we were not aware of ourselves. I took the liberty of recalling the Embassy transport not long after Damian Marshall had entered the offices of Lyal Ollesan, in an effort to remove any overt suggestion of monitoring with it’s presence during this time.”

Returning his gaze to observing the life in the parklands, Jaun’Qoul continued to listen,

“Damian Marshall then made two calls from the intelligence room, both of which we intercepted, he departed aboard an armoured transport that arrived from his Family’s security agency shortly after. It returned to the offices of the agency. During this time I recovered the drone as dawn was near, but we successfully tagged that particular transport, should, in the unlikely event it continues to be used as Marshall’s transport, we can track it“

“These calls, what of them?” the Aun encouraged casually, watching gue’la younglings run through the park towards an education transport.

“The first was connected with the Marshall security agency, requesting a lockdown and tightening of details surrounding all of the Marshall Foundation’s interests including his collection from the meeting with Ollesan. We traced several more calls from the agency to personal friends and subsidiary organisations. We suspect some high profile members of the Foundation have been secured. We can investigate these secondary calls further if you wish my Aun.”

Jaun’Qoul nodded with some satisfaction at the news,

“Prudent, I had expected as much from Damian, no need to follow up the secondary contacts for now, what of the other call?”

“The second connected to a public call booth, oddly short, we suspect that it may be a code attached to a more private security effort” the Shas’el still seemed perturbed by it.

“The message?”

“First in, last out” the tau warrior gave a show of bemusement.

The Aun however, did not. Jaun’Qoul’s visage matched every park memorial statue, stern faced and determined,

“Assemble your Stealth teams, use additional forces at your discretion, but seek out Damian Marshall”

“My Aun? But our protoc–”

“Find him, then contain him. Now.” standing as he spoke, Jaun’Qoul physically projected a need to be obeyed.

CHAPTER NINE

Tidying the cabled mess with a curse, the installation specialist looked up from his work inside Capital's newest financial building when he heard a familiar sound. Walking across the construction site he gathered up his tweeting PDA and connected the call. There was nothing at first then he went cold from the remark a voice made before hanging up. Resolve quickly set in, his face regaining a composure he had not worn in years. Working the screen menu he looked up the first entry then dialled. A barely awakened voice greeted his call; he repeated what he had heard. The sudden commotion on the other end signalled his first task was done. Minutes later the site manager performed the usual morning rounds and came across the abandoned tools of his senior security system consultant. The man was gone, as was his utility vehicle.

Pacing neatly through some delightful young women in the morning commuter bustle, the young officer made to smile back at them when he was interrupted by an incoming call. Stepping to one side of the Memorial Park walkway circuit he listened to the connected call on his handheld. His face drained of colour when he heard the short statement. Quickly making a similarly short call after he regained his composure, he returned the way he had come. Later that morning, an expectant Militia captain exploded before the man's unit, riled up by the lack of any explanation his closest associates could offer for the officer's disappearance.

Snoozing in her bunk after a late sortie, the Militia Air Corps flight leader was awoken by her private PDA. Annoyance began to rise in equal measure to her dread. She flapped her hand about the cabinet beside the bunk, seeking the handheld groggily. The suspected call from a recent break-up proved anything but. In moments she was walking with a determination for the airfield's hangars wearing her full flight gear, after a short comment into her PDA she closed the folding design and slipped it into a fitted pocket.

Around the same time in southern Karapesh Lieutenant Kaern Rales and Sargent Jeno Gullen had started carefully cleaning rifles and organising field gear inside their unit tent. After a successful extraction, solid debrief and subsequent welcome showers, the duo were in good spirits. What they had seen in the mountains did not bode well for Capital Militia in Karapesh and they were aiming to be as prepared as possible.

Both were local inductees, posted to this forward base of operations in Karapesh, a sure sign for the two veterans they were exactly where someone higher up wanted them to be. Kaern's private PDA bleated a ridiculous tone he had put on it recently, to which Jeno gave him that trademark look of disbelief. With a smirk at his friend and trusted junior, Kaern connected the call that changed his jovial demeanour quickly. A minute later Jeno's PDA chimed from under his bunk.

Later that day their absence was noted, despite assigned liberty time. A base alert would reveal little else, causing suspicions to build and eventually someone decided it should be flagged for

the IDC's daily memo. Soon enough, random reports became a trickle, then a deluge.

"That is our conclusions yes" Lyal defended against another uninformed jibe at the findings.

It never ceased to amaze Ollesan just how much effort was required to shift the opinion of bureaucrats, despite entrusting him with keeping the administration appraised of what is going on beyond their parliamentary bubble. The Minister for Foreign Relations spoke up, leaning over his recorder heavily,

"What say you Ambassador? Will your people help us again?"

"Of course, should the need arise" the Aun replied eloquently.

"Need? Will you not engage the Imperialist faction with us side by side?"

"I do not believe that is in the terms of our treaty minister" Jaun'Qoul replied again from behind a secondary podium he had delivered his findings alongside Lyal that morning.

Like the modern materials and minimal form that gave style to the podium, the surrounding oval auditorium in the centre of the new World Government complex was just as well designed. A gathering of senior politicians sat in their respective booths, quietly considering the recent analysis they had just heard from the two figures on the central platform.

"Our esteemed friend means Minister," Lyal interjected, "that by our treaty established many years ago, the tau are

bound not to engage in warfare against our kind unless directly threatened”

“Surely this constitutes a threat to all of us?” the Prime Minister responded from his private booth, advisors nearby screening an incessant stream of subtly announced PDA calls.

“That is true, but timing is essential,” the Aun cautioned then paused for effect, “I would dislike for our military to be seen as eager to engage estranged members of your own people”

“But you suggest actual Imperials may be supporting them, Lyal?” the Prime Minister countered by questioning the Intelligence man.

“We have not as yet established this as true, but certainly, someone is supplying them with advanced weapons” Lyal confirmed what he could.

“We are unsure as to whom it is” Jaun’Qoul supported the director, “But I do however have a suggestion, a request if you may”

“Go ahead Ambassador” the Prime Minister offered the floor.

“We have the ability to set up a secure sensor network in orbit of this world, we would like permission to do so”
The request instantly caused open discussion about the auditorium to erupt.

“I thought you couldn’t do that Jaun?” Lyal remarked in aside as the tau awaited a response.

The Ambassador calmly answered his counterpart,

“I did not say we could not do it, we merely lack the resources to maintain it indefinitely, it is a major undertaking and something we do not do lightly”

Lyal nodded, seemingly satisfied.

“Ambassador” the Prime Minister announced despite the murmuring that continued among the gathered council membership, “You may install this network on one condition”

“Certainly, that is?” he looked to the gathered governing body with expectantly.

“Shared intelligence gathered by it”

“Of course, that was my intent” the tau bowed slightly.

“Will this detect any Imperial warships in orbit?”

“Most assuredly so. This is what prompted me to request the network be deployed. Hopefully we will soon discover if there is an interstellar craft operating covertly nearby”

“Good, good. Ollesan please keep us apprised and work closely with the Ambassador’s people”

“Certainly sir” the director acknowledged a rather obvious request.

“Prime Minister?”

Capital’s Militia Commander spoke up, his dress uniform sharp and understated. On seeing he had the Prime Minister’s attention he continued,

“We have assigned several of a our special recon units to observational roles of late, but in light of this analysis I would like to request permission to assemble a response plan to this threat”

“Granted” the Prime Minister nodded with a confident smile.

“If I may,” the Commander panned a stern look across all assembled; “I suggest we send immediate reinforcements to our current bases, naturally performed in a manner which would

mask our true intentions. This should provide us time should we be attacked within the week while my people draw up an effective mobilisation order”

Militia Commander Mica Waylan easily projected authority; he was efficient and didn't suffer fools. His uniform covered a fit body that gave a classic frame to the man. Veteran of the Epilogue period and a dedicated officer, Militia troops respected him greatly. This combined effect always brought into line the hardest of critics who confronted the military advisor's invariably accurate assessments. Again he was successful when the Prime Minister replied,

“See it done Commander, ensure you obtain all the details from the work of Ollesan and his people”

“Sir.” Waylan nodded to the Prime Minister, meeting eyes with Lyal, then took his seat again.

The Prime Minister stood up, satisfied with what had been achieved over the morning,

“I suggest we contact our regional governments in light of these findings, this may require rapid and effective combined efforts in a short space of time. We cannot afford rivalries and verbal roadblocks should this situation in the southern continent become untenable despite the best plans of our joint Militia. Thank you all, and please be about your business with expedience”

He bowed lightly to the Ambassador then made to leave. On seeing this, everyone began to depart their booths around the auditorium.

“That went well” Lyal mentioned as he crossed in front of the tau, dossier in hand.

“Indeed it did, much was achieved”

“You know where to reach me, anything your network finds when it is ready, let me know”

“Of course Ollesan, what ever we find important for you, I will ensure you are the first to know”

Lyal nodded his thanks then moved over toward the Militia Commander, his hand outstretched to the other man in the usual gue’la greeting.

Collecting several dataslates from the podium the Ambassador offered them to a quietly hovering vesa unit. Touching a glowing icon on an ornamental bracelet to alert his escort, the dress guard of four Firewarriors appeared via a side exit. Shas’el Elan’Jhin, the officer resplendent in his finely polished neutral dress armour, stood patiently in the outside circuit corridor of the round auditorium. The tau warrior gave a slow and deliberate nod, to which the Aun replied in kind. As the Ambassador drew closer, Elan’Jhin trotted alongside, his pace quickened to meet the more graceful flow of the taller Ethereal,

“Our network has found him, he is in the far west”

“Good, bring him to me at our southern facility, I will travel there now”

Elan’Jhin winced, “I would do so my Aun but we have discovered, a complication.”

—

Jaida pushed her way through the packed corridor of diplomats and ministers as she sought to find Lyal. In only a couple of hours since the committee meeting had been concluded, the less sensitive information revealed within had spread like wild fire throughout the corridors of power. The reactions to which the Intelligence office administrator presently fought through, searching this wing of the government complex,

“Lyal!” she shouted, seeing the director among a circle of military folk about a projector screen, all reviewing Ollesan’s report in detail.

“Lyal!”

Hearing his name, the director turned about to see Jaida briskly approach, clutching a wad of documents. She looked warily at Commander Waylan and his staff.

“A moment in private if you will”

“Certainly,” Ollesan waved an apology to the gathered officers then moved into an adjacent conference room, partly glad for the distraction from Waylan’s near interrogatory questions.

Closing the double doors behind them, a quick check showed they were alone and Jaida revealed the closely held documents.

"Surely you could have called me?"

"No, this," she patted the pages and slates, "this you had to see for yourself" she handed him everything.

Lyal flipped through the reports, names and faces as Jaida regained her breath, pushing her glasses back into place.

“Who are they?”

“Flagged missing persons” she replied, sitting down at the table in the centre of the room as Lyal spread out the pages, he remained standing whilst reviewing them.

“Certainly a mix, why are they of interest to us? Surely this is a bit soon for even local authorities to be concerned?”

“Check the filing times Lyal, every one of them” she suggested like a sage, ignoring his concerns.

“Today,” he noted aloud then flicked through several quickly “each one, that’s..”

“Forty six” she finished the count for him, “so far”

“So far?”

“Yes, they keep coming in through IDC, a trickle at first but now that we’re onto them, our field offices are channelling everything”

“Any connections?”

“Glad you asked” she smiled slyly then revealed a large portable project screen from under the remains of the pile, “at first we thought the Imperialists were either recalling plants or even just as ominous, assassinating folks they had marked out in some systematic program”

“Neither?”

“Correct, be one of the most ridiculous clandestine kill operations ever seen” she paused, activating the large screen of the device, “so we used what files we had on a sample of these people and filtered them”

The screen filled with a list of professions and names that matched several he had just read.

“Specialists in security, surveillance, heavy machines and even Militia inductees” she read the list aloud to keep the pace up.

“Even from Militia?”

“Yes, and they’re the most numerous and best of the bunch with regard their disappearing acts; naturally the most quickly reported” she pressed a few graphical buttons and revealed a new list, “this, is what they took with them”

Lyal picked up the project screen, as if bringing it closer would provide more insight,

“Seven Versa’s...” he spoke aloud in surprise, those were not small air lifters.

Then he read through a long list of portable hardware,

“They packed to go” he added quite incredulous.

“A flight leader just walked in, several others joining her. They simply geared up and flew off from an airborne logistics-training field outside Capital. Limited security, I doubt anyone questioned what may have looked like an exercise”

“No transponder signals I take it?” Lyal remarked.

“No.”

“And you’re sure this isn’t a Imperialist operation?”

“Yes, we thought about that, but using the Stage we found connections among the military types particularly,” she tapped on the screen to reinforce her next comment, “most have at one time either been sponsored by, or supported through the Marshall Foundation.”

“You’re suggesting the Foundation has been setting up a private force by buying expertise through donations” Lyal questioned the notion.

“Looks like it” she conceded.

“Is Hanell in the room?”

“Yes, everyone is back in, we’ve been watching it develop since late this morning”

Ollesan pulled out his handheld and dialled a secure line connecting to the Stage room directly. When he got a tone, he put it on speaker mode for both of them to hear.

“Hi boss” acknowledged Hanell.

“You’ve been expecting me I take it?”

“We’re hoping to see some more magic sir”

“Well, do this for me” Lyal began with a smirk, “run all the names of past employees the Marshall Family had before the Marshall massacre”

“Right”

A moment passed then Hanell replied, “Nothing sir, that’s a blank sweep.”

Ollesan grimaced as a mental door was slammed in his face.

“Did that include names of the Household Guard?”

“No, they’re volunteers like Capital Militia”

“Check that list” Lyal encouraged.

Hanell could be heard to type fast, a sharp intake of breath followed,

“Almost everyone is related to the Marshall’s Household Guard, over two hundred and fifty at it’s height”

Jaida looked at the small pile of reports,

“This is going to grow.”

Lyal nodded, correcting their earlier assumption,

“Marshall hasn’t bought a force, he’s doing what his family always did. Look after those who looked after him, these people are rallying to him.”

“You mean their loyalty has remained over these years?”

Jaida was astounded.

“They trust in the Marshall Family Jaida, their own families have done so for well over a century, even longer I imagine,” Lyal looked out over the faces on the reports covering the near end of the table, “this is a level of trust and loyalty I don’t think we will ever understand. It’s what binds these people together, maintains the dynasties. He’s ensuring they’re safe, together. It would appear he is going to fly them to a secure location, utilise the Militia folk to protect their hidden enclave”

A short polite cough interrupted Lyal’s oratory of thought,

“Yes?”

Meiren spoke up, “Sir, I’ve been working back through the Guard families and an image of Damian’s grandfather with some early members of the Household Guard standing about their Colours is on the Stage. Part of a title image for a documentary”

“What of it?”

“Well it has reminded me of something Damian Marshall said last night sir”

“To us?”

“No, his last call, the one he mentioned was just a pass phrase for securing people within his Foundation”

“Yes, I remember” Lyal recalled the small comment.

“Well, that phrase is actually the motto of a Marshall Regiment, the elite Karapeshi First,”

Lyal and Jaida felt a chill of realisation run through them.

Meiren continued unaware, “If I recall from our work yesterday, when the Rising started, they took the fight to the Imperials alone.”

CHAPTER TEN

A cool evening breeze wafted through the forest as night shrouded the Estarian Alps, the distant lights of Capital city far on the eastern horizon, began to replace the receding glow of the sun. Any developer would have paid a small fortune for such a vista. Unfortunately for those opportunists, virtually the entire range of the Estarian Alps and surrounding forests were Preservation Land, claimed through an environmental society set up by the Marshall Foundation decades ago.

The region, like many other preserved zones about the world, had bounced back as much as the people since the Rising. Flourishing with flora and fauna; encouraging guided tours, camping and even instigating a resident parks board to ensure it continued to do so. Mighty trees had grown to heights described in times before the Rising. But tonight, their majesty became an obstacle for a VTOL aircraft that was flying fast and low across the treetops.

The sleek minimalist fuselage tapered into a thin tail with finned vectored vents adding a nodule of mass at its tip. A broad dorsal hump supported a pair of winglets just behind the cockpit, each holding VTOL thrusters controlled by exhaust flow vanes. Yawing hard about a low ridgeline, the pilot alternated their angle, diving toward a river below.

Winding across the undulating valley floor, a distorted reflection chased the craft as jet wash shear patterns spread across the

waters surface. Some distance behind, several Versa VTOL airlifters flew in a tight formation, the heavily loaded cargo bearers bumbling along together in pursuit of their nimble cousin ahead. Whilst similarly designed, they followed at a leisurely pace, which suited their more pregnant and robust appearance.

The aircraft they followed abruptly turned sideways, rising from the riverbed into the night sky, tail boom sliding out dramatically. Powerful thrusts rebuilt the acceleration to quickly enforce a new heading. For most it would have been a delightfully aerobatic turn, but to the trained eyes the aircraft bore down upon, it was a rapid reaction high angle engagement run. Despite knowing his friend was inside, it caused Damian a slight restlessness in his gut. He recognised the refitted civilian craft for what it once was; a lethal ground attack Vector fighter, barely exhibiting half it's true potential.

Damian walked over to a strobing beacon, planted out in the forest glade minutes before, with armed bodyguards beside him. Ahead the Vector artfully picked out a landing site, three slender landing props touched down as jet wash buffeted the long grass underneath, settling as the craft powered down.

The men continued their approach while the onyx canopy cycled over to one side. The pilot stood up from the rear seat of the inline pair and removed her wrap-visor, uncovering a smoothly featured face possessed of a caramel complexion. Darkly coloured lips flashed a sly smile as the woman adjusted a tautly drawn back pony-tail.

“Mister Marshall” she said laconically over the cooling thrusters tinkling behind her.

Jumping down the short distance to the soft meadow grass, she turned to face Damian. He couldn’t help but trace an eye over her athletic form so smoothly wrapped by her flighsuit, despite the best efforts of the distorting disruption pattern it bore,

“Miss Rashiede” he smiled with a teasing gleam in his eye.

Spreading out to secure the meeting, Damian’s bodyguards turned their backs politely as he moved in and gave the woman a close hug.

“Hey Kali”

“Hey you” she held him closely, lingering when he had already drawn back.

“Alright flying” he offered with an effete lack of interest, holding her at arms length then recoiling as she backhanded his shoulder.

“Those who can’t, critique” she shot back.

Damian chuckled, watching the airborne convoy begin to arrive. The Versa air lifters touched down about the meadow, handlers emerging from the thick woods in response.

“There’s a meeting within the bunker in an hour, we’ll open the hangar canopy in fifteen once the Versas’ are unloaded” Kali nodded, her professional aura returning. Damian looked back at her before heading on to greet the others,

“Thanks for coming, wasn’t sure how many would heed the call”

Kali watched the arrivals also, quietly impressed,

“Those transports are filled almost beyond their rating, you’re a hard man to deny” she winked, ducking under the tail boom to inspect her Vector before he could reply.

—

Whilst some would call the Marshall’s consummate environmentalists, the preservation society they had created also hid a secret. A secret held close since the Rising, covered over purposely with tonnes of earth and fauna in more recent decades.

In the early, desperate years of the Rising, an officer had led several simultaneous and daring raids into underground Imperial missile complexes around the globe. Through savage close quarter fighting, they fought and died for every room it required to reach the controls. Turning their payloads upon a fleet of descending Imperial dropships that brought troops and war machines to easily crush the Rising. The warheads, paid so dearly for, destroyed them all. Flaming ruins fell like fiery meteors from the night sky, heralding a victory for all to see.

These few hundred men and women, of whom only dozens remained, not only delivered their cause from the brink of defeat, they provided the world’s people with a single, binding miracle. All who saw the mighty Imperial vessels savaged from their lofty perches rose up over the following days. What were once scattered pockets of resistance became a multitude of war zones. The people believed in the Rising, and as they fought and at times died, they did so not with desperation in their eyes but

affirmation in their hearts, this world was theirs, it would be another's no longer.

After those apocalyptic days most had assumed the silos, these underground charnel halls, had been collapsed and sealed over. This was true for all except two. One of which lay in the Estarian Alps, its value realised, the order to destroy it annulled. In more recent times as civil engineers carved road ways to impressive camping grounds in the newly preserved habitat, it had taken comparatively little effort to conceal the complex under tonnes of rubble, earth and even small trees. Decades on, hikers had camped upon an undulating forest floor which in actuality lay atop a massive missile silo battery and command bunker complex. Within hand picked stewards had quietly observed their unwitting trespassers, ensuring the secret remained.

The officer that orchestrated this historic international assault with his most trusted captains was Gideon Marshall, who led the assault on the Estarian complex. Tonight almost all who stood in the main chamber now were the descendants of these men and women. Over two hundred pairs of eyes looked upon Gideon's grandson, and Damian looked back upon the gathered faces of various age and complexion unflinchingly.

He stood on a walkway that crossed over the middle of the main chamber, in what used to be a mess hall for a thousand Imperial Guardsmen. Like everybody else, Damian wore combat fatigues of a pattern suited to their homeland of Karapesh. He began with a conversational tone,

“We are few today, fewer than those in the past, who took control of places such as these. Our blood is part of these walls, our history circulates in the air about us.”

He paused, looking to several of his advisors and most trusted confidantes who stood along a wall nearby, then leaned back from the rail and continued,

“My family chose to hide this place, not only as a refuge for those we care for in times of future strife, but also a reminder of when we fought together, died together. Tonight, we find ourselves in that future, tasked to fight an enemy who has chosen to return”

A murmur drifted through those assembled below, not of dissent but surprise and natural concern, whispered rumours had proven true. Damian stood tall, he had to be resolute, appear the Marshall people expected in moments like this,

“Like myself, you are all sons and daughters of Karapesh, even if you have been born in foreign lands, the blood that fuelled victories flows in your veins still. I ask you too follow me home, return and confront those who would seek to take our world from us again and like those who fought before; we go alone.”

Damian paused, placing upon his upper right arm a circular, embroidered self-adhering badge that his father had worn, and Gideon Marshall before him. The white emblem was stitched across russet hue, an idealised mountain atop a thick baseline across the centre, representing the plains of Karapesh. A single numeral lay overtop, upper portion within the triangle shape, the rest filling the lower half,

“First in!” he shouted,

Everyone copied the action, drawing faded badges handed down since the Rising, applying them into place forcefully.

“Last out!” they roared.

—

High in a corner of the chamber, an al’ma’caor infiltrator drone refocused several optical pick-ups. Adjusting further, the diminutive arachnid form shifted to a superior position by which to record the happenings below. Having observed the gue’la leader talk to the gathered soldiers, it continued to watch as the group dispersed, going about their duties quickly and with a much faster pace than before. With the original mission it had been tasked with recently completed; a survey of the complex that involved working alongside a networked clutch of drones like itself; it had little reason to remain longer. Internal logic engines proposed a return to the drop point. A gestalt decision was made across the clutch and they all began to evacuate for recovery.

Skittering along rapidly without attracting more than cursory attention, it retraced a previously mapped route out of the complex. Travelling across service pipes and ducts, down corridors, through adjoining rooms, behind stacked stores and between walking footfalls; it ran fast upon nano-engineered legs.

Suddenly, the drone happened upon a fellow clutch mate. The two halted, waving leg signals and reviewing escape plans over a hastily created link. The clutch mate decided the route it utilised was obsolete and fell in behind the first. They proceeded

onwards to an old service vent, through which the first drone had gained entrance earlier that evening by plasma cutting a small coin sized slot. Slipping through it, they climbed vertically to the top. Leaping onto the long grass and leaves outside the duo crossed the hill overtop the facility below, to close on their drop point as several others arrived in unison.

Kneeling down within his stealth field, Shas'Ui Kunas'Ka Ulo dipped the round cartridge disc in his spare hand onto the forest floor, all twelve al'ma'caor'vesa hopped onto the lip of it, then curled into their respective connector cusps, like insects eager to hibernate. Standing back up he inserted the canister in a storage recess, then reviewed the newly rendered floorplan as it uploaded across his helmet display.

The facility below his hooves was revealed in intimate detail. He studied the layout with experience, looking for choke points and other such tactical issues as the optically projected floorplan shifted before his vision, following retina movements as he regarded different sections. Satisfied with the completeness of it, Ulo contacted Orbital control,

“Eas'Tau Shas Ar'Tol”

“Ar'Tol” replied the mission officer, this time none other than Shas'el Elan'Jhin, his cadre commander.

“Recon successful, key points marked”

“Proceed with phase two”

“Understood” a mental command disconnected the tight beam link.

Many tor'kan above, a sensor satellite fed high resolution visuals to the Shas'el, his eyes reviewing the operation on a wall display inside the southern operation centre the tau had been allowed near Capital city.

"The la'rua is moving out to finalise the operation my Aun"
Jaun'Qoul nodded slowly, satisfied with the nature of the plan. The sudden complication of a small army about Damian Marshall, was now about to be used against him.

"You may arm the shas'ui and his la'rua Elan'Jhin"

"Understood"

For the second time, within only a few rotaa, Ulo witnessed the master arm icon wink into life. He gave the order and his shas'la spread out to five locations while a sixth member provided security. Nearing his objective, the shas'ui detached a magnetically clamped device from his flank armour. Coming to a halt above a defensive bunker beneath him. The watchful gue'la within had no idea he was there while the dinner plate sized device settled onto the grass-covered hillside.

The stealth warriors retraced their approach to surround the security point,

"Eas'Tau Shas Ar'Tol" Ulo requested, while the la'rua made good time in relocating to a safer distance.

"Ar'Tol" replied Elan'Jhin.

"M'yen Or'Es'Ka is set"

"Your Excellency?" the Shas'el politely deferred final command to the Ethereal.

The tall alien solemnly nodded his assent for the task at hand. Elan'Jhin turned back to the display, deftly signalling a mission

controller nearby. The tau operator reached out and depressed an icon on the touch panel before her.

The five devices laid atop the complex spun on their own axis, small blades flicking out as they automatically buried themselves deeply into the earth. A few moments later four thunderous detonations reverberated throughout the complex, sending the gue'la within stumbling as duty lights flickered out and age old dust was shifted from crevices above them. They were denied the spectacular show afforded to the tau, who looked on from some distance away; huge masses of earth were projected upward, becoming a landslide overtop every bunker targeted, including the hidden exits they protected. The missile hangar doors of the complex remained untouched, the fifth explosive awaited anyone foolhardy enough to exit using the stored aircraft within.

“Situation contained my Aun” commented Elan’Jhin.
The Ambassador solemnly nodded.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Brutally appointed and purposeful in their mass, four frigates maintained guard about two broadly shaped transport ships, to the point of being symbiotic of the larger vessels. Holding their position outside system space, the flotilla quietly awaited the prearranged signal for action.

