

“Rath *frakking* Oligard,” Justinios Drake spat as he tossed his datapad in frustration. “That hypercritical, dim-witted, overcooked nerf steak of a human is more than happy to cause violence at any occasion that presents itself despite his self-righteous preaching to the contrary!”

His droid Kilo, whose official designation was K1-L0, was the only other being in the room for the Aleena’s little fit. The other regular members of Justinios’ team, the Mandalorian Tavens Caedo and the Taldryan scout/sniper Liya Oldag, were not present to hear the Proconsul’s ranting. Things had been relatively quiet on all fronts, so the trio had just agreed the day before that they would all get some much needed rest and relaxation. Unfortunately the Collective did not seem to care for their individual vacation plans and, based on the Deputy Grand Master’s frantic message, had instead initiated an attack on the Severian Principate. By the few accounts that were available the entire assault was made to look as if it was being carried out by the Brotherhood and was extremely convincing.

“Master Drake this situation is entirely illogical. If the Brotherhood were to actually assault the Severians, why begin the attack while we have some of our most skilled members on their ship?”

As far as Justinios’ logical brain was concerned, Kilo made a fantastic point. But, in matters of war and peace, logic was a rare commodity. There was also the little fact that the Brotherhood was not just any other pocket empire. There was only one answer that Justinios could think of and it involved the driving emotion behind most bad decisions, fear.

“People get weird when they discover a coven of space wizards living in their galactic neighborhood.”

Now that his mini tantrum had passed, the Aleena used the Force to return his datapad to his tiny hands. Swiping furiously he entered the extremely long sequence of security codes and safety overrides that would give Kilo access to any and all information coming in from all of the factions within the Brotherhood that Justinios had access to. All of Taldryan’s networks, the Shroud Syndicate, the Inquisitorious, the Grand Master’s Royal Guard, even the Shadow Academy society. The old Imperial tactical droid was now a beacon for any intelligence regarding Oligard’s latest scheme.

With his trusted companion processing data with all of the impressive computing power at his disposal, the task of calling the other members of the team back in fell to Justinios himself. Lieutenant Oldag was the easier of the two, seeing as her status as an officer in Taldryan’s army put her officially under Justinios’ command as Proconsul. With a few taps of the datascreen he was able to issue orders recalling her to Taldryan’s flagship, the Secutor-class carrier *Resurgent*.

The Mandalorian would be a bit harder to convince as his participation in their merry little band of conspirators was completely voluntary. Dialing up the mercenary's personal comlink, Justinios mentally prepared for a fight.

"It hasn't even been two days. Agreeing to work with you has been terrible for my leisure time." Tavens' tone was unmistakably frustrated. "I assume the Caelus system is on fire if I am hearing from you."

"No, but our home could be if we don't do something. How well do you think that Caelus will fair in a three way war between the Brotherhood, the Collective and the Severians?"

A loud sigh was broadcast across the open comm. "What did the cloaked fools on the Dark Council do now?"

"Believe it or not, it wasn't their fault. In fact the Deputy Head Dark One In Charge was on a legitimate diplomatic mission when the Collective decided to bust up negotiations."

The Proconsul wasn't shocked that Tavens' first inclination was that the Dark Council had done something reckless. In fact, the Aleena was convinced that the Councilors were going to find some way to start a war with their newly discovered neighbors. When their initial reaction was actually one of peace, Justinios had almost passed out from shock.

"So the Breaker-of-Chains strikes again? Fine, I'll make my way to you. Fill me in on the details later." With that, the Mandalorian cut the connection sounding even more angry than when he answered. The bad news for the Collective was that he now blamed them for interrupting his rest and relaxation instead of Justinios.

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The VT- 49 Decimator known as the *Quantum Void* left the hangar bay of the Taldryan flagship and jumped to hyperspace within an hour of the first reports of the Collective's false flag attack. In that time, Justinios and Kilo were able to catch both Liya and Tavens up on all of the intelligence they had available as well as their objective. Taldryan's Consul, Rian Taldrya, had authorized the mission in that span as well. The Clan leader was happy to have some eyes in a system where the attacks were occurring before the Clan's main forces jumped anywhere themselves. This pleased Justinios because he had very rightfully earned the reputation for being insubordinate. Rian was patient with his somewhat hyper second-in-command, but Justinios knew he could only push the envelope so far.

