The Celestial Standoff

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demands had been made, the Batterans had asked for planets, a few solar systems in total. On opposite ends of human existence, five men held control of weapons that could deal devastating damage to anyone they were aimed at. Two men controlled one side, debating whether they wanted to give up their planets or not. But really, they were more focused on what they wanted for dinner. Three men controlled the other with a threat to fulfill, but hardly the nerve to do so. As both sides settled into a waiting game and the clock spun steadily towards its stopping point, families across the galaxy settled in for breakfasts and dinners, work, and sleep. Children played and adults lived, all unaware that they were potential casualties in a war for continued human existence. “Hey Chuck, do you remember when we were kids?” “Of course, Rin, I remember.” “Do you remember soldiers?” “Yeah, I always wanted to be one.” “Me too, I thought they were cool. Do you ever wonder what they would think about what we do, and our decisions?” “I haven’t before, I guess they might have something to say,” said Rin. “I mean things have changed so much since then though, maybe they wouldn’t even understand it.” “That’s true Rin, they wouldn’t understand our wars.” “No, no they wouldn’t. Do you remember 40 years ago when the Batterans revealed their long-range targeting systems? The Quan sector didn’t stand a chance. Their soldiers were dead before they even stepped onto the field.” “I remember the Quan soldiers just kept charging; they didn’t stand a chance. It’s not like we can protect ourselves from modern lasers anyways, armor’s worthless against current firepower.” “They should’ve given up. There was no way to fight back.” “Are you saying we should give up? We have the same systems as them these days, not to mention that both of us have far surpassed the technology of that era.” “But so are theirs. And now they want our planets. Would it be so bad if we gave up?” “They’d probably kill us all anyway or enslave us.” “Is it worse than death, Rin?” “Our people could ever be free again.” “But life, our lives, theirs. We could all die. Us. Them.” At the head of the table, a screen shined down the demands of the enemy onto the faces of the two men. Rin and Chuck sank low in their chairs with the weight of civilization’s future pushing them down. If anybody fires they will know, and if they fire so will the enemy. Across the galaxy, three more men hold the same fate. The heads of the Batterans may have changed in the past 40 years, but they were just as brutal as when they had killed the Quan army. “We already won, aren’t they calling for peace?” said Henderson, arsenal coordinator for the Batteran Autarchy. “They’re trying to bait us into withdrawing, they can’t seriously be considering firing.” posited Hoffman, chief political strategist. “It doesn’t matter, they will call. And if they fire, so will we. They know that.” Sovereign Monell stared out his window, the moon of his planet glowing faint pink down onto him. He knew they wouldn’t launch; he was counting on them believing that he would. But in case they did, Monell kept a communicator in his pocket. At the press of one button, this galaxy would die with him. “Chuck, we need to concede. If we had a few months we’d have our new defense system, but we don’t have months. e have hours, a day at most,” begged Rin. “We can’t just give in, Rin; they’d just take and take once they knew they could. I’d rather end this violently than give up.” “We can’t, they’d know we shot as soon as we do.” “I’m not saying that we should fire. I’m just saying that if it comes to it, we can’t give in — we would be trampled.” Chuck shook his head in determination. “If we fight, we die. That’s how it was for soldiers when we were kids. That’s how it is for us now. Congratulations, we got our dream.” “We’re at home, nestled in our office and yet we stand in the forefront of a great battle. We are home and we still won’t survive.”
The two men stared at each other. Chuck turned his head solemnly and stared at the screen containing all his fears spelled out. His failures looked both himself and Rin in the face. On the other side of the galaxy, a man fiddled with a pen, staring down the most horrible fate he could imagine for anyone.

“Shit!” Hoffman cursed at the ink he had spilled on his shirt. His nervousness was beginning to show as the deadline for their demands drew nearer. He couldn’t help but wonder if he could dissuade Monell and Henderson, they were men of war. Monell was a battlefield commander in his youth and a dictator in his old age. He knew what war looked like, having witnessed firsthand the devastation of the Quan, helpless to fight back against the technology of that time. Hoffman thought to himself, we are two glass ships carrying glass cannons.

Henderson spoke up, “Sir, we’ve got the weapons armed and ready if they fail to give in within the hour.”

“Good, on my command, but for now we will wait for them to seal their own fates.”

Far off from Monell, Hoffman, and Henderson, a man panicked.

Call, call, call. I cannot call. We must not be weak. But surely, it’s better to be weak than to die. I have to give in. I cannot call. Chuck won’t call. Chuck might not let me call. Failure, we are failures as leaders. We will fall in vain — a sacrifice for nothing. The soldiers of old would sacrifice themselves for their beliefs, they would live and die for their countries and hearts and their god. Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori they used to say it was the motto of earth, taken to the stars. We are all soldiers now, all at risk of death. If one of us dies, so do the rest. This was not always the nature of war, the past doesn’t matter, this is how we fight. We cannot fight, there cannot be a struggle, we will live or die. I have to call. Chuck won’t let me call. The pressure was cracking Rin as his thoughts raced.

Henderson looked blankly at the window. He couldn’t process what he was about to do. Nobody had stood up to them; everyone had given in rather than be destroyed. Everyone was smaller than his current opponent, nobody else could kill him. Nobody else could kill his family. His wife. His sons. His parents. Henderson tapped his foot quietly and quickly under the desk so that Monell couldn’t see; Hoffman could, and saw Henderson breaking down. Henderson checked the time: 30 minutes left. Eventually he spoke.

“Sir we can’t do this. They’ll kill us too.”

“No, they won’t. They won’t fire, they’re too afraid.” replied Monell quickly.

“They’ll fire if we do.”

Hoffman sat silently, staring dejectedly at the two men speaking. Monell spoke again. “We won’t, but they don’t know that.”

“Sir?” questioned Henderson.

“I won’t doom us all over a handful of planets.”

Hoffman interjected, “Sir, why didn’t you tell us that before?”

“You wouldn’t have had your killer instinct if I had, for them to believe me, you had to believe me.”

“Sir, if this gambit fails, what do we do?”

“We double down and ask for more.”

Chuck watched Rin from across the table. He was taking apart his watch and reassembling it quickly, a pointless action to keep his hands busy. Rin was calming down, settling into the idea of doing nothing. If they did anything they would retaliate, but there was no reason why they should go first. Rin broke the silence.

“If they do anything, our early warning systems will know, right?”

“Yes, if they take action we will know immediately.”

“And we are prepared to retaliate?”

“Of course.”

“Good, let’s be ready for anything, but we can wait for them.”

Chuck nodded silently, he knew how hard this was for his friend. He was never as strong as Chuck was when lives were on the line. Rin was out of his area of expertise; he was far better with his own people.

All living with the realities of war, war where it turned out the greatest weapon was nothing made by man but rather a volume of dark matter, flung from the far reaches of space. Slipping silently across the skies of a system on the outskirts, and in a single moment destroying a colonized planet, a planet long fought over by the greatest powers in the history of humanity. • • •