

## Prologue

It was the end of the rebellion, and this day would either make or break the freedom fighters. General Tiber Maximilian Adolphus had struggled for half a decade against the corrupt government of the Constellation, taking his cause across the twenty central Crown Jewel worlds and riding a groundswell of popular support—all of which had led him to here. A last stand where the old regime was bound to collapse.

The battle over the planet Sonjeera would decide it all.

The General's teeth ached from clenching his jaws, but he stood on the bridge of his flagship, ostensibly calm, confident. He had not intended to be a rebel leader, but the role had been forced on him, and he'd never lost sight of the goal. The ancient, incestuous system had oppressed many populations. The more powerful noble families devoured the weaker ones to steal their planetary holdings. Ultimately, even those powerful families split up and tore at one another, as if it were some kind of game. It had gone on far too long.

For five years now, the General's ever-growing forces battled old-guard loyalists, winning victories and suffering defeats. Any reasonable person could see that the bloated system was rotten, crumbling, unfair to the majority. People across the Crown Jewels had only needed a man to serve as an example, someone to light the spark and unify their

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grievances. Adolphus had fallen into it by accident, but like a piece of driftwood caught in a whitewater flood, he had been swept along to his inevitable destination.

Now his forces converged over the main prize: Sonjeera, with its glorious white stone buildings, tall towers, and ancient museums—window-dressing that made the government appear to be as marvelous as the politicians claimed it was.

Diadem Michella Duchenet, the supreme ruler, would never admit defeat, clinging to her position of power with cadaverous claws. Rather than relinquish the Star Throne, the old woman would see the capital world laid to waste, without regard to the innocent citizens she claimed to represent and protect. And if the General let it come to that, he would be no better than Diadem Michella. But he didn't see any way around it.

In the battles of the rebellion so far, Adolphus had been careful to keep civilian casualties to a minimum, but he knew the Diadem would eventually force his hand. She would draw a dark line of morality in front of him and dare him to cross it. Today might be that day. . . .

“Steady ahead.” His flagship, the *Jacob*, was named after his father, one of the first casualties in the string of political and economic schemes that had provoked Adolphus into action. “Frigates and sweepers forward. Open the gunports and show them we mean business.”

“Aye, General.”

With an intense focus, he studied the screen and the planet growing larger by the minute; Sonjeera sparkled with tiny dots of ships, stations, and orbital activity. It was a sapphire laced with clouds, green continents, and city lights that sparkled across the night side. The crown jewel of all Crown Jewels.

His eyes were dark and old beyond his years, not having seen laughter in a long time. His black hair was neatly trimmed, and his square jaw had a tendency to show beard shadow, but he had shaved carefully only a few hours before. He intended to be presentable for this engagement, no matter how it turned out. History had its requirements. . . .

His deep-blue uniform was neat and impeccable, the coppery rank insignia prominent on his collar, though he sported no medals or decorations. The General refused to let his men present him with accolades until they had actually won. He had not entered this conflict for glory or wealth, but justice.

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“Tactical display, Mr. Conyer. Let me see the distribution of our ships, and project the defenses that Sonjeera has mounted.”

“Here they are, General.” The tac officer called up a display of the 463 rebel ships—a fleet that was certainly superior to what the Army of the Constellation could muster here on short notice. Destroyers, fast harriers, frigates, sweepers, large carriers, even civilian cargo ships refitted with armor and weapons.

Above the capital planet, cargo ships and short-range in-system yachts and transports scattered, seeking shelter. A meager ring of security ships kept station near the main stringline hub, the orbiting nexus of interstellar lines that connected the Crown Jewel planets. Not nearly enough. The General’s forces could—and would—overwhelm the security ships and seize the hub without much resistance.

“The Diadem has mounted no primary defenses that we can see yet, sir.”

“She will,” Adolphus said. It couldn’t be that easy.