In the time that the squad was assembling, Kilo had been able to determine that their best chance of helping to avoid a massive conflict was to jump directly into the fray on the colony moon of Lyra to find direct evidence of the Collective set up. With the *Quantum Void* being registered as a personal starship, it most likely wouldn't immediately be fired upon by any

Principate forces. If the fake Iron Navy Forces fired upon it then all the better, turning some Collective pilots into space dust would give them some standing with the local governor. It hadn't been confirmed that the pilots were brainwashed former Iron Navy officers, but that was the general consensus on the intel feeds. Justinios thought that a situation like this is where the old Jedi Order failed. Sometimes you had to kill a few dozen who were beyond saving to protect billions from an escalated conflict. It was a simple calculus to a former professor like Justinios. The old Order let feelings cloud their logic even if they had claimed to believe to be operating free of emotions.

Luckily for Justinios, nobody on his team had such moral strife to wade through. Each one of them was fully committed to preventing a conflict with the Severian Principate at all costs. As the moments to hyperspace reversion ticked down, everyone patiently waited in their assigned battlestation. Justinios in the pilot's seat with Kilo as his second, Tavens and Liya were in the dorsal and ventral turrets, respectively, and their droids were safely powered down in the storage compartment. Neither Liya's seeker or Taven's old Sentry droid were going to be much use until they made it moonside and it was determined to be safer to store them securely for the inevitable mid-space fistcuffs.

As soon as Justinios pulled back on the levers that brought the *Quantum Void* back to realspace, Eorilia's moon dominated the front viewport. The crew of the Decimator had little time to take in the sights because chaos surrounded them in an instant.

"Half a squadron of TIEs just turned towards us and are on an intercept vector," Liya said over the comms with a military like calmness.

Justinios was disappointed that their arrival had been noticed so quickly but wasn't shocked. "Kilo I need friend or foe designations for all ships immediately."

"Do we fire at them?" the Mandalorian asked.

"Negative, if we destroy one Principate craft in error this whole scheme is shot."

Despite there being a chain of command, with Justinios at the end of it, the Aleena was happy to let the Lieutenant remind her compatriot just what was at stake. This team was seeing combat together for the first time and they were all volunteers on this little side project. Learning to work together would strengthen them all more than Justinios pulling rank.

"Liya is right. Kilo we need those designations." The unmistakable shaking of laser fire hitting shields was the response Justinios received to his second request. "Going evasive."

"Kilo, those of us in the turrets are getting itchy fingers..." Justinios could hear the worry in Tavens' voice. He wanted to think of something reassuring but was too focused on evading the pursuing TIEs. Instead, it was the droid that had the reassuring statement.

"Check your displays."

Justinios put the Decimator through the tightest loop he could manage, but the larger craft was at a disadvantage in maneuverability against the much more nimble TIEs. As the Proconsul flattened out his trajectory once more he glanced down at his own tactical display to see the familiar green and red indicators of friend and foe. The ship rocked again but this time it wasn't enemy fire hitting the shields, the same IFF information had obviously been updated on the turret displays as well.

"I'd tongue kiss that droid if he had a tongue, or even just a mouth." As Tavens crudely complimented the work of their synthetic counterpart, another red TIE Fighter icon disappeared from the screen.

"Thank you... I suppose," Kilo responded, unsure how to handle what was likely his first unwanted advance. "The Collective slicers did a great job but there is one small error in their forged transponder codes. Shall I transmit this back to the Taldryan fleet?"

"Yes, along with their fleet makeup," Justinios ordered. Rian had promised backup as soon as he could muster it but was clear that he had no idea when that would be or what form the backup would take. Justinios' hope was that by letting him know the enemy had a Ton-Falk-class Escort Carrier on the field it might speed things up. "Once you do that, try to get whomever is commanding the Principate's defense on the comms. Once we deal with our immediate problem we will need to convince them we are on their side."

What was once half a squad was already down to a quarter of one. Now that the Decimator's impressive armaments could be brought to bear, the TIEs found themselves turning into space dust fairly quickly. While he wasn't surprised his crew was able to handle six measly TIE Fighters, Justinios did take note on how quickly they seemed to be falling prey to the quad laser turrets.

