

Chapter 13

The words yanked Celia by the collar back into the bridge. Her father's thread glowed on the holo-board. Any remaining strength in her legs evaporated, and Celia struggled through the three steps back to the command chair. Opting to not push her luck, Celia gripped the back of the chair for support.

"You found another message?"

After you asked me to triangulate your father's messages.

"You have his location?" Celia's heart raced, and she looked at the beaten shell of her homeworld in the distance.

No, ma'am.

Her battered legs wobbled.

I ran periodic attempts with various search code modifications. So I ran one more before the shutdown and...

"VOZ..." Celia grumbled.

Sorry. I located the ghost data in our signal buffers, tracked it to a third-tier server, and isolated an encrypted video message from the Admiral's earlier generation TexCom.

"We need to work on your small talk." Celia grabbed the armrest and sat. She struggled to find a comfortable position, so Celia settled on mildly miserable. "Please display it."

A swarming mosaic of digital static flashed on the main holo-screen. Moments later, the random tiles coalesced into the image of a square-jawed man with short hair, fringed in gray. Admiral John Vickers stared at them in an opulent hallway gilded with polished wood, stone, and precious materials. Digital artifacts speckled the still image. Celia's heart skipped each time it blinked to refresh the buffer. Then the image moved, and a commanding voice filled the bridge.

"C, your last message cut out, and we lost your signal, so I'm trying a higher generation of TexCom network. Whatever you do, don't try to come and get me; it's becoming too dangerous down here."

The camera slipped off of the Admiral as he moved, and Celia was sure she

spotted Kr'lTraax among the familiar faces of her father's staff officers in the background. The camera tracked onward, through the corridor, and into the smoke-darkening sky of hours ago. Multi-hued flashes high in the thickening sky signaled the appearance of Terra's inner layers. They hung in the air as if unsure where they were headed until gravity played its card and the massive volumes plummeted toward the helpless city. Titanic impacts exploded in the distance, the crew witnessed the initial destruction of Terra Prime in high definition. The camera shifted back upon Celia's father, and the Royal Gardens were in view, just over his shoulder. The Unity Sculpture was its advertised size and pulsing with that same odd, scintillating light.

"Whatever you do, get away from Terra. It is not safe here; nothing is, not even the Corps." Admiral Vickers leaned in as he did every time he needed to make sure she understood him.

There was a rumble that clipped the audio, and the camera wobbled. When it settled, the Unity Sculpture was in frame in the lush gardens. Then the gardens blurred for a moment, and the entirety of them dropped a dozen meters to reveal the full height of the monolith as they saw it in person. The ruined gardens burst into flames. Amidst the fiery chaos, there were a series of flashes at the base of the Unity Sculpture. Dozens of huge and shimmering bubbles clung to the bottom of the spire, then one by one, they vanished. One disappeared, leaving the obsidian mound where they found the unconscious Enari within. Another vanished and left the circular opening. Within a moment, the landscape looked as it had when they first crossed the obsidian plane.

"None of the intel said anything about this." A familiar voice called from off-camera. "Find the King!"

The camera settled back onto Celia's father.

"I'm so proud of you," Her father's brow crinkled just like hers, "you're everything a parent could hope for. But please, get away from this system; Ph'avell will know where to go; listen to him. Keep yourselves safe, and don't let anyone know you were here." He stepped away from the people around him, "If the SoulGuard know we've communicated, or you've been here, you will not be safe."

Big Jake Vickers, looked up and the camera swept across the Royal Palace

down onto the metropolis. Nueva City was on fire in patches, and massive explosions rose across the plain. The image shifted up, and multi-hued flashes increased in number, moving closer and closer to where Celia's father stood.

"Get out of her!" He yelled to his retinue of professional soldiers and the terrified Kr'lTraax. The camera flipped back to his face.

"I love you, kiddo. Whatever you do, be safe." The image froze again on John Vickers's face, then it blurred into a mosaic of digital static again.

End of transmission.

Celia blinked, and the negative image of her father's face flashed in her mind. She kept blinking to keep him there, but the ghost image faded, and a distant clatter behind her cut through the ringing in her ears. A control panel tumbled past her and skidded to a stop next to Jacey. Celia tried to turn toward the source, but it felt like she was encased in setting resin. In the periphery, she saw Ph'avell underneath the comms station. Maxtron and Hamilton seemed frozen, adding pointless nuance to a painting she couldn't grasp the meaning of.