Over the codecall link, Franck Tello, the General’s second-in-command and a close friend, broke in from the bridge of his own destroyer, cheery as usual. “Maybe that’s the old bitch’s answer. One look at our fleet, and she ran to hide in a bomb shelter. I hope she brought sanitary facilities and some extra panties.”

The men on the *Jacob*’s bridge chuckled, a release of tension, but Adolphus slowly shook his head. “She’s not stupid, Franck. Michella knew we were coming, and she’s been losing battles for years. If she was going to surrender, she would have cut a deal to save her own skin.” He didn’t like this.

As his fleet spread out and prepared to form a blockade, the surface-to-orbit traffic around Sonjeera increased dramatically. Passenger pods and shuttles rose to space, people evacuating the capital world in a disorderly rush.

“Maybe the bitch already fled,” Tello suggested.

“That doesn’t sound like her,” Adolphus said, “but I’d bet a month’s pay that she called for an immediate evacuation to cause chaos.”

An overloaded stringline hauler accelerated away from the orbiting hub, its framework crowded with passenger pods that dangled like ripe fruit. A second hauler remained docked at the hub, but it would not be loaded in time. The last-minute evacuees would be stranded there in orbit.

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“It’s like a stampede. We’d better wrap this up before it turns into an even bigger mess. Four frigates, take the stringline hub,” Adolphus ordered. “Minimal damage, no casualties if possible.”

His first ships streaked in, broadcasting a surrender order. As they approached the hub, the second stringline hauler broke away from the dock and lurched away from the station, only half loaded. Three passenger pods disengaged and dropped free, improperly secured in the rush, and the ovoid vessels tumbled in free orbit.

“Stop that hauler! No telling who’s aboard,” Adolphus said into the codecall. He dispatched one of his large, slow carriers to block the vessel.

Passenger shuttles and evacuating in-system ships flurried about, retreating to the dark side of Sonjeera in panic. Adolphus clenched his jaws even harder; the Diadem had made them terrified of what he and his supposed barbarians would do . . . when it was Michella they should have feared.

The second stringline hauler continued to accelerate away from the hub, even as the General’s slow carrier moved to cross its path before it could activate the ultrafast stringline engines.

The carrier pilot yelped over the codecall, “He’s going to ram us, General!”

“Retreat and match speed, but do not deviate from the path. If the hauler pilot insists on a crash, give him a gentle one.”

The rebel carrier refused to get out of the way even as the hauler moved forward. Adolphus admired the fortitude of the carrier’s crew; if the fleeing hauler activated the stringline engines, they would both be a vapor cloud. The hauler closed the distance and the rebel carrier blocked it, slowed it; the two ships collided in space, but the impact was minimal.

As the four rebel frigates again demanded the surrender of the stringline hub, the ten small Constellation security ships left their stations and swept forward in a coordinated move, opening fire on the General’s warships. Explosions rippled along the first frigate’s hull, drawing shouts of astonishment from the crews.

“What the hell are they doing?” Franck Tello cried over the codecall. “We’ve got hundreds more ships than they do!”

“Return fire,” Adolphus said. “Disable engines if possible . . . but do what you need to do.”

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The frigate captains launched retaliatory fire, and three security ships exploded. Two others were damaged, but the rest circled around, undeterred. Streams of explosive projectiles flew in all directions, most of them directed at Adolphus's frigates, but countless others missed their targets and acquired nearby vessels, including the evacuating in-system ships that were scrambling away from the stringline hub.

When he saw two civilian transports explode, Adolphus yelled for his fleet to close in. "No time for finesse. Eradicate those security ships!"

In a hail of return-fire, the rebels blew up the vessels before they could cause further damage. The General's jaws ached. He hated useless death. "Why wouldn't they stand down? They had no chance against us."

Lieutenant Spencer, the weapons officer, cleared his throat. "Sir, if I might suggest, we can force the issue now. Threaten to blow up the whole hub if the Diadem doesn't surrender. That would cripple the Constellation's interstellar transport—the people would never stand for it."