"Liya, what kind of tactics is this squad using in their assault on us?" the Aleena asked. Although she was an army officer, she was still trained to recognize fighter assault tactics on a fortified position. For all intents and purposes, that's what the *Quantum Void* was to the smaller ships, a moving bunker in space.

"Umm, none?" she replied, sounding slightly confused with her own response. "I mean, it's like they are just randomly taking turns trying to... got 'em... taking turns trying to attack us."

An involuntary sound of contempt escaped from Justinios' mouth. Whoever these pilots were, they were clearly fodder sent out by Rath Oligard to sow discord with no regard for their own safety. This made the brainwashed theory even more plausible. "Until every chain is broken, even if I make them all myself first."

"Huh?" both Liya and Tavens asked simultaneously.

"Forget it. Kilo any luck?"

The last two red TIE indicators blinked off the main viewscreen in rapid succession. Justinios once again began flying straight at the colony itself which was swarmed with enemy TIEs. It looked as if any remaining Principate defenders had been destroyed or disabled in the time that Justinios and his crew defended their own ship. The Collective attackers were now focusing on the settlement's defenses and the Aleena saw with his own eyes just what Liya had described to him. The attacks were unorganized, as if the pilots weren't even attempting to communicate and coordinate with each other. The stationary gun emplacements would occasionally hit one of the nimble fighters, but the Ton-Falk-class Escort Carrier, which was broadcasting as the *Arx's Pride*, engaged more fighters as a response. To make matters worse, the Escort Carrier was staying well out of range of the big guns. The colony would be picked apart by the fighters without backup and the fake *Arx's Pride* would swoop in to finish the job.

"Master Drake I have Governor Jar'deon Blazio of the Severian Principate."

Justinios gave his droid companion a nod to put the Governor through.

"I won't pretend to know what is going on anymore, but I suppose you are going to explain to me why a ship with civilian transponders is stupid enough to be firing on Iron Navy ships?" This was Justinios' first interaction with anyone within the Severian Principate, but if they all were as nervous about combat as Blazio was, then maybe there was less to fear.

"Governor those aren't Iron Navy ships, despite the extremely convincing con job that our friends in The Collective put forth. I am Justinios Drake, the Proconsul for Clan Taldryan of the real Dark Jedi Brotherhood. I am here to prove to you that not only are we not responsible for these attacks, but that we are committed to defending the Severian Principate from the hypocritical, brainwashed, power hungry zealots in The Collective."

"That's a lot of adjectives. Well as you can see we are at the mercy of our attackers at this point so I have no choice but to accept that you are who you say you are. Besides my remaining security forces there are thousands of civilians living dust side. If you save their lives you'll have gone a long way in earning my trust."

Justinios was hoping this would be one outcome of his half baked plan, getting a high ranking member of the Principate to trust the real Brotherhood. As important as that was, the Proconsul was also hoping to acquire some concrete evidence to support the Brotherhood in their claim of being set up by The Collective. That proof was likely within the databanks of the *Arx's Pride* but as the *Quantum Void* sped towards the colony proper, Justinios had no idea how his Decimator could penetrate the carrier's starfighter screen, disable the larger ship, and then forcibly dock

with it. Of course, without the first hand account of the entire situation from someone on the ground, physical proof would also carry little weight. Justinios knew he needed both Blazio's word and strong physical evidence to truly accomplish his mission.

As he tried desperately to figure out how to accomplish both objectives, Kilo got Justinios' attention. "Master Drake, you have a message from the Consul."

The Aleena looked down at his display, a two word transmission from Rian popped up, "*Resurgent* inbound."

Having no clue if the Collective was listening in to his conversation with the Governor, Justinios couldn't risk tipping The Collective forces off that were about to be seriously outgunned. If they ran, it would save the colony but the chance for acquiring a "smoking slugthrower" would jump off with them. Instead, Justinios began typing furiously at his own terminal before responding to Kilo.

"Send these instructions through to the *Resurgent* as soon as it reverts to realspace. Short burst only with my personal encryption."

