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Implacable Enemies

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The air in Space Station One was always dry with a sort of gloomy portent, the type of air that the Commodore had only felt in old bookstores back on Earth. He stood at the faint traces of light that men had always called stars. The war was not going well. The Republic had control of most of the Orion arm of the galaxy, but the Coalition held most of the Carina-Sagittarius arm.

When they first met the two had kept an unwary peace. But like the pointless ideological battles between the extinct nation states of old Earth, the Coalition couldn't long abide the existence of the Republic. They coveted control above all things and the Republic remained outside of their control. They had a fear of the unknown that made ours look like a small, uneasy concern. The first wave of the attacks struck the new outer rim of the Orion arm with devastating effect. At least a dozen colony worlds had been subjugated before the Republic First Fleet could respond. Then the fleet arrived, it was driven back with heavy losses. The Republican fleet ships were large and powerful, while the Coalition ships were minuscule by comparison. Yet they were far more numerous. Where a Republican ship could destroy hundreds, the Coalition had still more ships to replace it. Eighteen ships of the First Fleet had been destroyed or seriously damaged before the fleet was able to withdraw safely.

A second foray, a counter-attack, was virtually annihilated in the space between the arms. The strategy council had felt that in the vast empty space between the arms the Seventh Fleet would be undetectable. They couldn't have been more wrong. Now the Republic was just trying to hold on to what it had left, but the prospects were not good. The Coalition could outbuild the Republic, and intelligence confirmed that they were building up an unstoppable invasion force. The prospects were looking grim.

Still the Republic had not stopped its forays of exploration. In the Perseus arm, it had come across the Banshee. They were a race of unfathomable greed. Once they had been organic, but now each individual inhabited a spacecraft the size of a small planet. This seemed to be in response to a driving desire to be immortal. Now, these planet size vehicles plundered the universe in search of untapped resources to fuel their ever-expanding needs. The Banshee had no need, interest or care about the inhabitants of the worlds that it gutted. Evidence indicated that there were no survivors on worlds the Banshee had ravished. Our first contact with them was merely an observation admitting we possessed plentiful resources which they would soon be by to collect. It had taken the Third fleet, the Sixth fleet and about 1.2 million lives to stop a single one of their ships as it arrived in the Cygnus portion of the arm almost a decade ago. Since then they had stayed in their segment of the galaxy, but no one expected it to last.

The Admiral kept an old image of a city in ruins, called Warsaw. It had been trapped between two technologically superior nation states in Earth's past and this was the result. Like everyone else in the Republic, we feared that this image would soon be all that remained of our civilizations. Every expert in every Republican system said that we would never be able to outproduce even one of the Republic's foes, never mind two.

So, the Commodore sat, staring out at those points of faint traces of light, imagining they were death rays aimed straight for his heart ... but that's because they were. To him, they appeared as the army of the dead advancing unrelentingly, with an eternal hunger for the living.

"So, what's this news I keep hearing about," an admiral addressed the commodore.

It was time for the conference to begin. The Commodore turned around to face the assembled brass. "We've received a message from the Banshee," the commodore remarked grimly.

"What," the admiral snickered, "Another 'thanks for putting yourself on the menu' note?"

"Not exactly," There was an awkward silence before the commodore continued, "They've sent us an offer of alliance."

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The entire room went silent. You could actually hear the scrubbers taking the CO₂ out of the air. "Excuse me sir?" the Commodore replied.

"What do they want?" The admiral repeated, "They must want something."

"They do, they want the entire Carina-Sagittarius arm." The room returned to a state of pandemonium. No one was happy with that answer. Admiral Kerns again broke his silence, "Why?"

Admiral Marcus, commander of the 2nd fleet was quick to interject, "They can't be serious."

"I believe that they are," the Commodore responded, "the Banshee are determined to live forever. We were the first civilization in 1,000 years to destroy one of their ships. The Banshee don't see the smaller ships of the Coalition to be much of a threat. They expect to be able to destroy the Coalition within 100 years without the loss of any more of their ships. Their strategic thinkers estimate that it will take then 25 more years to conquer us and at a significantly higher casualty rate."