Shrouded in shadow and starlight, signal lights extinguished, only invisible docking beams kept their hulls aware of each other. Soft tufts of iced propellant ejected periodically to maintain the silent tableau. Expectantly perched like carrion stalkers, observing a floundering creature with the patience of knowing the inevitable, they spied the world far below, quite certain their presence remained undiscovered.

Weeks of waiting paid their due, a tight beam transmission garnering their preparations earlier than expected. All aboard were refreshed with a fierce determination that had ebbed during the lull. Running lights flared into brilliant purpose, revealing armoured plating, weapon batteries and beam cannon. Gargantuan ramming prows of the transporters leered into being as they too were illuminated. Massively armoured for headlong charges into the defences the enemy, they defied any cataclysmic effort to halt their progress.

A single warble of reply at a prearranged time confirmed their arrival. Easily mistaken as a mere stellar murmuring, for expectant listeners it was a clarion call to arms.

Slowly and with the grace of aquatic giants, the transports tipped their bows downward and dove with engines flaring, deeper into system space. The attendant warrior ships uniformly brandished their weapons and girded battle systems for war. Before them a lone tau orbital pirouetted about the northern pole unaware. Soon enough it would spy the warships, but by then it would be too late.

—

Groaning about them, the bunker protested at the abuse it had just endured. Men and women hurriedly strapped on assault armour, primed tri-blasters and prepared as quickly as they could to receive invaders. Fire teams positioned themselves amidst an irregular skirmish line within the mess hall with weapons pointed overtop upturned tables and other hastily erected barricades. Uniformly they aimed upon the only entrance into the assembly room of the bunker.

Damian Marshall among them,

“Elliot?” he queried as a man moved into place next to him.

“If it’s Tau sir, spray and pray,” the burly Master at Arm’s paused readying his own triplex rifle alongside Damian, “hopefully their shield machine wears out before you run out”

Damian eyed the older man, then gave a dry grin,

“Any other nuggets of encouragement?”

“Aye sir” he gave a wiry look back, “whoever they are, they’ve desecrated hallowed ground of the First” sliding back his charge primer he sighted the weapon, “I’m feeling a might spiritual tonight.”

Rightly so, for his own father had been an armsman to Gideon Marshall years before, when the First took this bunker complex.

Nearly all had been disorientated by the initial shockwave, the air fiercely compressed within the complex as they dined in the mess hall. Fortunately for Damian and his personal guard, working in the sealed planning room only moments before, they emerged largely unscathed.

There were no lasting injuries, but for all intents the attack heralded a perfect breaching by stunning all inside. Whoever did it was sneaking into bunker right now, forcing their way in through shattered pillboxes, killing the helpless guards on post and preparing to charge their strongpoint at any moment.

There was no rush, no last stand, only silence. Soon the duty guards stumbled back, exhibiting varying degrees of concussion exposure. Elliot looked to Damian while everyone else started exchanging puzzled glances.

“I thought the idea was to finish us off while we’re still falling over ourselves?” the veteran chuffed.

“Actually, I’ll think you’ll find we’ve lost”

“Sir?”

“There was never going to be an attack, we’ve been sealed in”

Whilst the realisation dawned on the other senior officers, Damian already knew one person or more correctly one alien, who could win this fight without a single casualty, Ambassador Aun’Juan’Qoul.

Heralded by rumblings on the cool savannah breeze, a midnight storm approached the Devro estate. Untended leaves shifted through the ruined gardens, ripples played across the pool surface, a door slammed nearby. Quietly observing the impressions move across the water's surface, Adam sat sipping his drink. Indulging his other senses after practicing a martial sequence along the terrace earlier. Stopping when his thoughts began to disturb him more than the inclement weather.

His eyes wandered over the stone balustrade, toward the mountain ranges far on the southern horizon. Something greater now resided in the caverns there. Lurking with an intent largely unknown. The Rebels had been disposed with and the Imperialists were clearly a mockery of the true Imperium, definitely to be liquidated in due process also. Their faith blinded them to the true reality of their precarious position. This process, of rebels bringing dissent and an Imperialist faction producing irrational fear on a world tortured by a legacy of Imperial rule showed a pace to a game being played that only a few could grasp. Right now, Adam felt he was losing touch at a time when his grip should be firmest.

He drew a long sample from the tumbler, savouring the warmth of the liquor, then placed the glass aside and rose from the deckchair to wander along the terrace. He collected a hand piece from the table as he did so, dialling a secure line to his most valued informant. Waiting through the subsequent secure

connection tones, they were finally interrupted when a the line synched,

“Asra, is he in Capital still?” he walked over any of the usual pleasantries.

“No, Damian is gone,” she answered smartly, “we even received reports the Tau have mobilised over night”

“Any reasons?”

“The First has reformed, Damian knows what your father did”

That sent a chill down Devro’s spine, utterly eroding his calm,

“You are certain?”

“Very. I think the Ambassador is moving to stop him from doing anything rash, like accost you and destabilise Karapesh further”

Adam stood silent for a moment, then raised the handpiece to his ear again,

“Your thoughts?”

“I think he has bigger matters on his mind, but there is going to be a reckoning between the two of you over this”

“There always would be Asra”

“I tried to cover you as best I could, but I just can’t filter out facts about your father Adam, and you have also been implicated in trying to assassinate Damian”

News of failure travels fast he thought to himself with some detachment.

“Look Adam, the monopoly which Marshall has certainly needs to be questioned but I thought you were different to your father. You had this rare conviction that,” she paused, “What you are doing is a mistake. You’re going to end up just like your

Benir, you may already have. You continue down this path I simply cannot help you”

Never one to be lectured too, Adam almost rebuked the preaching with a verbal tirade. However it had been like waking to a cold truth in realising she was saying something he knew already.

Whilst the affair during their tertiary years on campus was brief, she had quickly developed a faith in his drive to restore a balance of the power in Karapesh. An idea that could, in her opinion, become one of the greatest hopes for the nation’s future. He had preyed on her idealism while his empire renewed, accepting and at times requesting information he would normally never have access too as she rose in the political and intelligence community over the years of their one sided friendship. Adam had used her to gain an edge in business and alliances ever since and all the while he had never regretted it. Until now, listening to her voice lose that confidence in him, he realised he had in reality, come to need her respect throughout his life.

Standing here on the defensive, scheming ways to weather the coming storm, Damian Marshall rushed to the defence of their country like every member of his family before him, and now Adam realised why he felt the way he did,

“You’re right Asra” he admitted to the silence on the other end of the call.

They were quiet for a timem she spoke first,

“One of the team said something yesterday, it really captured how I see you”

He kept quiet but his silence encouraged her to continue,

“You counterpoint each other”

It wasn't so much she was right, more she pointed out the truth he couldn't admit until he was in the same place as his father and grandfather before him. His pride had struck out at Damian, given a chance. He didn't hate the Marshall family for what they did, or who they were. His father and grandfather were revealed to be just men out for their own interests; just as he was right now. This one sided rivalry had enabled the coming of an unwanted future, one this world had been given a chance to act against if only he had said something months ago.

Again the Devro family would be seen as scheming self-indulgent opportunists working the angles to survive, benefit even. Just a subtext, a supporting act to the manner in which the Marshall's conducted themselves. Faced with a true unknown, he had failed. The Marshall's were not the issue; it was about him. He had to change the path of his Household, learn from the inherited lessons his forefathers ignored.

Asra waited, she knew he never spoke without measuring his words. Adam looked to the room where his off world guest was held, realising there was one true source of information worth demanding, the first step to changing what his name really stood for.

“Asra, there may be a way I can see through this, like I should have done when I discovered how deeply rotten the Rebel effort had become. If we talk again, I hope you see your faith wasn't misplaced all these years”

He disconnected the call, leaving the hand piece rocking on the terrace balustrade, already halfway to the guest wing of the Family manor.

Parked to the side of a street in Capital, Asra sat in her car, half way between government offices. Throughout the night constantly ferrying storage platters and secure briefs as the crisis developed. Her eyes wavered over the disconnected call icon,
“I hope so too,” she breathed quietly.

—

“The door if you please fio’la” on the Aun’s word, the nearest earth caste technician hurried forward. Freshly arrived, the Ambassador stood amongst a large body of firewarriors. Security drones and supporting Devilfish transports hovered amidst the forest, the transports fitting where they could among the forest trees. All the while a lazy mist drifted through the early morning interlopers. At the front of the assault force was a ravaged mound of upturned earth and shattered trunks, under which the handy work of the night before had sealed a regiment of highly trained gue’la soldiers within their own underground complex.

The heightened protectiveness of Jaun’Qoul’s honour guard this morning was exceptionally obvious, a veritable ring of pulse weapons and shield emitter emplacements. They cared little about disguising their dislike of his presence so close to an assault.

Stepping hastily over the excavated soil, the fio edged forward with pulse pistol at the ready, scanner leading the way. A flight of engineering vesa hovered away to avoid the tau as he panned the scanner to and fro across their recent excavation work. Focussing on a small rectangular box, partly covered in sodden earth near the bulkhead, he placed a slim device next to it. The doors shuddered then slid aside, loose earth tumbling into the breach.

Like water through open floodgates, a strike la'rua that had been edging up behind him, poured inside with shield vesa to the fore. Several tense raik'an passed, then a signal for the Ambassador to proceed was acknowledged. As one the assault group moved inside, a crescent of defenders creating a weapon festooned rear guard outside.

Inside the bunker corridor the air was damp, the smell of freshly tilled earth permeating further as the cool early morning mist ghosted through the reopened entrance. Navigating a path through trodden detritus, the Ambassador had to pause when a pathfinder shas'ui stood before him. The tau officer physically interjected himself between the taller being and further progress within.

“Shas'ui?” the Aun questioned the act.

“Your excellency, I cannot assure your safety, please allow my shas'la and I to subdue all within”

“I understand your concern Shas'ui, thank you” the Aun lightly moved around the warrior, “but now is not the time, nor are these people our enemy”

Not quite dismissed, the Shas'ui moved to follow but found himself confronted by the Ambassador,

“I go alone.”

“Your Excellency!?”

“Alone.”

There was an unmistakable stand off between the two for a raik'an, and then the shas officer acquiesced,

“As you will it my Aun” the officer stepped backwards, slinging his pulse carbine over a shoulder.

The Aun bowed in gratitude for the understanding, then looked to a drone nearby.

“However” the collected warriors became alert and expectant, “I will make use of that kor'vesa”
Hovering further along the corridor, a heavy shield drone hummed to itself unaware it had been selected as the sole escort to the most important tau on the planet.

Expressing undeniable satisfaction at the idea, the shas'ui quickly offered up a small half almond shape, almost thrusting it into the Ambassador's hand.

“Thank you Shas'ui, please ensure the security of this opening until my return”

“My Aun” he bowed sharply.

Juan'Qoul placed the vesa controller against an ornamental bracer, proceeding inwards, as if within the embassy itself. The gathered press of photo-electronic camouflage and weapons bustled out of his way as best they could within the confined space.

After a couple of wrong turns despite having interior plans, Jaun'Qoul eventually arrived into the largest space he had discovered during his exploration. Stooping under a series of plumbing pipes he stopped to check the map again.

“Ambassador”

Out of the gloom across the expanse, the speaker appeared to Jaun'Qoul. Damian Marshall emerged from the shadows, his weapon aimed at the tau.

“Lord Marshall” the Aun greeted with formality despite the less than hospitable welcome.

“Care to explain yourself?” Marshall cut him off.

“That is why I am here” Jaun'Qoul proffered with a motion.

“With at least two platoons of infantry?”

“Appropriate protocol for when I leave the residence”

“Protocol?” Damian strangled a laugh, “We’re way past any of your protocols now Ambassador. Speak your piece or get out so we can finish this.”

The gue’la sighted his weapon anew; the shield drone hummed more acutely in response.

“You won’t do much with that I’m afraid” the alien politely indicated the futility of the weapon.

Slowly several more heavily armed gue’la filtered into the room like predators surrounding a kill,

“I have it on good word there’s a chance I’ll prove you wrong.” Damian replied darkly.

The Aun paused, all grace about his being cast aside. After a moment the alien approached Damian until a flick of a muzzle suggested he should come no closer,

“Since you show a penchant for taking chances,” the Aun paused to appraise the crescent of weapons about him, “I’ll provide you with some facts for you to better judge the odds of your endeavour here”

Damian eyed the taller being over, looking for any sign of mistruth,

“Facts? Currently the only facts I know entail my people being sealed down here by yours, my country on the brink of civil war and quite possibly an Imperial invasion is imminent. And right now? I’m beginning to believe you have been lying to me and this government ever since the whole mess began”

“And you would be right.” the tau calmly agreed.

—

Waving the door guards aside, Adam burst into the room holding the mercenary Renae.

“Time for some answers” he spoke sternly, not breaking his pace in crossing the neatly appointed room.

She looked up from her nursing position on the bed, startled at his entrance,

“I’ve given all there is worthwhile” she defended feebly through the shock of realising her seeming invulnerability around this man was at an end.

“I actually don’t believe you” he replied coldly.

At one point he thought he had fallen for this woman, but now he realised it was the seduction of how truly foreign she was and the dangerous way in which he could manipulate her. He was playing games with one of the most valuable assets anyone in

Karapesh let alone the world had; a part of him had just realised how grossly he had erred. Adam was in no mood to be misled this late in the night.

“What are you going to do Adam? Shoot me?” she taunted. Her mistake was delivering it in that voice he had heard say many other things during nights when they had shared a bed on the Estate.

He walked straight over to her and branded a back hand slap across her face as if her head was never there,

“Too quick, but talk and you live to see the morning” he snarled at her sprawled out across the bed in pain.

“You bastard!” she spat back through crimsoned lips, ears ringing from the blow.

He grabbed her flailing body, pressing a firm grip on her medicated leg, probing the cauterised las wound. She screamed. Instantly the duty guards stormed into the room.

“Get Out!”

The shouted order verbally repulsed the duo back outside.

With steeled anger in his eyes he looked upon her as if for the last time.

“You’re.. you, stop Adam..” she pleaded but he didn’t let up.

He was going to break her right here, right now.

“Tell me everything you know, you’re the only person who has any idea what’s backing these stupid Imperialists, I’ve come to doubt that the Imperium is coming”

“They’re...” she whimpered through his vice grips, she fought again without realising.

He pinned her bodily to the bed head, twisting her neck under a powerful grip,

“They? Who’s *‘They’* Renae? What have *They* got back there?” he goaded her to tell him, dared her to spit it out like a dirty little secret.

“Adam..please” she fumbled her words through tears of surprise and pain, so sure she was untouchable; this sudden brutal side of him was an elemental shock to the system.

All of a sudden a strong keening sound arose outside near the gardens, followed sharply by the sound of a thunderclap. At first Adam thought the storm was upon them, had it reached the Estate so fast? It happened again, then again. This time closer, a more audible rasping within the high pitched sound. Outside his duty guard shouted alarm and opened fire. He spun a look to Renae, demanding explanation.

“They’re here..” she said clearly, eyes fixed beyond the door in terror.

The guards directly outside screamed and died. All across the Estate alarms whined and lasfire hissed through the night. Yet more thunder claps reverberated around the Estate.

Beginning with an impossibly bright light, a keening screech filled the room Adam was in. Renae screamed and rolled from under his grip when he covered his eyes from the actinic sparks and energies swirling about them. A sonic snap shunted him across the room, staggering into a nearby wall.

He looked up to see a figure standing across the room. It was a gangly, elongated humanoid. Where he could see skin through

slim body armour, it was green and slightly translucent. Simply put, it was remarkably amphibian. From the way it carried itself, even the manner with which it twitched. Hosing and strange combat lenses festooning the forward area of the armoured head that looked about the scorched room and spied Renae.

A bulky pistol suddenly flicked out at the end of a gangly limb, pointing at her and fired. The impact threw her ravaged corpse into the next room through an internal doorway. Turning to repeat the task upon the next target, the creature discovered the other human was gone.

Devro had quickly rolled across the room and behind the alien, from where he launched an attack with hand and foot. Landing blows designed to maim men, the alien merely staggered back, gurgling and flailing ultra flexible limbs in defense. Adam slipped over rubble underfoot and the creature seized him with clammy hands, three flanged fingers on either side of his face and drew the human off his feet. The alien proceeded to crush Adam's skull within the clammy grip.

The man fought as any person would in their final moments, grabbing at whatever he could. In that desperation, Adam yanked a chest tube off the armour, which got an instant reaction. A spray of chilled red fluid morbidly redecorated the shattered room. The alien flung him into the nearby wall and immediately set to reaffixing the component. Enough time for Adam to collect a smashed chair leg and bludgeon the alien's closest arm, leg and face armour.

He kept pounding and assailing the creature as it staggered under the renewed assault. Adam became a wild man, smashing again and again, belting any attempt to defend the blows. When the chair leg finally broke, he reared back like a feral being, thrusting it through a buckled joint in the neck ring, working it through to the floor with all of his being; screaming into the featureless faceplate of his would be killer.

“My Lord!” bellowed Kade as he barrelled into the room with a lascutter whining at full burn.

His combat amour filled the room, carapace savagely rent in several places. The man bled freely, but it seemed only to embolden his warrior aura. Devro looked up with wild eyes, covered in gore and unknown viscera of his attacker. Glaring at the senior officer momentarily, Adam slowly regained his composure after a few breaths of hard fought for, life giving air,

“W-what the hell was that!?” he blurted out as the shock of the fight began to wear off.

“Don’t know my Lord, they took us by surprise alright” he growled, “but we’ve contained them, we’ve lost most of our night roster though” he grimaced, looking out into the night sternly.

Adam collapsed with his back to the wall, loosing his grip about the improvised stake, now slick with a viscous yellow fluid.

“This one nearly had me” he stammered through his exertion.

Kade appraised the brutalised and pulped amphibian form,

“Clearly..”

Adam began to get up, “Reset the guard and get the transports ready. We’re still on someone’s hit list it seems.”

“Couldn’t agree more sir” the massive guard hauled the spent Lord upright, “Next time, keep your sidearm on sir, we’re at war”

Adam stood for a moment amidst the ruin. Alien fluids underfoot, Renae’s shattered form a room away and his body owning up to injuries it had ignored while he had fought to survive. He looked upon the warrior figure next to him wielding the improvised close quarter weapon, he met Kade’s gaze,

“Yes” he agreed, “This is war.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Returning the salute to a team of passing specialists, Waylan continued to pick a path through the torrent of civilian support staff bustling within the Capital Militia Headquarters. The confines of the operations centre a marked change from the open expanse of Capital Airfield outside, but no less busy. On reaching the heavy bulwark of the command room, he acknowledged the guard on duty and stepped through.

Within the oval hall were communication and intelligence cubicles nestled about the perimeter of a central space taken up by a large holo-plotter, surrounded by a team of advisors and senior staff. The command centre was ramping up to full war conditions as attending personnel moved about their duties with a renewed sense of purpose.

His presence heralded with a hail, immediately bringing those present to attention,

“As you were,” Waylan responded to the mass greeting with a curt nod.

The frozen tableau of a war room renewed a frenetic pace. As he reached the plotter, his most senior advisor was already offering him a dataslate,

“Raele?”

“Sir, we’re being hit all along a majority of the outposts that we established in the Karapesh Ranges”

“Imperialists?”

“Yes. Definitely more organised than the Rebel bandits”

“Anything further north?”

The two leaned over to review the expansive plotter screen, a gift from the Tau. It was larger than a state dining table and allowed Waylan and his staff to create details as needed, map locations and follow enemy actions as they developed atop survey data provided by tau satellite images over the years. A remarkable tool now saturated with icons blinking for attention, enhanced by the recent satellite network the Ambassador had instigated.

“No, and that bothers me” Raele offered while Mica nodded in thought.

“Me too” the commander agreed, “I take it we have the fourth and fifth under way for airlift?”

“Yes sir, thankfully the Versa flight Marshall’s people took hasn’t slowed the timetable any, they removed gear from the training base only”

Even still, Waylan found himself irritated. There were laws that allowed Families to requisition military units in times of crisis, but Marshall had outright absconded with a wing of craft and some of his best pilots and soldiers without so much as a thank you note. When this affair was done, he would have his pound of flesh about the incident.

“Small mercies. I’m hoping he has some immediate use for them rather than shipping his own interests to safety”

Raele lifted a thin databoard within reading distance,

“When I reviewed the AWOL list, he took a handsome slice of the best we’ve got across the professions, IDC say these folks are comprised of descendants from the First”

That caused Mica to raise an eyebrow, while those gathered showed a mix of surprise and reflection.

“Do you want me to confirm the files on these people?”

“No,” Waylan waved off the paper work idea, “I don’t think Ollesan has this one wrong. Nor would Marshall pull such a stunt with people he didn’t trust”

Mica looked to the plotter then indicated the central Rebel bases,

“Hopefully we meet the First at either one of these locations, their parents were quite a capable recon force”

Several officers nodded hopefully,

“Right now though, I want us to continue to mobilise the reservists to shore up our southern border,” he looked to the leader of the citizen forces, “Adal, put the word out for a call up”

“Sir.” the man stiffened.

“Commander.” interjected a communications junior, “something odd going on” the officer muttered with a quizzical look on his face.

Fixated on the screen before him he continued, “Capital relay tower is on emergency beacon and so is Government house”

“Just then?” questioned a government attaché present.

“Yes”

Everyone paused, usually by the time a beacon was activated they would have received several calls relating an emergency. If the sites’ own link disconnects, the beacon was on an automatic switch after a few moments in the event no one on site could activate it.

“One could be a glitch, but two in the same time frame?”

Raele considered the event, scanning the gathered team then toward Waylan as the commander made to say something,

“Contact the base watch–

But he was drowned out by a sudden, near deafening sound as intense omnipotent light blinded him. Waylan fumbled for his sidearm just as a sonic snap shoved him into a nearby cubicle. Several minutes later; the emergency beacon for Militia Command activated automatically.

Slightly perplexed at her efforts, the analyst monitoring the gue'la command plotter turned to look upon Elan'Jhin,

“Nothing Shas’el” the fio addressed a stern faced tau, “Just their emergency beacon”

“Then it has begun, activate the security net. Clear the residence.” the warrior replied.

The fio’ui paused in her own duties when the Shas'el leaned in closer,

“Inform the Aun that he is to return to orbit immediately.” In moments the evacuation of the Ambassadorial residence began.

Elan'Jhin had returned to Memorial Park overnight with three fully armed la'rua, honed instincts telling him that this time, the Aun's diplomatic mission would be directly targeted. This foresight had been rewarded with the bittersweet realisation of impending conflict. Elan'Jhin was finished here, so he turned his attention upon the two accompanying shas'ui behind him,

“As planned” he reminded, gathering up his helm from a utility belt clip.

They uniformly donned helms and readied their pulse carbines whilst making for the exit shaft out of the underground centre.

Elan’Jhin wasn’t sure how these attacks were happening so fast, which indirectly cut him off from his Xar’Vesa stowed at the Southern base; regardless he would lead these shas’la in defence of the residence and ensure the staff were evacuated.

Moving through the central house on exiting the lift, Elan’Jhin rejoined the third la’rua. Observing the other two spread about the surrounding courtyard within the compound in loose skirmish lines. The envoy staff moved quickly through the warriors, allowing his forces space to move efficiently among the hurried groups of evacuees. Each tau resident having undergone scenario training to prepare for such eventualities.

Settling himself into a predetermined fire position near the main entrance foyer, Elan’Jhin checked his visual meta-map and spied the others aligning overtop their own position markers. Satisfied, he contacted the Ar’Tol and confirmed a final order. Across the planet, every tau military unit witnessed their Master Arm icon blink into existence; the rest received a chilling evacuation symbol. The diplomatic mission was over.

Among the sectioned offices behind Elan’Jhin, the first sphere blazed into being. His aural feed dulled the disorientating sound and his armour absorbed a majority of the sonic blast that accompanied the event. Without pause or contemplation, he calmly rotated, acquired and executed the Naghyr raider before it even realised it had arrived in the main office hallway.

“Naghyri! Random incursion defence!”

The fire teams reformed into protective fields of fire as more Naghyri snapped into existence about the tau. Quickly the

invader's small arms fire equalled then exceeded the rasping sonic crack of hyper-velocity pulse weapons.

Defence turrets and drones popped up along the perimeter and fired, sensors trying their best amidst the chaos of spawning arrivals. However the raiders had come prepared, purpose made grenades incapacitating vesa defences with ease.

"Secondary line, central offices" Elan'Jhin ordered, expending a second charge clip providing suppressive fire with his carbine.

The shas'la about him fought in fire pairs, working down the central corridor back to the main shaft. Room by room amidst violent close quarter fire, the tau fought a visual stacatto of randomly appearing opponents. Moving up behind the la'rua, Elan'Jhin barely had a chance to avoid two flashes that disintegrated the office space around him. Several spikes suddenly embedded into his shoulder guard, a newly arrived Naghyri snap firing as it saw the tau officer dive past.

The Shas'el barrelled into the fibro-wall ahead of him, rolling through the debris, just as a pair of kor'vesa skimmed over his unrefined escape. Their sudden interjection caused all the Naghyri to find cover fast as the drones opened fire, shredding interior panels, erupting offices and bringing down fibro-walls with their combined pulse and grenade fire. It was devastating at such close quarters. Taking the initiative, the tau reformed into a firing line, the fusillade wiping out any survivors.

Abruptly the Naghyri quit the fight, retreating from the compound. A blaze of spike fire discouraging pursuit as they fell

back toward Memorial Park through the main gate; the human duty guard long slain at their posts. Even still, the tau harried them across the courtyard grounds, walking their firing line. Only two raiders survived the escape, carried by their oddly flailing gait into the park gardens beyond. The drones and firewarriors however, drew up at the limit of their political territory, clearly frustrated at being denied the fleeing raiders.

In no mood to observe protocols, Elan’Jhin took a pulse rifle from one of his warriors and stepped out onto the grass of the parkland. Acquiring the fleeing raiders, he dropped to a knee and braced the weapon smartly. The rangefinder snapped up, synching with his helm to focus on the fleeing aliens, tracking them through the manicured parkland with flickering HUD target symbols. Their bodies abruptly splayed out in mid air before screaming gue’la citizens, a mess of gangly limbs and support suit fluids, perforated by a short burst of pulse fire.

Elan’Jhin rose up, regarded the distant twitching corpses, then turned about. With a taut expression he noted many of his shas’la had not survived the close quarter fire fight,

“Continue the evacuation” he kept them focussed, “Set up a security line about the residence, see to our casualties”

He returned the rifle to its owner with a curt nod, then began to pick his way through the shattered courtyard.