Time sped up, and Ph'avell called out in success as he emerged with a few components clutched in his clawed hands.

"What are you doing?" Maxtron whined.

"Going dark. This bird has all sorts of helpful gizmos built-in to prevent blue-on-blue casualties. Not so good if you're hiding from those very people."

Her mind rushed to make sense of things. Could Terra Prime be destroyed, could her father be alive, *and had the Corps been compromised?* What's next, was she supposed to believe the gods were real too?

"We need to reprogram the transponder. If the Soul Guard ping us, we're junked." Ph'avell tossed the components in Major Skandii's seat as he stood.

"That shouldn't be too hard." Hamilton nodded.

"Um, I... I know where it is," Jacey jumped up.

"VOZ, once everyone is back in their enviro-suits, cut life support and all nonessential systems..." Ph'avell looked at each crew member. "But drive..." Jacey nodded. "Sensors..." Hamilton nodded and pointed to his ears, "and the

med-pod." Ph'avell turned to Maxtron, "Lieutenant Blane, make sure everyone suits up. It's going to get cold and impossible to breath in here soon."

"Wait a minute... Stand down." Maxtron's implacable face twisted, and he grabbed Ph'avell's sleeve, "Suit up? What in the hells do you think you're doing? When did this become *your* ship?"

"I'm just heeding the words of my CO and trying to save our lives. If you want to wait for whatever's coming, suit up, and I'll be happy to open the airlock for you. Oh, and it's not my ship; it's *hers*." He pointed toward Celia.

Celia's heart kicked into overdrive, and she reflexively looked at the crew; she needed to protect them.

With only Celia and himself, the bridge was silent. A small blessing in their parade of bad choices because Maxtron needed to think of his next steps. Maxtron's entire life's plan; attend the right school, get into the right military career, then into politics; it was all in jeopardy. What would the Galactic Senator who wrote his admission recommendation say about him now? Moreover, was the Senator still alive? Celia ignored him and stared at the main holo-screen. She wasn't doing anything to improve their situation, so Maxtron sent an innocuous message to that very Senator's aid to ensure they were safe in all of this chaos. It never hurt to keep in touch with those who can change your life with one call.

He'd never admit it, but leaving the system was the right move. It also kept him in the Rear Admiral's good graces. Admiral Vickers was a career officer who cut his teeth in ForceCon, before moving into command and now lead the entirety of the Corps' special operations. Exactly what Maxtron wanted to do in the Corps, and he relished the thought of becoming Ph'avell's CO in a few years.

Maxtron watched Celia walk with a noticeable hitch toward the bridge doorway, using the rod as a makeshift cane. He wondered why Celia opted to drag them away from everything they had been taught? They lost a crew member, and she was pretty injured as a result.

"You'd think getting these messages would make things easier, but they're making it harder. The worst part is, I keep wondering about my mother and if she's okay." Celia leaned against the doorjamb beside his station, "Do you have family on Terra?"

Maxtron realized his expression hadn't changed as he tried to figure out what she was up to. Was this some sort of *getting to know you* session?

"No immediate family I know of. Maybe second cousins a few times removed? Maybe," He leaned back against his station, "Blaine's have been on Kerenthal since the Second Migration. My family signed the accord establishing the system and incorporating the planet. And as the eldest child of the eldest child, it falls onto me to service the Corps."

"I'm sure they're proud of you. I hope your family is safe at home." Celia's brow wrinkled.

"Do you think this is happening there?" The thought that what had just happened could happen elsewhere surprised Maxtron.

"No, I'm sure there would have been reports." Celia's full lips mashed together, "We need to make sure this doesn't happen again."

"Agreed. And if this guy's responsible, then we owe it to the Union to turn him over." Maxtron couldn't help but point down the corridor toward the med-lab.

"If he's responsible." Celia looked toward the med-lab, then sat down in the Major's seat, "It was that kind of unknown fear that spurred the Second Migration. Things got a bit bumpy in the early contact with the other six races after the First Migration. The growing fear of losing out to other races is what drove everyone further out. What happened today scares me to death, but we can't become fearful and make choices based on that."

"What are you talking about? The Second Migration was good for my family and many others."

"Not everyone did as well. How do we reckon with the pre-Union Terran government fomented a fear of the other six races to drive planetary and military expansion? The Second Migration kicked off the Dark Wars and two centuries of

needless killing?"

