

SEVENTEEN MINUTES

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North Pier, Astarte, Salonika
Canopus IV, Magistracy of Canopus
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The Magestrix had already begun speaking when the call came in. Senior General Hadji Doru felt the silent rustle of his personal comm from the pocket of his uniform trousers. Irritated, he glanced at the press corps to make sure none of the vultures were looking his way and then surreptitiously slid the device out of his pocket.

There was no *damn* way he was going to answer it, he just wanted a peek at the screen so he'd know whose head to roast on a spit later. His staff was supposed to know never to call during a political function unless—

He saw the screen and the train of words in his head just *stopped*.

His comm was blank, no name, no number. Nothing but a background color: a bright, bloody field of red.

Condition Crimson.

The comm told him it was 10:22, local time.

He let the phone slide back into his pocket. His eyes flickered up. As the head of the Magestrix Command Center he was responsible for routing military alerts to the Magestrix.

But he also knew Emma Centrella would have his head if he caused a panic without good reason.

The rally was being held on a wooden pier that jutted fifty meters into the blue water of the Bay of Altay. It was a warm day and Centrella had tossed aside her jacket, leaving her in a silk blouse the color of ivory and a slate skirt that came down to her knees. She was still beautiful despite the ravages of time, tall and slim, her raven hair falling around her lovely face in waves, skin the color of cinnamon.

But there was something else hidden within the delicate curve of her jaw: steel. Sometimes people missed it because of her good looks, but Emma Centrella was strong—strong enough to make a difference when it counted.



She stood alone on a small wooden stage set three-quarters of the way down the pier, her entourage (including Doru) pushed to the side. There was no podium on the platform, no stage setting at all save for the handheld microphone and the chair her jacket was draped across.

It didn't make a bit of difference.

Centrella had the crowd firmly in her hands.

There were some reporters and local politicians in attendance, but most of the thousand souls that crowded the pier were trawler sailors or fish mongers or cannery workers, all of them happy to listen to her wax poetic on the importance of the fishing industry to the planetary economy. These were her people and they loved her.

No one was watching Doru.

He quietly faded back into the gaggle of officers and staffers, moving casually toward the end of the pier.

Doru was a tough, old bird. He was thin even in his garish turquoise-and-black dress uniform and tall, weathered brown skin pulled tight over his skull, hairline receding, his black hair accented by a shock of white at the sides, his face dominated by a thick mustache and even thicker eyebrows. In a society that worshipped beauty, he was unsightly; the old, nicked butcher knife at the bottom of the drawer.

Overlooked, but still capable of drawing blood.

Suddenly aware of security, Doru's practiced eyes picked out the orange floats that marked the steel net that ringed the quaint wooden pier. Five boats orbited just outside the barrier, manned by agents armed with knives, slug throwers, and spear-guns should divers try to cut through the net.

The bay was a placid blue, smooth like dark glass. Gulls and terns inscribed lazy arcs in a robin's egg sky free of clouds. The little gray moon, Cybele, was visible, its maria picking up the blue of the sky. A cool breeze carried the strong smell of brine accented with the oily odor of the creosote that coated the pier's timbers.

Doru reached the end of the pier, looked around to ensure he was alone, and then pulled out his comm. The red screen disappeared with a touch, replaced by the familiar downward-



pointing Blakist sword. A light blinked red to green indicating his comm had completed the crypto handshake. He expected text to pop up on his screen, routed directly from the planet's HPG.

So he was surprised when the logo was replaced by a face.

She was a young woman (well, early thirties, which was young as far as Doru was concerned) in a Magistracy dress uniform, a force major, judging by the diamond on her collar. She was pretty, pale skin, shoulder-length auburn hair tied into a pony tail, full lips.

Her eyes were dark, almost black, and as serious as a heart attack.

"Senior General Doru?" she said. *Holy God*, he thought, *this is a realtime HPG transmission*. Such things were fabulously expensive—even for governments. *She damn well better have something important to say*.