Admiral Kerns leaned forward, resting both his arms on the conference table, "Yes, by why?"

The commodore looked unsure of himself, and even less sure of his answer. "I assume it's because they believe we will be much easier to conquer once they occupy systems on both sides of the Orion arm."

Admiral Marcus didn't appear pleased, "You can't be considering this? They must know something we don't. Why else would they want the Coalition's systems?"

Now the Commodore seemed more reassured for some reason. "We don't think so. If they were looking for some special resource that would make their ships invulnerable, we expect that they'd ask only for those systems, not the entire arm. The Banshee would know that we'd find such a demand more palatable and we would be more inclined to agree."

"Unless, of course," Admiral Marcus argued, "they want to cover up what they've discovered and want us to play along."

"Any chance we can negotiate them down to just half the arm?" the grand admiral inquired.

The Commodore appeared a little depressed, his face worn and haggard. "I don't believe so sir, no. They were quite insistent on the entire Carina-Sagittarius arm. They estimate that the Coalition will destroy our military capacity in the next 29 months. Their position is that we are in no position to bargain."

“We can’t agree,” Admiral Stern protested, “We won’t last a minute with the Banshee on both sides of us.”

“What if they are right?” Captain Uvanov interjected. There was a slight pause as the recording cameras, reset their positions. “What if it does take them 100 years to destroy the Coalition? That would give us a century to build the fleet and invent more effective weapon technologies. It could be just the time we need.”

“What if the Coalition surrenders?” Admiral Marcus demanded.

“Would we surrender to the Banshee?” the Grand Admiral asked in response. A silence came over the room. The officers sat fidgeting in their chairs. “I don’t think they’ll surrender either.”

An officer from the back of the room cleared her throat. “What choice do we have?”

“There’s always a choice Brodie,” Admiral Kerns commented, “the only question is which is the best choice?”

“With all due respect, Admiral,” the commodore continued, “I think she has a point. Our own staff put our chances of success well below optimal. We’ve yet to win even a single engagement with the Coalition.”

“That just means I have to fire all of you,” the admiral smiled, “It doesn’t mean that I have to ally myself with the Banshee. Besides you still haven’t answered my question, why? There were once tribes of Germans who threw themselves at Roman walls, they did it because even more powerful tribes were pushing them out of the way. Are the Banshees running away from an even more powerful enemy in the new outer arm of the galaxy? Are they looking to run to the other side of us to get some breathing room, so they can develop new weapons to deal with this threat?”

“Sir,” the commodore rejoined, “we have less than 29 months to determine the answer to that question or it won’t matter, because we won’t exist anymore.”

“What if we say no?” General Chang asked pointedly, “If we say no, do the Banshee ally themselves with the Coalition? If that’s the case, we won’t even have 29 weeks.”

Before anyone could answer that question, Lieutenant Mallory stormed into the room. He was holding a dispatch. He whispered something in Grand Fleet Admiral Kern’s ear and then handed him the dispatch. The Grand Admiral spent the next few minutes reading it. As he got closer to the end his face turned pale. “Gentlemen, as you know, Admiral Murray has been training his crews using the new smaller attack vessels. This morning, during one of his training exercises the group was attacked by a strike force of Coalition ships.”

The Sentinel-class ships were the latest in Republican technology. They were designed to emit a huge Electro-Magnetic pulse, with enough power to disable a wave of attacking Coalition ships. In tests, the EMP blasts had worked better than expected, but the weapon had a significant recharge time. The shipyards on Mars had been working continually and were able to produce four Sentinel ships for deployment. Admiral Murray’s idea was to use four of the ships in a group, with the ships firing in sequence, so when the last ship had fired, the first ship would be ready to launch another pulse. This required practice, so all four of the ships were sent on maneuvers.

