

The Caxac watched the riot unfold on the screen, wings battered and ripped, her riot police brought down the peasants who flew wildly about in the sky, smashing into buildings, looting, burning... the torn silk of wings floated down to the ground with the grace of dying leaves, and the shouts and screams of all sides became an unintelligible cacophony of horrors and complaints.

Worse?

Over half the rioters couldn't even *riot* properly because they were badly underfed. The flames spread from building to building, and emergency services, what were left of them, struggled to respond.

A blast of energy raked the ground below, no doubt fired by one of the hovering military vessels meant to keep order. Effective months ago, familiarity had given birth to contempt, and now their power had to be demonstrated on the people it had once been meant to protect.

*'Is this how the Ydyaxa fall? By our own mad desperate claws?'* She wondered, and not for the first time since the defeat of her people by the terrans, she questioned the wisdom people always insisted she held.

She shifted to another terminal, and the same picture was shown with different faces. *'I knew scrapping the fleet wouldn't do enough.'* She thought, and tapped the emergency comm channel. It hadn't been used since the human armada under Admiral John Yamamoto had appeared on the border of the hyperlane and threatened an invasion that would never come.

*'At least I have a backup plan...'* She thought, and recalled the projections that showed widespread hunger was inevitable within five years without strict rationing, and was inevitable within seven years even with it. To compensate for this horror she'd done all she could. Strict egg control meant few new offspring would need food, special professions such as scientists and laborers in vital industries were given priority, and even a 'selective termination' program of the elderly had been put into place. That program even included an incentive program that would give one third of the rations to the survivors of those elders who voluntarily ended their lives.

As the days turned into weeks and weeks into months, then months into years, the weary population began to grow angry. The well fed were despised, especially by those with lower priority offspring... *'If only they would heed their Caxac, within ten years we would begin to recover. But if they riot and destroy, it may take twenty, thirty, or perhaps we never recover...'* The reason for that last thought was on yet another screen, showing rampaging citizens tearing over one of the flower farms, tearing up the crops to consume with no chance of replanting. Such selfish actions would provide immediate relief, but everyone responsible was almost certainly going to die.

The military police who caught up with the civilian vehicles carrying raiders began firing, and it wasn't long before fires began to spread and gunfire was returned against the military... the farm was going to die in fire, and all the supplies that it would have provided would either be consumed in one go or they would be outright destroyed.

*'I have no choice...I cannot risk the destruction of our people.'* She thought, and as the system-wide communication network finished readying itself, she spoke.

Her face appeared on every channel, her words went out over every audio network and line both public and private, every handcomm and every station, all at once.

"I, your Caxac for the whole of my life, address you, my people, all of you, and tell you that I have heard your cries. I tell you truly, one and all, that I undertook only what was necessary to protect the *whole* and keep us independent. But I see I overestimated what you could endure. This is no fault of your own, sometimes... anyone can be asked to bear too much. The fault, if it lies anywhere, lies with me for my failure to deliver victory over our enemies. Therefore I will undertake one desperate measure that will save all your lives. It is a measure no Caxac has ever undertaken before in all our history, I will be marked by shame through all the aeons to come, but it will save you. I, however, have one price. Three months of peace. Three months with no riots, and if you deliver this price, then I will ensure you are delivered food and goods needed for survival, and end the blockade that has

choked us slowly until we reached our current state. To all authorities from local to planetary, I order you to cease any attempt at arresting any rioter after the peace comes. And I further order that any arrested figure is to be released within seven days of this message reaching your offices. This is the end of an era that ended in error, and what begins with it... I can only hope it is better than what came before."

She then tapped the rapid-comm line that connected her to the nearest human citadel on the nearest system. She didn't wait long for an answer. "This is Admiral John Yamamoto." The human's face was on screen an instant later.

"I will make this brief." The Caxac said. "My people are dying, the Ydyaxa are dying. I wish to save my species."

"And?" The Admiral said in a deadpan voice, "Why are you telling me that?"

"We are beaten, human. Did I not admit it? Must you humiliate us further?" She asked, and the human shifted a little, it was a rare movement from the stony figure, and one she intended to capitalize upon. In her study of the people who surrounded her own, it seemed they had particular codes of behavior, and the humiliation of a defeated figure was counted as a shameful act.