“Mercenaries, always mercenaries” he grunted to himself darkly, insulted. He was well aware what they could expect worse next time; this was obviously a probing assault. But of all things, their contractors were somehow able to teleport the Nighyri shock troops on site. This did not bode well. Elan’Jhin glanced at

the gutted residence while he considered the implications of this, just as the two storey structure detonated from within.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Brought together within the confined planning room, both the humans and tau felt the circulating tension. Having near entombed Damian Marshall and his people, it would take a thorough explanation by Aun'Jaun'Qoul for the animosity to subside. The alien leader looked across the plotting table,

“Like wishing waves to cease their assault on the shore, I had hoped you would ignore the willpower that drives your lineage Lord Damian”

The man he entreated remained quiet. Jaun'Qoul seemed unperturbed, turning to take a palm sized crystal hemisphere which a shas'ui behind offered; one of several tau Damian had allowed into the complex since taking Jaun'Qoul as volunteer hostage,

“If we can move on from how we came about this opportunity to talk,” he continued while placing the translucent object on the table, “please let me show you my concerns”

A moment passed, the plotter now slave to the alien device,

“Perhaps through this explanation, you will find cause to forgive my aggressive appointment making”

Twisting the hemisphere under his hand, the tau navigated through a selection of newly displayed icons, deftly accessing information stored within. Suddenly spectacular top down imagery appeared for all to see.

It was a projected map of their world; the light bathing the human audience while the Ambassador traced an elongated finger across the plotter table.

“This cavern,” the Ambassador finally spoke, “is of great interest to us after immense energy spikes were detected there, the most powerful last night”

Damian leaned closer to review familiar terrain, finally breaking his silence,

“Do you still have recon units in the area?”

“Only two, one watching a fallback route, the other surveying this particular cavern entrance”

“Any sign of actual off world Imperials?”

“No, just the Imperialist faction that you know of” the tau moved back from the table in repose,

“Damian”

The tone of address caused the Lord and his human officers to uniformly look up from their studies,

“We don’t expect there to be any Imperials coming out of this or any other cavern, and that is in part, why I stopped you.”

“Excuse me?” Damian was taken aback, the reaction repeated among his staff.

Jaun’Qoul braved the puzzled expressions, merely nodding indicatively at the plotter, he twisted the hemisphere once again. A vast inter stellar map filled the plotter field.

“This... is the Tau Empire” with the air of a tutor, the tau explained with a hint of pride.

A gleaming border zone spanned the star map, reflecting in the eyes of all present. Inside the border, multiple pearls glinted proudly with a soft blue haze.

“Our homeworld, lies within this cluster” Jaun’Qoul gave a cursory indication to broad tract of space, “and your system, is here”

The small, lonely star of the gue’la system glowed afresh when Jaun’Qoul guided an icon over it.

“As you can see, your world lies on the edge of the spiral arm, and across the gulf is Imperial space. It is a long distance for the Imperium to sneak about infiltrating this world, when they could just as well arrive en masse and simply take it, no?” Marshall and several other gue’la nodded, the star charts were familiar, but their world had concerned itself with rebuilding rather than space faring for many decades. In fact their ravaged starport was now the memorial parkland of Capital.

“Your system is one of several in this region that are excellent ports for trade. All of which we have access to by alliance, protectorate or colonisation”

The tau let that sink in.

“As you all know we have an agreed treaty, covering your world within this region, as a Protectorate,” the tau ensured all understood, then added, “pirates, rogue factions and expanding fiefdoms want this planet. Without us, you would soon find your independence under the sway of yet another tyrannical regime or much worse.”

Rotating the hemisphere, Jaun’Qoul affected a motion that caused the star map to pan outward.

“Make no mistake, your world’s peace is bound too our presence, however it has also created the current crisis.”

The Ambassador paused, distressed by what he was about to say,

“My people have many rivals in this part of the galaxy, a few are capable to challenge our path.”

A flick of his hand, and a new region of space glowed purple, indigo pearls populated it in distressing number.

“This, is the Drantakh Annexation” the tau announced with dour reflection, “A title awarded by their method of incorporating worlds”

“Not fans of the tau sense of a Greater Good?” Kali flashed a wiry look.

The pilot stood behind Marshall among the rest of the human officers, a few bemused smiles appeared among them.

“As you say,” the Ambassador appeared to dwell on the sea of purple hues, “they are not enamoured with our ways Ui’Kali” Damian caught the Ambassador’s gaze,

“The Imperium is using them to back the Imperialists?”

“No, the Drantakh *are* the Imperialist faction”

Before the gathered humans reeled Jaun’Qoul added,

“This is not a return of the regime you fought, but in fact a precursor to an invasion by a wholly alien force.”

Seeing no need to soften the blow the Ambassador continued,

“The Drantakh either utilise your skills or remove you. They exploit enthralled races to their whim, or bend fanatics to their cause. They also enjoy employing mercenaries with such regularity that few victims ever realise the Drantakh were in fact the invaders of their world. Many often die fighting hiring armies. We ourselves have at times interceded, which resulted in several minor skirmishes. This is in fact the fourth world that they have actively sought to control despite our protection.”

Jaun’Qoul looked to the young Lord calmly,

“Access to this world is strategically important to the tau empire. In accordance to the dictates of my post to that end, I have sent for aid, so feel emboldened that help is in fact already coming”

The tau paused then sat down, looking upon the images before him while showing a most human expression of reflection,

“But there is something of far greater value to protect here”.

After a few moments of silence the tau looked toward his counterpart,

“Damian, as you are aware, I knew your grandfather well,”

Jaun’Qoul spoke candidly, “he was a proud, determined man, fresh from defeating the Imperial orbiting fleet. I found myself having to negotiate an alliance to aid your world”

Jaun’Qoul made the best effort of a human smile, not an easy task for his race,

“The reality for our empire is this, we have only ever met broken refugees. The waifs of campaigns fought against the Imperium, abandoned colonies and lost expeditions. Dependants all, each of whom we have subsumed into our empire over time.” The alien carefully regarded the gue’la standing on the other side of the table,

“Gideon carried a spirit, the willpower which I believe built the great realm of man, something we would like to see in the hearts of those we watch over already. This pride is evident in the people under your command right now.” with a wave the Ambassador indicated all gue’la officers across from him.

“So, to enact your protection, is to consider becoming part of your empire? Or has our supposed sovereignty been an illusion all this time?” Damian’s voice was laced with cynicism. It summed together what he felt was the real agenda here, a trade of one oppressor for another, albeit one with a smile. Jaun’Qoul didn’t reply, so Damian continued,

“All this support and patronage over these decades is merely a cover for your empire to prop up yet another border world against these..” he searched for the name,

“Drantakh” the tau envoy offered.

“The Drantakh, a race who merrily back one faction to use another group in some intergalactic game of claim jumping between your empires? If you had let us know, trusted us as much as we trust you, this situation could have been prepared for, perhaps even prevented?”

The Ambassador leaned back and clearly considered his reply with care,

“Our protection has often dealt with issues that you have no idea about, or little opportunity to effect a positive outcome upon. Being selective in what dangers I discuss with your government, is from a particular viewpoint subterfuge, but from where I stand? It is often a necessity. I reveal this to you as a problem for both our peoples to counter together. Now that I have had a chance to understand how deeply they have infiltrated your world, it is the only way.”

He leaned forward, almond eyes locking with Damian’s own,

“What I offer Lord Marshall, is the forces I have with me to protect your world against a threat, created simply by my being here. In as much as it would be counter to my empire’s efforts to let the Drantakh win, it is even more imperative that your people

remain in control of this world. An example to others that they too, must step up and be self-reliant, in spite of the tau empire. Not dependant unto it, or controlled by it.”

The room was still for a few moments until Jaun’Qoul spoke again to all the gathered officers,

“You must prevail here, not simply because it is of strategic importance to my kind, but because it is the people here whom are of greater value,” Jaun’Qoul waved over the sea of glinting blue pearls within the borders of tau space, “as our empire grows, ensuring the prosperity of it requires more than just marks on the barrel of a rifle. We need allies, in the least, strong neighbours. Their survival is ultimately, our survival.”

Damian assessed the alien carefully; the tau regarded him in equal measure, like a mirror.

“You would have us as neighbours then? As allies?” Damian probed a line of inquest.

“In truth, I would hope we were still friends, first” the tau offered up a rather frank reply.

Damian smiled despite himself, “You have that Ambassador, though you sorely tested it”

“I know,” the alien admitted.

Finding assuring looks of support from his officers, Damian turned his gaze over the small group of tau.

“You realise there is no diplomatic representative of the central government here?” Damian began, “so any official alliance is out of the question.”

Any of the tau that understood Imperial Gothic gave themselves away by flinching at the comment,

“But, I think there is nothing immediately inappropriate with a private citizen of my standing, showing a visiting dignitary or members of staff about my own backyard,” Damian smiled while offering his hand to the tau Ambassador, “albeit with some precautions given the times”

“Naturally, given the times” added Jaun’Qoul clasping his cool skinned hand about that of the young Family Lord.

“I accept and offer my apologies for the manner in which I detained you”

“Of course, though the removal of the high explosive device on the roof of my bunker would be appreciated, as a gesture of goodwill”

“My first reparation” Jaun’Qoul offered with a sincere tone of contrition.

Lacking any cordial hesitation, an aide moved alongside Jaun’Qoul, just as other tau officers uniformly became agitated.

“Ambassador?” Damian questioned.

Pausing to hear out the aide, the diplomat answered clearly,

“Capital is under attack”

A wave of shock and uttered oaths broke over the human officers.

“My mission’s military attaché just enacted an evacuation order. I will contact the orbital from my transport immediately Lord Marshall” gathering the hemispherical device, Jaun’Qoul began to leave.

Damian turned to Elliot, “We’re mobile in an hour, raise Capital command and inform them of our intentions to support Karapeshi Militia units. Everyone else, get your teams ready to move.”

The human officers filtered out briskly alongside their tau counterparts.

“Ambassador?” Damian drew Jaun’Qouls attention. The lithe being turned around to regard him as the last of the officers from both commands left.

“Yes?”

“Do you think we have a chance against this invasion, just us?” Damian questioned privately.

For a moment the Ambassador thought, his returned gaze softening,

“That is a question for your grandfather” he replied.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Dutiful icons winked into existence, each digital droplet of violet announcing an unknown intruder. They began gliding down the curved screen that spread across the forward section of the command chamber. Ru'Che, the orbital Kor'O, observed these intently while his mind considered every nuance of information the stellar interlopers revealed to the sensors.

The tau commander was similar in height to that of the Ambassador and equally lean in appearance. Such attributes the most obvious genetic marker of the Kor cast; the navigators, star farers and pilots of the Tau race. Ru'Che's life was genetically predisposed, a fact he did not despise, for this vocation was the very thing his being revelled in. Like all kor caste members who operated the station, his uniform was quite austere. A sleek segmented chest piece that protected most of his torso, overtop a grey skin suit with smooth carapace roundels set upon the upper arms and hips, each matching the white torso armour. Behind him a shorter, stout figure in identical colours approached.

"Kor'O?" questioned Shas'el Jisu'ro as he arrived. He crossed the short distance from the entrance to the parapet. The officer wore the ubiquitous segmented combat armour of a firewarrior, with a few extra marks that befitted his rank, much like Elan'Jhin.

Focussed upon the visions before him, the Kor'O did not turn about immediately, "We have unannounced traffic, and judging by their unique angle of approach; hostile"

The tau warrior stiffened, "The Drantakh?"

"I would hope so, unless we have earned the ire of another faction this far out on the Fringe"

Nearby a por'vesa drone bleated an expected chime. Politely approaching the two officers as a small holofield appeared, revealing Aun'Jaun'Qoul.

The tau bowed deftly on seeing the image,

"Your Excellency," Ru'Che spoke first.

"Kor'O. What news?"

"Unfortunately we are yet to re-establish a link with the Embassy but the Southern operations base has remained untouched. I tasked a fly over to ascertain what's going on in detail."

Interjecting, Jisu'ro supported Ru'che

"I suspect the Southern base is untouched due to our defences there. Until we hear from Elan'Jhin I have assumed command of his cadre, reserve forces of which I have already prepared for an urban assault drop."

The Ambassador's apparition nodded in approval.

Stepping slightly before the firewarrior, Ru'Che prepared to deliver the really bad news,

"My Aun, we presently have an unidentified flotilla bearing upon the station, a deep space observation satellite alerted us a mere raik'or ago"

The Ethereal blinked, "It would seem the sudden attack upon Capital is coordinated to this assault. The actions of Lord Marshall may have affected their schedule?"

"It is plausible. The flotilla's engagement trajectory is not exactly optimal. Personally I would initiate action by order of the fleet not ground forces. I think my direct opponent has been forced into this attack"

Through opinion, the station commander agreed with the Aun's thoughts.

"That could work in our favour," the Ambassador appealed to fate.

Interrupting the deliberations, the station Fio'el trotted into the command bridge. Spying the discussion atop the command parapet, he hurried over with a rustle of engineering fatigues and utility apparel of similar tones to his fellows.

"My Aun" he bowed lightly to the image, nodding toward the Kor'O who had summoned him earlier. The doughty tau looked like an ancient desert raider with a Reela up his poncho,

"Your Excellency," he launched immediately "We have determined something about the power source in the Karapeshi Mountains during the attacks," he paused evidently for effect, "It's a teleportation array"

The officers went quiet for the implications were profound.

"Like the Gue'ron'sha?" the Firewarrior put in the first query.

"In some respects, but not as precise."

The tau had held a healthy respect for the super soldiers of the Imperium and their abilities. They had since developed counter tactics but the Drantakh device was still a nasty surprise,

“The attacks on Capital appear to be teleport strikes. Based on the few reports from the gue’la and Shas’el Elan’Jhin’s link at the Embassy before we lost contact; the description holds true”

“Go on” the Aun encouraged.

“Well, being a multiple site incursion, my team gained a lot of insight into the device from observation alone. If we had not deployed the array network recently, we would have missed a great opportunity to–”

“The details Fio” reminded Jisu politely.

“Yes,” the engineer paused, “ah, they hit four sites. Three in Capital and the Embassy” he paused referring to notes on his wrist screen,

“We are pretty certain the device cycles at twelve raik’or intervals with a transmission window of two. Each site was hit almost to the interval while we monitored the energy spikes. We’re unsure of the number of enemy that can be teleported until we get more information from Capital Militia or Shas’el Elan’Jhin. However they continue to send in forces as we speak, so I am unsure if that means limited numbers or they are just bolstering the assault”

The Aun paused on that note then spoke up,

“I must bring Lord Marshall in on this conversation, we are currently setting to redeploy from the missile base. I will be a moment.”

The officers performed small head bows as the holofield blinked out, but the drone remained. Ru’che looked to his security leader, seeking the warrior’s tactical experience. Jisu’Ro smiled, he knew that expression. Folding his arms, Jisu watched the violet droplets edge down the display.

“Considering the nature of the imminent assault, if the Drantakh have developed a true teleportation capability I intend to set up my strong points at the Reactor, Command, Hangar concourse and the Armoury. It is where I would target my own boarding assaults if given the ability” he paused then looked at the Fio with a flash of insight, “tell me Rius, why haven’t they tried from Karapesh?”

The stout fio considered this, then nodded to himself,

“Interference,” he offered then continued, “it probably takes time to attune the transmission to work within the characteristics of this world’s atmosphere. I’m theorising, but I suspect projecting a transmission through the atmosphere into space to board an orbiting target, presents a technical hurdle, let alone the interference our field generators would cause”

Ru’che looked at the flotilla icons, “Could these be mounted on board a Drantakh assault frigate? A transport maybe?”

The Fio turned to a sweeping arc handrail that rose up from the parapet floor seamlessly to offer an array of touch screens. Between them and the large wall display, concentric twin trenches below the parapet housed the Air caste command staff and their embedded equipment. The operators sat ensconced in crescent curved, high back seats, each engaged in tasking response forces to the sudden violence erupting on the world below and more recently, assessing the incoming flotilla.

“Left corner” Rius’lan announced to the others as he finished his database hunt.

A detailed plan of the Drantakh vessels suspected to be coming their way appeared in the uppermost corner of the sweeping main screen.

“These schematics come from our last action against the Drantakh” Rius’lan guided a pointer icon with his finger across the touch screen before him.

“I expect the transports would mount these,” he looked upon the schematics being displayed to explain himself, “It’s the range at which one would have to bring your vessel in through our deflector fields, making it more an assault boat tool than a ship of the line”

“Close Quarters” grunted the firewarrior.

Ru’che saw his initial idea had merit, “You believe at least one of these unknowns could be a teleport capable transport to send raiders?”

The Fio looked squarely at the kor’o, “We have learned from the Imperium. They are the perfect devices for boarding teams” Jisu’ro evinced a slight discomfort, recalling debriefs on the results of such actions.

The fio didn’t seem to notice,

“I could integrate our findings into targeting systems to monitor for emissions similar to those we have seen so far. At least we can pinpoint equipped ships”

“Do you think they could send over an explosive?” the Shas’el asked.

“Probably not unlike gue’la raiders we have encountered, requiring a user to travel with one. Add one boarder; you need someone to defend him while he arms it. Send two you may as well mount an assault to cover the planting of the device. The

concept pretty much expands from there really. That said, Elan'Jhin may have experienced such an attack."

"Twelve raik'or you say?" Jisu'ro muttered to himself in thought.

"Yes, two raik'or window for an unknown number to transit"

"Best my teams can do is seven raik'or sweep through the main concourse should we need to hunt them from a fixed point"

"Then shas'el, you have five to remove the threat before the next raid"

The Kor'O wasn't being amusing; he stated it bluntly so there was no mistake,

"Jisu, whatever it takes, do not allow them a foothold"

"Kor'O." the firewarrior nodded curtly, "I will see about our strong points and a form reserve la'rua for any such incursions."

"Good, keep me informed"

With a nod Ru'Che dismissed the security leader then looked at the expectant Fio'el.

"Ruis, see about preparing an evacuation of your people once we have a disembarkation point, until then garner as much data as you can"

Nodding sharply, the engineer left as hastily as he had arrived. Before Ru'Che could return to reviewing the incoming raiders, the drone bleated again. Accepting the link he was presented an array of ghostly alien figures.

"My Aun" bowed the Kor'o as he greeted the figures before him.

Damian recognised the alien commander from briefings with the tau from annual functions with local industrialists on the future of trade when their world was ready to develop interstellar commerce. For now, it would have to be through the orbital. He still found the commander's grasp of Imperial Gothic, which exceeded that of the Ambassador, as one of the more disconcerting experiences when dealing with him.

Carefully placed by one of Jaun'Qoul's escorts, the bulbous hololink sat on the centre of the plotter. It consisted of a glossy black ball sitting atop a similarly coloured tubular ring. The round emitter projected the Kor'o while the ring recorded those about the table, relaying a full room of ghostly gue'la and a lone Ethereal about the parapet of Ru'Che's Command centre on the orbital.

"Do you have anything further on the actions in Capital since we last spoke Kor'o?" Jaun'Qoul's image spoke.

"Our first fly over of sites in Capital will be occurring in the next ten minutes"

Nodding thanks for the update, Jaun'Qoul continued for the benefit of the gue'la,

"We have reason to believe the Drantakh are using teleportation technology for the incursions within Capital"

"Teleportation?" Damian couldn't contain his surprise. He knew of the technology, it was exceptionally rare, and as such he had never been witness to its use. Everyone else was similarly shocked.

"However their device is limited thankfully. They can transmit an unknown number of personnel and materiel for around five minutes, but the array seems to require a cool down

or recharge of about twenty minutes. The sequence of attacks in the early hours gave our engineers much insight.”

Having covered the essentials, Jaun’Qoul indicated the kor’o continue,

“We do know that the first assault has consisted of Naghyri Raiders, a mercenary faction, quite fanatical in their adherence to Drantakh policies. They have warped the Naghyri religious fervour to create one of the most maniacal shock troops we have yet encountered. Regardless of motivations, they have definitely done their work and I can only assume the Drantakh themselves will be in the next assault. Which brings us to the latest development, a point which the Ambassador and I were discussing when we realised your attendance would be required” Ru’Che deferred to the Ambassador to break the news.

“Kor’o Ru’Che has detected a flotilla of vessels inbound for this world”

The comment stirred everyone into a myriad of side commentary,

“Time?” Damian asked, motioned for silence.

“We have little over twenty hours before opening engagements”

Damian considered the galling news and realised their current plan was flawed against the new threat,

“You need to secure your people Ambassador. The Drantakh may know of my original intentions to halt the Imperialist advance, but I would be mightily surprised if they knew my current location. Consider this facility at your disposal to provide a secure operations base for now”

“My thanks” Jaun’Qoul acknowledged.

Damian nodded then continued, "I will still proceed to Karapesh, but I would like one of your recon units in support so we can infiltrate the surrounds of that cavern base as quickly as possible"

The Ambassador took a moment to relay an order,

"You will have a team of six at your disposal and a liaison officer will join you"

"Good, they owe us for the headaches" Damian's remark caused Elliot and the others smile.

Realising an overall plan was forming, Ru'Che spoke up,

"I'll begin an evacuation of our non-combat personnel to the joint operations base immediately, this will include as much munitions and supplies as we can lift"

Damian agreed, "Good, you'll find a–"

"Yes, the field south of your facility would be our drop point"

Momentarily forgetting the alien already had a good knowledge of this once secret hideaway, Damian smiled at his faux pas,

"We had best clear ourselves out of here then," he looked to Elliot, "help our guests acquaint themselves, I'd like yourself and our support staff to remain. Looks like our blocking action just became a direct strike"

"Sir. Also, if I may, can the Kor'o relay a message? I am still unable to contact Militia Command"

The expression on Ru'Che's face changed,

"I am sorry, but we too have been unable to contact any Militia or government facility in Capital since the attacks. We are receiving four beacon signals from major Capital locations however"

The alien's reply was equally frustrated, then darkened as the Kor'O observed the gue'la exchange solemn glances.

Damian finally explained, "That means Ambassador, we're the only viable forces left"

Everyone went quiet.

"Then I will try to relieve Capital"

Damian nodded smartly,

"Good, I'm intending to strike the Imperialists base immediately, mass redeployment just got taken off the list. That teleport device needs to be destroyed"

The tau rifled through his robes quickly then offered a thick cufflink sized disc to Damian,

"A communication device, it will keep you in contact directly to myself and Kor'o Ru'Che. We can update you as we find out more regarding the transmission base"

Damian took the disc and affixed it inside the protective neck ring of his chest armour. He was about to say something when the Kor'O interjected,

"We have detailed imagery from the flyover"

Those attending paused and looked to the plotter as Jaun'Qoul operated his crystal device once again.

The Embassy was a smoking ruin, besieged from all directions. Their tight perimeter illuminated by a ring of defensive fire, a small knot of defenders fought to keep eruptions of randomly appearing attackers at bay. Everyone watched the fire fight in quiet contemplation, the sombre observation interrupted when Jaun'Qoul had seen enough,

"Kor'o, have Shas'el Jisu'Ro launch his crisis drop in support of these defenders, then the Government block. A

secondary deployment must link up to Militia Command. Then abandon the Southern Base for this location. I imagine it will soon be dealt with from orbit as the Shas'el suggested" Ru'Che could be seen to agree as the Ambassador looked across to Damian, "best prepare your departure Lord Marshall" The two leaders looked at each other knowingly for a moment, this had all become a desperate gambit.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Waking from his stupor, Elan'Jhin saw his helmet discarded nearby, a jagged piece of shrapnel embedded through the optics. He had come close to being speared through the faceplate. Touching his face out of concern, a sharp pain lanced the length of his nasal fold. Surprised he drew his gloved hand away; viscous cyan blood smeared his fingers.

“Southern wall, breach!” a shas'la warned. The tau and their crippled, one carbine kor'vesa, poured fire into the Naghyri as they attempted to regain a foothold inside the remains of the compound. A couple of the intruders went down, the rest quit the attempt and resumed sniping the tau position. Elan'Jhin sat through the exchange with his hand still before him. Only eight of his original thirty six warriors still lived.

He had been in a few desperate actions, but none quite like this he considered, taking a moment to shake off a growing nausea. The wound, though seemingly minor, affected tau senses quite badly without treatment in the near term.

“How long have the Naghyri been back?” he finally spoke, causing a couple of the warriors to flinch.

“This is the second attempt shas'el,” a warrior answered. Elan'Jhin studied her rent armour for markings but found nothing readily visible. However the bulbous drone controller on the side of power pack, the only one in their current deployment, belonged to Shas'ui Kuna'Ro. He gave a quick glance about the rubble defences and noted the other two leaders were not present.

“We fought off the first wave but ui’Shan and ui’Che’Va fell while trying to hold the perimeter. We’ve been here since this new assault appeared shas’el”

Kuna had picked up on his head count quite quickly.

“How long between incursions?”

“Ten or Twelve raik’or. It was ui’Shan who figured the initial count but since,” she paused, “more will be here in about four raik’or. They don’t seem to teleport within the compound, probably due too the rubble”

A sure sign they knew the layout of the area well enough beforehand.

“Any word from below?” he asked, touching his nasal fold experimentally, flinching again.

“None” she answered flatly.

Eight warriors, a crippled drone, no comm-control, his breathing and focus hindered and facing a sustained assault, he would have to recommend it as one of the more insidious academy scenarios if he ever lived through it.

Forcing himself up against a destroyed drone shell, he watched fleeting figures move beyond another wall breach. He rubbed his face again, grunting at the stupefying pain. A burst of spike fire made him roll back behind the defences with a curse and lose grip of his carbine.

“Shas’el...”

Ui’Kuna’Ro offered the weapon back to him with a sharp nod. Just then a pair of aircraft soared overhead. He lay back and spied the fast silhouettes of Barracudas, delta wing shaped fighters bearing that characteristic blunt nose, a pair was

executing a text book fly over. He smiled, Ru'Che had an eye on them.

"They know we're still in the fight" Elan'Jihn commented, more to himself than the others. But each saw the tau flyers well enough.

"Here they come!" barked Kuna'Ro, raising her carbine and opening fire.

Elan'Jhin rolled over and shuffled up the rubble barricade, aiming his own carbine anew and sighted a leading attacker amidst flashing orbs of teleportation energy.

The aliens loped into the grounds over the shattered walls, assault weapons leading the way. Bipedal with legs much like a tau, they bore equine heads with large bulbous eyes, set slightly to either side of the skull. Splayed craniums spread outward from the temples, covered by a fitted helm. The shape of which followed this natural sweep, exaggerating the physical feature. Rough hands with three digits and an opposing fourth, held their weapons tightly as they fired on the run. Exposed feet, stout and well padded, gave them good footing in the rubble. The Drantakh had finally committed to battle.

Each wore combat fatigues under protective plates of armour, any visible skin was gnarled and a mottled brown grey. As far as soldiers go, they were well equipped and very professional. This particular unit's battle dress was suited for an urban fight. Finally confronted by their real foe, Elan'Jhin put fire into the leading element.