"This is General Doru," he said firmly.

"Sir, my name is Force Major Price. I'm the military intelligence officer on Lockton." She drew a deep breath. "Sir, I have flash message traffic for the MCC."

The hairs rose on the back of Doru's neck. Important, indeed. "Go ahead, Force Major."

"Sir, we've uncovered actionable intelligence of a threat to the M—"

And then she cut off, mid-word, her grim, pretty face replaced by dancing, gray static. He stared at the screen for a long moment, listening to the hiss, hoping the HPG would reacquire the signal. When it didn't, he turned the volume down.

Actionable intelligence. Information that demanded an immediate response. *A threat to the M—*

Surely she meant to say *Magistracy*.

But what kind of threat? A pirate raid? That seemed like the most likely bet. Or maybe some of the aggression that was rippling through the Inner Sphere had spilled into the Periphery? It could even be a natural disaster, if it were big enough.

Where was this threat? Lockton? Somewhere else? How many worlds?



His screen didn't answer any of these questions—it just hissed with static. Apparently this was the Word's day off.

Doru broke the connection, found the number for the HPG in Crimson and hit the call button.

The chief Blakist communications officer picked up, a forty-ish man in white robes. His fleshy face radiated uncertainty beneath his pale cowl. "Demi-Precentor Geren, Canopus IV HPG, how may I serve you?"

"This is General Doru from the Magestrix's office," he said coldly. "You just dropped a realtime HPG transmission. Since I'm sure we paid an enormous fee to route that message, I'd appreciate it if you'd reacquire it."

"Sir, I—"

"Now, please," Doru snapped.

The Blakist's mouth opened and closed, reminding Doru of a fish pulled from the sea. He looked confused. Upset. But for just a moment, Doru thought he saw something else beneath the man's doughy face.

Something harder.

And then the precentor was babbling and the strength Doru thought he'd seen was gone. "I'm terribly sorry, sir, but your assumption is not quite correct. This isn't an isolated reacquisition problem. All incoming feed has been disrupted by an unidentified synchronization issue. Please believe me when I say we have every technical resource working to resolve the problem."

Doru picked through the slippery torrent of words until he found the few that really mattered. *All incoming feed*. He shook his head. "Are you saying that interstellar communications is down for the *entire planet*?"

"I am afraid so, sir." The precentor's voice was apologetic, almost obsequious. But again there was something else there and this time Doru didn't miss it, though he had a hard time understanding it.

Was it— He shook his head, not really believing it. Was it *triumph*?



* * *

Commander Lisa Bretton was in the zone, her senses alive and *on fire*, her mind processing everything around her, a computer sifting the world for threats.

She felt the solid oak planks beneath her stylish navy flats, felt the weight of her Hawk Eagle auto-pistol on her hip. She ignored the discomfort of the heat. It was an unseasonably warm day, hot enough that the Magestrix had taken off her jacket. But Bretton couldn't remove the navy blazer that hid her weapon—nor did she want to. Discomfort was irrelevant.

Bretton listened to the Magestrix's speech, but she ignored the words. Her mind filtered them right out. She was listening for tone: fear or distress. As long as her principal's speech was a smooth alto punctuated only by the crowd's cheers, it could be ignored.

She listened to the voices murmuring in her ear, but took care not to lose herself in them. There was value in closely following her team's reports—but there was also a danger. The value was that she might pick out a pattern not apparent to a single agent. The danger was that bug in her ear offered the false assurance that everything was fine. She could not afford the barest hint of complacency. And so she listened to the voices even as she distrusted them.

This was the way of the protective officer, every instant lived on the knife edge between risk and reward.

She paid attention to all those things, but mostly she watched the crowd, her eyes always moving, never stopping. Bretton knew people, could tell at a glance what a person was feeling. Her searchlight gaze moved from face to face to face, looking for someone who didn't belong, someone doing something strange or out of place. Someone whose emotions were out of synch with the speech.