"I offer myself, Admiral of mankind. I submit myself to your people for arrest, trial, and if need be, execution for the war and for the destruction of the Friendship. I ask only one thing in return. Feed my planet and help us to rebuild. I will appoint a successor to carry on as a governor, instructing him to abide by your Empire's laws and obey it as a subject people." The Caxac's words hung in the air, and she saw the eyes of the human grow wide.

"I will arrange a transport today, and more will follow weekly until order is restored." The Admiral bowed his head in a rare show of respect as he gave his answer, and the Caxac imitated it as best she could.

"I will be on the return trip. Do with me as you will afterward." She said, and cut the transmission so she could summon Admiral Sha'ya and appoint him as the new Caxac and military governor.

She glanced at the screen, the riots were slowing and dying...and all that remained for her was to *wait*.

In the aftermath of her offer to the humans, the rising Empire of Man felt a shockwave of differing emotions. Some danced with glee, celebrating in the streets that the once feared butchers were now broken down to their souls, others took a more measured approach and began considering how to take advantage of the situation.

But the government's response was to abide by the promise of Admiral Yamamoto, arranging convoys of food, medicine, and other vital supplies to the broken worlds of their former enemies.

One widespread sentiment was an unexpected rush of positive emotion. 'A politician who trades their life for their people? Maybe they're not all bad. Maybe it really was just a fear driven overreaction...' Sentiments of that sort were more common than one might have expected.

And within a three month time, the former ruler of the defeated Ydyaxa Empire was brought to Earth, convicted, and sentenced to life imprisonment...

And the blockade came down. Ydyaxa merchants began to take to the stars using refitted military vessels, and shipments of supplies began to speed the reconstruction of the broken system. Human soldiers kept order in the streets by partnering with local security officers, and under Sha'ya's strict military leadership, order was maintained step by step until life could be restored to normal, less a few differences.

There were no shipyards capable of building military vessels in the Ydyaxa system, and military forces were restricted to one soldier for every ten thousand civilians.

And with that, the different colored spot on the stellar map that showed Ydyaxa territory vanished into the terran blue.

"There's a lesson here." President Lawrence said to his cabinet as they went over the previous year's events. His steel gray eyes matched his firm seated posture in their severity, and he did not wait for his colleagues to ask him what that was, instead, he told them.

"A strong fleet is vital, in securing our exploratory vessels. We should make a habit of keeping a battleship in every sector to defend starbases and act as reinforcements for explorers. We must never let what happened to the Friendship, happen again."

The rest of the staff nodded along, "What's more, we now know that first contact is likely to be a messy business. According to the eggheads who have been working on translating those other transmissions, the signals came with advanced energy signatures, that usually means weapon systems. When we go out to meet them, we need to go with guns enough to tell the others we're strong enough to defend ourselves."

It was so practical a set of suggestions that two policies were put into place that month. The Militia Doctrine, which set a battleship in every occupied system, required that all surrounding systems were responsible for mutual aid. This meant it was possible for any system under threat to muster up a fleet of three to five ships to defend their borders, or fall back to other systems to create serious fleets of ten or more ships for quick engagements.

The other doctrine was simply the 'Lawrence Doctrine' or more commonly known as 'The Law Doctrine'. This policy stated that every science vessel attempting to explore unknown territory should be accompanied by one vessel to defend it or buy it time to escape.

In the days that followed, language after language was translated enough to make first contact remotely via transmission, and the science vessels that reached out to 'new neighbors' did so with Peacemaker Class battleships right behind them. A clear universal signal that while the humans weren't going to initiate violence, they were not going to suffer it to be done to them either.

And there were no shots fired as one by one the borders of expanding empires were found and informal peace was established with the understanding that both sides were armed.

Humanity however, did not forget the lesson learned with the Friendship Incident.

The Militia and Law Doctrines remained in effect when the transmission came in from something never before seen.

"We just can't find a world for them." Doctor Coleman said with exasperation as he slumped in his seat, his arms were limp and dangled wearily against the outside of the chair's armrests. "Our ships have searched everywhere, and *if* they ever had one, I can't find it, nobody can find it."