The drantakh surged forwards in response, heavy calibre spike rifles staking into the barricade about the tau. They reached the makeshift fortification quickly, leaping in amongst the tau defenders. Elan’Jhin fired point blank, parting the legs from an attacker. The drone vaulted into the fray pulse carbine blazing, shoving a mob of drantakh over the lip of the barricade, never to return. Screams and shouts mixed with strobing pulse fire and the metallic impacts of spike rifles. Elan’Jhin spat, clearing a rivulet of blood from his mouth, his wound worsening with exertion. Suddenly someone was back to back with him; it was Kuna’Ro shoving an power cartridge into his hand,

“Recharge!” she admonished him.

Like a saal chastised, he switched out cartridges; firing immediately as more leapt among them. It was then, as the alien assault began to overwhelm the tau, that Elan’Jhin saw a familiar silhouette slice low over the tall buildings beyond.

Swift and deadly, a lone Barracuda closed in on the compound with brazen disregard for altitude.

“Down! Down!” Elah’jhin yelled to whoever still lived. Grabbing the shas’ui, he twisted her off her hooves and they fell amidst the dead.

An Ion Cannon chuffed like a beast clearing its throat; the rubble amidst the drantakh assault line became lethal founts of charged earth. Wing mounted drones engaged with their burst cannon, growling pulse fire through alien figures, stitching, hunting and killing. They spun round in the mere instant the Barracuda flicked overhead, ensuring a parting death to many more.

Cheated for so long, the sonic wave clapped over the ruins, sweeping away sound, debris and ragged bodies into one single indescribable moment of concussive chaos. Sated, the Barracuda arced away through an open parkland sky, receding engines rumbling a harsh, but victorious howl.

Elan'Jhin felt it all, and the rumbling departure still revibrated deep in his chest. His punished form prostrate to the fury he had just lived through.

He rolled off Kuna'Ro, in time to see the perpetrator of their inglorious salvation meet up with its partner and depart. Everything seemed to heave a final sigh, and go silent. Next to him Kuna'Ro propped herself up, exchanging power clips between her pack charger and carbine while turning her dented helm to regard Elan'Jhin,

“One raik'or...” she began her count anew.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Tau units flitted across the largest wall display within the orbital command chamber, Jisu'ro paying particular attention to those about Estaria and Capital city, admiring how quickly the cadre reformed within a few raik'or of the attacks occurring. He expected nothing less.

The tau had learned long ago, a diplomatic mission without a response to hostile overtures would invariably fail. So it came as little surprise to discover that the ceremonial cadres involved were often filled with some of the most able warriors in the Empire. They were honed fighters who were prepared for sudden action, becoming enured to the draining effect of apprehension during political tensions and ready for sacrifice if needs be.

Out here, near several fluid border zones, cadres such as these were the most elite he could ever hope to command. As much as Jisu'Ro felt his gut tighten with every raik'an that passed and their battle here drew closer, he felt his pride bare fangs and dare the drantakh to try their best.

"Shas'El?"

Reverie broken, Jisu'Ro turned about, looking up to meet Ru'Che's gaze.

Uncharacteristically the tall kor commander was amidst the operation rings at the foot of the terrace.

"Kor'o?"

"A word aside if you please" he replied quietly.

The two drew away, nearer the entrance. It was Ru'che who spoke first,

“How goes the redeployment?”

“Very well in fact. My best hope is we cause the drantakh some concern when they discover our planet side assets are no longer where they belong. Lord Marshall's offer has been a boon strategically. I've also been able to seal a majority of the orbital with so few personnel aboard, it's almost halved every aspect of my security effort”

Ru'Che seemed pleased, glancing at the approach of the flotilla,

“Our response in Capital?” he questioned anew.

“Only a few moments away,” Jisu'Ro said, “I'll have to return to the operations suite in a raik'or”

Jisu'Ro shuffled expectantly, he could see Ru'Che summing up an order,

“Shas'el, organise several of your best controllers to support the hand over planet side when you are done”

“I have organised a suitable team already, if they haven't gone with the latest Orca, they will do so within next few raik'or” Suddenly the Shas'el realised what the Kor'o was implying,

“You're not confident we can hold them here long enough are you?”

“No” his friend's lean face became more gaunt, “I've been running my simulations; this will be a battle fought and ended on the ground. It will take them too many rotaa to wipe out the surveillance network to really cripple the defense effort before help arrives. This orbital is nothing but a toll the have to pay on their way in”

“How long do you believe you can occupy them?”

“They’re expecting something easy for our size, but we can hit above our weight and that should cause them some initial pause. Our fire solutions are from an established orbit, so the first exchanges will benefit us, after that? Less than a rotaa, possibly half that if they produce something new.”
The pair exchanged like-minded glances about dirty surprises.

Drawing a tight face, the shas’el observed the busy command area then looked back,

“Shall I send down my security teams and set up an automated defence network here?”

“Yes, I think it would be the wiser option and it will include you. Aun Jaun’Qoul will need your warriors to support Lord Marshall”

Jisu’ro compressed a bit. He saw the reasoning, with Elan’Jhin missing; he was the unilateral cadre commander. Losing both the Kor’o and himself was simply not acceptable.

“Understood” Jisu’ro affirmed, lips taut, “You get off this glorified satellite the moment it goes down the burrow Ru’Che”

His lanky friend smiled, “You have my word”

Grunting, half convinced, the shas’el shrugged,

“I’ll organise the new transfers with your handlers and have Rius’lan upload a vesa defense network from planet side, for now though, I need to deal with this”

They exchanged a nod, Jisu’Ro moving off to oversee the first counter-attack planned for the Capital interlopers.

Stepping into the base level of the VTOL storage chamber, one experienced a slight inverse vertigo after the confined passages within the bunker. In the half lit darkness of the modified missile silo, all twelve platter levels lay stacked in rings the length of the cavernous central space; Damian marvelled again that such a space had held a single, gargantuan anti-ship missile. The very warhead launched by his own grandfather so many decades ago.

All along the cathedral heights, a dozen aero techs busied themselves. Moving charge carts and munition trolleys upon elevators attached to enormous support pylons that ran the length of the silo. They had been installed alongside the modified platter levels when his family first conceived of the silo's potential for storing a covert VTOL wing. The upper four spacious enough for the craft, with the lower levels rebuilt as workshops and stores for everything they required.

Since this morning, most of the VTOL's had prepped then left, hovering upward through the centre and out spilt hemisphere blast doors. They had departed to the field south of the forest, including escorts, the result left a garden worth of flora and earth on the silo floor. Currently the techs focussed a final effort upon awakening the last of the stored Vector fighters. It was impressively fast work, each sleeping Vector had until the night before, been sheathed under tarps and mothballed.

“You’ve been holding out on me”

He turned about to see Kali swagger over, her eyes skyward, tracing lustful lines over the military grade fighters several

platters above. Like him, she wore a Karapeshi style flightsuit with all bushland hues. In spite of the androgynous effect one observed with military apparel, the suit still lost out against her physique.

“Spoils of war Miss Rashiede” he smiled with theatrical smugness.

“Helps when family friends scored the production rights”

“That and we had the tau over for lunch too”

“Ah yes, the *General and the Ambassador*. Learned about that in preparatory school” Kali smirked.

Damian grinned back, then looked upward also,

“I’ve got Mitchum and his brother, with Kyle and ‘Bells, running cover for the Versas when they head out, that leaves two Vexes”

“Who’s got those two?”

“You and Me”

“You are forgiven for holding out Mister Marshall”

He gave Kali a wink, “pre-flight them would you? I’ve got to ensure our tau friends are ready”

“Sure” she chirped, heading towards the closest elevator.

Damian watched her go, while toying with the communicator disc inside his neck ring. He came to a realisation, stopping to merely utter the Ambassador’s name.

“Lord Marshall?”

“Ambassador; good, figured this comm out thankfully”

“Excellent, you’re asking about the recon team?”

“Yes and the liaison?”

“Fio’el Rius’lan will be joining you. He is on his way down and has expressed a desire to see these devices first hand if he can”

Damian knew the name; several major infrastructure projects for sanitation and power had been led by the well liked, somewhat idiosyncratic chief engineer.

“Look forward to meeting him. I’m just waiting for my Master at Arms to confirm the lift schedule”

“Not too much longer I hope, the next wave of Kor’o Ru’Che’s people will be arriving”

Damian half heard the overly pedantic concern, he watched Kali give a big grin and double hand sign of joy as she worked about the first Vector,

“I’ll be escorting the recon transport with a second Vector to scout out to the first layover point on our way into Karapesh. Might as well use the speed”

“Yes, well be cautious.”

Jaun’Qoul was quite formal when he spoke, but his concern was obvious.

“I will Ambassador” Damian replied warmly as the link clicked off.

Seeing Elliot approach with the head warden alongside, Damian began twisting inside, trying to mask it in front of Elliot. Was he really living out some crazy sense of Family pride, cheating those loyal to him of their lives in a foolhardy raid?

“We’re ready,” the Master at Arms reported smartly as he drew up before Damian.

“Good, thanks for organising the lift. I’ve spoken with the crews about the first layover” Damian replied with an almost perfunctory tone as his mind began to race.

Elliot gave a dry smile, “Everyone has their mission packet. Five and Six will carry the hot chargers, so make sure they get there. That should insure this isn't a one-way trip. One other thing though” the head warden moved closer on Elliot’s word.

Offering a thick, silver alloy tube, the wisened caretaker rotated it to reveal the Karapeshi First emblem, embossed midway along the length with staunch seals each end.

“You had best give this to Lieutenant Kaero Rales, his father Kellar ensured it safe before joining your father that night; Kaero should carry it now” barely able to hold it steady, the warden proffered it again.

Damian took the canister, feeling the weight of both the object and history held within the four-foot length.

“Thank you both, for this and everything” Damian nodded, hoping he conveyed enough reverence and humility despite his internal concerns about the future.

After a silence between them, the older man began to depart, satisfied that years of stewardship had ensured a legacy would continue.

Elliot’s own father, Ferra, had also been a young lieutenant fighting with Gideon Marshall during the raid that took this bunker, and consequently one of only a couple dozen survivors. When the Family massacre occurred, being much older, Elliot had been studying abroad on a Marshall tertiary scholarship. Both of these men had lost their fathers that night. It wasn’t long after

that Elliot reprised his father's position as Household Master at Arms; so it seemed fitting to ask the thoughts of such a man on a day like this, particularly holding the heirloom.

"Did your father ever say anything about the raid, here I mean?"

Elliot paused, then looked up the silo heights,

"He spoke of a few things for certain, his own concerns and fears beforehand," he noticed the younger man shift slightly at that, satisfied he had judged right, he continued, "there was one thing I figure worthwhile for a son of Gideon to hear."

Damian raised an eyebrow; surprised the man had a prepared response. His expression encouraged Elliot to answer.

"Step forward with me today and no one will step back tomorrow."

"Your father said that?"

"No, your grandfather did, just before they attacked."

Damian went quiet, fending off that gnawing concern he was taking a similar step for the wrong reasons, one hand tracing the embossed emblem subconsciously. Elliot watched the younger man grip the canister,

"My Lord, we have to do something, and if this is our only chance in a time running out of opportunities, I assure you," he looked at Damian carefully, "everyone here is willing to trade their future so others can get a chance to continue tomorrow. It is why people have made the choices we are presented with today before. Now, it is our turn."

They looked at each other quietly, Damian had no idea what to say or if anything really needing saying after that. Finally they shook hands.

Elliot smiled, "Our fathers would be proud sir" giving a reassuring nod to the young Lord.

Watching Elliot leave, Damian began to embrace what needed to be done, despite every rational concern a gamble must be made for their future. Deeds be done or done unto you, he mused.

"Hey! Daydreamer!" Kali shouted from above.

Damian snapped out of his introspection, looking upward. He acknowledged with a wave then moved toward the nearest elevator punching in the platter number. When he alighted, Damian saw Kali eye both him and the long canister,

"You okay?"

"Mmm, just..." he paused, "something my grandfather once said" he added quietly.

She regarded him a moment then offered up his visor brace after Damian stowed the canister,

"Karapesh always needs a Marshall" she jested.

Damian smiled briefly, taking up the band, her remark tolling loudly in his ears. His family was buried in the red earth of Karapesh, seemingly drawing colour from his bloodline. There was no more a fitting place for him to lie down in the end, he considered.

Looking across to Kali settling into her cockpit, she caught his glance before he turned away.

"Let's go home" she smiled.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Dranta

Fleet Operations Orbital, Court of High-Tiers

**One year, Two Months & Six days before the Odysseus
Offensive [Terran Time]**

Satchel held close against her flank, the aide darted through another security detail patrolling the outer corridor of the Orbital's Flag deck. At an unfamiliar junction, she found herself checking the direction monitor; spying the answer, she darted right. Coming about the corner of that corridor, she was suddenly confronted by a Naval Heavy Assault Troop. Her own dark grey uniform, decorated with slender dress plates, looked insipid next to the armoured brawn of the Drantakh before her.

“Identify yourself” chuffed the troop leader.

“Eighth-Lariss of Division for Commander Kierkook, Third Tier Fleet Op” She shoved out a disc.

The trooper manipulated it through a swipe scan, then waited.

“I am in a hurry” she encouraged sharply.

The entire troop bristled.

After a few moments, the scanner gave a tone and the troop leader offered her ID disc back,

“You may pass Eighth” the intentional dropping of her name, a calculated slight.

Few troopers liked non-combat tier climbers. Even more so those that out ranked them. She eye balled the leader then dropped her

gaze upon his shoulder plate glyph. Making sure he noticed her remember his name.

“Thank you”

She pushed past the dozen troopers before they could even give way, stepping through the ornate bulkhead behind, and into the Court auditorium beyond.

“..within the last four,” the Third-Commander paused as an aide arrived, passing her satchel onto his desk, “..years, we have catalogued no further notable naval activity since”

Those gathered considered the implication of the intelligence among their own staff. Each of the Drantakh High-Tier officers, seated behind crescent desks that rose from the floor of the court auditorium; all were clearly pleased at the news.

“This is everything?” Third-Kierkook queried his aide in aside.

From a seat behind, she tilted her head to one side, in the affirmative. The female was slightly flushed by her impromptu summons, but she had delivered everything in good time.

“Excellent” he added.

Lariss looked at Third-Kierkook, quietly triumphant. That was about as much thanks as she and her unit would get. How this drantakh had obtained the archeotech in the first place was still a mystery to her. Regardless, they had studied it relentlessly and after many trials, it was ready for operational use. Though many leagues lesser than the construct they had used as a guide.

The Third-Commander turned back to the court and continued his briefing greatly buoyed by this success,

“Furthermore, my Division people have confirmed completion of the Far-Leap project”

Those gathered went quiet at the announcement, dropping that project name abruptly ended all discussions. It was without doubt, the most secretive program Fleet Division had undertaken in recent times. All the rumour mill had was the name and that strategically, it was a game changer for the drantakh military.

“This is exceptional news Third-Kierkook”

Ultima-Eti had drew in a slow breath, the dranta’s aged form leaning heavily over his broad desk, weighed down by ornate plating and embellished undergarments of Office.

He was situated at one head of the ovoid configuration of desks. Opposite this position were the Weapons of the Ultima, which lay atop the Plinth of Office. A dais that every auditorium was furnished with should the Ultima chair a meeting within any about the Drantakh realm.

“Exceptional indeed..” the Ultima muttered quietly, his head lulling from side to side in satisfaction. The cranial sheath-crown, splayed broadly behind his brow, caused a glowing nimbus about his equine head in the downward lighting of the Court auditorium. Aged eyes regarded the Third-Commander for a moment more,

“Based upon all you have told us so far and the finalisation of this Far-Leap, you have kept so very close to yourself, you wish to propose action upon Odysseus?”

The Great leader used the human Imperial Gothic name, so there was no mistake as to who once owned that sphere before, almost invoking some dire stellar ghost of legend.

Everyone was quiet as the Third-Commander answered,

“With the Tau seemingly satisfied it is safe, I do believe now is the time to erode their grip on that world, it’s position on our frontier and obvious benefits to Gulf trade, mark it as one of five we should attempt. I personally feel it is the best of our options” He glanced at the rotund Third-Jorvun, an ally of his within the Fleet court. The final member of their trio was on deployment, which Keirkook hoped to capitalise on during this Operations court for his own gains. Jorvun rolled forward under his mass of outwardly spread plate armour to add the orchestrated piece,

“I would agree with my fellow Third-Commander. We have endured the Tau politically only to have them manoeuvre against us four times, actively hindering our expansion in the Gulf region. This has resulted in no small loss of troops and materiel. We should take this world they seem intent on, and do so with force. A rightful demonstration to remind them of which border it truly lies behind and that we shall broker no more when challenged.”

Quite a speech of support, Kierkook considered, possibly a little theatrical for his liking but still, the remaining Tiers of command seemed halfway convinced by it. They had been embarrassed too many times by the Tau Empire and now with the Far-Leap project operational; he may have his chance to lead a prized Fleet commission. Normally some of his main rivals would voice their concerns, shoving a carcass under his bed, but after so many setbacks no one was in the mood for further surreptitious methods; well maybe not as complex a subterfuge as before. It was high time they punched the tau square in their flat, split faces.

He and Jorvun let their combined recipe simmer in the court a few moments longer,

“I would be correct to assume my fellows of the Tier and his Ultima, are of similar mind?” Kierkook opened the discussion anew.

The room was quiet except for the omnipresent hum of the orbital. The Ultima looked about slowly for dissent. Normally he would end by conferring with the duo of Second-Commanders. But both had consecutively perished in recent, Tau incurred, setbacks. Their desks were politely prepared, but empty. Without this ritual pause in the proceedings, Ultima-Eti had instead finished his obligatory perusal upon Third-Commander Kierkook,

“Your assumption finds common level upon your Tier, Third-Commander”

Kierkook tilted his head low, then looked up,

“In such case,” Kierkook began, “I took the initiative in preparing an operational outline for the taking of Odysseus based upon the initial intelligence gathered”

Drawing a file from his own satchel, he retrieved a disc kept within. Slotting the data record into a purpose made recess within his desk. Quietly the inbuilt imaging unit projected a hologram that filled the centre of the room.

Characters and images floated about for all too see while the already low lights dimmed further. Amidst the visuals sat a lonely orb, the planet of Odysseus.

“Among several border systems, we have inserted low profile mercenary infiltration cells actively recruiting potential on world dissidents. After careful insertion of unaligned human

operatives some time ago, we have greatly progressed this world's covert programs"

He played with a touch pad on his desk to alter several details,

"We have good relations with two factions on this planet. The Karapeshi Rebellion and descendants of Imperial units once stationed there. Naturally we have exploited these with offers of munitions, sub-par arms and false covers explaining our operatives' presence. This has been successful enough to ensure a front that would mask any large insertion at a time of our choosing should this foothold be expanded upon"

He paused to allow the Ultima to condone the action. There was a slow, purposeful and positive side tilt of that glowing nimbus,

"Explain to us your plan, Second-Commander"

The commission was his.

Forcing down a rush of pride, he casually drew closer the satchel Eighth-Lariss had provided earlier, withdrawing a prepared research file and accompanying disc from inside,

"Allow me to explain what Far-Leap has to offer".

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Drantakh Assault Flotilla

Present Day

The closer the engagement window approached, the more the crew became quiet at their stations, the background hum of electronics and the ship itself growing ever louder. Marked by triangular icons, their flotilla descended methodically down the display before Third-Jorvun and his attendant Fifth's. Gradually approaching a lone orbital that floated atop the world below. Everyone chanced a look to see the vector line progress, but largely kept to his or her consoles, ensuring their own part in the assault ran true.

“Anything?” Third-Jorvun queried.

“Nothing Third-Commander” offered a Sixth, from a device packed corner.

So far, so good Jorvun decided. Since Second-Kierkook had entrusted the assault flotilla to him, an opportunity to gain prestige in the eyes of the Tiers as repayment for his support. He would play this as cautiously as he could, for really all that stood in their way and a complete invasion of Odysseus, was a single Tau Orbital platform.

“Relay signal, inform Fourth-Lokha he is breaking pattern, have him correct two degrees” the order transmitted swiftly. Soon enough, the offending Frigate realigned within the polar charge. The plan was demanding, with an angle of assault that required operational coordination beyond that of most ships of

the Dranta line. For now, Third-Jorvun's command Frigate was the eyes of the attack. Like wars of old, he led the charge. About the rectangular Command centre, where a collection of the most advanced Dranta technologies had been crammed together, there was little space for operators or the decision makers. Different sections of the infested walls were monitored by crash-chair seated operators, while the Tiered officers stood about a central command display and broad plotter bench. Everyone wore the slim grey armour plates and fatigues of Fleet, presently bathed in hue altering battle-alert lights.

"Engagement line imminent" reported the navigation Fifth. Third-Jorvun felt his broad gut tingle, for once across, they were committed to suffer fire, even if they withdrew.

He was for some part, still angry. Their part had been rushed. The whisper-signal had come two days early, not allowing the Third to engage via a more optimum, and faster trajectory. All counter to the operational outlines Second-Kierkook had crafted with his impressive Division Unit. Something very serious had forced the hand of their Mission assets on Odysseus; otherwise there would be equally serious repercussions regardless of victory. The Heavy Assault carriers welcomed it however, embarked troop complements had become restless during the wait and his Assault Frigates could only run so many simulations before fraying the nerve of their crews. Notwithstanding the additional risk of discovery with each passing day, no matter how good their energy signature discipline was.

"We are engaged" commented the Navigation-Fifth. The Drantakh officer gave Third-Jorvun a wary glance.

“Note it in the log,” he replied to the Fifth's gaze then turned to the plotter.

His tactical officers mirrored him,

“Needle–beam the flotilla, form the assault line along the preset distances”

“Sending”

“Weapons–Fifth, range”

“We’re one hour out of our own engagement window Third–Commander”

Jorvun chewed slowly, he loathed diving down the throat of the beast and having to endure their fangs first. This all could have been avoided,

“Tell the transports to hold off cycling the transmitters until my order”

“Sending”

“Third–Commander?” Jorvun’s tactical advisor, Fifth–Larchun, gave him a quizzical look at the order.

“Fifth–Larchun, this is the tau. If you transmitted a love note to Dranta recently, I would wager you a week’s roster some split–face read it before she did,” he looked down at the dome topped spindle icon before them and considered the occupant's therein aloud, “they would know something was up if two of our line suddenly emitted off the scale reactor readings. Their perceptive arrays are not to be underestimated”

He mulled further to himself, there was also possibility the tau already knew, given the actions occurring planet side. Surprises were fleeting in a technologically advanced war. They could be playing coy right now, waiting for him to flourish his hand, only for it to be removed at the wrist.

“Warp-Skaters!”

Third-Jorvun looked sharply to the display over his shoulder, this far out? Intermittent echoes flickered; leaving residual icons that coalesced ever closer to the flotilla. The Drantakh had experience with these accursed warp-skein surfing capital missiles. The ship-killers flitted in out of real space to gain unheard of velocities by way of small micro-dives, becoming a nightmare for ECM to combat at range as their trajectories winked out randomly.

“Eight, no.. Eleven inbound! We've been targeted!”

“We hold the formation, no one break–“

An almighty shudder reverberated through the hull, a near miss.

“Second salvo inbound, fleet ECM reads another eleven”

The first wave had informed solutions to the second, the third wave would be even nastier and so on. Weapons of the tau, they had such new ways to reach out and kill you.

“Third-Jorvun, we must release the batteries” urged Fifth-Larchun, speaking the thoughts of each taxed electronic warfare operator.

Jorvun chuffed his annoyance; he had wanted to keep the point defence magazines and capacitors at full cycle, ready to close with the Orbital. Running their reactors now only chanced failure early in the engagement. It was those last few moments that were murderous if you didn't mount thorough grid fire. That said, having a ‘Skater materialise in your hull was a decidedly terminal event and the chances were running higher after coming under fire this far out,

“Batteries; Counter-fire free” he agreed with some frustration.

Far above the world's polar sky, a halo of balefire and violent iridescence glittered and sparkled; it appeared as if the stars themselves sought to smite each other.

Rolling back down the charnel pit barricade, ui'Kuna'Ro sidled up against a near unconscious Elan'Jhin,

“They haven't sent through anything new yet Shas'el, I've counted several times now, it's strange”

She fussed over her carbine while regarding the perimeter again.

“Hrnnh, probably expected us done..” he fumbled his sentence, “I mean, the fly over, ..unexpected, saved us” She nodded casually; convinced no one had expected that aerobatic swing of fortune. Across from her the only other survivor, la'Chona was maintaining a more vigilant watch than her. He was a tough, if stunted shas'la and very clearly a proven fighter. She was certain after this, no shas'la in the Cadre would dare slight him by reiterating the belief he had been misplaced by a faulty Fio progen-creche incubator drone.

An odd flurry in the sky caught her attention; she raised the carbine up and auto-focussed with the weapon's enhanced optics,

“Friends are coming” she announced her atmospheric discovery. They all looked upwards.

High above, like a mad avian flock having forgotten to fly, an entire wing of kor'vesa tumbled unceremoniously downward. Kuna'Ro adjusted the gain on her scope, spotting a trio of

skydiving silhouettes still higher; a Crisis team. They had to be led by either vre'Es'Shi or Kan'ka, she wagered to herself.

“Extraction?” mumbled the shas'el.

“No, Ar'eldi insertion”

She looked over to say more, but the shas'el had finally passed out. Kuna'Ro silently hoped this drop heralded a concerted rescue effort.

The vesa continued their reckless trajectories, seemingly prepared to crash headlong into the ruined compound. At about two hundred tor'lek they righted on gyros, inbuilt grav compensators killing their airspeed. Performing a synchronised formation manoeuvre, they swept across the compound, to create a perimeter bristling with carbines and armoured domes.

Quietly lowering into their midst, a commlink drone with two companion shield drones, took up protective positions about the barricade. Hurtling not far behind, the xor'vesa la'rua rolled out, righting themselves in the last few hundred tor'lek, hooves first. A mix of grav-tech and vectored thrusts provided all the braking required, annulling their inertia and flaring up the loose debris as a chorus of pneumatic armoured hooves thudded down atop the rubble in unison.

Kuna'Ro regarded the Crisis team as they scanned their immediate surrounds, weapons at the ready. After a moment the lead XV turned about and stomped toward the survivors. Climbing atop the barricade, she hoped to face the new arrival at a more even height.

“Shas’ui, status?” a new voice crackled into her headset as their comm-net synched.

When the XV took up an air of casualness, trademark of one particular shas’vre, her recognition of the voice mattered little,

“Four critical, two in the fight Vre’Kan’ka. The staff are trapped in the bunker below, but we have had no contact since an explosion within the upper building”

Kan’ka took this in while observing what must have been a bitter fight; these shas’la had done their duty to the last,

“Where is the Shas’el? I’ve been sent to locate him”

Kuna’Ro waved behind her to a battered warrior with armour rent in several places. None of the visual cues remained of his rank; the lack of a locator signal only confirmed the device had been damaged at some point.