"But the Union was founded after the Dark Ward, and things between the Seven homeworlds are better. The Universal Church was born from it." Maxtron crossed his arms.

"If one, or more, of the Seven, is behind this attack, then something drove them to action, and that doesn't feel like the result of things being better."

"Well, someone did this, and they should pay." Maxtron crossed his ankles.

"Agreed. But if Thandarian and Gurch extremists *are* behind this, why would an Enari be in the epicenter of this? Besides, that vid showed the chamber, we found him in appear *after* all this began. I'm not running away from this, Max; I want to get to the bottom of it."

"Then, just follow the order." He pressed.

"I'm following the only directive we have from a Corps general officer." Celia stood up with a hiss through gritted teeth and balanced her weight on the rod.

The beauty of the Corps was, receive orders, carry them out, and do that better than others, then you rise in rank. Simple.

"Our careers are at stake." She had to understand that as well as anyone else.

"Careers? Max, we're in danger; we need to survive. Maybe the seas will clear soon, and *then* we can return to our lives." Her soft blue eyes moved like searchlights across his face.

He wasn't going to change her course now; he just needed a little more time.

"Alright, we go somewhere safe, keep an eye on how things are here, and see what we can learn from the pri...." Maxtron held up his hands, "the Enari. Then return once things clear up?"

"*If* things clear up, but yes." Celia looked back toward the med-lab, then hung her head. "And Max, start the crew on level-two post-traumatic AR sessions; that included you too."

No matter how nice the building or ship, you'll find its dirty little corners if you poke around long enough. Hamilton had been escorted to one of the Dragonfly's less glamorous locations, just off the galley. After peaking into this particular hatch, he questioned his desire to eat the food prepared behind another panel a few meters away.

"You sure you don't want me to climb in there, Doc? After all, I was the one that showed you where the transponder was." Jacey called from the corridor.

"I said to connect the photon probe *before* the relay and do mind your claws." Hamilton pleaded.

Only Hamilton's arm and head fit into the crawlspace access panel. He was all the way in when he imagined with the rest of him looked like.

"You know, I might fire this thing off, on purpose, just to put myself out of misery." A muffled voice came from below, "Last I checked, I'm helping *you* do this because you couldn't squeeze your giant... *brain* down here."

Jacey let out a loud snort.

"Sure is dusty down here." The young pilot feigned a sniffle.

Hamilton was impressed with the Thandarian's ability to follow directions so well. He only wished he had a free hand to blot away the beads of sweat sliding free from his bald pate.

"You sure it'll be okay to pilot the ship after you shut things down?" Jacey called into the hatch.

Hamilton's thumb keyed in another data set once the probe was activated.

"No offense, but these birds can fly themselves." Ph'avell's voice echoed in the crawlspace. "The Skystalker's run these things with just drives and nav systems to keep undetected. It'll be fine."

"What if the XO's right; we should stay-put and hand the guy over?"

Hamilton smacked his head against the panel. He wanted to throttle the

skinny. He looked down at the Thandarian to sympathize.

“Admirals are not prone to reactionary behavior. If the old man says we go dark and run, it's for a good reason.”

The holoscreen showed the node reboot progress, and Hamilton's arm began to tremor from the strain. Then the lights all turned green on the display.

“Bongo,” Hamilton smiled to himself, “we’re set here.”

“Let's prep to go dark; where's the Captain?” Ph'avell disconnected his equipment.

“I think I passed her in the med-lab,” Jacey said.

Hamilton caught the look of concern on Ph'avell's face.

The med-pod bathed the dark med-lab in a soft blue glow, and Celia stared at the unconscious face in the window. Could the other be right? Was the next Kul Vummo resting peacefully in their care, waiting to be written into history as the most significant mass killer? *Who are you?*

She was taught to take in the facts, listen to her crew, weigh everything against itself, and choose based on those factors. Her hand hovered above the med-pod controls. If the Enari was a killer, she could bring justice here and now. Her eyes squeezed tight until little lights danced in the black.

Celia stumbled back against an exam bed. He wasn't some construct with no past. Somewhere out there, people loved him and waited for him to return home. But the Major was dead, and maybe Kr'lTraax and her father too. *Who cares who you are?*

Celia wiped at her wet cheeks. Nobody would cry for him. Celia's swollen knuckles were white as she raised the rod. It would only take one hit to the control panel to make him go away. The rod waggled as she scoured her consciousness for the go-ahead.