She hadn't found anyone like that.

But she kept looking.

The Magestrix hit a good line and the crowd roared, people cheering and waving banners, their faces alight with joy.

Except . . . *there*.



Bretton's roving gaze stopped on a big, beast of a man. He was a monster, pushing two meters and *built*. Middle line-backer big. He was clapping, but he wasn't cheering. His face was blank, revealing absolutely no emotion.

That's what had drawn her back to *this* face. The Magestrix was an accomplished speaker and beloved by her people. Most of the folks in the crowd were happy or even rapturous. A few were distressed by the heat. And Bretton had seen more than one crying baby.

But only one face was blank.

No, that wasn't quite right.

The big man glanced at someone else in the crowd, a woman, lithe and pretty, brown hair and dark eyes, no emotion on that lovely face.

A chill wriggled down Bretton's spine.

The big man was wearing street clothes, a dark blue polo shirt that hugged his muscular physique and gray slacks, but the woman was wearing a long green coat. *A coat in this heat.* Suddenly Bretton was sure she was concealing a weapon.

She raised her right wrist to her lips and murmured: "Tango Red Alpha. I have two targets. Conroy and Singh, get ready to pull them out of the crowd."

* * *

Doru's next call was to his staff. "The planetary HPG is down."

"Yes sir," said the MCC watch officer, a colonel, and then he stopped, waiting for more. The colonel (*what was his name?*) was from one of the Magistracy's finest families, which wasn't the same thing as saying he was one of the Magistracy's finest officers.

"I think it would be prudent to put our forces on alert," said Doru dryly.

The man's broad face twisted into a puzzled expression. "How will that help the Blakists fix the problem?"



Doru didn't really know what the threat was. Maybe he was overreacting. But that was fine.

He was paid to overreact.

"I want the alert order issued in the next thirty seconds." Doru's voice was cold and Vanek (*that was his name, Vanek*) blanched.

"Yessir, 'course, sir." The colonel turned to snap something to someone off-screen and then turned back. "Should I issue a recall?"

Doru thought for a moment. If he'd been back in the Concordat the answer would've been obvious, but Magistracy culture stressed the importance of recreation. One did not call MAF troopers in off leave without good reason. "Draft the order," said Doru. "But it doesn't go out without my personal approval, understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"For now make sure ready forces get to their machines. Load live rounds. And notify me as soon as comms with other systems is restored."

"But not Royal Foxx," said the colonel.

"What? "

A long, harsh burst of static cut off the officer's answer and then Vanek was back. "—for a few minutes. "

Doru frowned. "You were saying something about Royal Foxx. "

"Yes sir," said Vanek eagerly. "Foxx is having their own communications problems. We were receiving a message packet from them that dropped out a minute before we dropped comms."

A sudden chill washed through Doru.

Static. He looked up at the sky, running the orbital mechanics in his head.

His gut tightened when he arrived at the only possible answer.



“Recall all forces, recall them *now*, damn it.” Aides and staffers looked over at him and Doru realized he was shouting. He didn’t care. “Turn telescopes and radar on the Cybele L1. And get our goddamn aerospace up. *NOW*.”

To his credit Vanek turned away from the camera pickup and began shouting orders. When he turned back his face was the color of chalk, his eyes wide and hunted.

“Five minutes,” snapped Doru, “I want a complete summary of force dispositions in five minutes.”

And then he cut the connection before Vanek could answer. He turned and pushed through the little crowd of advisers, meaning to find the chief of staff and tell her what was coming.

But before Doru could find her, he heard the first of the screams.

* * *

Afterwards, Bretton would remember that it all happened in slow motion. It wasn’t really true, of course, that was just a bullshit movie thing. What *really* happened was that her mind, her clever, jittery mind, saw what was going to happen four tenths of a second before it went down.

Four tenths of a second.

Enough time for the disaster to register in her mind.