"But that's not what *I* stand for, Lieutenant," Adolphus said. "Hostages and terrorist acts are for cowards and bullies. The people of the Constellation need to see that I'm different." The Diadem's propaganda machine had already painted him with the broad strokes of "monster" and "anarchist." If he were to sever the lines of transportation and trade among the Crown Jewels, the people would turn against him in a matter of weeks.

"General, the stringline hub is ours," said the first frigate captain. "We have the high ground. Nobody on Sonjeera is going anywhere."

Adolphus nodded, but did not let down his guard. "Harriers, round up those loose passenger pods before they burn up in orbit."

"This is making me damned nervous, General," Franck transmitted. "How can the Diadem just sit there, with almost five hundred rebel ships lining up in orbit?"

"Here it comes, sir!" broke in the weapons officer. "Constellation battleships emerging from Sonjeera's sensor shadow."

Now Adolphus understood. "The security ships were trying to stall us. All right, how many are we facing?"

Conyer ran a scan. As they stormed forward, the Diadem's ships moved in a random flurry as if to disguise their numbers. "Three hundred

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and twelve, sir. And that's an accurate count. Probably all the ships she's got left."

Though his rebels outgunned them by a substantial margin, he was sure Diadem Michella had given her fleet strict no-surrender orders. If the General's fleet gained the upper hand, the Constellation defenders might initiate a suicide protocol . . . though he wondered if they would follow such an order. General Tiber Adolphus engendered such loyalty among his own men, but he doubted the Diadem was capable of inspiring such dedication. However, the security ships around the stringline hub had already demonstrated their willingness to die.

"They're not slowing, General!" Lieutenant Spencer said in a crisp voice.

"Message coming in from the Constellation flagship, sir," said the communications officer.

The screen filled with the image of an older gentleman wearing a Constellation uniform studded with so many ribbons, medals, and pins that it looked like gaudy armor over the uniform shirt. The man had sad gray eyes, a lean face, and neatly groomed muttonchop sideburns. Adolphus had faced this opponent in eight previous battles, winning five of them, but by only narrow margins. "Commodore Hallholme!" Even as the Diadem's last-stand defense fleet came toward them, the General forced himself to be calm and businesslike, especially with this man. "You are clearly outgunned. My people have strongholds on numerous Crown Jewel planets, and today I intend to take Sonjeera. Only the details remain."

"But history rests on the details." The old Commodore seemed dyspeptic from the choice he faced. Percival Hallholme had been a worthy foe and an honorable man, well-trained in the rules of engagement. "The Diadem has commanded me to insist upon your surrender."

The *Jacob's* bridge crew chuckled at the absurd comment, but Adolphus silenced them. "That won't be possible at this time, Commodore." This was his last chance, and he put all of his sincerity into the offer. "Please be reasonable—you know how this is going to end. If you help me secure a peaceful resolution without any further bloodshed and no damage to Sonjeera—a planet beloved by all of us—I would be willing to work out amnesty arrangements for yourself and your top-tier officers, even a suitably supervised exile for Diadem

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Michella, Lord Selik Riomini, and some of the worst offenders among the nobility.”

While the Constellation ships surged closer, Adolphus continued to stare at Hallholme’s image, silently begging the man to see reason, to flinch, to back down in the face of harsh reality.

For a fleeting instant, Adolphus thought the old Commodore would reconsider, then Hallholme said, “Unfortunately, General, the Diadem gave me no latitude for negotiation. I am required to force your surrender at all costs, using any means necessary.” He gestured to his communications officer. “Before you open fire, you should see something.”

Multiple images flooded the panel screens on the *Jacob’s* bridge: Forlorn-looking people, gaunt-faced, sunken-eyed, and plainly terrified. They were packed in metal-walled rooms that looked like spacecraft brig chambers or sealed crew quarters.

Adolphus recognized some of the faces.

Over the codecall channel, Franck Tello shouted, “That’s my sister! She’s been missing for months.”

Some of Adolphus’s bridge officers identified other captives, but there were thousands. The images flickered one after another.

