

Chapter 1

Fleet Admiral Dramok Hobato never failed to impress Rear Admiral Piras. Though the man was over two hundred years old, he stood as tall and strong as men half his age. His muscled body cut a fine figure in its sapphire blue uniform. The fleet admiral's face, lined with the many years of life and service, remained square-jawed with determination. His purple eyes could skewer an underling into absolute stillness, freezing junior officers like prey under the stare of a hunter. In complete disrespect to his advancing years, Hobato moved with grace and speed. Even his hair remained mostly black in the bright task lighting. Only a little iron gray dared to streak the long waves that reached to the middle of his back.

It was the vid displayed rather than his commanding officer that commanded Piras's attention at the moment, however. The footage playback hovered over Rear Admiral Tranis's massive wooden desk. Hobato, Tranis, and Piras all stared with grim concentration at the awful scene depicted on the hovering holograph.

The free-floating screen displayed a multitude of Earther battlecruisers in space. The awkward ships were a cancerous mass on the edge of the Kalquorian Empire. They had gathered near the border intersecting with Joshadan and Galactic Council territories.

The vessels were leftovers of a horrendous war that had ended a few years before. To Piras, the sight of so many 'cruisers was like the recurrence of an awful nightmare.

Piras scowled at the swath of space depicted in the vid, at the vessels blocking out the stars and a nearby reddish-brown planet. He knew that sector well, had patrolled it as a destroyer captain years ago. That it had fallen into the rebellion's hands was bad enough. Now this unbelievable evidence of further treachery floated like a derisive taunt against those who remained loyal to the Empire. Piras heard the dull sound of his teeth grinding and forced his jaw to relax.

Hobato's tone contained no anger. It evinced no emotion at all. "The spyship watching Batya Colony and the Basma's concentration of ships there sent this in two days ago."

Tranis sat back in the office hoverchair he occupied. His handsome, bearded face filled with the despair Hobato refused to show, and he rubbed his eyes. "Earther battlecruisers. That's a lot of them. Hundreds. Maybe a thousand."

Piras managed not to roll his eyes. Trust Tranis to state the obvious.

He let go of the irritation that always came in the younger admiral's presence. Instead, he forced himself to attend Hobato's report. As usual, the fleet admiral cut right to the chase.

"We believe this is what remains of the ships that still answer to Earth's former leader, Browning Copeland."

"So many."

"Not really. Not compared to what they had at the start of our war with them."

Piras finally spoke, offering his own obvious observation. "It's still a lot considering the firepower on those monstrosities."

"Indeed." Hobato's calm regard flickered to Piras for a moment. "I don't have to tell you what this means to our side of the current conflict."

Piras paced on the opposite side of Tranis's desk. His feet made no sound on the padded flooring, as green as the ocean surrounding the island that housed Fleet Headquarters. Even inside, the sea-salt smell permeated the building, giving one thoughts of lounging on the sand...unless one was grounded by the endless catastrophic events that had descended on Kalquor as of late.

Tranis's office made it hard to concentrate in any case. The walls were a functional gray, the furnishings utilitarian. Yet the personal mementos kept the atmosphere casual. The room was dotted with commendations and pictures.

Piras avoided looking at the still vids of the other man's clan, even though several were hung on the walls right at eye level. They were hard to ignore, but he managed it for the most part.

To himself he thought, *mind on task*. Out loud, he said, "It means the renegade Earthers who didn't surrender have joined Dramok Maf. The Basma now has enough of a space force to match our fleet. Perhaps even overwhelm us."

Ugly as they were and of a lower technology than the streamlined Kalquorian destroyers, the Earther battlecruisers were nevertheless brutal machines. With weapons that could take out entire cities from space, they had pushed Kalquor into near defeat during the earlier war. Earth had been defeated in the end, but remnants of their fleet had gone into hiding rather than surrender.

Now they were back. Throwing what they had left on the side of the Basma Dramok Maf was bad news to the fleet. It meant Kalquor's civil war had shifted in the enemy's favor. The loyal among Kalquor's fleet had been the one advantage the Empire had held over the Basma's revolt. That advantage was now gone.

Tranis found the one bright spot in the horrid mess. "The battlecruisers are a serious threat only if they're properly manned. Reports say the 'cruisers have been running with skeleton crews. Most of the Earthers have abandoned the lost war."

Hobato reminded him, "The crews could be supplemented by former soldiers from our ground forces, the Kalquorians that went to the revolt's side. In fact, we believe that's the reason behind this large convention of the Earther ships at Batya."

Piras stared at the vid. "A lot of the traitors went there when the attack on Kalquor itself failed." He shrugged. "The loss of Batya and that sector is regrettable, but it's not a primary concern at this time. I thought we were going to concentrate our efforts on reclaiming Lobam and Sib?"

