

Chapter 519

The return of Tick and Tock changed everything overnight. Not because of them directly, rather the Empire high command decided to use their news shock to launch the assault they'd been rumor mongering for the last few years.

However rather than rally themselves into Collective space, their weapons were finally turned to the Federation. The entire border moved as armies that had been 'avoiding the Clans' fighting' were coincidentally on the border with the Federation.

On top of the general troops, a dozen more specialized armies in each of the three core Tiers, Tier 15, 25, and 35, pushed deeper and assaulted strategic waypoints in Federation space. Under the umbrella of their attack, smaller units split off and made targeted incursions wherever they could cause damage. Others acted at the farthest reaches of the border drawing attention afield.

Matt didn't need his Insight to see from the initial push the Empire was trying to drive a spike into the heart of the Federations supply lines that fed their frontline with the Clans. It was a good plan. One that would show instant results on the frontline as reinforcements were rerouted to the new incursion or delayed as they circled around the large spike of enemy controlled territory.

From the troop movements he gave even odds of the move being a tactical feint or a true attempt to cut the Federation's war efforts off at the knees.

Ultimately Matt suspected the end result would be the former even if they intended the latter. There was no way the Federation would allow such a vulnerable overextension to remain unassaulted in their territory. However such pushes had turned into stubborn thorns in the sides of Great Powers more than once in the long river of history.

Rarer yet were the times when such a minor breach turned into true conquest as the defenders failed to extract the thorn.

The three of them weren't left out of the new orders either and the news came with words they'd been waiting to hear since the war began from General Raven. "Go be annoying in Federation space. Just don't get caught or killed while you buy us time."

As things went they were simple orders, but it was also exactly what they excelled at.

Matt pulled up a node chart for the three of them to peruse.

Their previous orders had them adjacent to the Federation assault but far enough away that they had space to work around the Empire assault rather than with it.

He picked out what he considered the best targets and highlighted them for Liz and Aster. "We have three high priority targets but without Allie we are going to need to make a

choice as they are fairly far away from each other. The first is a military repair dock. It's Tier 35 but was far enough away from the previous fighting I doubt we will find a ton of resistance. Odds are we can jump in there and smash heads and equipment, and leave without any serious fight. We'd do a lot of damage in the short term but long term it's more an inconvenience at best. That brings me to option two, it's almost the exact opposite. Military supply depot and *the* main hub for Federation high command in this sector. They are overseeing just under a quarter of the Clans Federation frontlines from this location and are responsible for giving out detailed orders. It's going to be well defended with at least two pinnacle teams there on a permanent rotation out of the frontlines. In the absolute best case scenario, that's going to be a fight and a half given the defences they have, but if we manage to take it we can do *a lot* of damage to the Federation. Damage that won't be so easy to recover from as rebuilding a shipyard. Our third option is somewhere in between. Our focus would actually be on the civilian world as it's a Tier 30 world with a heavy specialization in military production. This one single location produces almost a quarter of one percent of the Federation's Tier 35 disposable war supplies such as talismans and combat potions. Controlling that system for even a few months can cause serious supply issues as we'd own all such outputs according to the rules on plunder. It also shouldn't be that heavily defended while being far enough away that we'd be able to hole up nicely and dig ourselves in. Where is everyone thinking?"

Matt had an opinion but didn't voice it immediately wanting to let Liz and Aster think it over.

Liz drummed her fingers on her armrest a few times before highlighting the second option. "This would cause the most damage but I'm not sure we can safely manage it. Is everyone agreed there?"

Matt wasn't quite so sure it was impossible but it wasn't the option he was angling for.

With no pushback Liz brought up option three. "I think we can probably do the most good with option three. We can cut off an important supply and that will bring them running towards us."

"That will happen regardless." Aster corrected. "In fact it's why I want to go option one. We go in, break everything, and then go start hitting secondary targets as we keep on the move. We were told to be as annoying as possible and while a thorn is annoying. Having people run around randomly is way worse."

Matt pointed a finger towards Aster silently weighing in.

When both women looked at him he added. "I can also see the slightly less important objectives and option one has several juicy ones I think we can hit at the same time including a rumored convoy of Tier 35 replacement gear we might be able to intercept. If they follow normal protocol that's enough to completely resupply three or four battlefields. Lila just did this to us in Blades and Glory if anyone needs a reminder of how effective that can be. Even if we can't capture everything, we can take the most valuable storage devices and throw them into the hold and burn the rest. I also just like the idea of being mobile."

Liz shrugged as she brought up the first option. "I don't care enough to spend the effort to change your stances so lets go with option one. Can you throw up rings of notable targets for us?"

Matt did as requested and they picked out targets they wanted to try and hit. Much of their response would boil down to quick reactions and pivots as they encountered and fought off the Federation elites. That fact meant their list would only take them so far but their goal should hopefully be fulfilled by that point. They only needed to buy the Empire troops a year to let them dig in to complete their own mission.

When they gave their orders to the Captain they didn't settle back in but split off.