“The start of the exercise consisted of assembling the ships in a straight line, a formation which presented an easy target to Coalition attack ships. The first EMP discharge, damaged the generators on the other three ships, delaying subsequent EMP blasts. It was after the first discharge and while repairs were underway, the Coalition ships attacked. The Warrior’s hull was breached but eventually made it back to base with the loss of 123 personnel. The Aboukir was destroyed with the loss of 202 personnel. The Madras was damaged by friendly fire. The Zenith the destroyed within the first six minutes of the attack with the loss of 424 personnel.”

“Since the event was just an exercise, rescue vessels were not present and most of the ship’s crews died of hypothermia in space while waiting to be rescued. Many had not been shown how use escape pods correctly, and crews launched their pods into debris or other vessels.”

The expressions on the assemblage of brass around the table changed from distress to downright despondent. All four of the Republic’s latest ships were out of action. Of those four, two of the Republic’s last hopes had been destroyed. There was tell-tale a slump evident in everyone’s posture. “Gentlemen,” the grand admiral slammed his fist down on the table, “We need a break. Something, anything to turn the tide.” He threw the dispatch across the table, “this isn’t it.”

Admiral Mabuto seized the moment, “I think I have your break.”

The grand admiral showed no outward signs of being impressed. “We’ve been all through this Mabuto, it won’t work. There’s nothing in space to transmit the sounds.” Undeterred the well-decorated officer made a call. As soon as he put down the receiver, a short, dark-skinned man entered the room. In contrast to the gold braid and the ribbons in the room, the man’s loincloth was downright dingy ... not to mention extremely understated. He carried four-foot long all metal spear and used it as a walking stick.

“This is Mr. Nuneba, of the Efe tribe,” Mabuto introduced the native African. He bowed respectfully. “We’ve been working on a new delivery system. If we can step outside, Mr. Nuneba here has agreed to give us a demonstration.”

Outside, on the tarmac, was a simple supply shuttle for the fleet, weight approximately 2,000 tons fully loaded. Constructed from a carbon-durillium alloy, it could withstand the changes in pressures and the rigor of spaceflight. It was even capable of withstanding a few blasts of weapon’s fire. Using a crew of seven it brought supplies and equipment to the fleet. The dark pigmy walked up to it and then bowed his head as if in prayer. He casually touched the shuttle with the tip of his spear, and then calmly walked away.

For a moment, nothing happened at all. Mr. Nuneba returned to the rest of the group, rotating to face the shuttle as groans and creaks could be heard. In the next moment, the entire vessel seemed to dissolve into dust, ending up in what appeared to be a large pile of sand where the ship had once stood. A gust of wind blew part of it into a swirling cloud which it deposited at the pygmy’s bare feet.

“The process involves creating a sympathetic vibration which is strong enough to cancel the attraction between molecules,” Admiral Mabuto explained before an audience still holding their mouths open in awe. “In the past, the tribe had used vocal emanations to achieve the effect. This, as the admiral points out, has no practical value outside an atmosphere. However, the Efe have recently learned to transmit a

carrier wave through a metal object, like a spear.” Mr. Nuneba took a well-deserved bow before the parade of more extensively dress military dignitaries.

“What’s the point?” Admiral Marcus seemed unimpressed.

Admiral Mabuto did not seem disturbed by this question. In fact, it appeared that he rather expected it. “As you can see the carrier, in this case, Mr. Nuneba’s spear, is unaffected.” The assembled audience didn’t seem to make the connection. “Mars yards has agreed to retrofit our ships with old-style 40mm cannon. The Efe tribe has graciously agreed to act as crew on our vessels, making the rounds carriers of the effect before they leave the ship. This will make us capable of successfully engaging both Coalition forces and banshee ships with significantly fewer casualties.”

“How long will it take Mars to make the adjustment?” Admiral Kern inquired.

“Just under three weeks, sir.”

“Commodore,” The grand admiral dictated, “Thank the Banshee for their offer and tell them we’ll put their idea under advisement.” He began to coolly walk back towards the conference room. “Now that’s what I call a break.” He halted in his tracks and looked at the assembled group. “If anyone of you *dares* to say short help is better than no help at all, I’ll bust him ... or her ... back to crewman ... third class.”