

The tension was so thick and rich that Captain Armond Nelson of the Prometheus could have drizzled it over hot pancakes like syrup, and it wasn't so just for him alone. The whole crew of the Juggernaut class vessel was itching to just get on with the war and end the staring contest.

They were right on the border with the Inta-ka-na at the southernmost connecting tip between their Empire and the space of the Terran Republic. Everybody knew beyond any doubt that the fight would begin soon. Captain Nelson had no doubt about the outcome in his mind, however. *'We're much stronger than the Inta-ka-na. And we have assets they do not...right behind their lines.'*

It was enough to put a smile on his face despite the tension, few terran soldiers really knew how much work had gone into preparing for the battle ahead. He recalled the mission briefing before his departure to this hyperlane, *'The war began when the challenge was issued, and was decided before our first shot was ever fired.'* It was only in the aftermath of the briefing, after reviewing all the many notes and 'trigger events' that were supposed to prompt certain actions of his own, that he truly understood what that meant.

And on this day, the first trumpet of doom for the Inta-ka-na confederation rang.

His comm station beeped to draw his attention. "Play it out loud, for the whole ship to hear." His soft voice took on a commanding air he rarely used, and it briefly startled his aide to hear him speak that way, her eyes shot to him from where she was previously looking, as if unsure it had actually come from him.

Having confirmed the reality of her ears, she tapped the shipwide comm channel and played the message.

"On this day at three pm Terran Capital time, we of the Ka'na Liberation announce our rebirth, and our freedom, from the Inta-ka-na, their Confederation, and all states to which our bodies have been sold for generations. We celebrate this day with attacks on fourteen installations and fifty-seven cities across five planets, and we formally request admittance

into the Terran Republic as citizens. Our people are your people, and your people are our people, if you will have us.”

Another transmission beeped, and the stunned blonde officer looked his way a second time, understanding dawned on her as she realized he was expecting this, and he nodded again.

The transmission played for the whole ship, just as it did for every other, in every Republic fleet.

“The Terran Republic has voted to accept the Ka’na Liberation citizens as members of the Republic, with all the rights and securities of any human, the freedom to travel, to work, to petition the court for redress of grievances, and to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Fingers trembled among the experienced officers who understood the implications of that declaration, the vote was too quick, and its meaning was doubtless...but for the rest of the galaxy, it carried on to clarify.

“As our people are being held against their will through the ancient crime of forced labor, that scourge of liberty called *slavery*, the Terran Republic senate has voted unanimously for the declaration of war upon the Inta-ka-na Confederacy and all their supporters. And President John Brown has signed the declaration at this moment, three o’one pm Terran Capital time. All fleets are to engage with the enemies of liberty, secure the freedom of our people, and the freedom of all Republic citizens, no matter where they may be.”

The transmission died, and Captain Nelson took one brief second more of his life, letting the gravity of the moment settle in on his soul before he said, “Enter the hyperlane, and ready all weapons. We have a job to do.”

The ship moved gradually for a moment, and it seemed the stars, which despite expanding with the Universe seemed ever so still, were going to stay as twinkling dots to his eyes... until they didn’t. They became a blur as the ship went to maximum speed in an instant, propelled along the hyperlane, the guns and torpedoes and missiles and beams and all manner of destructive things born from the minds of callous researchers and patriots

and dreamers all in common work were made ready to rob nameless strangers of their lives for all eternity.

*'It would be better for all life if there were nobody brave ever born, if evil and good were both cowards, nobody would ever take from any other, and everyone would be safe. Or, failing that, if only everyone who longed to oppress were a coward, if evil created terror in the heart, then good would triumph every time and easily...but I don't get to have either of those worlds. I'm stuck with this one. On the other side of this lane is the Inta-ka-na fleet, the vast majority of their numbers, brave...do they come in male or female or both...or something else? Dead gods... I don't even know what they look like, and I'm going to have to slaughter them by the thousands.'*

The Captain's thoughts boggled even himself as he steeled his nerves, in a way it was worse than the fight against the Sacred Dark. Those had been more advanced, even if they were less numerous, against the Inta-ka-na, with the Prometheus in the lead and their greatest Admiral en route to join him and probably only months away? This gave him a sense of *guilt* he lacked before.

But then there was no more time.

The white light that blurred the screen in the glow of countless stars was gone, the black of the night sea returned, and in front of him were arrayed some four hundred ships to his seventy.

*'They're outnumbered.'* He thought, as he shouted out loud, "Fire!"

The ships of the Inta-ka-na came on, bravely, and they made up for their lack of range by waiting directly at the hyperlane exit point, thus robbing Captain Nelson of the long range advantages of his ships. Lightning and plasmic weaponry fired back and forth, torpedoes shot off out of nowhere as a lucky AI hack destroyed a guidance system, and they shot off course to disappear into the dark, leaving the battle behind forever. *'I wonder if they'll still be sailing on for a billion years or so? Maybe they'll hit some other poor ship from a species that hasn't even evolved intelligence yet, and they'll wonder about us now?'* It was a stray, pointless thought that he quickly set aside.