But not quite enough time for her to react.

The pool holocam caught her in its pickup, off the stage and two meters to the left of the Magestrix. It caught her face, smooth and blank, displaying all the emotion of a circling shark. Then her eyes widened. That was zero. The instant she saw what was really happening. And then she managed to shout her warning.

Zero point four two second from recognition of danger to reaction. Fast.

But not fast enough.

And so, because she stood there *frozen* for four tenths of a second, her mind tricked her into thinking everything was moving very slow—when really it was moving very *fast*.



She'd been expecting a problem with the big guy, and that's who she'd been watching. That's who she'd sent Singh after, because he was the better agent. She was watching the woman out of the corner of her eye, but her attention, her *focus* was on the middle linebacker.

Her whole team was juiced up, wired for sound. She had drawn two of the boats in, close to the pier. Li had moved to the left side of the stage, his only job to knock the Magestrix down if something bad happened.

It was probably nothing. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, paranoia was just paranoia.

But that was never the way to bet.

Bretton's right hand curled into a fist, her fingers aching for the feel of gun steel. If this had been a city plaza, she would have positioned snipers on the surrounding rooftops. If this had been a stadium, she would have positioned snipers in the upper decks. If this had been the palace she would have positioned snipers in the galleries.

But this was a fucking *pier* and there was no place for snipers.

She had twenty-seven agents in and around North Pier, all of them hard-eyed, heavily armed combat veterans absolutely devoted to keeping the Magestrix safe. She commanded a formidable force.

But as she watched Rajiv Singh slip through the crowd, she was filled with bitter regret that she didn't have snipers.

Singh was a tall, rangy man in dark glasses and a dark suit. He was quiet and he was *smart*. He approached the big target from behind, his hand already on his shock-gun so he could put the linebacker down fast if he had to. He reached up (Singh was one meter 87 he had to reach *up*) and tapped the guy on the right shoulder, making him twist around to see who was behind him.

The linebacker turned around and smiled.

Holy mother.

Sunlight gleamed silver off the man's teeth. Were they—*steel?*

Linebacker roared: a deep, powerful sound that reminded Bretton of a lion.

And then everything happened at once.

The Magestrix fell silent, her speech interrupted by that terrible noise.

Linebacker smashed a giant fist into Singh that sent him sprawling into the crowd.

The *crack* of a weapon shattered the abrupt silence. Linebacker grunted as he took a gunshot in the chest.

But he didn't go down.

Bretton heard the thump of frantic footsteps as Li sprinted across the stage.

And the brutal rattle of automatic weapons fire in the distance. In her ear, the desperate cries of the agents guarding pier access as they were cut down.

And then Bretton's eyes widened as she saw the woman in the green coat place her hand against Conroy's chest. A ruby flash lit the officer for a moment and then he collapsed, his face a charred, smoking mess, the savory-sweet smell of burning flesh tainting the air.

"*THE WOMAN*," Bretton shouted.

The woman, the second target, was already turning. Her right arm was a bloody, mangled stump, the laser *inside* it (*godohmygod it's built in her*) rising toward the Magestrix.

Li hit Emma Centrella, knocking her to the ground and covering her body with his, just as a flash of ruby light sliced through the air.

Bretton didn't see it. She never took her eyes off the threat, her own weapon coming up. But she heard the pained grunt of her principal as the air went out of her lungs and knew that Li had done his job.

In some distant part of herself she hoped he hadn't paid with his life.

A chorus of screams rose all around her, civilians running, pushing, scrambling over each other, panic racing



through the crowd like wildfire running through a tinder-dry forest.

She saw the civilians bolting for their lives and didn't see it at the same time.

(*Gunfire. MORE gunfire.* She saw one of her people fall. *Welby.*)

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Singh hit Linebacker with the shock-gun, pumping fifty thousand volts into the monster, dropping him to his knees, but *son of a bitch*, not knocking him out.