“We’re holding them aboard these ships, General,” Hallholme said. “*Seventeen-thousand hostages*. Members of your own families and their close associates. If you open fire upon us, you will be killing your own.”

Adolphus’s stomach churned with revulsion as he looked at the terrified hostages, including women, children, and the elderly. “I always thought you were a man of honor, Commodore. This loathsome act is beneath you.”

“Not when the Constellation is at stake.” Hallholme looked embarrassed, even disgusted with himself, but he shook it off. “Look at them. Have all of your rebels look at them. Once again, General, I demand your surrender.”

“We’ve all faced tragedies, sir,” said Conyer, with an audible swallow. “We should have known the Diadem would stoop to such barbaric tactics.”

“We’ve got to take Sonjeera, General!” said the navigation officer.

On his own ship, the old Commodore barked an order, and on the transmitted images, the Diadem’s guards strode into the field of view,

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brandishing shock prods with sizzling electric tips. The hostages tried to fight back as the guards fell upon them with the shock prods, burning skin, shedding blood. As the hostages screamed in pain, Adolphus felt the torture as if it were inflicted upon himself.

“General, we can’t let them get away with this!” said Lieutenant Spencer.

Hallholme raised his voice to a grim command. “Guards, set shock levels to lethal.” His ships continued forward. “Surrender now, General. The blood will be on your hands.”

The two fleets closed until they were separated by only a hairsbreadth in space. All gunports were open, weapons ready to fire.

“You are an animal, Commodore.” Seventeen thousand hostages. “I will not surrender. Weapons officer, prepare—”

“And we have your mother aboard, General,” Hallholme interrupted, and her image flooded the screen. Adolphus had thought she was safe, sent away to a quiet village on Qiorfu under an assumed name. And yet she stared at him through the screen, her face bruised, hair bedraggled, sealed in a brig cell somewhere. “But which ship?”

The General froze for just an instant, a pause too short for a single breath.

For Hallholme it was enough. He barked a command, and all three-hundred Constellation warships opened fire at point-blank range.



Diadem Michella Duchenet loathed the man for what he had done to her peaceful Constellation. The twenty core worlds had been unified under a stable government for centuries, with a high standard of living and a population that didn’t complain too much. Tiber Adolphus had mucked everything up.

She tried not to take it personally, because a leader was supposed to be admirable, professional. But the Constellation was *hers*, and anyone who threatened it committed a personal affront against her.

She sat on the Star Throne like an angry death-angel looming over the court-martial proceedings. More than a hundred rebel warships had been destroyed before Adolphus finally declared his unconditional surrender. In desperation and under attack, some of his own men had

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opened fire on Hallholme's ships, but the rebel General had refused to slaughter the hostages in the heat of battle, even though it meant his defeat. Adolphus had lost thousands of men, and thousands more were prisoners of war. Now that the war was over, maybe she would have to be merciful.

The Council Hall on Sonjeera was crowded, every seat filled, and Michella had made certain that the full court-martial would be broadcast across Sonjeera, and annotated recordings would be distributed among the Crown Jewels, even out to the rugged frontier planets in the Deep Zone.

An escort of six armed guards brought Tiber Adolphus into the chamber, stripped of military rank insignia. The shackles were completely unnecessary, but the Diadem considered them an effective statement. This man had to serve as an example.

His numerous followers would also be punished; she would confiscate their holdings, put the most prominent into penal servitude, and scatter the rest to live in poverty. Adolphus was the one who mattered to her.

As he walked forward, managing to carry himself upright despite the chains, the crowd let out an angry mutter, though not nearly as loud as Michella had hoped. Somehow, the man had sparked a popular fervor across the Crown Jewels. Why, they actually viewed him as heroic! And that disturbed Michella.

The night before, while preparing for this spectacle, she had met with Lord Riomini, who came dressed in his characteristic black garments, even for a private meeting at the Diadem's palace. Selik Riomini was the most powerful of the nobles, ruler of his own planet Aeroc. He also commanded the Army of the Constellation, because his private military force comprised the bulk of the ships drawn together to fight the spreading rebellion.