The moons had been the fleet's chief worry thus far since war broke out. The Basma's forces had claimed two of the five natural satellites orbiting Kalquor. The enemy's proximity to the home planet made the revolt's presence there a real and immediate threat. Only fear for the large civilian populations trapped on the moons had kept ground forces and the fleet at bay. Small, strategic attacks had yielded no victories for the Empire thus far.

Hobato nodded, his keen gaze halting Piras's pacing. "Of course Lobam and Sib remain our priority. But this matter of the Earther ships is a game changer. We need someone on the inside and soon. The question is, who do we send?"

"Trained spies. Our very best. Maybe the captain of the ship that got the footage of the 'cruisers?"

"No good. Active spies on the roster are going to be suspect. That was the one part of the fleet the Basma wanted no part of...and the group he's done everything to keep the most up-to-date information on. With some success." Hobato offered a grim smile as he passed along that unwelcome news.

Tranis looked at Piras, his usually grim expression lighting with a smile too. "A former spy, one who hasn't been on that type of duty in a long time, would be our best hope for infiltrating Maf's inner circle."

Piras snorted. "That leaves you out. You were promoted straight from a spyship command only a few years ago."

He managed to keep the grudge out of his tone. Dramok Tranis had deserved his promotion to admiral. He excelled as the member of High Command who directed the fleet's spyship group. He was smart, resourceful, brave, and everything else an officer of the fleet should be. A hero, without a doubt.

He was also the man who had taken away the one thing Piras had wanted most out of life. It was an unforgivable slight.

Not that Piras let any of that affect their ability to work together...well, except for one notable time several years earlier when the injury had been new. In this era of war, he couldn't afford to be anything but professional. He didn't have to like Tranis to work well with him. He'd proven that over and over in the time they'd spent together in Fleet Command.

Hobato continued to give Piras a penetrating stare. "It's not only a matter of Admiral Tranis having been out of the spyship game for barely five years. He's also got an Earther Matara as part of his clan. That above all else disqualifies him."

Like Piras didn't know that. Like the still vid pictures hanging on the wall didn't remind him, had he deigned to look at them.

It wasn't that Piras cared one whit about Matara Cassidy, the beautiful Earther Tranis's clan had won at the end of the war with Earth. Her sweet face might spark a little envy in Piras's heart, but it didn't compare to the pain he felt when he looked at another face in that portrait.

It hadn't been enough that Tranis had managed to clan Cassidy. Or that he'd become admiral younger than any other man in the history of the fleet. No, he had also clanned the one man Piras had loved for sixteen years. The man he'd shared his bed and body with, thinking that at any moment, Nobek Lidon would finally say yes to his offer of lifelong companionship.

Was Piras wrong to feel jealousy towards a man who had won it all? Perhaps, but he refused to add guilt to his list of hurtful emotions. Lidon had been his Nobek in all but vow, working at Piras's side on board their destroyer through scores of campaigns and battles. Within months of Tranis becoming their ship's first officer, Lidon had accepted the younger man's offer to clan.

Piras let none of the pain show. "I think it's quite clear that the Basma would not welcome Admiral Tranis with open arms."

"He might welcome you." Tranis's voice was low and careful.

Piras started and looked the bearded man in the face for the first time. "Me?"

Tranis shrugged his wide shoulders. Their black-trimmed blue uniforms were identical, they both had black hair and bark-brown skin, but there the resemblance ended. Tranis was bigger with more bulk than Piras, a sturdy man with a broad, masculine face. Piras would have liked to think youth and good looks had been what lured Lidon away, but he knew better. He knew exactly what Tranis possessed that Piras hadn't...and never would.

Tranis's surprising statement kept Piras from delving too deeply into the whys and wherefores of lost loves. That the leader of the revolt, Dramok Maf, might want Piras as a recruit claimed all his attention.

Tranis clarified his stunning claim. "Your service as a spy was long ago and short-lived, though you did go through all the training. You have no clanmates despite your age. Not even prospective clanmates that anyone is aware of. Most importantly, you have no Earther Matara. One might think you're against the Empire's ways since you don't follow the norm."

Piras felt his face heat. Was Tranis suggesting he could turn against Kalquor? "I have no Matara because I spent my career in the fleet and concentrated on my duty rather than chasing Nobeks and Imdikos." That wasn't quite true, and Tranis knew it. He at least had the good breeding not to negate Piras's claim. "Then there was the war with Earth, and now—"

Hobato held his hand up. Piras immediately silenced his rebuttal since the Fleet Admiral outranked him. He bowed his head in respect to the unspoken command.

Hobato's voice held a trace of warmth as he said, "Admiral Piras, your loyalty to the Empire is not in question. I believe that's part of the reason Admiral Tranis and another knowledgeable party suggested you for this mission."