Then Bretton was lost to her pistol, her arm an extension of the Eagle, eyes like laser sights, hands coming together in a two-handed grip, trigger finger *pulling*, the world filled with the the stuttering fury of her weapon and the sweet chemical smell of burnt gun powder.

She emptied her whole clip, fifteen rounds, into the woman.

She went down.

And then she got back up.

And that's when Bretton felt the first the first stirrings of despair. Conroy was dead, burned down in a moment by the horrible creature that was part woman and part weapon. The bodies of her agents were scattered across the wooden planks of the pier: Zhu, Welby, Braun, Kettelmeyer.

She glanced back and saw that the stage had been splashed with red. She felt terribly cold. *Li.*

She turned on Linebacker, her hands working to eject her Eagle's clip and slam another one home, her hands working without her thinking about it which was good because she was having a hard time thinking right now.

As she watched, the monster tore the shock-gun's barbs from his flesh, bent down, and grabbed Singh's head. There was a sharp cracking sound and her agent went horribly limp.

Bretton jerked her weapon up, squeezed off four quick rounds, all of them righteous shots, center of mass just like they taught you at the academy: *crack crack crack* and then *crack*, the last one slow because the first three had spanged off the monster's chest like he had some kind of armor *inside him*.



She dropped her weapon and just stared.

In twenty seconds the stage would be swarming with her people: agents from further down the pier, agents from the shore, agents from the boats. None of the assassins would make it off the pier alive.

But that didn't matter. Because twenty seconds was much too long. Her throat tightened painfully. Lisa Bretton had failed in her duty.

And because of it Emma Centrella would pay with her life.

* * *

When Doru heard the screams he thought: *The force major wasn't trying to say Magistracy. She was trying to say Magestrix.* He pushed through the mass of the confused aides bunched up behind the stage. One word echoed in his mind: *assassin.*

But when he heard the ugly voice of gunfire, the dialogue of bullets answering bullets, his mind conjured up an even worse word.

Coup.

Frantic, he shoved a female staffer down, shoved his side-arm in the face of a man who wouldn't get the hell out of the way. Running, *running.* He leapt the stage from behind, landed in a crouch.

He flashed on the Magestrix, laid out on the deck, a protective officer's body sprawled across hers, both of them covered with blood. Centrella was struggling to rise, no doubt animated by her stupid, stupid pride.

"*Stay down,*" Doru barked.

Most of the Magestrix's security team had been hit. But not Bretton.

As Doru watched the agent pumped four useless rounds into a giant of man with stainless steel teeth.

The monster clutched a machine pistol in his right hand. It was already rising toward Bretton. She was going to die.



And then the Magestrix.

Except Doru was faster. His hand laser was already out, humming in his hand, singing a deadly song as he pulled into his trigger.

Emerald fire sliced cleanly through the assassin's wrist sending the hand *and* its weapon clattering to the deck.

But Doru's moment of triumph lasted only a second. Because he heard the hum of a second laser. And when he looked left he saw a nightmare of a woman whose mangled right arm was itself a weapon, a weapon trained on the Magestrix who was rising obligingly to her feet, something clutched in her right hand.

* * *

Doru. Somehow the general had appeared out of nowhere, his laser cutting right through Linebacker's giant hand. This at last had brought the monster down. The killer sank to his knees, clutching his severed wrist in his massive left hand.

It was a single sparkling miracle.

But *one* miracle wasn't enough.

The woman was going to kill the Magestrix.

And suddenly Bretton was running, sprinting toward the woman who'd killed Conroy, summoning every last particle of speed to put her body between the assassin's laser and the Magestrix. Knowing it meant her life she jumped—

(She heard the sharp bark of a slug thrower.)

—then hit the woman, the two of them falling to the wooden deck. She rolled free of the killer.

Bretton was instantly on her feet, shaken and confused. *Why am I still alive?*

And then she looked down. The woman was laying on her back, staring up at the blue sky with empty eyes, a hole drilled neatly in the center of her forehead.