“El’Jhin needs extraction immediately, as do the other three”

The suit’s helm glanced upwards as if spying something distant,

“I’ve already flagged an extraction flight that’s on circuit, we were unsure how welcome our arrival would be. Hopefully any follow up fio’vesa will get to the staff below when they arrive. To be honest, they are safer down there for now”

Kan’ka looked about the bloodied rubble, his digital gaze settling upon a dead insurgent,

“I have further orders to relieve Capital’s Government district, then link up with the remains of the gue’la Militia command. The sensor-net is barely differentiating the bio readings within the urban density here. Have you seen any raiders moving beyond the compound?”

She let her carbine hang loosely to one side in mock thought,

“Not sure, I was preoccupied”

The Xor'Vesa nodded idly, then caught onto her tone,

“Fair point, it was worth asking though,” she could hear Kank'ka wince at himself, “I'm going to task two kor'vesa squadrons to stay and–“

He was interrupted by a burst of actinic sparks crackling about the parkland, heralding a new brace of energetic orbs. Each snapped haphazardly into existence; out of the glow yet more Drantakh and Naghyri raiders arrived, all too casually. They carried support gear and random kitbags, patently unaware of the rapid demise the preceding assault wave had suffered at the guns of an expert kor pilot.

When confronted by a hovering wall of tau military hardware, their surprise was something to behold. Vre'Kan'ka rotated on the spot, signalled weapons free, and fired.

At such close range with burst cannon, a massed carbine fusillade and Kan'ka's choicely placed plasma bolts; the hapless aliens were blasted into seared viscera and anatomical ruin across the parkland surround. Punctuating the end of hostilities, a stuttered vesa carbine burst elicited a final rasping yelp.

Protected by the battlesuit bulk before her, Kuna'Ro had sought no cover during the one-sided firefight, feeling a detached satisfaction at witnessing the carnage. When the tension subsided, the shas'ui offered up what seemed a trivial piece of advice now,

“The count is twelve raik'or, between waves” she said.

“Best synch that count into the kor’vesa network,” Kan’ka replied in aside, then continued where he had left off, “I’ll take a squadron of six with us and move on, the remainder should suffice for next time”

“Should do, considering”

A distant crackle of small arms snatched at their attention, the city’s population was still embroiled in the most unexpected of battles.

“They fought a good fight Kuna’Ro”

The shas’ui stiffened slightly at her senior’s words; so far she had kept thoughts about their losses at arms length,

She gave a respectful sign back, “Hunt well Kan’ka”

At that, the Crisis team jogged out of the compound, halting at the edge of the park to survey their options. The shas’ve spied a vantage point and boosted himself out of sight, his team following with a small wake of drones flitting behind.

Finally allowing her guard to drop, Kuna’Ro slid back down behind the barricade, enveloped by the comforting stillness within the shield drone energy field. Eventually the sound of familiar turbines began to filter over the parkland; by then she was lost in thought over those who would not be leaving here.

No sooner had the support por’la gathered up the wounded, the compound was filled by a fresh la’rua. As the Orca dropship lifted off, Kuna’Ro began accessing and manipulating operational rosters via the on board tactical console. After several attempts at forgery and plausible mistakes of fact, a slight murmur of

satisfaction escaped her lips. The drantakh and her would meet again.

Spike bolts pelted the armoured transport, causing Leena and her detail to flinch back behind its bulk. The high velocity stakes were lethal against personnel, but singularly useless against serious armour.

“Bastard” grunted Jared, her specialist, “almost had a bead on that one boss” he flashed a devil-eating grin at Leena while working the action of the high-powered rifle again.

“You’ll get another chance I’m sure” she commented, assessing her handful of smartly dressed security agents.

Daring a scan over the sloped bonnet of her client’s ride, she took in the whole four-storey government block; now a battlefield, strewn with civilian and Militia dead. Bodies lay across the entrances, forecourt and lawn surrounds. She could see a number of the gangly aliens flick in and out of cover from those same front entrances and upper windows, trading fire with various armed defenders dug in along the semi-circle entranceway drive.

Normally a rolling cavalcade of military and security transports for the dignitaries inside, the semi-permanent row of vehicles had become a makeshift defence perimeter for everyone to take cover among and return fire; the space between having become a no man’s land.

She ducked back down, “Complete mess guys” she spat.

Two of them kept a look out around the ends of the transport, the other four including herself huddled in close, assault carbines tucked aside,

“Right, we’ve lost contact with our man. Poor bastard is stuck inside, probably dead. But he’s our paycheck, so we have got to at least make an attempt”

The group shuffled uneasily, every sortie had been a massacre, the magically conjured aliens intended to stay put while their kill teams hunted everyone inside. As if to punctuate the point, an explosion, screams and the chinking sound of spike weapons erupted from within another wing of the Government building.

“That’s two sections out of four boss, I doubt we’ll find anyone alive in there at this rate”

Jared was right, the circular core structure, which housed the auditorium hall, had four wings jutting out at angles. After they had taken control of the core building, it was allowing the aliens to move from wing to wing methodically.

Leena grimaced in thought. She would have to bide her time, cowering behind this fat arsed luxury ride was making her itch to get in the fight and not think straight. The recent murder of escaping staffers they had all witnessed earlier, played through her mind again and she gripped her carbine tightly.

“Leena...” a voice broke her momentary brooding. Farren was distracted by a glinting reflection from the newly invaded wing, his eyes stayed fixed while she shuffled along the chassis to look over his shoulder.

“That’s tap-code” she commented on spying it also.

“Mmm,” Farren murmured, focussed on reading the winks of light, “smart bugger, four men, blue.. fifteen seconds. This might work” he added with a buoyed confidence.

Leena looked about, and saw the appropriately coloured vehicle, one of her competitor’s rigs. She tapped her earbead and linked to the security channel common to all companies.

“Ray, this is Leena. You see that tap-code?”

“Ya, we’re ready. I’m about done with sitting on my ass” She saw the grey haired veteran look about the end of his rig, nod and flick out a five count.

“Jared, nail that bastard behind the right entranceway colonnade.”

“Boss” he rolled back down under the rear wheel housing.

“Rest of you, cover the first group, anything that sticks it’s whatever out except for that window, shred it”

“Boss” they chorused and checked their automatics.
Five.

Ray kept his word, his small unit of six operatives stepped out expensive, the hammer of their heavy carbines raked every suspect window, the living cordon a shimmer of muzzle flash and casings. A crack-whump punctured the din, the muzzle breaker blasting dust under the limousine. Jared spat a satisfied profanity as his mark flopped out onto the forecourt a gaping hole spewing red and yellow fluids.

Leena fired before she really saw the alien, the lanky arm darting out from an upper window overlooking the escape route. It pulled back as her rounds pockmarked the masonry. The first knot of people fled for their lives wailing in terror. One

immediately went backwards, the spike picking the man off his feet before he had made another step to freedom.

“Rooftop!” Leena growled whilst caught out engaging another sniper.

Farren pivoted, spied the alien atop the roofline of the wing they looked onto. He put a burst centre mass. The gangly figure stumbled and fell over the apex out of sight. A blur of hysterical figures ducked behind the blue rig and a cheer rang out from the semi-circle.

“Got three Leena” Ray commented bluntly, his voice bitter over the man sprawled out only a few feet away.

“Two more groups boss” Farren clipped, watching for the alien on the roof again.

They repeated the spectacle twice more, the insurgents didn’t reveal themselves again, deciding they could spare a few humans and focus on killing easier targets inside. Even as the survivors fell bodily into the arms of the security teams, more spike fire and screams erupted deep inside the government block.

“That’s what? Eleven out of five hundred odd people?” grunted Jared, priming his rifle again as he came out from under the wheel housing.

They all exchanged dark glances.

A commotion from inside the office the recent escape had erupted from caught everyone’s attention. Glass, wood and decor crashed and toppled, then the whole window smashed aside, an alien tumbling outward with its victim, the duo struggling across the lawn. Everyone who could drew a bead attempting to interject with a shot, but the embroiled figures offered no opportunity. A familiar spike pistol action sounded out across the lawn and the

fight ended. The alien flapped around, tried to get up only to roll hapless to one side of the man underneath. The alien gurgled within its bulbous multi-lens head armour, and then finally after a twitch, it died.

“Crazy bastard, he shot it” Farren couldn’t contain his surprise.

Those nearest shouted to the man to get up, get into cover, but he remained still and soon everyone quietened down fearing the worst. Abruptly the figure rolled onto his haunches, a little winded, then snatched up the spike pistol, scanning his surrounds like a pro.

“Jaida! Now!” he shouted, leading the pistol along the windows overlooking the escape route.

A dishevelled woman half leapt, half fell out of the broken window frame and ran to the lone man, ignoring the loss of her glasses. Quickly the duo ran sideways for the line of armoured vehicles as every able weapon covered the miraculous escape.

The man thrust his partner behind Leena’s transport and tucked in amongst the security team.

“Hi” he exalted with adrenalin-laced eyes, offering a slime-covered hand, “Lyal Ollesan, IDC”

“Leena Winslow, Winslow Sec-Ops” she eyed the man over as they shook hands.

Before she could comment further, the sound of turbines approached from the direction of Memorial Parklands. Just beyond the entrance wall perimeter, three Tau battle suits thudded down in the street, their helms tracking the facia of the Government building. A lone armoured hovertank descended

rapidly behind them, the tau transport disgorged a dozen tau warriors in armoured battle dress, just as a flock of drones slid through the air above. The hovering gun platforms paired off overhead the line of human defenders. Immediately they set about suppressing sniping locations, places Leena had also surmised the insurgent aliens had taken up.

“It’s on,” Jared grunted, breaking his rifle down and swinging it over his back, he drew a modified sidearm. Everyone instinctively knew the battle plan, grabbing what munitions they had and readying for the death sprint across open ground. Leena handed her heavy calibre pistol over to Lyal.

“Thanks, not much use this” he wagged the oversized spike pistol and tossed it, “I think it’s user imprinted” he smiled sardonically while also ridding himself of his ruined suit jacket.

The tau battlesuits quickly vaulted the outer wall on a roar of jet thrusts, landing in the middle of the human defensive line. Plodding purposefully forward through the vehicles, their weapons whined with power and cautiously tracked. The trio were suddenly met with a rain of spike bolts and the scene became bathed in blue plasma light and strobing pulse fire as the tau replied.

There was no single commanding shout to charge, or a lone acknowledged order for action. Every single officer, soldier and security agent ran at the ruined entrances in an uproar of vocalised anger, their weapons fore and firing at whatever tried to stop them. The assault quickly arrived in amongst cover on the other side unscathed. So rapid was their charge, they had

either caught Death napping, or possibly he too had taken cover in the face of such naked vengeance.

Lyal leapt through a shattered ground floor window nearest to him, instantly confronting an alien insurgent. At this range any weapon was good enough to kill and he opened fire, it jinxed aside and drew a bead on him, whipping a lanky pistol arm about. A pulse round exploded the bulbous helm and Lyal's would be killer flopped away headless, a wet burst of fluids splattered across the wall behind.

Bounding down from a braced fire position atop the window frame, a stout tau warrior trotted past Lyal with a curt nod. Wordlessly they teamed up and the odd pair moved deeper into the building, rejoining the murderous fray.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Hold” the Kor’o made a deft hand movement.

The long-range gunnery kor’ui checked his fire. As the range closed and the capital missiles lost their evasive ability to skip toward the Drantakh fleet, the enemy defense grid was proving even more effective. Best save what few they had for that final fight over death’s ground, Ru’Che mused to himself.

“Roll half, bring to bear new batteries, torpedoes with ECM and Marker mix. Maintain intercept fire.”

The command chamber remained calm, professional. Soft taps and considered movements of the crew maintained their morale, despite being hideously disadvantaged. He listened as they affected his orders smartly.

“Rolling Kor’o”

“Munitions transferring, one raik’or”

Gracefully pirouetting on its axis, the security waystation’s taxed firing tubes fell silent, fresh launchers taking up their allotment in the fire sequence.

“Roll complete Kor’o”

Announcing the completion, the kor’vre overseeing station management continued ensuring damage control vesa and munitions tractors were quickly dispatched. Her controllers a hive of activity, despite the orbital having gotten off lightly so far.

Renewing the barrage, Ru’Che settled long arms behind his back, one hand cusped in the other. The fight went well, despite the inevitable, causing the Drantakh some expense for such a small

defensive structure. He traced an eye over the graphical image of his station on the central curved tactical wall. The orbital was slightly tilted, the armoured dome protecting the deck column underneath like a broad umbrella in the most deadly of rain. Situated around the lower end, the main batteries were enjoying an unhindered field of fire across the lip of the dome, like ancient spearmen behind a shield wall. They could engage around the structure even positioned squarely, but at these distances, even a raik'an delay gave your enemy an advantage to spot and confuse inbound weapons.

A levitated platter of seafood morsels, which included a few local species Ru'Che had developed a taste for, passed atop a refreshment vesa. After taking a selection it politely continued deeper into the room, leaving the tau officer to consider a nagging curiosity as he ate. At current velocities, his opponent would bypass the station, manoeuvring through the planet's gravity causing him to reengage while attempting an orbital circuit under fire. It was obvious since the engagement had begun, but the questionable purpose of it still escaped Ru'Che.

He chewed lightly in thought and began manipulating a rough tactical hypothesis above the viewfield before him. Their trajectory intersected between his orbital and the world below. Dangerous if planet side defences were in place, but the Drantakh would know there were none, they only faced a lone orbital. He let the AI project several possible course lines. Something was escaping his attention. Looking up he reviewed the enemy fleet configuration on main tactical, then their resultant courses on his own display. The transports would be

ensconced behind a shield of frigates all the way through, leaving him further perplexed.

“Kor’o?”

He looked down politely from the upper platform to the nearby sensor suite, taking a pause to swallow.

“Yes Vre’Jasu?” he acknowledged the officer; curiously the kor’vre was still focussed on his own viewfield.

“We have intermittent light echoes returning from out system space. Main strategic now”

Ru’Che looked up sharply. His jaw line tensing as freckles of violet populated the indicated degree of reference. For the first time he felt a cooling flush of dread, that configuration was not unlike many he had dealt with in simulations since the tau had warred with these aliens. It was a vanguard element formation, and behind it no doubt, a Fleet of the Line.

Before Ru’che’s fear could unfurl banners and parade overtop his calm demeanour, it was barrelled aside by a sudden realisation in facing two fleets. He had been right from the start, the Drantakh were indeed going to bypass him, but not to force land their cargo planet side.

Ru’che danced long fingers within the viewfield. Tracing trajectories again, he saw the transports intersecting a short window where they would burn through the southern thermosphere. Insane if deploying a combat drop, but that was not their intention. He eased away from the sweeping arc of touch panels before him, the realisation of what the Drantakh where about to do finally dawning on him.

Aun'Jaun'Qoul listened to Ru'Che, the Ambassador's own face tightened as he realised exactly what Damian Marshall would now encounter, for the timing was terribly close.

"Your Excellency, he must know" Ru'Che argued respectfully.

The Aun was oddly quiet, deliberating internally despite knowing full well what must be done. He finally spoke with much care,

"He already shows signs of questioning why he leads his people into that complex. Should we give him reason to flounder in the knowledge that their deaths are assured and yet an even greater threat is to come? Or we remain quiet and leave him focussed and unaware, a chance to fight on ignorantly, in hope that they survive?"

The Kor'o was quiet; he understood the truth of it,

"He has to succeed" was all he could add.

"He and his people will give their world as much time as they can" Jaun'Qoul spoke quietly, if not reverently, "so we must give him as much time as we can, since it was a path we brought upon them"

Before Jaun'Qoul, the softly projected ghost drew itself up within the bunker's briefing chamber,

"My shadow will be long on this my final sunset" Ru'Che quoted an ancient work.

"I thank you for the shade" Jaun'Qoul provided the counter phrase.

Ru'Che smiled lightly then faded away, leaving a quiet Ambassador in the dimly lit space of the briefing room.

Shafts of light streaked overhead the smaller western Karapesh ranges in peach and violet rays, colouring the sky afire as soft mottled clouds reflected copper hues across the land. No matter his reservations, Damian could not deny the beautiful sunsets of his homeland. Breaking the quiet reverie, a tone played in his ear,

“Five minutes out” Kali announced the waypoint.

“El’Rius’lan?”

“Yes Lord Marshall?”

“Damian, please..”

Having corrected the stout fio several times during their continental sprint into southern Karapesh he was on the verge of giving up,

“We’re ready to cover Vre’Ulo and his team when they deploy”

“I’ll tell the shas’vre”

Bushland whipped below the trio of fast movers as Damian waited. The two vector fighters flew at full military power, either side of the cruising hovertank, and if the tau pilot so cared it could still leave them behind. Admittedly it was a grey area when gifting such equipment to an ally; the flyer in Damian, particularly Kali, often ruminated on this disparity despite their understanding of the reasons.

“He is ready” affirmed the engineer.

The three craft shot out over a low depression in the rolling plains, arcing to one side of a sprawling complex ahead. Before them lay several vehicle parks, permanent amusement stalls and a larger structure, the defunct Karapeshi War Museum. Long abandoned after being bombed repeatedly by the Rebels in

recent years. As sad as this was, the vandalism went so far as to destroy the glass encased dome that protected the last remaining, publicly known, missile silo of the Rising War. The underground structure slowly eroding like the budget assigned to maintain the site ever since. It was meant to be a reminder of what had been achieved in one day against the Imperium, now it was a gaping pock mark eyesore in the middle of nowhere, a symbol of how far Karapeshi pride had fallen in the last few decades. Tonight, in spite of this, the Karapeshi First would fill its corridors one more time.

Focussing on readouts projected across his field of view, Damian assessed the area for anything untoward, not one to rely on even the precognitive sensors of their tau allies. He spied two thermal readings near the preserved silo. A figure moved, then light winked tap-code began,

“We have confirmation, the Shas’vre is good to go” Damian said, satisfied.

“Understood”

Rear ramp lowering, the hovertank descended within a few feet of the ground. Sweeping across an open parking area as the stealth team vaulted out, each with a short jet burst, their forms fading before they even touched the bitumen. It was a disconcerting display seeing the whole unit visually disintegrate. However, locator beacons shone a bright blue across Damian’s visor.

“The shas’vre is deployed, moving to the perimeter” Rius’lan said while the hovertank arced away.

“Acknowledged”

Damian flicked his eyes across the wingman icon, comm-channel switching seamlessly,

“Kali, you’re in first, land on the ground deck. Plenty of room for everyone tonight”

A short wink of her icon, and the Vector on his left vaulted forward. It slid sideways to stop smarty above the gaping maw of the antique facility below; flight vanes flaring out like a raptor above hidden prey.

“Descending” she announced as the sleek VTOL lowered itself in complete rotations.

Damian continued to run cover while the tau approached the lip of the missile silo. Almost appearing apprehensive as the snub nose peeked over the edge.

“Contact, powering down..” Kali paused in a post check, “clear for next”

The transport hovered out purposefully, lowering itself similarly out of view into the man made chasm. Deftly guiding the much bulkier hovertank, the pilot settled down on the ground deck moments later. Eventually, after Damian did a wide circuit of the immediate area, he too followed suit, landing on the outer edge at the bottom of the silo shaft.

Vaulting out of his cockpit, he saw Rius’lan and Kali in conversation with the scout specialists, Kaero and Jenno while the tau pilot and sensor operator set up a small holo-array next to the recon hovertank.

“Quiet run” he commented, loosening some of his flight rig. The group regarded him, Rius’lan speaking after passing a glance at lieutenant Rales,

“The fighting is still far to the south, judging by the transmissions we intercepted”

The two Vector pilots nodded in that manner gue’la did when agreeing.

“Guess that’s good for the Versa’s coming down tonight”

“We’re setting up a passive array now,” the fio reassured, “I should have contact with the first satellite to pass over Karapesh shortly. It will give us some idea of what’s going on near the Ranges or anyone sneaking close”

“Good, looks like our boldness is staying charmed so far”

Damian stretched his taut frame, “Well, I’m going to grab a nap in one of the ring rooms here before the Versa’s arrive.

Lieutenant, a word?”

Kaero shrugged at Jenö, then followed after the Family Lord.

Damian moved to a familiar, but rusted doorway at the base of the missile silo, Kaero Rales at his side,

“Good to be back in a Vex sir?” Kaero asked with a gleam in his eye.

Damian chuckled, despite his wariness.

“Yeah, fast ship, Garmin would,” he paused, “well, he would have enjoyed a spin again” he said with more solemnity, nursing his ribs without realising.

He thought of years before, when he would smuggle Garmin onto base for highly illegal flights during training days and with Kali’s help. They never got picked up for it, but it soon ended as Damian cycled back into civilian life after a well-reviewed, two-year stint in the burgeoning Capital Militia. Kali had remained, addicted to the craft and the thrill. Even with the brief time they had been around each other of late, he could feel that past

emanate from her, though tension and familiarity could easily be drawing ghosts over his thoughts.

“He would have” the lieutenant reflected, lost in thought just as long, “gruff bastard”

They both smiled. Damian wasn’t the only Family youngster Garmin kept in line over the years.

Slipping a silvered canister out of his kitbag, Damian stopped,

“I brought this,” he commented, revealing the alloy tube.

The man’s eyes widened slightly, “Is that?”

Damian nodded, “The head warden suggested you take it. Your father hid it during the raid on the Estate” he offered the canister up.

Kaero ran a hand over the embossed emblem, then finally took a hold of it,

“Thank you sir, I’ll carry it every step”

“No thank you lieutenant, without sergeant Jenö and yourself, we wouldn’t even get a look into the cavern network. Even with the regiment involved, we will need everything, including our history to help us through”

Gripping the canister tightly, Kaero looked up,

“We’ll fight hard sir, first in”

“Last out.”

They saluted and Damian headed on toward a fitful rest. His mind filled with memories and concern for those who were about to follow him.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Ducking under the airborne obstacle, Jisu'ro deftly avoided another passing fio'vesa. Every corridor and chamber was bustling with relentless activity and countless other vesa units.

"In the Council's name," the Shas'el muttered. He had no idea the diplomatic mission had this much in storage back at the Southern Base.

"Shas'el, the Orca from Capital you flagged has arrived" a controller announced as requested.

Jisu tapped his commbead in acknowledgement, diverting the inspection route toward the centre of the concentric bunker and the cavernous missile silo at its heart. Avoiding several more vesa and attendant fio'la in the process.

The entire facility was getting an expeditious refit. As soon as Ru'Che had informed the Aun of their dire situation, the Ambassador had changed tact and began measures to secure and secret this base to levels not even dreamt of by the local gue'la. They would ensure the likely victors did not enjoy their stay until help arrived, already several of his juniors were drawing up sabotage and night raid plans. Shas'vere Ulo's veteran stealth la'rua having been assigned to Marshall's increasingly one way raid, made him realise he would likely be down a third of his stealth force too.

Shaking off the odd inverse vertigo on stepping out into the silo, Jisu'ro looked up to see the Orca slowly easing itself onto the ground deck. The craft was too massive for any of the platter

levels, currently festooned with busy fio'vesa and fio'la attacking weak structural beams with plasma cutters and reinforcing tools. They had said he could land an entire assault flight of fully loaded devilfish on those flimsy platters by rotaa's end. Which, when it came to withdrawing the cadre into hiding for a potentially protracted guerrilla campaign, seemed a claim he was likely to test.

The rear ramp of the transport contacted solidly with the decking, several impatient fio'vesa moved in immediately, flitting overhead a crowd of tau support personnel disembarking with casualties. But these were just white noise while the Shas'el walked into the cargo bay of the Orca. It was Elan'Jhin who saw him first.

"You look liked a worried creche minder you old fool" Jisu'ro smiled as he turned to about and spied a battered Elan'Jhin standing on the other side of the bustling hold.

"Fool? You're the saal youngling going into battle without xor'vesa fio'tak wrapt about your greying hide" They paused and then grinned at each other. The two crossed the tight confines and embraced briefly, then resumed a more dignified air. Their brotherhood ran deep, being the last of their ta'lissera.

"You have recovered well?" Jisu'ro ventured.

"Mmnn" Elan'Jhin affirmed with a grunt, "a stupefying wound, but easily stymied with decent attention" he added lifting up his ruined helm, the jagged shrapnel shard still firmly embedded in the optics.

"You had time for a keep sake?" his brother chortled.

“No, Ui’Kuna’Ro gave it to me” Elan’Jhin indicated by deflection, the battle weary shas’ui, who stood next to the other survivor of the brutal Embassy siege.

“To remind you of your place Shas’el” she spoke respectfully, but with an implied undertone.

The two Shas’el went quiet; it was Jisu’Ro who barked out a laugh,

“She’s right, you belong in a xor’vesa”

Elan’Jhin grunted dismissively, then gathered up his carbine. He wouldn’t openly admit the error of judgement; he enjoyed being among his shas’la. But if he had worn his xor’vesa to battle, the result might have been much different. A selfish mistake that would be recalled each time this day came to mind.

“Have we had some success at the Embassy yet?” Elan’Jhin renewed the conversation while the four tau followed out behind the last of the fio’vesa.

Jisu’Ro replied quickly, proudly even, “Everyone is accounted for, your shas’la did their duty Elan’Jhin” he nodded toward the tailing shas behind him; Kuna’Ro and Chona looked at each other quietly under the Shas’el’s approving gaze.

“So we face the Drantakh again” Elan’Jhin muttered in aside after a few more steps.

His brother made a commiserating gesture and then gave the two juniors a glance, causing them to recognise it was time to report elsewhere.

The tau officers waited briefly until no unwarranted ears were close while they stood under the first silo platter,

“Worse still, a Fleet of the Line appeared on Ru’Che’s tactical little more than a dec ago. I don’t know how long we will have to keep our heads down, but I’ve already got all elements falling back here the moment their missions are completed. We’ve got to protect the Aun and his staff first, then think about inflicting telling cuts on these Drantakh later, if we can operate at all given their future landed strength,”

Jisu'Ro continued after a moment, “Our counter-attack shut down each raid on Capital. Vre’Es’Shi and Kan’ka performed superb actions with a handful of casualties. In all it seems only Naghyri appeared, what Drantakh there were, focussed on the Embassy personally”

Elan’Jhin twitched slightly, but he kept his council,

“Any more teleports since?”

“No, they just wanted to hit this world’s proudest power base to prove they can reach out to any city world wide, it was classic showpiece aggression, possibly all the strength they had planet side, for now” Jisu waved a hand to the heavens.

Elan’Jhin nodded, “Wrecking the central gue’la Militia command would do that, how bad has it been?”

With a grim face, his sibling began recalling the numbers,

“You are well aware of the Embassy, but the toll has been brutal. At least two thousand gue’la are dead; the Government block, Intelligence, Communication towers and Militia command base airfield have been gutted. Seems the Naghyri set charges everywhere. Some were defused, others..” he trailed off, “we cleared what we could get too. We have no idea how many civilians beyond these locations have died”

Elan'Jhin was galled. It took him a few moments to process just how wide spread the assault had been. Fixating upon a thought he looked up,

“Did Gue'o Waylan survive the airfield attack?”