Piras gaped at Tranis. It was his former rival's turn to flush. Tranis was not a fan of Piras's. Their shared dislike was one of two things they had in common.

Tranis managed a reluctant smile. "Your devotion to Kalquor is the reason I recommended you, along with the other considerations we've already mentioned."

"I should hope I have some merit beyond not being clanned," Piras said tightly. *A status you helped make happen, damn your hide.*

Tranis gave no indication he guessed at Piras's thoughts. "I wasn't with you when you captained a spyship. However, your record in that, while short, was exemplary. I also remember the kind of leader you were on the destroyer we served together on. You are without doubt a man of the Empire. We can trust you to get the job done."

"And you think I can infiltrate the Basma's operation somehow?"

Hobato stepped close to him. "I'm counting on it. Maf's going to be desperate for someone in the admiralty. Especially now that we've discovered the operative he had in our midst."

Piras's blood froze. "A traitor? In Fleet's High Command? Who?"

Tranis's voice came out in a growl. "Rear Admiral Banrid. He was arrested moments after our meeting began and is now in custody."

Piras stared at him in disbelief. Banrid was an affable man, the kind of officer who won support from underlings through friendly authority rather than strict hard-assery. Piras's opposite, if he was to be truthful about the matter. Still, Banrid was the last person Piras would have suspected of turning traitor.

Then again, that was the point, wasn't it?

Piras concentrated on what was most important at the moment. "What is it you want from me? To feed the revolt bad information? Set them up somehow?"

Hobato shook his head. "The Basma won't fall for any of that. He's too smart. You'll have to prove your worth to him by providing him with real data he can use against us. But only for a little while. Only for as long as it takes you to be pulled into a position where you can do something about his fleet."

Tranis spoke up. "We want you embedded deep into the revolt, Admiral Piras. Functioning like a real part of it, fighting against us, trying to destroy the Empire. At the same time, you'll be discovering their weaknesses and plans. From there, you'd disrupt their operations on our behalf."

Hobato scowled darkly, his first real hint of discomfort. "First, we have to get you in."

Piras considered. "That's not so hard on the surface of it. We know the Basma has more spies within the fleet. It's discovering who is the enemy among us and winning their trust that's going to be the trick."

Hobato gave him that grim smile again. "That's not your mission. I want you to go straight to the source, if possible. I want you with personal access to Maf or Browning Copeland. Or both."

Piras blinked. They were coming at him with their proposal too fast for him to order his thoughts and understand what was being asked of him. "That's right. You did mention you wanted someone in Maf's inner circle. Not here at Fleet Headquarters."

“You’re to eventually find yourself on board a destroyer full of double agents, ready to fight at the Basma’s side.”

Hobato nodded to Tranis. The younger admiral stood and bowed, signaling the meeting was coming to an end. Piras was still unsure of what was happening, and he said so.

Tranis replied, “The captain of the destroyer who will deliver you to Maf, should all go according to plan, will be contacting you today. He’ll supply you with the details.”

“I can’t hear it from you?” Piras’s head was swimming.

Hobato shook his head. “I prefer to remain in the dark about how you will carry out your mission to get into the Basma’s good graces. It will make it much more believable if the particulars remain unknown to me. Tranis is to be kept out of the loop as well.”

Tranis added, “Admiral Hobato wanted you to understand this is coming from the top. That this assignment, while almost unthinkable to a man like yourself, is indeed valid.”

“Will I hear from my contact over com or in person?” Piras hadn’t used his com scrambler in so long, he wasn’t sure it would even work.

“He’ll drop by your office. His visit shouldn’t seem out of place. He says he’s well acquainted with you already.”

Piras snorted. “That would be half the damned fleet seeing as how I was on board ships in some capacity for so long.”

“He says you’ll know it’s him right away.” Tranis gave Piras a searching look, curiosity lighting his bearded face.

Hobato was all business, as usual. “Talk to your contact about the mission. He’ll explain the whole scenario for you to consider. Let Tranis know your decision when you make it.”

“Will Admiral Tranis be my link in some form until I join up with Maf?” Piras was relieved to hear himself sound as neutral as the fleet admiral.

“You will speak to him again only to confirm your participation. As far as the rest of it, you’re on your own. Make the decisions you must to gain Maf’s trust.” Hobato hesitated, then put his hand on Piras’s shoulder. “The costs may be high, but do whatever it takes, Admiral Piras. We have to win this damned war or it will be genocide.”

Piras knew Hobato didn’t overstate the situation. Maf’s fanatical determination to rid the empire of the Earther women and their half-Kalquorian children was what had started hostilities in the first place. He and his followers would stop at nothing to cleanse Kalquor of the ‘infestation’.