The droid nodded to indicate his understanding of the orders and the sound of the quad laser turrets firing reminded Justinios that he had reached the outer edge of The Collective fighter swarm. He did his best to both evade enemy fire, even if that meant missed shots for his partners. The *Quantum Void's* shields were strong but had been tested by their first encounter and no pilot ever got excited about testing just how strong their armor plating was. The TIEs that turned their attention on the lone defender were just as disorganized as the first six had been but Liya and Tavens were having a hard time landing shots due to Justinios' evasive flying.

"Hey JD you mind flattening out every once and a while so we can slag one of these fighters?" Taven asked.

Justinios knew this was more a concern for the Mandalorian wanting to contribute as it was blood thirst. "You're doing great," the Aleena replied, "as long as you keep firing they have to keep chasing us. We're just trying to delay until the *Resurgent* makes it in system."

"Oh ho ho," Liya said into the comms. "Rian isn't taking chances then it seems."

No, the Consul wasn't and Justinios appreciated that since he and his crew took a huge risk to jump into the system blind simply on the hope they could make a difference. Sending in reinforcements that were far more than what was required to complete the task at hand was greatly appreciated.

But before he could celebrate, alarms began blaring. "The shields are beginning to fail," the calm mechanical voice of Kilo advised. "The *Arx's Pride* also has begun to advance on the colony."

It seemed that The Collective were choosing to bring their assault to a finish with the Escort Carrier choosing to use their lone missile launcher to lob warheads at the settlement. The guns were knocking them down before they could impact the surface but that effort distracted from shooting down the fighters. The usually carefree Aleena was beginning to get anxious about how much time the colony had before The Collective wiped out any survivors. Fires were visible from almost every angle and Justinios had seen a lot of angles while avoiding what now looked like almost a full squadron of pursuers. The escort carrier had closed the gap between it and the colony proper and the frigate's dual laser turrets were now firing down at full speed. Even though the ship's guns were considered light weapons in naval terms they were taking huge chunks out of the colony's buildings with each hit.

As if they had timed their arrival to perfectly align with the moment of highest tension, the *Resurgent* reverted to realspace and began spewing it's fighters out almost instantly. Looking at Kilo for confirmation that his orders were received, the droid gave him a thumbs up as confirmation of his silent inquiry. Time was of the essence, Justinios was afraid that as soon as the *Pride* knew it was overwhelmed, it would jump out even if that meant leaving it's fighters behind. Unfortunately for the carrier the TIE Defenders of both Priestess and Prophet squadron were streaking towards it at full speed. With all of its own starfighters focused on the settlement, the highly advanced TIEs were peppering the carrier with blue ion cannon fire in mere moments.

It took a bit longer for reinforcements to arrive at the colony itself. After a few more minutes the *Resurgent's* TIE/SF squadrons made it to surface and they began making short work of the outnumbered, outclassed, and out piloted Collective ships. Finally able to breath, Justinios opened up a channel with Governor Blazio once more.

"Overwhelming force is always a solid strategy Proconsul Drake, but I can't help but notice you have disabled the offending carrier as opposed to destroying it." Despite the dire situation of the colony, the bureaucrat clearly still had enough operating sensory equipment to inform him of the state of the battle space.

This was the final stage of Justinios' plan, even if in this case the word 'plan' meant more of a stream of consciousness response to the situation as it developed. "Governor, that ship likely contains hard evidence that the Brotherhood has been set up, and I intend to recover it. Unfortunately, the *Resurgent* doesn't possess any shuttle craft and I will require some backup to successfully neutralize the carrier's defenders. I'm hoping you have some help to offer me."

"I have security forces to spare," Blazio responded. "We only have civilian craft left to use as shuttles but since you've now both cleared the airspace and disabled their carrier, the risk seems fairly low, unless..."

Justinios' stomach sank. His own mind raced with all manner of things that could now be giving the Governor pause. The one at the top of his reptilian mind was that the Principate leader was concerned this was now a DOUBLE false flag. What if Blazio was now concerned the first attack was a trick, a sacrificial nuna to gain his trust and send his security forces out in unarmed ships so they could all be destroyed at once which would allow the colony not to be destroyed but captured? As Justinios began to form a response to counter this concern, Blazio broke the silence.