"He has to be executed, of course, Selik," Michella had said, as they shared an unimaginably valuable brandy he had brought her as a gift. Riomini would likely succeed her as Diadem, and was already setting his pieces on the game board in the power plays among the nobles. Despite her age, however, Michella did not intend to retire for some time.

Riomini sipped his brandy before he answered. "That is the very

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thing you must not do, Eminence. The rebellion pointed out fundamental flaws in our government and lit a spark to tinder that's been piling up for generations. If you execute Adolphus, you make him a martyr, and this unrest will never die. Someone else will take up his cause. Punish him, but keep him alive."

"I refuse! That man committed treason, tried to bring down the Constellation—"

The Black Lord set down his glass and leaned closer to her. "Please hear me out, Eminence. If you address the grievances that formed the basis of this rebellion, the people will calm themselves and wait to see what you do."

Michella was ready to argue. "And what will I do?"

"Oh, you'll make a few cosmetic changes, establish numerous committees, look into the matter for the next several years, and the momentum will die away. Soon enough, the rebellion will be forgotten. And so will Adolphus."

Intellectually, she could see the wisdom in his words, but personally she could not put aside her anger. "I won't let him get away with it, Selik. I won't grant him a pardon."

Riomini just chuckled. "Oh, I would never suggest *that*, Eminence. I have an idea that I think you'll like . . ."

Now, the deposed Adolphus stood at attention in the center of the polished stone floor. The noble lords in attendance listened in breathless silence as the docket of his crimes was read, one item after the next after the next, for two hours. Adolphus denied none of the charges. Obviously he assumed his death sentence was pre-ordained. Michella had taken particular pleasure in informing him that his mother had been among the hostages killed during the combat operations (and she'd issued orders to make sure that was true).

When it was all finished, the audience waited. Diadem Michella rose slowly and grandly from her throne, taking time to summon the words she had crafted with such care. She even fashioned the sweet, benevolent expression that had made her a beloved maternal presence throughout the Constellation.

"Tiber Maximilian Adolphus, you have been a scourge upon our peaceful society. Every person here knows the pain and misery you've caused." She smiled like a disappointed schoolteacher. "But I am not a

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vindictive woman. Many of your former followers, after begging me for mercy, have asked me to redress the problems that you tried to solve through violence. As Diadem, that is my duty.

“As for you, Tiber Adolphus, your crimes cannot be forgiven. Although you deserve execution, I grant you a second chance in the fervent hope that you will turn your energies toward the betterment of humankind.”

She waited for the surprised buzz of conversation to rise and then subside. Finally she continued, “We therefore send you into exile on an untamed planet in the Deep Zone. Go there with as many of your followers as wish to join you. Instead of causing further destruction, I offer you a fresh start, a chance to *build* something.”

She had seen images of the planet chosen for him—a wasteland, a giant scab on the hindquarters of the Galaxy. It had once been beautiful, but a massive asteroid impact had all but destroyed it some centuries in the past. The landscape was blasted, the ecosystem in turmoil. The few surviving remnants of native flora and fauna were incompatible with human biochemistry.

As an added twist of the knife, Michella had decided to name the world *Hallholme*.

Adolphus raised his square chin and spoke. “Diadem Michella, I accept your challenge. Better to rule on the most hellish frontier planet than to serve the corrupt government on Sonjeera.”

That provoked a number of boos, oaths, and hisses. Michella continued in her studiously maternal and benevolent tone. “You have your chance, Tiber Adolphus. I shall grant you the basic supplies you need to establish yourself.” She paused, realizing she had run out of words to say. “I have spoken.”

As the armed guards whisked Adolphus away, Michella had to hide a satisfied smile. Even his followers would admit that she was benevolent. They could not fault her. And when the deposed General failed—as assuredly he would. When she sabotaged his equipment and tainted his supplies, the failure would be seen as his own, and no one would be the wiser.

On that horrific planet, Adolphus wouldn’t last three months.