He said, “I’m supposing I’m on my own if any activities I commit on behalf of the mission are discovered?”

“We will proclaim complete disavowal of what we’ve discussed today,” Tranis confirmed. His eyes darkened as he said it.

Hobato bowed to Piras. “Good luck to you, Admiral Piras, no matter where your path leads. For honor and Empire.”

The subordinate admirals bowed to him and chorused, “Sir.” They stood at attention as Hobato left.

Tranis motioned to the humming sound blocker on his desk. “Anything else?”

“No,” Piras grunted. “That was plenty.”

Tranis switched off the machine that kept any bugging devices from relaying conversations to those who might attempt to listen in. “If you’re going to your office, I’m heading in the same direction as you. Shall we walk together?”

Piras nodded and preceded Tranis out into the corridor. He was relieved to have finished the meeting without looking at the clan portraits on the dark gray wall.

Piras and Tranis walked side by side down the wide corridor. Aides and other officers passed by, muttering amongst themselves in hushed tones. The quiet conversations held excitement, and expressions were avid. Admiral Banrid's treachery was no doubt the focus of everyone's attention.

Only Piras and Tranis were silent as they navigated their course through the silvery-walled hall. They were in the wing that contained all the offices of the highest-ranked officers of Fleet Command, where they themselves helped direct Kalquor's space arm of the military. Where up until now they'd enjoyed a slight advantage over the vessels the Basma had won to his side, roughly a third of the original fleet.

Now Maf had Earther battlecruisers, maybe a thousand of them. The thought curdled Piras's guts.

Though Tranis walked alongside him, there was nothing Piras wished to say to his once-first officer. The only conversation they might have had was top-secret. Talking about personal things...such as how Lidon was doing in his new career as a Global Security officer...would have been more awkward than the silence that weighed between them.

Lidon. Just thinking the Nobek's name made Piras's stomach hurt.

Fortunately, they neared the traitor Banrid's office, giving Piras no need to fill the uneasy quiet. A contingent of Fleet Security was filing in and out of the room. The scarred, brutal-looking Nobeks who safeguarded headquarters guided small hover carts out of the office. The carts were heaped with the treacherous admiral's personal and official belongings: commendations, computer, com, and various other items.

Piras and Tranis were stopped by one of the red-armored Nobeks to verify their right to be in High Command's section. They paused without complaint as their credentials were verified. They were waved past the open doorway, which Piras couldn't help but try to glance into. A concealment field, showing a pale sheet of nothingness, blocked his view of whatever evidence-gathering was going on inside the office.

"Hard to believe. I never would have guessed it of Banrid," Piras muttered.

"Shocking," Tranis agreed. He shot Piras the haunted look he'd worn since the horrific end of the previous conflict, when Earth was destroyed by her own leaders rather than surrender to Kalquor. "We're tearing ourselves apart with this civil war. For what end? What is happening to us?"

It was a younger man's question, the kind asked by only those who had not seen what Tranis had. That the Dramok still possessed the idealism to wonder such a thing made Piras feel as old as Hobato.

Piras heard a gruff voice in his head give the answer, a voice as familiar as it was heart wrenching. He repeated the wisdom Tranis's spiritually-minded warrior clanmate would have said. "The usual. The wish for power. Wanting what one doesn't have. Fear."

"Many captured traitors have claimed they were blackmailed into what they've done. That they were victims."

"The Basma's son testified to that. Maf's web of deceit has been dragging in conspirators, both willing and not, for a long time. Perhaps it will come out that Banrid was such a dupe."

"Foolish men making foolish choices that Maf capitalized on. Now we're paying for it in blood. He'll destroy us all."

Piras's tone was dry. "Of course he will. Promoting extinction over interbreeding is his endgame, after all."

Tranis chose to ignore the veiled slight. "Now Maf has another tyrant at his side. With Browning Copeland added to the fun, we get to fight two insane fanatics."

"Life is marvelous, don't you think? Next thing you know, we'll have to fight Trag and Bi'is at the same time too. Because destiny has decided to fuck the Empire and all that we stand for." Piras rubbed a hand over his face. "Sorry. I'm venting. This war has put me in a permanent bad mood."

"What we discussed earlier isn't helping either. You are the best man for it though, Admiral. I really believe that."

Piras didn't know what to say to that. It almost sounded like admiration, which Tranis would never offer him in a million years. Fortunately, they reached Piras's office, and he could escape the other man before the conversation went any further. With relief, Piras sketched the expected bow.

Tranis didn't return the courtesy right away. Instead, the other Dramok gazed at him for a long beat. He finally said, "Lidon's doing well."

Piras's breath stopped for a moment. When he could speak, he blurted, "I didn't ask."

"I know." Tranis bowed and walked away, leaving Piras staring after him.