Jisu brightened fractionally, both having met and enjoyed the direct nature of their gue'la counterpart over time.

“Yes, I recently informed him of our new predicament in person. He's here with forty odd survivors who came when we began an airlift,” the shas'el waved ahead, “he has been using a communication suite to organise guerrilla cells and help the civilians evacuate”

They began to walk toward the newly installed shas'ar'tol, Elan'Jhin's smeared and ruined armour receiving several shocked glances from those who passed them in the confined corridors.

As they moved through the bustling activity, the shas'el ignored the wake of sideways glances; remaining focussed on getting up to date,

“Any news from southern Karapesh?”

“Intermittent, a satellite is taking synchronous station tonight to help Marshall infiltrate the Drantakh complex, overall it seems only Imperialists are taking the fight to the Militia based in the region”

“The drantakh using their meat shield to expand the landing” Elan spat a tau curse under his breath.

On entering, they both reviewed the freshly installed tactical array that spread the length of the gue'la mess hall. Tau units moved about Capital, others created an insect trail from the abandoned southern Estarian base. Ru'Che's station winked and

flickered as he engaged the assault fleet high above the polar orbit. Then in southern Karapesh, a small nest of stealth icons kept watch over their only hope to stem the speed of the Drantakh ground assault.

“You think he can do it Jisu?”

There was no reply. Eventually they exchanged alike glances.

“Usually we’re the ones defending the locals brother. I’m not sure if we could do it either.”

“I know,” Elan’Jhin winced, “I don’t like hiding here, even if it is exactly what we should be doing”

Jisu’Ro nodded solemnly.

Gue’o Waylan was looking their way; his expression seemed to mimic their own. They both held the alien’s gaze,

“I think its because these people don’t go down without a fight when it concerns their friends” Jisu considered aloud.

“Neither should we” Elan’Jhin growled, gripping the hilt of his ta’lissera, he moved toward the gue’la survivors.

Following in behind the leading element, Kade eased the armoured scout car through the convoy of tracked transports, closer to an aged building nearby. Leaning back to rest, he marvelled at the disrepair and depressed state of the Karapesh Rising Museum,

“Haven’t been here since I was a kid,” he recalled.

In the cupola behind him, Adam Devro agreed, but said nothing. Future generations were meant to remember what their forebears had fought against and even died for. An historic site built around their greatest moment and presented to Karapesh and

the world by his father and Loran Marshall. Adam's father made sure to garner a majority of the construction contracts, while Loran Marshall had funded it through a community foundation. Tonight Adam couldn't keep his mind from drawing the conclusion he had opened the door for that future to be cut short, whichever way those men had seen it.

Several more transports arrived behind the first group. A mix of Militia open tops and all terrain scout vehicles, accompanied by a mechanised platoon of Rising era tracked transports; the Household rear guard having fought a hard won disengagement from pursuing Imperialist forces.

Their odyssey began as an organised withdrawal from the foothills surrounding his family Estate, eventually turning into a rolling engagement as the force headed out across the plains to reach the midlands, then north to link up with any Capital Militia moving into Karapesh. All they had met were scattered Militia survivors retreating from the southern Ranges. For now the Imperialists seemed content with the ground they held.

The household column encountered only small forces on missions of opportunity, harassing the retreating Militia. When they encountered Rising era combat transports and infantry, wielded by Kade, it was a lively exchange. The survivors of the last attempt had taken to skulking just out of range, trailing the column until it halted.

Adam looked down toward the approaching Karapeshi Militia Commander. The man removed his visor, fresh skin gleaming in contrast to a dust caked face.

“Commander Effram” Adam acknowledged the officer.

“My Lord,” he saluted, then glanced over his shoulder, “For now this is everyone, we’ve lost contact with that group trying to reach us from the west”

Nothing more needed saying, the commander had begun the day a captain; unchanged rank roundels still remained on his tattered uniform. Despite an elevation through fate, Effram was still determined to fight; he just needed his men to feel the same.

“We’ll busy ourselves setting up a perimeter for the night, we can head out first light, but the men are worn out sir. We may have to stay longer. Good a place as any really, fitting in fact” there was a tone of finality in his voice.

“Do what you can Commander, we will discuss future plans when rested”

Gathering himself, Effram nodded warily, “Comm me when you’re ready to talk Lord Devro”

He executed a remarkably smart salute given his condition.

Adam replied in kind then slipped down into the cupola seat.

“We should keep moving” he uttered without realising. Kade glanced up, not used to such frank admission from his Lord. The younger man was right. Last stands always lacked imagination.

“I’ll have a chat with our unit leaders; have the guard do a once over on equipment, get fed, then you can make your decision after that sir”

Ever the voice of sensible action, Adam nodded his assent at Kade's suggestion, then leaned back into the utilitarian seat.

"Lord Adam Devro" announced the apparently not defunct tannoy system about the parking area.

Kade nearly banged his head on the underside of the armour, in as much Devro gave him a rare, but startled glance.

"Lord Marshall requests your company"

The sense of dread that flushed through him was such a unique and curious sensation, one he had not often encountered. Adam almost enjoyed how Fate wanted to twist the blade in his gut further.

"I apparently arrived just in time" he commented to Kade, the usual composure returning with trademark air.

The broad man didn't smile, he did however gather up several firearms about his person.

"Allow me to accompany you sir," he said flatly.

—

Quietly the contingent of Militia and Household Guard watched the Family Lord, flanked by Kade and four more bodyguards, move through the corralled transports. The group progressed toward a small maintenance entrance near the lip of the aged Missile bunker. They kept wary eyes on two slim and lethal looking tau battlesuits, each having materialised in such precognitive positions of superiority, Kade realised the entire column had been allowed into this area. Everyone had unwittingly driven into a kill zone.

Ahead stood Damian Marshall, enclosed in fitted Rising era body armour and assorted combat gear. A stout tau engineer in rather functional utility overalls and a Militia pilot, whose flight suit betrayed an athletic female physique, flanked the young Lord. It was the twenty strong body guard and another lone tau in an advanced battlesuit standing nearby, that provided real consternation.

“Sir...” Kade quietly questioned the idea to meet, “we should have just driven on as you said”

“Now now Kade, for one, it’s impolite to ignore an invitation”

“Still”

“Still nothing, just nod and smile, I’ll see what Marshall wants from us tonight”

A grunt was all the consent he would get, Kade slowed his pace to fall into a flanking position. The Master at Arms unashamedly lived up to the title, an accrument of weapons and armour about his person causing a one man show of force to those arrayed before them.

“Adam”.

“Damian”.

Greeting each other tersely, they failed to hide any animosity. The level at which it radiated from Marshall was palpable.

“Bad time to bring friends on a tour of our fathers’ handiwork don’t you think?” Adam spoke first, eyes wandering the forlorn location.

Damian cocked his head slightly, “Speaking of such, you and I need to talk”

Bristling ever so slightly, Adam's bodyguard readied themselves, Damian's force replied in kind.

"Alone" Damian added before something stupid occurred. Devro glanced toward his second; a return glance of 'I don't recommend this' was countered with 'Stay here'.

Waving a hand to encompass the gathered military and situation about them, Adam relented to the absurd chance of it all,

"Certainly, good a time as any"

Indicating the stairwell nearby, Damian made purposeful progress downward. Adam followed after while the both groups of honour guard moved closer out of concern and curiosity.

"You must be Marshall's bitch of the First" Kade growled at the woman pilot, sure of her seniority by the way people moved aside in her presence.

Kali eyed him over with effected disdain,

"Makes you Devro's dog, you're easily muzzled I see"

They eyed each other for a second, remaining on opposite sides of an imaginary fence, then in unison cast a wary vigil down the stairwell.

Stepping off the last step onto the platter Adam found himself confronted by Damian, the other man quietly awaiting his arrival.

"Odd to find—" Devro staggered backwards, his jaw lancing with pain.

Regaining some balance he dropped into a protective stance only to collect a roundhouse kick to the side, leaving him sprawled across the dust-covered grating. Having enough of this, Adam flicked up onto his heels and parried two more blows, delivering a counter strike met by a forearm bracer. The assault paused.

“Why?” Marshall spat a demand, sizing up his opponent as he flicked out the dead feeling in his arm.

“Opportunity” Adam replied to judging eyes.

A flurry of arms and defensive movements, the two took a measure of each other. Damian spat a profanity then drew back,

“Taking an opportunity? It’s an invasion you self-centred ass!”

“I recently learned that when my estate got sacked the other night”

Damian clearly didn’t pity him, “Oh for shame, you lose some toys?”

Delivered with such condescension and poise it tipped Devro into a more aggressive state, he lashed out with a sequence that nearly finished the fight if not for a final nimble dodge on Damian’s part.

“How long have you been helping them?” Marshall breathed out heavily, circling about.

“I didn’t expect them to last when Capital finally turned on them I was–”

“Just like your father, out for his own benefit”

It caused Adam to pause; a sudden clean blow darted in. He found himself on his back, with the room spinning. Flailing wildly, more in a dazed attempt to find balance than fend off further blows, yet no follow up occurred. Damian had withdrawn, squatting with his back against one of the internal support struts that rose up the central space of the silo.

“You stupid bastard” Marshall stammered out.

Letting the grimy decking cool his aching skull, Adam lay back in the dust-covered mess of the most hallowed ground in Karapesh. Wiping his lip, he spat metal tanged saliva to one side,

“True, I’ve been pretty stupid; finding out you’re supporting an alien invasion adjusts any paradigm, even ones you’ve been convinced of for years”

A silence between them hung for a moment, broken only when Adam rustled in place, lolling his sore head to look at Damian. The other karapeshi was regarding him without malice or pity; the once fiery anger only embers,

“You’re going into the main cavern aren’t you?”

Damian nodded.

“I’ve been there, I have an idea where you need to go and to be honest, if anything we need to work together, despite our past.”

His opposite seemed to pause,

“Our fathers’ tried this once, mine died.” Damian stated flatly.

The deadpan delivery had made it all the colder. Adam couldn’t help but flick his gaze down,

“That was my father, but it doesn’t have to be me. Your family long ago gained the respect of all those people up there, including my own guard.”

Looking aside, Damian touched the decking with his hand thoughtfully,

“Respecting the name, it got the First back together, filled them up with pride and history. But to look at those people and take them where we need to go” he paused to check himself

from rambling, “I wonder if they follow out of duty or the legend?”

Adam rolled upright to sit, still nursing a slight stupor,

“For what it’s worth? They follow you because you do represent the legend; we’re sitting in an inverted edifice to that end. But they need more than a Marshall to lead. If you don’t want to become a pastiche of your forefathers like me, you have to make hard choices or otherwise this,” he circled a finger, pointing to all above, “has already failed.”

Relenting for a moment, Adam rallied one last time,

“Maybe you and I cannot escape our past, but whatever you think, just do something. You’ll be surprised what those people are capable of when they believe in more than themselves”

Damian was clearly unwilling to place the price on the shoulders of those he wished to protect. There was a certain kind of moral detachment required, one Adam had used without repentance to his own failing. Each needed a measure of the other.

Changing tact Adam indicated their surroundings,

“Impressive gathering all the same, didn’t expect this from you”

Tiring of Devro’s slick charm, Damian fired a quick retort,

“Didn’t expect you would keep quiet about the Imperialists this long”

A complex flash of emotions passed over Adam’s face,

“Something I’ll have to bear,” he spoke finally, then after a moment leaned in closer, “but if we get this done, and I get you out of that hell hole, you and I? We’re square.”

The admission was direct but Damian could see all he really wanted to know once that charming visage dropped.

“If we can’t be straight with each other in the face of this?”
Damian held Devro’s gaze, “Then what does mine or anyone’s opinion of you matter tomorrow?”
For once there was no snappy comeback or business like quip, Devro quietly mulled Marshall’s words.

Damian stood up, “Tomorrow will sort itself out regardless if we come back or not, we should keep our mind on the present”

“Is that from the Marshall guide to becoming a hero?”

“Only a fool aims to be a hero, thankfully I’m too busy getting into trouble by keeping up my end of the family line”

“Makes two of us” Adam confessed with a measure of introspection.

They exchanged amused glances.

“Honestly I didn't expect to cross paths, let alone actually get some perspective out of it,” Damian moved toward Adam, “I’m heading to the Ranges, with or without you”

“You can only do it with a small group,” Adam warned, “anymore and you will be discovered.”

“All the better; If you want to guide me Adam, I would rather two distrusting overly entitled lords fail, than lose the people who follow us in, as for the tau? They brought this on us, so they can share in the folly. If any more blood is spilt for my family’s name in such errands, let it be my own. It seems why I’ve been drawn back here.”

“Fatalistic words”

Damian put a foot on the first step up, “I guess so, but when your entire family already lies in the soil under you, makes one wonder about fate playing a hand”

Devro nodded a quiet, uncomfortable understanding. His father was wholly responsible for much of his contemporary's outlook,

"Damian.."

Marshall gave him a gaze that now was not the time for being personally reproachful. Eventually Adam looked up the stairwell, a certain air of action emanating from him,

"Well then, we start with the easy stuff. Mend the fences afterward?"

That actually got smirk out of Marshall.

"Do we shake hands when we get up there? A sign of progress" Adam queried half serious as they began upward.

Damian gave a negative sign,

"For some, seeing you actually walk out of here is progress. Let's keep it at that".

They emerged from the shadows with ruffled uniforms, covered in grime and reddened, abused faces. There was no hiding they had resorted to more than just words.

"Well, they both came up alive, that's something" Kali spoke under her breath to Rius'lan.

Both entourages became restless, expectant of further disagreement between their respective leaders. However each lord rejoined their escorts without incident or harsh words.

Kade could be seen to grind his teeth as he acknowledged Adam's approach,

"You need to come with me, change in plans"

“You can trust this Marshall? Considering?” he eyed several welts on Devro’s face.

Adam gave his most determined gaze,

“It is time I shed the concerns of the past and worked with him for the future of Karapesh,” he cocked an eyebrow, “besides, I’ve gotten tired of running from these Imperialists, there’s opportunity here for damages due”

Kade grunted, then requested a guard to go fetch the Militia commander. Devro himself remained quiet, watching Damian talk among his own people. Everything Marshall had said about him was true, and it needed to change. If the last two Families of Karapesh remained divided, as history had shown, it would be for the loss of a nation, if not the world.

Damian clearly underestimated how far he could push the faith that Kali had in his judgement. He pressed his case,

“Like it or not, that man knows a way in there. If I have an opportunity to do this successfully with fewer people, I’ll take it”

“I’m amazed you can trust him?” Kali retorted, confusing most nearby at her odd paranoia.

“Double-crossing me in the heart of an enemy facility sounds a bit below Devro’s IQ” he spoke closely; the tone reminding her few knew the real story.

If the First got the slightest whiff of the assassination attempt, not a single Devro householder would walk out of here. Kali glared at him, but perceptibly backed off just as Devro neared with his ‘pet’,

“Marshall, this is Kade, my Master at Arms”

The two men gave each other a subtle nod, just as two more armour encased aliens appeared out of the night air nearby to

stand next to their own leader. A low hum of power emanated from their battle gear while they observed the group. Kade gave Devro a cagey glance.

“This is vre’Ulo, he’s coming with us” Damian introduced the enigmatic figures.

“Interesting, what about the rest of our force?” Adam queried.

“Since your offer of guiding a small strike team, we have some options for once”

Adam arched an eyebrow while Kade visibly contained an outburst.

“First let’s get you up to speed,” Damian said, heading toward a serviceable elevator nearby with his entourage, then goaded his new ally, “we’ll see how committed you are once you understand how against the wall we really are”.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

In the low light of a crisp, early Karapesh morning, five hundred figures moved through the rolling grassland with a silence borne of determination and renewed spirit. Having dismounted a good thirty minutes out from the Imperialist outpost, the combined Karapeshi force had quietly moved toward their target. Every shadowing scout around and sentry encountered had been eliminated thanks to the tau and the needle rifles among forward elements of the First.

“Sir, we’re in position”

Kade listened as a steady stream of squad leaders reported similarly. Commander Effram even deferred to him, while the Militiaman would lead his own in the fight ahead.

“First is set” spoke Lieutenant Rales, Marshall’s chosen leader for the Karapeshi First.

If one could call a force barely at battalion strength, a regiment, but Kade kept that observation to himself on seeing the people it had become comprised of in the recent hours.

“Alright lets remind these idiots why they got kicked off world the first time,” several household guard nearby grinned under their combat helms, a couple of chuckles on the comm-net assured Kade the force was as confident as he could expect, “be smart and expect no quarter, prepare to move on my command.”

What they had learned overnight only served to galvanise that he and Devro needed to see this through. After the plan was hashed out, Kade had to bite his tongue when Adam chose to climb

aboard an alien hovertank; surrounded by alien warriors, Damian Marshall and a lone tau mechanic. For a man used to ensuring the safety and positive outcome of violent situations surrounding Adam Devro, the odd emotional turmoil at relinquishing this right had surprised even himself.

When a flight of Versas and several Vector fighters appeared from the depths of the defunct missile silo, he had to admit, the affect it had on the demoralised guard and Militia was undeniably positive, it even buoyed his own thoughts about their chances of success. Any moment now those same fighters, led by that irritating Rashiede, would pummel the forward base and the combined Karapeshi ground force would rush it. On that thought he sent the signal.

A keen, chest-rumbling emanation approached from behind their position. It proceeded to roll across the grassland toward them with disturbing violence. Men evinced a quick curse as Rashiede and four Vexes flicked overhead, only a few feet from the grassland. Weapons firing, their formation spread about the confused Imperialist base. As the encamped force reacted, it was all too late; alarmed shouts could be heard, exotic long barrelled rifles swung upward to meet the surprise threat. Airborne rotary cannons growled and rockets stabbed into rows of armoured vehicles and stacked stores. As quickly as they had arrived, the vector fighters gathered their flight vanes and flitted away at speed.

Kade knew two vexes would return to remain on station, supporting the attack while the remainder would fall back to the landed versas behind, rearm and prepare for the follow up.

Kade lifted himself from his semi prone position in the tall grass, "All commands, advance."

Auto-shotgun at the ready; he led the squad about him in a crouched run. Several hundred meters along each flank, the grassland populated with early morning silhouettes, rifles at arms. In unison they rushed the embattled Imperialist post, pressing through the tall grass like a wave. A few keen eyed defenders saw shapes closing on their position. Hastily aimed shots rang out, quickly silenced by snipers supporting the attack.

Suddenly an exuberant roar filled the morning air, at odds to the grim faced determination of Kade's own command.

A Devro guard gasped in amazement, "The First!" Looking to the left, Kade saw it too; he felt his hair tingle in recognition. Every important image from the Rising, each poster in the academy, even photos of joint commands the Devro regiment had fought under; he looked upon something he had known since childhood.

Atop a metal shaft, held tightly by sergeant Gullen, a lone pennant had risen proudly into the morning light. Russet colours unfurled smartly against the rushing air as it was carried forwards. Lieutenant Rales led his command underneath it, encouraging a war cry as the Karapeshi First charged up the slope toward the Imperialist post, a living artwork of military history.

“Eyes front!” Kade barked.

Professionalism snapped back into place, but the mood had changed. The rush became a sprint, possessed with all the vigour of people under scrutiny of heroes past.

Even the Imperialist line did not escape the effect, defenders cowered despite their officers’ haranguing; a symbol of victors past had come for them, their ancestors slain under its colour. More shots rang out in desperate bursts, finding no targets when they should have raked the advancing Karapeshi line.

Rounds snapped and whacked through the air about Kade’s command squad. None fell and it only emboldened the householders to sprint, leaping the first simple defensive perimeter to find the Imperialists falling back in disarray toward secondary positions, officers shouting for them to hold. All too fast, the Karapeshi Militia, Kade’s Guard and the First were upon them. Lasguns hissed and automatics replied. The pennant surged through the enemy defences unchecked, the children of the Rising falling under its wake on both sides.

Leaping a crumpled figure, Kade found himself in a fire pit, next to a member of the First. She was looking at him fiercely despite a mortal chest wound. The young woman gripped her lasgun with ashen-faced anguish,

“Please...” she asked.

Kade didn’t think twice, hauling her up to the edge of the pit until they could both see the First rushing through the base. Her head rested against the lasgun stock, then a soft breath escaped

still lips; she had died sighting her weapon. Someone moved to take up the orphaned lasgun,

“Leave it” Kade growled, touching her shoulder, his eyes stung.

Realising they lingered out of position, he gathered up his shotgun, waving for the squad to advance deeper into the base.

Minutes later it was over. Every Imperialist lay unmoving while the joint force stood over a foe burned into racial memory. Before the shock of surviving froze their impetus, squad leaders began organising their troops. Wounded were treated, weapons collected and restoring physical defences began. A short while later the transports rolled in, bringing heavier equipment and supplies. Some stayed, the less able falling back to the Museum silo, taking what wounded would survive the trip.

Spying a handful of technicals, magically unharmed by Rashiede and her pilots, Kade called out to Lieutenant Rales as the First’s command retinue passed,

“Lieutenant, see if your specialists can remount those anti-tank rifles about the perimeter”

“Master Emmers” Rales replied with a smart nod.

Flowing with a languid ease above the First’s command squad, the pennant fluttered smartly. Eying it for longer than he intended, Kade turned away to rush preparations.

If everything went according to plan, they would attract the attention of every Imperialist force in the nearby region. On paper the capture of the base was completely insane. Positioning the Karapeshi force to be counter-attacked from both flanks and

ahead by whatever lay between them and the foothills of the Karapeshi Ranges.

In their favour was the unexpected gathering of the most technologically powerful units in Karapesh. They also had an hour old image of any visible Imperialist units in the region thanks to a passing tau satellite. While they awaited the expected arrivals from each direction, they would be checking off a butcher's list. Yet for all their advantages, the Imperialist forces outnumbered them easily twenty to one. If anything, they needed more luck than firepower to survive the next few hours.

—

“Well, that's lucky” Adam spoke aloud.

Gathered about the holoboard, the trio spied an unremarkable, and more importantly, unguarded entrance across valley ahead.

“You sure the guards are not on a break?”

“Considering it was a less accessible entry, they didn't post guards, it would have drawn attention, which is why I favoured it.”

His companions stared without realising. Adam couldn't hold their gaze. For those who knew of his recent past, it would clearly take a lot more than guiding this team to forgive him.

Hovering behind a ridge overlooking the non descript entrance, the tau recon transport skulked low and quiet. Six stealth suits, two humans and a stout tau engineer filling the cramped interior. Their insertion had been a low, fast and tense flight. Flitting past Imperialist units rushing toward a frontline carved into the plains by the distraction force, a lone tau satellite high above their only

eyes for danger ahead. Finally, after plotting and jinxing a course across scrub and bush covered canyons and slopes, they found themselves on the other side of the cavern complex.

“Allow my team to examine the position”

Everyone looked toward Ulo, his impassive sensor cluster stared back.

“Now or never” Damian agreed, already checking his triplex.

Closing upon the secret divot in the mountainside, the hovertank slid out from behind the far ridge. Whispering closer while avoiding any line of sight the location could spy their approach from. Eventually the craft held position perpendicular to the entrance, without landing, a hundred metres away.

Hopping the small distance onto loose rock, the tau stealth team quietly moved out in spite of the precarious rubble surface, their diffused forms crossing the slope with ease. Eventually they surrounded the overhanging rock formation.

Ulo spoke in his translated monotone, “There is a monitoring device here”

“Can it b–“

“It has been dealt with, come now” the tau interrupted Adam.

The remaining trio worked their way up the slope. Taking twice the time the tau warriors had, despite just wearing chest carapace and a utility satchel.

Walking past the befuddled sensor post and hacked access panel, Damian led the others behind Ulo and his point man,

passing under the shadow of the overhang, then through the hidden bulkhead, finding the air inside was cool, damp and earthen.

“Just a sentry device? The Rebels and Imperialists were pretty confident” Damian marvelled.

“Actually, I think the people who knew about it are either dead, or out in the foothills”

Adam was grim faced, looking along a familiar corridor, his eyes showing an uncertainty about what lay ahead.

“The Drantakh don’t know about this door?”

“It was a hope of mine” Adam winked.

“We could have been massacred here you idiot” Damian snapped back.

“Or force the front entrance?” Adam countered.

They held each other’s gaze for several moments.

Damian glanced away first “Sorry that was a little reactionary”

Unsure he had heard right, Adam blinked,

“Sorry?”

“You’re right, it is the better option. We lucked out getting in”

Adam deftly nodded, glancing ahead as a third stealth suit passed,

“Best capitalise on it no?” he finally smiled.

“Lead on”

Damian followed, falling in behind the tau stealth team, the small force manoeuvring slowly and quietly through the confined rock walls of the passage.

Eventually their progress along the forgotten corridor halted and Ulo signalled the humans forward.

“Where to from here lord Devro?”

Adam studied the amphitheatre-sized cavern ahead; much was familiar. Ganties and barricades within had remained, linking container quarters embedded into crevices and atop natural terraces. Alien tenants loped between stalagmites and other rock formations, hurriedly preparing for new arrivals. In both directions within the curving cave formation, only the main thoroughfares were lit; unwittingly it was a perfect infiltration environment given the perceived impenetrability of the main entrance. However the part Adam had never seen, lay beyond at the deepest point.

A little disturbed by the alien Drantakh below and the news he needed to deliver, Adam shuffled slightly before answering,

“We need to follow this inner wall, to the furthest cavern”

“Naturally” Damian smirked.

“I am unsure we can do this without detection” Ulo confided, examining the route.

“I didn’t expect to get far without saying hello”

“You know these Drantakh?” Ulo turned his bulk upon Devro.

“No no, just an expression. I expect we would have to fight at some point. We may be halfway down already but there are still two caverns to bypass”

The tau warrior seemed to consider the word play,

“Speak plainly in future,” the shas’ve then continued, “we must move on, any exposed sections, you will pass behind my

warriors as our active camouflage should hide your progress in these less populous sections”

Satisfied those he escorted understood, Ulo allowed a lone warrior ahead, the bulky figure fading into the shadows.

Eventually Adam and Damian moved after the shas'vere with Rius'lan behind, the engineer avidly observing the structures and fixings about them as if making mental notes for a later critique.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Another blast blistered the armoured hide of his Frigate, rocking Third-Jorvun within. He evinced a small chuff, bobbing his splayed cranium in annoyance.

“Fifth-Karkan has taken command, Third-Commander” Fifth-Larchun advised.

The junior officer held a weary regard until Jorvun looked up,

“Say of the dead what one will Fifth, but that actually strikes me as good news”

Fifth-Larchun’s nostrils flared slightly, it was not of his tier to pass judgement on one above him, but the Third was right.

Fourth-Karkan’s new command had almost redoubled grid-fire and reformed position tight against the less exposed flank of the transports.