"I know. That's why I've brought them up. Our language experts have a translation for you, and we're going to need to know how best to respond to this..." President Taylor said and glanced idly at the portrait of his predecessor, President Lawrence, the author of the doctrines that had been protecting mankind for the last ten years of continued growth and expansion. *'I don't know how I'm going to fill his shoes...but there's no choice but to try.'* He thought, and tapped the screen to send over the guttural language of the spindly, plantlike creatures with subtitles written below.

"We are the Sacred Dark, warriors of the Mother Void. We abandoned the cradle to grow strong, and now we sail the void to slaughter heathens in the name of her glory. You cradle dwellers who cling to soil are meant only for death, but we may be persuaded by sacrifice to turn our armada's against your enemies. Tribute us when our ritual tells us to guide our ships toward you, and we will have peace for the sacred cycles. Refuse, and our ships will burn the surface of your worlds, we will harvest your goods and your people, and you will know better on our second coming."

The transmission ended, and President Taylor inhaled deeply, "They have no world because they left it behind. Their fleets are massive and their

technology is nearly on par with our own. Our only real advantage is that we can replace our numbers easier than they can. But because they're nomads, there's no real center to hit them at, even if we defeat them, they'll just slink away outside of our space, and then what? They come back later when they've rebuilt? This is a problem. The militia doctrine was meant to ward off minor incursions by small fleets and to act as a deterrent. Not to fend off a mobile civilization of religious fanatics!"

Doctor Coleman sucked in his breath at the *staggering* implications.

"Doctor...*tell me you have something.*" The President almost begged. *'Even if we win, we'll lose half the damn fleet fending them off, and we now have more neighbor states than we ever imagined possible...they'd surely take advantage of any weaknesses and slice off pieces of our territory. And if one does it, the others might too, and we might end up in a war for survival that makes the Ydyaxa War look like a skirmish.'* The possibilities were beyond horrific in the President's mind, but before they could go too wild, Doctor Coleman spoke.

"We do, actually. Two somethings, actually. They're only theoretical concept designs right now, but with the right funding?" He shrugged as if to say, *'It's up to you.'*

"What *kind* of designs, Doctor?" The president asked the old man. As the lead scientist and engineer, Doctor Coleman had served as the scientific advisor to thirty years worth of presidents. His designs included the first deep space science ships that could function with a crew indefinitely, as well as the warship designs that had eventually avenged the Friendship. With his retirement coming on quickly, both he and the President had expected a quiet transition to private life, only to see...this.

And for his last hurrah, Doctor Coleman did not disappoint. "I call this one, the 'Titan Class'. It's six times the size of a battleship, and it requires so much power to operate that only our latest engine designs can serve it. Maintenance is expensive, but it's worth any twelve battleships. The other, I call the Juggernaut Class. It takes *two* of our latest engine designs, is twice the size of the Titan Class, but it has one advantage that makes it all

worthwhile.” The doctor smiled with wicked intensity and the President leaned in toward the screen.

“Yes?” He asked with breathless hope and the sort of intense stare that had intimidated his political opponents into silence more than once.

“It’s a mobile shipyard. We can make anything up to battleship class with it, specifically, two at a time. It also serves as a repair station for any ships damaged in battle, so damaged vessels no longer have to take the long routes back to Sol for repairs. It means we can fight on the run and even replace lost vessels or expand the fleet on the go. Just *building* this one should serve as a warning to other Empires that Earth is *not* to be trifled with, not to mention give us an edge over nomadic fleets of raiders.”

“I’ll have the funding bill before the Senate *tonight*, you just tell me what I need to ask for, I’ll handle the rest.” The President’s no nonsense approach was cause for relief in the mind of the aging scientist, and he bowed his head politely.

“Humanity will never suffer the fate of the Friendship, not ever again.” The doctor said with quiet reverence and closed his eyes as he recalled the faces and names of those he knew, whose tattered and scorched flesh still drifted endlessly through space.

“We will make sure of it.” The President said, and signed off to prepare for whatever tomorrow brought.