The Prometheus was a favorite target, its size, its fame, its power to repair and build on the way, thanks to the massive atomic assembler nestled near the engine core which harvested elements that stars and supernovas cast off, or could even breakdown the materials of asteroids if needed...all made it a tempting and strategically significant point of attack.

*'If my ship is destroyed, it will go a long way toward boosting the Inta-ka-na's belief in their victory, but then, our engineers thankfully understood that.'* He couldn't help but smirk at the thought as torpedoes and missiles exploded against the shields while their phaser fire only glowed in futility. The shields wouldn't hold forever, but it didn't need to.

His fleet spread out on the wings and began to batter the outside of the Inta-ka-na formations. The goal of the Inta-ka-na was clear, those on the wings were trying to encircle and pound the Terran armada from all sides, while the core was meant to destroy the Juggernaut class flagship.

"Die." The Captain said, not of their ships or their lives, but of their *hopes*, and watched as the encirclement attempt became a death sentence, with the smaller ships of the Inta-ka-na exploding in fire as they spread out, weakening the wings instead of strengthening them.

The battleships that made up the majority of the fleet began to sail into the gaps like birds of prey, the close range fire causing even greater damage than it would have at range.

Here and there, a battleship joined the Inta-ka-na fleet in death, going out in a blaze of glory that diminished his fleet only slightly, and costing the Inta-ka-na far, far more...

From four hundred, to three hundred, and three hundred, down to one hundred and fifty, and down, down, down they went, the death rate spiked as the target rich environment became target poor.

*'Poor bastard. He did the best he could.'* Captain Nelson thought briefly as he could feel the resolve of his enemy to fight to the very last ship, even if it bought only one day more of repairs for the Terran Armada, he would trade

the lives of himself and all his crew. '*Worthy enemy.*' He offered quiet praise as the explosions of ships became a cascade, and the flagship of the enemy fleet, which somehow survived until the final hour of its armada, came barreling forward. The last command of the opposing admiral was obvious, as all their remaining ships turned fire directly against the Prometheus, cannons, remaining missiles, torpedoes, and beam weapons finally saw the collapse of his shields.

"You glorious bastard." Captain Nelson muttered as the flagship continued forward, the shields were somehow holding, and it took a full minute to realize *why*.

Life support is an expensive thing, energy wise, even in the ships of the Terran Republic, it was well understood that a fleet was essentially just colonizing space by wrapping metal around it, and life support was the most important feature. From cycling oxygen to disposing of carbon dioxide, it required a lot of energy to keep everybody alive.

But... what if you didn't have to do that?

All that energy, for all systems, concentrated in only one or two areas?

"That mad bastard has killed his crew." Captain Nelson said in disbelief. If all he kept alive was the bridge, the shields could be, at least for a little while, on par with the most advanced ships in the Terran Empire.

"Bring it down!" He shouted the order, but the handful of remaining enemy ships seemed to have imitated their Admiral, and flew on intercept courses, becoming shields to let that one...ship...through.

They died at the side of their flagship, and bought the precious minutes necessary for the unthinkable.

For one brief second the viewscreen of the Prometheus was dominated by the front of the long ship of the Inta-ka-na, and then, there was only white flames as the ship exploded against the Prometheus, rocking the flagship of the Terran Empire so badly that on every deck people fell and tumbled to the floor.

"Damage report!" Captain Nelson shouted as his crew righted themselves, and after a brief quiet the answer came.

"Forward weapon array incapacitated, repair bays one through six are destroyed, and shield system is offline."

"I wish I knew that one's name. He was on the wrong side, but he was brave, and deserves to be remembered for that, if nothing else. He was as brave as Admiral Yamamoto." Captain Nelson remarked, then added, "Seize their solar collector, and there are two small colonies in this system. Signal the transports to begin landing soldiers, occupy these worlds at once. Order the repair ships to get to work, and then gather twenty ships to seize the collectors in the two neighboring systems. We'll be moving out within three clock days."

"Sir...is that really enough time?" His first officer asked, and to the man's surprise, Captain Nelson denied it.

"No. It isn't. But this was the majority of their fleet. They were trying to buy time, if we give it to them, they'll just build another. Even if we're damaged, we can still win if we don't have to fight. Admiral Pike will be joining us with reinforcements soon, all we have to do is take down the surrounding undefended systems. We can handle that much while they are forced to scramble. I want their shipyards under Terran control before they can raise another fleet like that one. Don't you?" He raised an eyebrow, and his first officer quietly accepted the question as an obvious truth.

The war, such as it was, had begun, and they now had their first victory.

Nine terran ships had paid the ultimate price, with two dozen more seriously damaged, weeks of repair would be needed, and to build nine more ships in the Sol system would take a full year, to build them on site with the Prometheus would take four times that, but in one stroke, the Inta-ka-na had lost over eighty percent of their defense force.

The remaining twenty percent would be scrambling to respond to both the Terran Republic *and* the Ka'na Liberation Front. *'I doubt the rest of the Confederation will be all that eager after the cost of this one battle gets out.'*

The Captain pondered, and then felt himself relax as the defenseless colonies grew larger on his screen when his ship began moving in to support the troop transports that would bring the reality of war to the very homes of the Inta-ka-na people.