“Frigate two has improved its contribution Third-Jorvun, despite apparent damage reports”

Jorvun bobbed again, understanding the withheld commentary. It had been a fortunate explosion on the bridge that killed Fourth-Lokha; the remaining command staff; with the newly risen Fourth-Karkan at their head, were able to continue via the supporting secondary bridge in moments.

Casualties were to be expected, particularly when closing distances that an astute officer could calculate unaided. This engagement was quickly becoming fierce and trying. Despite the apparent tonnage, the tau orbital was flailing his command with firepower he found hard to believe could fit inside such a small

waystation. They were not referred to as security orbitals for nothing he mused internally.

“Contact Fourth–Ikar he is to engage the transmitters and disembark troops as soon as possible”

Larchun bobbed, relaying the order to a row of handlers nearby.

Ahead of the diving flotilla, the atmosphere of Odysseus loomed, their drop limiter vector leading them through a fiery course. In moments they would begin sending troops to the secured base, starting the final stages of the landing allowing Second–Kierkook to arrive upon an established beachhead.

“Third–Commander! They know!” chuffed Larchun.

Before he could check the holobank himself, impacts struck the hull, causing Jorvun to brace. As he had feared, the tau had waited, reaching out when they knew which vessels held the treasured emitters.

“Bring the frigate formation into closer shielding positions”

“Relaying by–“

An explosion shattered the mid section of the bridge; a conduit pipe speared outward, staking Fifth–Larchun against the holobank. Jorvun gathered himself from the decking, coughing amidst electrical fires as the whine of extractor fans buzzed in his aural cavities.

“Continue the formation change!” he barked.

Startled for a moment, the navigation–fifth set about with a purpose. Damage control engineers began suppressing the fires and removing wounded, environmental suits bustling past Jorvun with his most trusted Fifth shoved into a sling bag.

“Frigates on guard; grid–fire realigned” a Sixth remarked.

Third-Jorvun gripped the brace bar about the flickering holobank,

“Fire assigned squadron salvos, all working batteries to bear”

“Sending”

“Remind Fourth-Ikar to begin his deployment without delay”

“Third-Commander?” a Sixth-Tactical stepped forward.

“What?”

“I can take over from here Third-Commander”

Jorvun blinked at the youthful snout, she had stood her ground despite his foul mood. That was good enough,

“Of course, engage the orbital; Fifth”

“Third-Commander” she bobbed, immediately chuffing orders.

Knives drawn, the drantakh frigates and tau orbital slashed each other swiftly. In moments, holed and bleeding atmosphere, a Dranta frigate peeled away, avoiding going deeper into the approaching atmosphere. A sudden warp skater sheered a grievous portion from the prow of a second. Third-Jorvun’s own command suffered a horrendous pummelling, losing almost every main weapon facing the orbital. Descending into the hell fire of re-entry, he was unable to roll over to use the remainder; the flagship was out of the gun fight. Staggering onward the dranta ships continued to brave the unexpected fusillade.

Not to say the tau had it all one way. Already missing entire sections, the upper dome of the orbital began to break away, becoming a halo of glinting flotsam ruin about the pirouetting

structure. Leaking atmosphere briefly blossomed, weapon arrays stuttered out. A sudden explosion tore a massive portion, mid column and multiple weapons went quiet. Abruptly a shoal of escape pods spat out into space.

“Praise the Prime!” someone shouted, seeing a digital version of the event occur.

Third-Jorvun shifted his jaw as if ruminating. That; had been brutal. Half his command was shattered, of what was left? It would barely stave off a single tau gunship.

“Third-Commander, a fleet reading has resolved”
Well thank the Prime indeed; Second-Kierkook had closed the distance,

“Yes, Second-Kierkook” he chided the excited newly elevated Sensor-Fifth, the latest in a line of replacements.

The remaining long-range sensors of the flotilla reengaged from their dedicated support roles during the last hour of the fight. Quickly they began refreshing a myriad of near space astrological data.

“No Third-Commander, this is a new finding,” the sensor-Fifth paused, “transferring to the holobank now.”

Jorvun rotated to look at the flickering projection. Several new snouts did so as well; how few original command members remained. A wave of returns populated the holo, blinking into existence in distressing number. Judging by the light minutes separation, they had arrived not long after Second-Kierkook. It was too coincidental not to be planned. Even now the icons progressed along a parallel vector. If his tired memory served, it

was sizeable enough to be a significant portion of the tau southern quadrant fleet.

Slit-faced, malnourished, blue bastard runts; somehow they had known of the attack. In whatever infernal manner the tau used, Second-Kierkook and his fleet had been discovered and shadowed here. Breathing deeply, Jorvun flared his nostrils. No matter, the dranta fleet would engage and push the tau out of the system. Unexpected as it may be; there was nothing to panic about, they had accounted for such incredible eventualities, fighting tau created that level of Intelligence paranoia.

“Third-Commander, nine tau fighters are coming up behind. Atmosphere capable”

This tau officer didn’t know when to quit. Whilst capable craft; in such small number, they could do little more than annoy his damaged Frigates.

“Deal with them Fifth” he addressed the young female. She turned away from the holobank and tasked the appropriate grid-fire gunnery teams.

The hull began to tremble, not from the rattle of grid defences, but the high velocity caress of re-entry.

“Passing into the thermosphere Third-Commander”

“Fourth-Ikar is hailing Third-Commander”

“Link me”

After slight transmission hiss the Fourth appeared to one side of the main holographic; resplendent in combat plates,

“Third-Commander, planet side command reports a sizeable force of humans are engaging the Imperialist line”

“And this is my concern because?”

“They threaten the landing base if they push through. Current observation shows they are holding their captured ground well”

“You want to deploy into that fight?”

Fourth-Ikar was quiet, his image flickered and he swayed slightly as his own transport ship rumbled on through the atmosphere.

“Yes, we have the appropriate geographical data. On your order Third-Commander, of course”

Grubby snout-probing tier jumper; Jorvun wanted to grab the holo figure and crush it. So late in the game, such a piece of political tier manoeuvring really fuelled his ire. An encroaching enemy fleet, fighters to fend off, and troops to land; it was really poor form,

“Your suggestion has been logged. As overall Third-Commander of the flotilla, I acquiesce to your planetary combat experience, the drop is yours to command. Eradicate all non dranta forces at that location as you see fit”

Utilising long held naval and troop jurisdictions, Jorvun shielded his reputation, and hid a smile. Ikar rolled his lower jowl in annoyance,

“I’ll task the second transport drop now. We have already begun transmitting to the bas-”

Jorvun cut the transmission. He had other concerns.

“Third-Commander”

“Fifth?” Jorvun returned to fighting his ship.

“The tau fighters, they’re concentrating on our defensive turrets only. I had not antic-”

Young fool, Jorvun scowled, her inexperience was telling.

Spreading grid defence across the entire flotilla, just to engage a flight of fighters was making it easier for the nimble craft to draw

fire and allow wingmen opportunities to attack. The frigates needed to engage locally, reacting more swiftly.

As he was about to chuff a series of orders, Jorvun saw a lone fighter icon press onward. Covered by its fellows, the craft had come up behind the flame wreathed transports. His brow knitted in confusion, despite being in an optimum position the fighter did not fire. Suddenly the hysteria inducing concern of exotic tau weapons filled his imagination.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Warning shades of cyan bathed Ru'Che as he piloted the barracuda through a wall of fire. The craft protested quickly; designed for rapid re-entry manoeuvres it would not survive extended exposure within the fiery wake of the behemoth transport that wallowed ahead.

"You're clear Kor'O, good hunting"

Ru'Che responded tersely, "Disengage Vre'Hira".

"Understood, moving to co-" and he was gone, a star burning over Odysseus.

"Turning to escort the escape pods Kor'O, Aun guide you" Ru'che remained quiet as Aru finished the confirmation in Hira's place. The limit, at which his conscience could steel him against the price exacted upon his people, was finally crossed.

Allowing the onboard vesa countermeasures to dodge what few dangers were being hurled his way; Ru'che readied the signal package, a sequence he had downloaded only a few raik'an before into every barracuda within the decimated flight.

Such a short time ago he had stood inside the orbital command chamber; near suffocated by internal fires, the air infused with the nauseating reek of burned flesh and cries of the dying. All about, exotic ceramic hull plating cracked under massed Drantakh barrages. Despite throwing every last remaining munition at the alien flotilla, it was always going to prove a futile gesture when the enemy ships closed ranks.

Struck midway along the column, the entire facility had begun to destabilise, leaving Ru'che one last punch, the barracuda squadron, held in reserve till the very last moment. They would cross the smallest distance possible, through murderous fire, to harass the Drantakh interlopers as they wallowed through the atmosphere.

Such a desperate gambit would invariably claim every pilot, so he had ensured one craft was free for his use, to personally lead the final attack. Ru'che finalised the order to abandon the orbital, only then did he note the feeble transmission.

–Priority Download–

Ru'che had blinked, it was a pulsed databurst; the fastest format the Tau had for sub-light transmission. Recognising all the official protocols forced him to look up to the monitors,

“They're here?”

Blossoming like cyan rain, part of the quadrant Kor'Vattra had appeared. Only now did the hard light echoes return, for the force had already been in system for at least a dec or more, however all too late.

–Priority Download–

The prompt blinked again and he finally accepted. The moment his data ring winked; Ru'Che sat upon a nearby crashseat; immediately being drawn away from the inferno of the command chamber. Escape lights strobed, a shunt and he was diverted to the hangar bay.

Propelling himself through zero gee Ru'Che slid into the cockpit of the last Barracuda within the small launch bay. Hanging

serenely outside the barrier field, despite chaos and ruin, the Barracuda fighters waited for him. In moments he had joined the flight, the stillness of space arresting at first.

Turning to face the gargantuan vessels blazing across the atmosphere beyond, he finally uploaded the program to all. In a raik'an Ru'Che finally understood. If he didn't make it, anyone could deliver the content, they began the pursuit.

Surging through debris and grid fire, the squadron had run the gauntlet. Somehow they survived unscathed, the dranta flotilla either too damaged to spy their small craft approaching or to preoccupied too care. Each pilot was dedicated to ensuring one of their number got through; so they attacked not the ships, but all defences in their way. Nine became seven in as many heartbeats, they pressed on. Eventually five fighters slipped through; they had twisted and danced amidst enemy fire, flitting between interlacing energy beams and bursting fragmentation pods. Ru'Che led the way, his craft an arrow spiralling through balefire.

A pause in the complexity of defensive fire allowed the tau to tear every turret away that hindered their leader's pursuit. Finally, after several violent raik'an, Ru'che had come up behind the behemoths ploughing troughs of fire in the sky. There would be no mistake at this range.

Across the curvature of Odysseus, a distant sun rose to bathe his small fire-wreathed barracuda in a nimbus of light; Ru'Che winked and the packet was sent,

He smiled, “My shadow will be long–“
Alarms shrilled, his fighter tumbled, and Ru’Che fell from the
sky.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The hands of the alien had not been idle, long secreted in the furthest part of the cave network, deep inside the Karapeshi Range, the Drantakh had quietly prepared. Rubble and collapsed buttresses were all that remained of a ceiling high wall. Pushed aside and taken down once the subterfuge was over and practicality reigned.

Adam rasped his stubble in thought, "I met my contact in the previous cavern. I have no idea how these drantakh moved in without spooking the rebels or low level Imperialists"

"There?" Damian pointed.

Large enough for sizable components to enter, a uniformly shaped tunnel led away from the far end. However at some point, a collapse seemed to have occurred.

Rius'lan studied it also, "fresh work, completed within months before any damp took hold. That has been done carefully, see the rubble at the end," Rius edged closer and nodded toward the tunnel, "those are bore hole marks, placed charges"

It became clear that while the Imperialist funded Rebels distracted everyone, off-world agents organised the wall, allowing a small force to land and tunnel into this last cavern unhindered. After the first transmission array was in place, the drantakh had collapsed the works.

What the tau had recorded days before were not test runs; the drantakh had been drawing down the final parts and personnel from a ship in low orbit, avoiding the waystation before

Jaun'Qoul's satellite array was even an idea. Likely a Capital spy had warned the ship about eventual discovery, unaware the information was going to truly alien invaders. In a matter of days, the facility had quickly become operational, reinforcing the original work crew.

"They have been very committed" the fio'el showed a measure of respect at their ingenuity.

The modified interior was robust and functional. A row of rectangular barracks sat against the nearest rock face. Next to these, a supply bunker and across a cleared assembly area, five teleport chambers had been placed similarly. Abutting the collapsed section, further stores and generators filled the tunnel. It could easily be called a forward operations base, albeit below ground, decorated with ancient stalagmites and stalactites, while the air hummed with atmo-scrubbers.

Sensor cluster twitching, Ulo reviewed the row of teleport chambers opposite the barracks. They consisted of bulbous, wire-infested roundels in exotic arrangements, placed atop large, boxy, modular structures. A broad set of steps at the entrance led to the transmission site through sliding walls, allowing egress four abreast.

Silent during the examination, the shas'vere deliberated internally with his team, their stealth suits flanking the humans and the fio'el like a mobile hide. The escorted trio within would remain undetected behind a wall of technological camouflage, quietly observing the cavern.

Rius'lan shifted next to Damian,

“I would really like to see inside one” he indicated a chamber.

“A few drantakh in the way yet, you have a weapon?”
Digging about his satchel, the engineer drew out a small, oddly modified pulse pistol,

“It’s nothing, but I can use it”

Looking up from the weapon, Damian realised he and Adam would have to protect the engineer the whole way.

“Stick close, you may get your chance”

“I really hope so”

Despite imminent violence, the fio’el seemed quite perky.

“Lord Marshall,” Ulo spoke finally, “your objectives?”

After surveying the area, there was only one course of action,

“The first, then subsequent devices until we succeed or fail”

“I agree. We will cover your demolition. However, fighting our way out to the surface may prove the greater challenge”

The tau warriors unclipped several round dinner plate sized devices, passing them to both Damian and Adam. Ulo explained,

“Place one in each chamber, the device will do the rest. If not the fio’el can deal with it”

Securing a share of the explosives into his satchel Damian eyed Adam,

“You take the first, then we switch over from there”

“Right”

Damian paused, “Vre’Ulo, please pass onto your team, its an honour”

“As it is ours” Ulo replied.

Moving carefully, the tau spread out, each a half glimpsed shadow in the twilight cavern. The shas’ve clearly had his own

plan for applying an invisible wrecking ball to the cavern; Damian and Adam need only concern themselves with the teleporters.

Touching Damian's arm, Rius'lan nodded when the shas'vere was ready.

"Let's go"

"Let's" agreed Adam, readying his triplex.

Edging along the shadowed rock wall, the trio slid through a gap behind the first of the barracks. Slowly easing toward the assembly ground and a short, exposed sprint to the first chamber.

Just as Damian calmed his nerve to make a move, the roundels atop each chamber began to spool, swinging and twisting with increasing rapidity. The fio checked his wrist vesa,

"That's not good," he said quietly.

Damian drew back, hoping it was just a system test.

Edging to the corner, Adam considered what he saw, "how long till they start receiving Rius?"

"I'm not sure, we've only observed outgoing events. It could be any moment now or several min--"

A figure stepped around the corner, chuffing when confronted by three alien figures discussing transmission physics in the dark. Raising a spike rifle to fire, the drantakh warrior exploded from the waist up, viscera flying. Adam recoiled, meat slapping his face.

"Kyt!" Rius'lan stammered, staring where half the alien remained, pulse pistol in hand as he changed charge clips, "I need to recalibrate this"

Before Damian could say anything, small explosions reverberated within the cavern and the lights went out.

In a blaze of rotary pulse cannon fire, a stealth suit flared into being, blinking out of sight the next instant. Revealed similarly, another suit appeared several metres on. It continued like this; randomly atop the barracks, in the middle of the assembly space and next to the tunnel, Ulo's warriors wrought confusion among the drantakh guards. It would seem a single opponent was flitting from one location to the next, firing with apparent impunity only to fade away when fired upon.

This was Ulo's distraction; Damian grabbed the fio by the satchel strap, dragging the stout tau behind him. Falling in behind, Adam covered their rear as another explosion erupted and pulse fire strobed the gloom. Damian had to shake off the nausea-inducing flicker; everything appeared in visual snippets, edited to the dire beat of tau rotary fire.

Suddenly white light bathed the cavern walls as four heavily armoured figures stepped through open panels onto the steps of the fifth chamber. Rius'lan marvelled at his wrist vesa,

“One raik'or!” he looked up at Damian proud of his measurement, then saw the gue'la holding an explosive, “what are you doing?”

Damian indicated a knob on the plate sized explosive, “This a timer-dial?”

“Yes”

Damian selected the last few symbols, “I hope this means more than a second!” as he tossed the explosive like a discus toward the new arrivals.

It didn’t. The near immediate explosion floored everyone in the assembly area, the four figures toppled backward into chamber, followed by the smashing of equipment and a discharge of power. Abruptly the spinning roundels collapsed downward, tearing into the flimsy structure underneath.

“Those explosives are to be placed, not thrown”

Damian gathered himself off the cave floor, “Remind me to gift wrap the next one then”

“That makes no sense, why would y–”

Ignoring the deliberation, Damian hauled the fio onto his hooves, leading the fio onward through the firefight.

“A little help Marshall!”

Adam was already at the first array, shooting his way into the lit chamber. Behind him a half dressed drantakh soldier stormed up the steps, combat blade drawn. An unseen force slammed the alien prostrate. Like a shaft of sunlight stealing between passing clouds, a stealth suit appeared briefly raising an encased cannon,

“Be wary Lord Devro”

Before Adam could reply, the Shas’vre receded into the gloom.

From the third and fourth compartments, eight drantakh barrelled down respective steps, all wearing heavy, plated combat armour. Immediately they sought out the perpetrators of the attack, charging into a maelstrom of light and death. Their professionalism sent a chill through the two humans who had paused to look on.

These drantakh were the real deal. Corroborating their assumption, the tau quickly focussed their fire. Both sides darted between stalagmites; trying to suppress fleeting ghosts or breakup drantakh fire teams. Another eight arrived.

“And you think mending fences is harder?” Marshall quipped.

Adam laughed sharply then dove into the chamber with Rius’lan behind. Within a drantakh technician, disorientated by the battle, barely realised intruders had entered. The alien crumpled as Adam opened fire.

Crossing the short distance to the nearby console, Rius’lan looked about the suite of screens, ignoring the dead alien on the floor, flicking out a dataslate the same time as Adam prepared a plate bomb.

Rius marvelled, “Remarkable”

“Time to leave!”

“I think, yes, this has to be it,” the tau selected several sliders, the pitch of the spooling array changing, “the transmission is annulled” Rius looked up proudly.

“Perhaps you missed it, I just put a bomb in here” Adam snapped.

“It won’t detonate with a tau present, I’m perfectly safe”

“Suit yourself,” Adam relented, moving for the exit.

A pair of heavy troopers blocked his path. Snorting at the intruders as they brought massive spike rifles to bear.

Damian fired first, his burst causing the closest to stumble away, impacts ricocheting off alien armour. The second fired spikes across the chamber; staking a line along the far wall through the

space Adam had once stood. Rius drew his pistol and fired at the lone drantakh, the shot gouged a small mark across the alien's chest plate. It bought a momentary distraction for Damian to fire point blank into the alien's neckline. The heavy trooper collapsed to the floor.

Risu'lan regarded his finicky sidearm, "Capital ship weapons are more my specialty"

Adam and Damian exchanged a glance.

"Fio'el, time to go!"

"Coming, I just--"

"Rius!"

The access wall parted, they rushed along to the next chamber, weapons fire producing framed after images of their flight. An instant later the first booth shuddered and fell in upon itself, spooling roundels excavating through the ruined structure into the cavern floor.

As they hustled up to the next, spikes stabbed into the rock face narrowly missing Adam, he fired back into the dark unrewarded. Inside the second chamber a technician lay unmoving, slain by a pulse cannon burst through wall panels behind him; however the event horizon within had held.

"Fio'el?"

The tau studied his wrist vesa, "This transit field is active" then with concern, "but there's someth--"

Damian tossed in a plate, "Next one!"

No sooner had they moved on, the chamber crumpled behind them. The array atop spun away into the rock face nearby, disintegrating in multiple directions. A large piece whistled past

the fio to savage a drantakh heavy trooper moving to fire upon the trio.

Bursting into the third, they discovered two technicians debating next to the control console, so distracted they ignored the arrivals at first. Adam fired a burst that struck the console; they both spun about whinnied, smashing through a wall panel to escape.

“We cannot destroy the array yet”

Adam barely acknowledged the tau engineer, “Next one!” he tossed the plate onto the floor and turned for the door.

“There’s an increasing resonance in the transmission event,” the fio’el spoke louder, staying put, “I think it will eventually collapse the transit field automatically”

Adam rolled his eyes, “Best news all day, now lets go; the bomb is set”

“We cannot detonate this chamber, in a manner it’s becoming an explosive device, collapsing the field now would be bad, we can disconnect but we can’t reset the device”

Damian paused, “When it halts, the blast will collapse this cavern?”

“Yes, perhaps the cave network”

Touching his wrist vesa again, Rius’lan quickly began gesturing across the surface of it until he paused, soft grey blue complexion going grey,

“These last two are both affected, it must have transferred from the initiating array”

“Fio’el, disconnect the link, least we can do”

Damian guarded the exit wall while Rius'lan began reviewing the console. Realising the danger finally, Adam quickly collected up the bomb plate and passed it to Damian,

“Where are you going?”

“Visiting the next compartment, if Rius'lan caught it, they may power down and begin again; if they do we're all dead”
Damian went cold; he followed behind Adam without pause.

Moving to the centre of the transmission chamber to study the grid, the event horizon floated like hazy ball of light, Rius took as many images and sensor captures as he dared. He recognised much of the construction, it was not too dissimilar to Imperial designs he had spent ages retro engineering within relaxed science labs. When the unique difference finally dawned on him, he also discovered he was alone.

Ducking behind a stalagmite, Damian drew up alongside Adam as four more heavy troopers stormed down the steps ahead and into the fire fight raging within the cavern gloom. Sure none were straggling, Adam motioned to go. Passing through the slide wall they discovered an inter branch dispute over further reinforcements.

Silhouetted by a transmission horizon, another three drantakh heavy troopers and their leader were chuffing vigorously at a feeble, panicked drantakh technician who gestured avidly toward the transit field, judging by the tone the array above was emitting, he had yet to even disconnect the link. The group turned to see who interrupted their argument. Neither opened fire, each group wishing to retain the structure intact.

“Now what?” Adam breathed.

“It gets ugly” Damian replied, drawing his combat blade. Across the platform each drantakh did similar; wicked blades sliding from sheaths strapped to shoulder plates.

“You have a spare?”

“No”

“Of course”

The stand off lasted a heartbeat, with a coughing shout, the Drantakh charged.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The latest counter attack lay in ruins about the southern rise facing the foothills, bodies or converted carryalls, all strewn carcasses before the defenses and the rolling foothills beyond.

“Been a few minutes” Rales commented.

Kade grunted, ignoring a dozen small wounds, he had been one of the few lucky ones. The remainder of the Karapeshi raiding force were hunkered down behind what few worthwhile pieces of cover were left.

“Think this next lot are waiting for even more support, thankfully they don’t realise its unnecessary” he finally replied. Those directly about him were quiet; there was no need to mince words. Their effort to draw away eyes from the strike team heading into the ranges had worked exceedingly well. But it had, as expected, cost them dearly.

“Ready the last rail rifle, I think.. there!”

Wasting no time Effram waved a sharp signal, the gun crew already aligned, fired. Even before they prepared a new slug, there was a smoking divot where once a scout had decided to sneak a look at defences.

“Nice shot” someone verbally applauded.

Effram reviewed the ruin through his rangefinder, “They’ve had plenty of practice today” he considered darkly.

Fewer than three hundred of the Karapeshi first, Capital Militia and Lord Devro’s own household guard remained combat effective. Battered and bruised they gathered what munitions and charge cells they could from the dead and incapacitated. One

would think such losses would leave supplies plentiful, but the sheer weight of foe that had broken upon their defensive position had burned through whatever they could recoup from the casualties on both sides of the fight. Even the Vexes and Versas had to call it a day, several of their number burning wrecks about the battlescape. The Imperialists had long figured out how to capitalise on their higher number of rail rifles when it came to air support. Only Rashiede and Kyle remained, stationed a short distance out, and long decided to expend themselves on something important, to best keep the outpost from being overrun.

Effram edged over to the master at arms, “How many do you think are beyond those foothills?”

“Easily our number twice over, that rail shot will either get them all heated under the collar, or preferably, stay put and keep calling for help”

“Which do you think?”

“Suits me either way, I’ll be fighting fatigue if I don’t fight them soon enough” a rare grin cracked the stoic regard he gave the younger officer.

“Well we h–“

A flash. Then another. Kade felt the hair on his neck stand up. All of Devro’s guard uttered curses, immediately preparing their weapons.

“Listen up!” Kade roared, stepping onto the lip of the dugout, as he surveyed the ragged line of defenders among tipped over technicals, sandbags and shifted defense plating, “no more Imperialists, this is our real foe! They caught me out once before, in my underwear, and suddenly inside my Lord’s house.

We won that fight!" he eyed a few of the fighters nearby, "they think they can try me again! Unfortunately for them.. I've had time to put my boots on! And I intend to kick their alien asses off my hill everytime they try! So stay tight; work together, no bloody useless heroics or I will kick your asses when I'm done kicking theirs!" he paused as Kaero stepped up next to him without pause and let the banner fly tall, the tattered fabric caught an oddly shifting wind, "First in!" he shouted.

Several flashes pulsed behind him in the foothills, but their voices did not falter,

"Last Out!" all roared together.

Energetic orbs flashed closer and closer, punctuating lulls in autogun fire that had erupted amongst the obscured Imperialist forces. Carried upon the buffeting breeze that accompanied the energetic spectacle, distant screams washed over the outpost.

Kaero held the banner pole in close, now leaning against the firepit wall, "Five hells, the Imperialists are being slaughtered"

"Hell indeed," growled Kade, "dabble with demons, they'll come for their tithe soon enough."

The master at arms could see the cold logic behind the slaughter. It would be better to dispense with your human lackeys than have them turn on you when they realised their employers are aliens, out to kill other humans. He gripped his auto shotgun, watching for the first sign of alien approach, waiting for when they would tire of cleaning house

The air stilled, instincts that had brought them through a day of battles kicked in; weapons were primed, charged and loaded.

There was no need for a ready order. Effram moved out to his own command, leaving the lieutenant and Kade alone among their own men.

The first sign of attack was the instantaneous destruction of the last remaining rail rifle mounting, killing all who crewed it. The whip-crack of a railgun report arrived long after a row of angular combat vehicles surged over the northern foothills. Amongst them loped heavily armoured soldiers, many carrying newly acquired rail rifles as if they were carbines. Hyper velocity slugs began to puncture the ramshackle defences.