"Celia?" A deep gentle voice spoke behind her.

The rod fell from her grip, and she braced for a clatter that never came.

"Wha'cha doing Cap'n? A little reprogramming of your own?" Ph'avell held the rod as Hamilton walked into the mad lab.

"Getting rid of our problems." She wiped the tears away on the back of her sleeves.

"Killing him won't change anything but you." Hamilton placed his hand on her shoulder. She felt like a child next to him.

"Then what do *we* do?" Celia eyed the rod and knew the final step was too far for her, no matter how much she wanted.

"We need to get out of here." Ph'avell slid onto an exam table. "And we need a plan."

"Where?"

"I know an out-of-the-way place we can hole-up."

Hamilton's bushy eyebrow raised.

"A ForceCon safe-house on Umrii. It's in a shit-hole sector, far from here, and the planet governors only concern with the Union are mining tariffs."

"Won't ForceCon object to our moving in?" Hamilton inquired.

"No." Ph'avell hissed.

"Maybe we should lay low in an outer colony and not bet our lives on a chance the Corps stumbles upon us in their backyard?" Hamilton huffed.

Celia couldn't follow the argument.

"Fine, you want to know why? Because the squadron, *my squadron*, who maintains the safe house was just wiped out of existence on Terra." The fur around his neck stood up, "So, nobody's coming to the safe-house."

"Oh, I wasn't trying to...."

"Forget it; there's no rulebook for this. But we need to leave now." Ph'avell

shook out his ruff.

They looked at her again, but Celia just stared unfocused. *Don't trust anyone.* Not even the Corps? Courage, Honor, Fidelity was their motto. An entity based on trust. What did her father mean by this?

"Hello?" Hamilton waved his big hand before her face.

"Chief, prep the ship for departure." Celia's eyes drifted to the rod sitting on the exam table, and her voice sounded like a board dragged across a gritty floor.

The two senior officers looked at one another.

"Roger," Ph'avell stood and left the lab with the rod.

"Alright, let's take a look at that hand and those ribs." Hamilton grabbed a biosensor.

Celia remained non-verbal, staring toward the med-pod as Hamilton treated her hyper-compressed fingers and a fractured rib. He wasn't sure what to say. She was the talkative one of the two, always the first to crack a joke and make you feel welcome. He remembered the abject terror when she walked up to him at the post orientation mixer. Hamilton knew everyone wondered why the beautiful cadet would talk to him. He was convinced it was a hazing ritual and braced for the inevitable humiliation. But Celia wanted him to explain a few parts of a paper he published. As it turned out, she didn't understand most of it—something she made great use of in self-deprecating humor throughout the night. As the party broke, Celia apologized for keeping him from his friends. Turned out the big joke was on her; at that moment, *she* was as close to a friend as he had, and they've remained the best of friends since.

Hamilton applied a stim unit to her ribs, and she didn't flinch. The stim unit would cut the healing time for the tissue and bone down to days. She needed rest; hells, they all needed rest. They donned their enviro suits, and Hamilton sent Celia off to her cabin for some prescribed sleep.

He leaned back and continued her vigil of the med-pod. Why did *he* feel

responsible for a stranger? Hamilton opened the drawer full of the Enari's belongings and reexamined the items. Everything was handmade. Something niggled in the back of Hamilton's mind, handmade items were rare and pricey. And what passed for handmade now was designed on a computer and fabricated by a machine. The art of weaving, sewing, and metalwork was left to museum conservators. So why was this "villain" outfitted, head-to-toe, in bespoke wares?

The invisible white noise of the air recyclers ceased, and the hum of the ship engines took over. Hamilton knew they were now headed out of Union territory. He also knew he would be trapped in this blasted enviro suit until then.

Hamilton focused on the med-pod's telemetry and noticed a few odd lines in the results, like missing antibodies and vaccine markers. His hand thumped into the side of the helmet as he reflexively tried to scratch his head. Hamilton was a world-class head-scratcher. He began to question the efficacy of the pod. Hamilton kicked his feet up on an exam table and scrolled back through the pod's data history, looking for other anomalies. The blinks grew longer as he stared at the holo-screen until they stopped, and he fell asleep.