And then she looked up. Emma Centrella stood next to Doru on the stage, her beautiful ivory blouse pulled out of her skirt and soaked black with blood, her hair tousled, her dark eyes glittering with fury.

(*Li's weapon.*)

A slug thrower clutched in her right hand, a gray tendril of smoke rising from its barrel.

Bretton's breath caught in her throat. And then she managed to suck in a deep, shuddery breath.

She raised her wrist to her mouth. "This is Bretton. All agents to me." And then, her voice breaking with emotion: "Nighthawk is alive." She drew another deep breath. "Call down the VTOL. We're moving."

* * *

Doru heard the noisy clatter of the helo's rotors and knew the situation was spinning away from him. He stepped over to Centrella, put his hand gently on her shoulder. "Are you all right, Madam Magestrix?"

Centrella shook off his hand. "Someone slaughtered most of my protective detail," she snarled. "No, I am *not* all right."

Doru laughed, he just couldn't help himself.

"What the hell is so *damned* funny?"

He holstered his laser. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I'm just glad you're angry." Doru's voice dropped. "We're going to need your anger."

Bretton was talking into her wrist, telling her people to stay clear of the assassin's bodies and be wary of booby-traps. She stepped onto the stage. "Excuse me, ma'am, we're moving you." She pointed at the foot of the pier where a Warrior H8 in MAF colors was setting down amidst a scattering of bodies.

"Yes," said Doru, "but not on the VTOL."

Bretton turned to look at him, by turns surprised and furious. "You have no right to—"



"Shut up," Doru roared.

Bretton's face filled with blood. "My people just—"

"This isn't about your people. This is about what's really going on."

Centrella arched a dark eyebrow. "Just what *is* going on, Hadji?"

Doru drew a deep breath. "Madam Magestrix, two minutes before the attack Canopus IV lost all interstellar communications. And my staff reports that a minute before *that* Royal Foxx dropped off the net."

Her eyes widened.

"Listen, Doru," snapped Bretton, "we don't have time for this. The Magestrix is in danger and I *will*—"

"I was on a call," said Doru loudly, talking over Bretton. And then his voice softened. "A sudden burst of static cut me off."

Centrella looked at him and he looked at her.

"EMP," she whispered. "Pirate point."

"Near pirate point," agreed Doru. "We only have hours."

He turned to Bretton. "I suggest we put the Magestrix in the armored SUV—unless you'd like to put her in the air in the middle of a full-scale aerospace assault?"

The blood drained from Bretton's face. "N-no."

"Who?" asked Centrella.

Doru shook his head. "I don't know for sure," he said, "but anyone could land forces on Canopus. Only one power could shut down our comms."

"Word of Blake," she said.

"Word of Blake," Doru agreed.

"So this was—" Bretton glanced back at the carnage, at the pair of monsters lying on the wooden pier. "This was a decapitation strike?"

Doru nodded, turned to find Centrella's dark eyes with his own. "I don't know what kind of force composition we're look-



ing at." He drew a deep breath. "Magestrix, if we move now, there's time to get you off the planet."

"I agree," said Bretton quickly. "We must keep you safe, Highness."

Centrella looked from one to the other. "You *both* agree?"

They both nodded.

The Magestrix drew a deep breath and when she spoke her voice was like steel. "Well, I do *not*. I will remain here, with my people."

"But Magestrix—" gasped Bretton.

"And you—" Centrella pointed a finger at Doru, "can keep me safe by protecting this world."

Hadji Doru was a brave and resourceful officer, but he knew when he was defeated. "Yes, ma'am," he said softly.

She nodded and turned to walk down the pier, Bretton at her side, weapon out.

As Doru followed he pulled out his comm and noted that the time was 10:39. Seventeen minutes since the first sign of trouble. Seventeen minutes.

That's all it had taken for everything to change.