“The Drantakh?” Rales questioned, his voice monotone. Kade ducked as a brace of explosives sent debris flying,

“Drantakh,” he affirmed with a sharp glance, “we hold them, like before” he grabbed a spare triplex, aimed down a firing hole and put a burst amongst a trio of Drantakh loping up toward the outpost. One faltered, shook off the hits and kept coming.

Before anyone could pay attention to the lack of success, the entire Karapeshi force opened up immediately after.

“What’s that shit doing?” Kaero pointed out an alien, who had paused amidst the surging force, with what looked like an upturned urn.

Kade looked and felt an immediate sense of dread wash over him,

“Support unit, he’s geo-locating us – Jenoi!”

The specialist had seen the alien too, a sniper rifle barked, sending up a fount of earth right next to the figure. The plucky

bastard barely flinched, but a squad of drantakh quickly surrounded him and laid down a fusillade of suppressive fire.

“Dammit” grunted Kade, finding himself on the other side of the pit, a stake embedded in his plastron carapace.

He had lingered too long to spy the results, angered by his own stupidity he fought to draw the stake out.

Kaero shouted toward the second pit, the ground between churned up by stakes and energy bolts.

“I can hear you yah idiot, let me concentrate!” snapped Jenó.

Rolling over again the sniper ignored anything further, trying to line up the shot – then flinched back. The aliens had him suppressed and no one else had useful eyes on that special little bugger who was about to rain the apocalypse on the defenders.

“Stuff it”

He stood up with one foot propped on the dugout lip, crooked his arm and laid out the rifle through it. Sighting the alien, who was presently arguing with another next to the urn device, Jenó fired, saw the drantakh jolt, then fall away missing much of its torso. After gawping at the victim, the other drantakh went prone an instant later.

Jenó fell back into his pit, a dozen stakes embedded across his body. Kaero Rales watched on in shock, snapping out of it when a figure leapt into the pit nearby. He brought the banner shaft down upon the alien without hesitation. Another replaced the first, running the lieutenant through with a vicious combat knife, shoving the man bodily against the opposite wall of the pit. The

banner wavered, just before the alien grasped it forcefully, kicking the limp body of the lieutenant aside.

There was little translation needed, for the drantakh marine had seen many such tokens used by foes that had fought futilely against the Dranta. It would be a worthy–

“That’s mine,” a bloodied figure stated darkly in human tongue.

The drantakh marine turned sharply to train his weapon, but realised the speaker had it’s own braced and aimed at point blank range. There wasn’t a moment to contemplate anything worthwhile other than a chuff of anguish. Alien ruin decorated one side of the fire pit an instant later.

Again the banner faltered, but this time Kade Emmers stood up and grasped it. Ignoring the grating pain of his shoulder as he stabbed another stimp into his thigh. Letting the chemicals embolden his body, Kade took in the carnage. Everywhere the Karapeshi fought like animals, firing point blank against heavy armour plating; then blade to knife in their final moments. At the foot of the rise, an Imperialist carryall drew up, the new off world owners leapt out to join the assault, leaving the rotary cannon on it’s back unmanned. Either by enthusiasm or inability to use the human controls, they had ignored it. Hefting his shotgun, Kade climbed up the pit, raised the banner and charged.

In a few steps he could feel a group of Karapeshi running with him right at the disembarking drantakh. The aliens were caught out, surprised at a sudden counter assault. The few seconds

allowed the humans to close, gunning down a majority of the aliens by sheer weight of fire.

“Crew that cannon! Rake the bastards!” Kade roared, turning about he drew up his shotgun and brought down another alien that had run back to retake the vehicle; he cast the spent shotgun aside.

“Weapon up!” someone shouted, replaced by a chest-rumbling growl an instant later.

The rotary stitched through loose knots of Drantakh, killing several in seconds. This was going to break the attack, and Kade grinned madly. He planted the banner pole into the ruined savannah grass and drew out his sidearm, joining in the defence of the reclaimed carryall. Each second it operated was a moment closer to repelling the attack.

An explosion obliterated the vehicle, tumbling Kade aside until he saw twilight sky. A drantakh marine halted nearby, surveying it’s handy work, then it looked skyward sharply. Another explosion washed over Kade, dirt and wet gristle pattering down in macabre rain. A rail rifle whined into violence, then continued increasing in pitch. With what strength he had left, Kade covered his face as hot air washed over him again.

Blue bolts whipped overhead. He felt more than heard a heavy thump, before a massive battlesuit stomped past, weapons spitting energetic rounds. Another landed, firing incessantly as hovering discs flitted past, rushing into the firefight. Kade gave up cataloguing the chaos, the householder succumbing to a myriad of wounds.

Leaping from her transport, Kuna'Ro fell into a crouch, aimed and fired. The drantakh marine twisted away and fell over behind a broken defensive wall. About her others fanned out, protecting the landing, killing any dranta who dared oppose it. The interlopers had had their dire way for a few moments, now it was time to face a foe that could elevate violence to a whole new level.

Two of the gue'la Vexes shot overhead, rotary cannons growling through alien forces still pushing on the outpost, the pilots had protested mightily at being held back earlier, but once united with the relief force, they surged ahead with near reckless vengeance. The dranta landing now met a tau-defended position. Aun help them, she scowled.

Moving out on her own, not linked to any particular la'rua, Kuna hunted like a warrior of old, coming across out of position dranta marines, flanking and killing them. Pulse fire and stakes criss-crossed the ruined outpost, the confusion perfect for a lone killer. Stepping over the latest sizzling corpse, Kuna paused along the outer perimeter. Catching her breath, she watched a flock of vesa hunt down a Drantakh beyond the nearest rise. The fight had turned fast; she would be out of chances for revenge sooner than expected.

A weight pushed her down the slope, the harshness was telling, her attacker merely wanted to send the firewarrior sprawling rather than go hand to hand. Experience had her roll up onto her haunches, aiming the direction she had come from. A stake pierced her blastguard, spinning her off balance, losing grip on

her carbine. Before she could recover it, an armour shod boot held her down. The dranta marine stood over her levelleing a spiker, then abruptly jerked away, pulse rounds impacting across his body.

Kuna, still prone, looked about herself and spied a stout but short figure smoothly approach her down the slope, checking his flanks then ensuring the dranta was dead with a double shot.

“Shas’Ui?” he spoke as their links synched.

“Shona?”

The shas’la knelt down, checked her over then helped Kuna sit up.

“Bit soon for you to pursue the path of the Monat shas’ui, there remains two of us”

Kuna looked down at her hands, “I just..”

“You’re not alone Kuna, we both feel it, only I knew you would be the one to act on it.”

“All this way and the same Orca?”

“I will always follow you shas’ui, that and your assignment hacking was terrible”

He put out his glove, drawing her up as she gripped the offered support.

“Thanks Shona.”

The stout tau rescuer nodded smartly.

Progressing along the foot of the outpost slope, they collected her weapon near a burnt out gue’la transport, pausing to assess their position amidst the rolling battle. The drantakh presently faced a counter-attacked by the tau relief force, rabid Capital

Militiamen led by o'Waylan and a handful of the remaining defenders. Unsurprisingly they had fallen back.

"Shas'ui"

His tone put Kuna on alert, looking over to see the shas'la gathering up a pole with a large section of cloth attached to it.

"Looks like a gue'la unit flag"

"Not imperialist either"

An audible click had them both turn about slowly; behind them lay a prone gue'la officer, bloodied and weak, but still able to aim a pistol at them. Kuna quickly let her carbine hang from its chest clip. The tableau held for as long as the gue'la kept his pistol trained, and then abruptly he passed out.

"That was close" Shona commented, relaxing with a sharp exhale.

"Very," she added, considering the event for a moment, "bring the flag, we're helping that gue'la back to the outpost" Shona nodded, smiling under his helm while rolling the flag about the poll, glad her anger had ebbed.

Accompanied by distant explosions and weapons fire, the pair slowly hauled the unconscious gue'la to safety, soon accompanied by other ragged survivors and flitting medical vesa.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

A thick puck tumbled into the chamber, tossed between the two humans as the slide wall behind opened. Small pellets unfurled in midair as the clutch of mal'caor al'vesa struck the charging drantakh. A few scattered across the floor, only to scuttle with preternatural speed up alien legs and under battle plate. Plasma cutters fired, searing flesh and bone, mandibles designed to make mockery the toughest metals burrowed deep for alien spinal cords. The last trooper alive collapsed to his knees, snout clenched in rictus, then died.

A small metallic spider slipped out of the nostril of the dead alien, stumbled a few miniature paces then expired. The whole event took no longer than Ulo moving past the startled humans, to gather up the puck with his free gauntlet.

"Are you harmed?" he asked matter of fact, ignoring the horrifically slain drantakh.

"No, I ah.." Damian blinked, taken aback at the turn of events.

Ulo put the empty puck against a thigh clasp, sensor cluster regarding the two humans, then the dead as if remembering their presence,

"Rius told me no weapons fire"

Gathered together in the third chamber moments later, they waited while the fio'el performed a didactic upload crash course in dranta to understand the controls properly. Outside the cavern was lit by electrical fires and smouldering ruins, eerily quiet after

the chaos before. Somewhere in the shadows, Ulo's warriors kept a pensive vigil on the inevitable counter attack from farther up the tunnels.

Turning toward the engineer, the shas'vere encouraged in fluid tau,

"Hurry fio'el, their support will be arriving shortly"

Rius'lan nodded, his eyes fixed upon scrolling dranta sigils.

"I think I found a localised preset site. They've been sending to it regularly, the power required is low enough we wouldn't spot it unless scanning for it at the right time,"

"Your point?" the shas'vere rushed the talkative fio.

"Our exit"

"Good" Ulo turned, sensor cluster pointed at the gue'la,

"The Fio'el has found an exit" he spoke in monotone.

Adam moved for the transit field, "Right, lets get out of here, shas'vere?"

The tau remind in place.

"It's a long explanation, but we do not use these devices"

Devro glared, "Bad timing to admit a theological impasse don't you think?"

Damian interjected, "what do you mean Ulo?"

"The energies involved are anathema to our physiology, my team and I will escort Rius'lan out instead"

The humans looked to Rius'lan, he was accepting suicide with remarkable aplomb.

"The shas'vere is right, you can go where normally we cannot" the tau replied to the astonished gue'la.

Damian couldn't believe what he was hearing. The shas'vere put up a halting hand toward Adam before a protest began; Marshall

however picked up on the unique implied caveat in the explanation,

“Normally?”

The engineer actually looked smug,

“This isn’t a teleporter, it’s a gateway. The event created is not what I expected, the Drantakh have–”

Adam rounded on the diminutive engineer, “I’m sorry?”

“For once, I think I will explain later. Suffice to say, this is our exit,” the engineer stressed the collective term.

Ulo flinched, “Our perimeter has been engaged”

Stepping forward, the shas’vre indicated for the explosives the humans retained,

“Give them to me”

Ulo took the plates, turned and jogged his armoured mass outside, heading toward the cavern alcove entrance. The fio’el quickly pushed several sliders, glancing at his wrist vesa,

“However, that resonance will renew again, even faster this time”

Burst cannon fire echoed within the caverns outside as Ulo reappeared, his mass jogging in swiftly,

“Time to go then” he announced.

Rius’lan trotted toward the event horizon, “It’s active, we have only moments shas’vre”

Two more suits barrelled into the small space, bespiked and beaten, the shas’vre ushered the arrivals into the transit field without hesitation. Damian and Adam quickly moved to cover the entrance.

Pausing, Ulo internally ordered Eyto to fallback; several explosions thundered, the concussion reverberating throughout

the cavern depths. A billowing pall of dust blasted into the chamber as three tau shadows stampeded in, several rolling stalactites and a landslide of rubble close on their armour shod heels. The tau stealth warriors passed quickly by, continuing into the white event horizon, disappearing in turn.

“Fio’El, time to leave” Ulo stated.

Ignoring the request, Rius’lan continued to capture images of the exotic tech with his wrist vesa.

Ulo pounded across the chamber, grabbing the stout tau by his carapace neck ring. Servos whined and the fio flew into the nimbus. Ulo’s sensor cluster turned to regard the gue’la,

“I can manage” Adam entreated.

Damian edged backward toward their exit, still sighting his triplex on the entrance as Ulo ushered him closer.

“Hurry gue–“

Spikes stitched through the chamber wall, several striking the shas’vre. He stumbled back into the transit field and disappeared. Adam looked at Damian; they both looked at the plate bomb, eyes wide.

“Move!”

Two drantakh rushed into the chamber, spike rifles firing. Adam brought his triplex up smartly, dropping to one knee as Damian ran toward him for the transit field, the plate bomb already beginning to spin. Damian flinched with a yell, stumbling as a spike embedded in his thigh.

Adam drew himself up, pulling Marshall toward the event horizon whilst firing one handed, he twisted about to protect Damian

bodily. A spread of the spikes hammered into Adam's back, pushing them both into the light.

Air rushed over Damian's face, fast and loud. He tumbled, flailing as gravity pulled him down. The end came fast, cold and filled with noise as ocean water embraced him. Driven by the speed of the fall, he felt himself propelled deeply. Adam splashed down hard nearby in unison without making for the surface immediately.

Realising something was wrong; Damian removed his kit bag and carapace smartly, rolling in place he dove after the quickly descending shadow. Kicking hard enough to feel the spike grate bone, Damian gritted his teeth as a wreath of air bubbles snatched away a pain filled shout. Finally his hand found the evac grip behind Adam's neck ring.

Chest burning for air, Damian hauled upward. Pulling for the surface, the stricture of suffocation surpassing the protests of his wounded thigh. He was so close; his fingers began to break the surface. It simply wasn't going to be enough.

Something clasped about his wrist, grey blue skin tightened across Damian's hand as it took greater purchase, pulling him upward. Surfacing finally, he drew air loudly, coughing in the same instant. His tau rescuer indicated for the shore whilst treading water alongside; another pair of warriors were already hauling Devro away, face up in the surf. Lain in a row across the beach ahead, four stealth suits lay sprawled out like cracked

crustaceans, torso armour split and spread to the sides as other warriors abandoned their holed and flooded armour.

Sloshing out of the breakers, Damian hobbled up the beach with the shas'la supporting him. Nearby, water logged and grunting, Rius'lan fussed about Ulo; the leader's armour sealed by protruding spikes.

Easing Damian onto the sand, the tau nodded then left to attend to Adam. Laying back on the cool sand, Damian rested a moment then hobbled toward the others.

—

Waking up with a surge of energy, Adam Devro began vomiting seawater in a fit of coughs, finally settling his head back onto the sand.

“Ouch” he muttered after several moments.

Wiping matted hair from his face, he looked at the alien above, then a device penetrating his chest.

“What the hell is that!”

Damian appeared, bracing his shoulders, “Cardiac stim, you took a nasty hit. We need you awake to patch you up” Trying to move, pain lanced along his spine. At least he could feel the waves of nausea assaulting his body,

“We’re out?” Adam finally uttered through clenched teeth.

“Out and in the middle of a drantakh rubbish dump”

Damian replied with a laconic grin.

All about the gathered tau and their cracked suits, Adam could see all kinds of scattered refuse, including his carapace with two spikes jutting out of it.

“I was hoping for parades and–” Adam looked up. Marshall was already transfixed; three consecutive flaming trails speared through the sky, a cold flush swept away Adam’s discomfort.

Rius’lan also watched the dranta starships, made meteors, shower ruin across the sky,

“They seem to have met the inevitable outcome of the same problem, curious”

“Convenient” Ulo corrected, and then in repose “nothing in this fight has been straight forward, particularly surrounding these two gue’la”

The tau exchanged like glances, remaining quiet while everyone expressed jubilant reactions, aliens unified in victory.

“Time to signal for an evacuation?” Rius spoke first.

“A pathfinder la’rua to extract us, I set the beacon the moment we made the shore. It may be awhile I imagine,” his gaze turned to Adam Devro, “do you think the gue’la survive?”

“Deep tissue wounds only, nothing a synth–heal sheet can’t handle for a couple rotaa, they’re designed for this situation” Vre’Ulo grunted, then looked out to sea, easing out a breath, drawing another slowly through his fold, enjoying the acidic salt tang upon his senses.

“We must simply be patient,” Ulo leaned down, gathering a shell from the beach, “Coast of Karapesh you say?”

“Yes, remarkable silicates”

Ulo half snorted, a grin forming. He gripped the fio on the shoulder.

“Can you not appreciate anything without assessing it Rius?”

“To appreciate is to assess what makes it remarkable in the first place shas’vre”

Ulo laughed, finally feeling the relief of leading his la’rua out of yet another dranta forsaken hole. Rius remained a little perplexed, bemused by the jaunty shas’vre. He smiled anyway to be polite; returning to pawing his wrist’vesa long after the flaming drantakh meteors passed over the horizon. Although the fight seemed over, questions about what he saw in the cavern would trouble him for many rotaa to come.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Dust billowing behind, the Devilfish raced across the dry northern desert. Hundreds of tor'kan from anywhere Jisu'Ro had been on this world, yet he was not blissfully admiring the scenery racing by. Beside him Mica Waylan held onto an overhead rail, rocking with the motion of the transport craft.

"We'll get there" the gue'la reassured.

Looking up, the Shas'el nodded. He didn't dare hold out much hope though, even if finding the location was easy enough. It was more how they had found it that bothered him, a satellite image of a long stretching scar in this Aun forsaken desert, and a trailing wisp of long extinguished smoke, signs of hope dimming by the raik'an.

"I don't expect much" he spoke in monotones.

"I expect to shake his hand" Mica tried to buoy his contemporary, but clearly the alien was far too distracted to note. Jisu looked over at his brother, Elan'Jhin, who looked back with a supportive gaze.

The transport slowed as the pilot announced their final approach. Cautious even now, the trio readied their weapons and prepared to debark with the honour guard. A slight lurch and the rear ramp deployed, allowing all to rush out onto the awaiting hot sand. It surprised Mica how deft the tau proved at moving across the giving surface; he was soon left behind by their desire to rescover their friend and fellow commander, Ru'Che.

As Mica crested the dune before him, catching a breath, he could see an engineering drone and what he imagined was its medical equivalent already busying themselves about a scorched, coffin like capsule, half buried amid the wreckage. A ring of tau stood solemn watch like a funeral gathering.

“Hell I hope this is not how looks...” he muttered, sliding down the slope to join the pensive tau waiting for the machines to finish their diligent work.

Everyone flinched as the capsule seal suckered air harshly, then crash foam bubbled out, reacting to the break. Retardant spray was administered by the engineering vesa, coating Elan’Jhin and Jisu’Ro as the two clambered past and roughly handled the access lid aside.

They found Ru’Che recessed deeply within hardened foam and support gel. He was breathing hard, almost ghost white from exposure to high gravity and internal injuries, but his eyes quickly held those of Jisu.

“O’Ru’Che...” the Shas’el spoke with formality.

“El’Jisu..” the kor replied meekly, but similarly.

The shas’el rubbed his scalp slowly, retardant fluid and crash foam hiding a rarely seen emotional expression of relief as he gripped the edge of the capsule, then began digging his friend free.

“If it’s all the same, I’d rather not Lord Marshall”

Damian had expected this, and hid a momentary annoyance by shifting against his alloy cane.

“Look Kade, whilst Lord Devro is in my care, and you’re well, here... you’re best served reorganising the Militia, and the men of the First. They trust you and with the loss of Rales, my people need someone they respect to keep them focussed”

“What of my Lord’s House guard?”

“Well to be frank Kade, the old ways are now truly in the past. We’ve done our part, lived up to the task and now? If I read it right, we’re looking at a unified Karapeshi army. A new army needs leaders they know. You’re the last one left to be blunt, and everyone who saw through Unity Hill as folks have come to call it, well you’re minted for life”

Kade grunted, shifting his position in the recovery bunk. A few days ago he could have shot this man without reluctance, but even he had learned, through the hardest of methods, the Marshall’s meant something to people. As all symbols do, whether this man breathed or not, people would rally to his memory alone, follow under his banner loyally to whatever end.

“A new army?” he responded finally, glancing at Kali, “is she in it?”

“You need an ace pilot, mudkicker” she remarked from her spot in the only chair, boots resting on a small table. Patiently waiting after flying Damian from Karapesh to the tau medical building south of Capital that morning.

Damian grimaced, rubbed his face and gave her a glare to just be quiet.

“Good” Kade followed up, surprising them both.

“Ah, well that’s a yes?” Damian stumbled his confirmation. The burly warrior nodded slowly, then paused and fixed his gaze on Marshall.

“One condition, if I may Lord Marshall” the Master at Arms added, then seeing the younger man eye him cautiously he continued, “we fly that pennant of yours atop the new Regimental Colours”

There was an arrayed reaction on all their faces at the request. Kade was astounded at himself for asking, Marshall stood quietly deciding upon something that haunted him, and Kali, witnessing her friend letting go of his past, felt a familiar presence leave.

Wresting the top of the alloy cane, Damian looked at Kali and found support in her eyes, he smiled lightly and returned his gaze to meet those of the grey eyed warrior before him,

“I think,” Damian summed up his words, “that’ll be fine by all”

“You have your army then Lord Marshall”

“No, Karapesh does Master Emmers”

“If the Militia and Waylan sign on, it looks like Odysseus will,” Kali remarked, watching the two of them.

“Quite a thing...” Damian mulled the changes happening from Karapesh to Capital as everyone recovered from the shock of interstellar war.

Kali stood up, their task here settled, “Come on, let’s check in on your new friend,” marching out the door she ducked back in impatiently, “well tripod, on your way”

Marshall looked at Kade, the other man beginning to rethink his agreement with her in the mix.

“You’ll get along,” he reassured the Master at Arms, the replying glance was unconvinced, “any words for Lord Devro?” Damian added as he made to leave.

Processing the remark, Kade finally spoke up,

“I’ll visit in my own time Lord Marshall, its personal”

“When is it ever not personal between people like us?”

Damian smiled as he hobbled out.

“You do not approve?”

“Do you ask of my opinion or what I understand is the best for our people?”

“Perhaps both Aun’Vre”

Jaun’Qoul kept his gaze toward the starfield beyond, outside an energy barrier that encapsulated the meditation dais, atop the tau warship. The Aun’O at his side barely moved, her voice like a psychic emanation within his own mind, such was the stillness about their meeting.

“You achieved your goal, we drew out the last Drantakh fleet and broke it upon the world I found for you. It all went as you believed it would”

“And yet you doubt my method?”

‘Doubt? No, however I am troubled, in that we found a rare jewel and then callously threw it into the gamble. If the Drantakh had not rushed so fast to enable their *Far Leap* device, your blessed arrow for rapid victory may have failed and cost us heavily. Even still, they produced a great many of these devices,

who knows how many they still have?" Jaun shifted his gaze to a far and familiar constellation his heart aching slightly.

Again the Aun'O invaded his mind, "Any Second Tier would ensure all that gives him power is close to him, what came here, was all there will ever be. As much as I knew they would come here, I know this."

"A pity then"

"What could be a pity Vre'Jaun?"

"A fio'el under my charge saw the devices first hand"

"Yes? Well that's immaterial"

"Maybe, but he discovered the Drantakh did not make Vash'aun'an devices using your planted gue'la gift, they instead discovered a method for a stable gateway device. They took what we could not unravel and created something even we could use," Jaun'Qoul felt himself confronted by the Aun'O, but he spoke onward without being cowed by her emanation of presence, "we are fortunate they retained the trojan power system design we embedded and did so on many of their ships. So if every example is gone, then we have lost how they did this. Considering all we gambled, that Aun'O, is a pity"

"It is unfortunate you think this Jaun'Qoul, how do you suggest we avoid disappointment in future?" her tone was remarkably condescending.

"I told you what I understand, but now I will tell you my opinion. I do not approve on using up what few gifts and allies we have come across so willingly. If you do not burn the sapling, you will find shelter under a tree instead," he paused to let the parable sink in, "I intend to avoid disappointment and cultivate and grow an alliance here and not make decisions on feeding my

pride without a mind to the future, a future we will need strong allies, not dependants.”

He knew he had probably crossed a line, The Aun’O was clearly powerful and with influence. An entire third phase flotilla floated in orbit about them; a hundred starships, fresh from victory over several times their number through cleverness and technology. An entire region of space lay open for the tau to invade and subsume under the Empire’s sway. Everything said victory here, and the collapse of a great foe. The Aun’O had every reason to be upset at what would seem a petulant reaction to a favoured plaything being scratched during the tussle for the planet below.

Perhaps an assuredness of the technological and theological wonder that is the Tau’va and all the inventions and cultural superiority was blinding them to something at the core of all things; from totems in their burrows too vesa companions as they explored seemingly silent stars. The tau had cautiously manufactured reassuring, loyal possessions. Ensuring alliance by unequal might or abstract representations.

Jaun’Qoul mulled, while he stood there looking at the Aun’O in all her magnificence and majesty, have his people come to treat the races they watch over as an affirmation of the tau’va, each ally a totem to their success and self belief, only worthy to be sacrificed as they saw fit. Because engaging and making real connections is simply too hard. The concept of convincing another you can become friends without flexing influences, even relying on them when you are vulnerable? It is still the hardest task any being can undertake and remains an essential trial in life.

“If you have nothing more to say Jaun’Qoul, I suggest you depart to your saplings and trees. Our Kor’Vattra will bring all those oppressed by the Drantakh under the enlightened path of the Tau’va, with or without your guidance.”

Looking at her he acknowledged it was time,

“For the Tau’Va Aun’O” he bowed, retiring to the exit. Jaun’Qoul might never find himself on the soil of T’au again, particularly if he makes a habit of questioning the motives of an Aun’O aboard her own flagship.

Which was why he knew he had found a home on Odysseus as the gathered gue’la had all greeted him when he arrived. Whilst his honour guard and dropship remained outside the Marshall Family estate, the picnic for recovering guardsmen and militia of Unity Hill was being held within. It was a warming scene of a people once divided now united by what the tau had inflicted upon them. Down what path this would take Marshall or Devro and their world, Jaun’Qoul was unsure, but he would remain here to guide the outcome as best he could.

“I was under the impression you would be leaving us Ambassador?”

The Aun glanced over his shoulder to see Lord Damian hobble across the lawn toward him, the sound of music and conversation rose and fell like a bubbling brook about their meeting,

“I had thought that too Lord Marshall, but I changed my mind, I hope to take up a new vocation here,” he answered while gazing beyond the grounds, toward the Karapeshi Mountains.

“I don’t mean to be rude, but we can rebuild we’ve got hard earned experience in it. You need not stay through any obligation Jaun’Qoul,” Damian leaned on his cane, eyeing the tall being as he sought answers, “What could possibly entertain our Ambassador of the Tau Empire, when he should be liberating other worlds from the Drantakh?” the hint of grandiose adventure missed was amusingly obvious to the tau.

Jaun turned with a reflective disposition; taking in all those gathered, he smiled,

“Gardening.”