"You know what, it doesn't matter. At this point you have us bent over a barrel, so I'm just going to trust that your motives are what they say you are. If you are lying we're all dead regardless of my decision making."

Justinios muted his connection just before a giggle escaped his lips. Liya and Tavens were already making their own comments and laughing to each other in response to Blazio's turn of phrase. In order to proceed professionally, the Proconsul muted their internal channel before responding.

"I appreciate your pragmatism and as a show of good faith, let me land with my crew first. This ship will be able to absorb almost anything the *Pride's* defenders can throw at it and begin cleaning up any defenders in the docking bay so your craft can land in relative safety." Even if Justinios knew his team couldn't take control of the ship themselves, they could keep a much larger force busy while their reinforcements arrived. While the Proconsul was disappointed that Rian hadn't sent any forces capable of taking over the ship, he knew that in the confusion of the current situation that his Consul's first priority was showing the citizens of the Caelus system that Taldryan was serious about their safety. The clan's hold on the system was still tenuous and if Taldryan allowed a major attack to occur because they were off fighting a war in another system, then the citizens would quickly begin looking for leadership in some of the other factions forming in the nascent government.

Leaving the connection open, Justinios piloted his ship towards the disabled carrier. As it sped nearer, his mind exploded with images of fire and death. Faster than instinct, Justinios whipped the *Quantum Void* into a 180-degree reversal and pinned the throttle as far as it could go. A mere instant later the *Arx's Pride* exploded in a shower of twisted metal, sending a shockwave that shook the Decimator as it passed over the ship. Debris began raining down on the colony, caught in the moon's gravity.

"It seems that they didn't want visitors." The Governor still sounded uneasy. Justinios didn't blame him, this entire situation had been designed to create as much confusion as possible. "Did the plan change?"

"The Collective loves a good suicide bomb." Tavens wasn't broadcasting on the channel to the Governor but he hit the nail on the head.



Justinios relayed that inference to Governor Blazio. "No sir, your government just hasn't had enough experience with the Collective. They specialize in suicide tactics. I assume that the final order for the *Pride* was to pull up over to your colony, and detonate itself."

"Once they lost propulsion the next best thing was to ensure nobody got any intelligence and hopefully take you out with them," the Governor continued. "But it looks like we'll have plenty of wreckage to dodge still."

Despite the success of saving the colony, Justinios found himself dejected. Any concrete proof of The Collective's plan went up in flames with the escort carrier. At this point, the Aleena could understand if the Principate said "to hell" with both the Brotherhood and the Collective. He wasn't sure if he'd made the situation better, worse, or somewhere in between. Governor Blazio was kind enough to speak up before Justinios had too much time to wallow.

"Proconsul Drake, my official report will detail the actions of you and your Clan here today." His paused told Justinios that the inevitable "but" was coming. "But I also won't pretend that I fully believe your own story. You and your people saved lives here today, as long as this wasn't part of some greater ruse to gain our trust."

Taking a chance, Justinios asked, "We already had an entire diplomatic party ready to negotiate with your leaders just as these false attacks were orchestrated. What would we have to gain from a double fake?"

"Your point is valid, it would be an odd form of overkill, but these are strange times. Stranger than the days of the Empire in many ways. I will simply recount the facts of this encounter and let the Triumvirate make the call on who to trust."

The Aleena bashed the back of his head against his chair in frustration. Composing himself, he responded, "I suppose that is all we can ask for. Whatever the outcome, I am glad we could save lives here today."

As Justinios moved his hands to the comm's controls, ready to give orders to withdraw, the channel activated once more. "That is appreciated Proconsul, and if it is determined that you are telling the truth then your heroism will be remembered. If you'd like to continue building that possible legacy, there is a dangerous amount of scrap strewn about my colony. If you and your people were to clear some of it before withdrawing maybe you'll find something useful."

Justinios knew that somewhere in all of that wreckage there would be a veritable treasure trove of black boxes, flight computers and droid parts. He didn't know exactly what form it would take, but the Aleena was certain he would leave the Lyra system with the proof he required. Paired with the story of Taldryan's good deeds, Justinios was confident he had done enough to delay war, for now.