Matt went to the engine room directly so he could top off the mana batteries while Liz and Aster looked over their equipment but more importantly, their backups. They had multitudes but only their next sets of armor and potions were typically ready to grab. They couldn't wait until their actual war gear was done, the temporary stuff was fine but it just couldn't compare.

He helped them before they all returned to the bridge where they settled in for what was to come.

It took them almost a month of travel to reach past the heavily defended border regions to reach the interior of Federation space. Thankfully due to the circuitous route they'd taken they hadn't had anyone tail or identify them. Despite that, they were still only cautiously optimistic that they slipped through the tethers truly undetected.

Matt felt the rising tension in the rest of the crew but no one lost their nerve this early into the mission. He understood the cocktail of fear and anticipation that being caught before their first blow landed better than most. Despite that he still tried to project an aura of calm as if this mission wasn't any more risky than their earlier actions.

As did Liz and Aster.

Liz's may have been a bit more austere and Aster's a tad more playful, but the three of them pretended they were doing nothing out of the ordinary as they floated through Federation space.

They were only hours away from their destination when one of the crew on the scanners called out. "We picked up a ping and our spoofed ID didn't seem to work as we immediately received a directed scan. Approximate location, Quadrant B SubSector Two code: 116476."

The captain didn't need to hear any more and ordered them to accelerate forward at their best Matt powered speeds.

Their ship was all engines for a reason and they were *powerful*.

It still wasn't Allie fast, but they were speedy enough that the Federation shipyard which was their primary target hadn't managed to do anything more than send themselves into a panic by the time they arrived.

Liz's message went out system wide even as the systems defenders had left the fortress world and used what ship cannons that were functional to try and mount a defence. If they'd had another few days they might have hardened the system to an annoying level, but they'd been faster.

"Any non-combatants should surrender and flee the active battlefield."

A few groups had clearly been waiting for exactly that message and took off into space the moment they could. His senses identified them as exactly the personnel they had no desire to hurt. Support staff and workers.

They weren't civilians, but they weren't fighters either. Killing them would feel like punching down which was why they didn't want to do it.

Matt floated out of their ship with Liz and Aster, almost feeling nostalgic about the moment even as he floated through a [Portal] to get closer. They'd taken over a shipyard not all that different in the last war. Their methods would be vastly quicker this time as they didn't intend to hold the location.

Enemy fire started to pepper them as the defenders identified their position change but they were still outside the cannon's effective range leaving personal spells the main threats.

Matt ignored it all and pointed with his left hand which he used to cast [Mana Beam].

A train size bar of mana screamed silently through the vacuum of space as it covered the distance between the two at the speed of a billion mana a second.

The shipyard had internal shields that helped with structural integrity and protected from small scale asteroids and incidental damage but they might as well not have been on.

Matt was *anything* but incidental.

His [Mana Beam] cut wide chunks into the space station and he started from the bottom working his way up. He almost felt like a really flamboyant chef as he dissected the space station at the joints.

Then, because he wanted to see if he could, he turned his bar of death onto one of the main pillars. It took almost a full two seconds, but he managed to slice through even the thickest section of support without moving from his position.

It was quite fun and he may have cut a few extra pieces in half just because he could, but eventually he halted the supply of mana to his spell.

The shipyard and its many vessels were ruined. So much so they could have called it there and the job would have been completed, but they intended to go much further than just a few [Mana Beam]'s.

Matt opened another [Portal] for them. Like the first they rushed through as three but closer to thirty of them came out the other side. That shocked the defenders stupid for a brief but vital instant.

Liz split into five copies of herself but they were true bodies instead of Aster's illusions. Each went off to one of the lesser defended positions and moved to clear them out. While they were there she took the time to break anything she could. Weapons, defences, equipment, and even general structural pieces that hadn't been destroyed by Matt's opening attack.

Aster went the other way. She spread her spirit space summoning her towers next to any organized resistance hammering away at them while pilfering people and equipment with very little distinction.

Most of it would get destroyed later but there was still a chance some of the equipment hadn't been purged given the short amount of time the Federation shipyard would have had. Chances were, even if they retrieved all of the previous data there wouldn't be anything to learn from it, but that was for the Empire analysts to determine, not them.

Weirder things had happened. And recently at that.

Matt on the other hand went on his own little scavenger hunt.

Not for people or information, but very particular equipment.

With their recent forays into chaotic space via Allie's Talent they'd been considering longer travels in the more dangerous regions. True to the Unsparing's nature they'd started looking at upgrades from the other Great Powers' war chests.

He wanted to grab one of the Federation's new shield generators for study if not to outright steal for the ship. The reports he'd seen made it seem like a prime candidate to overclock without instantly burning out with the kinds of mana he could throw around.

To keep his travel short Matt flew straight through walls, floors, supports, and any equipment that was intact enough to get in his way. During his jaunt he threw out [Gravitic Bolt]s at anything of value he didn't have the time or inclination to collect.

Things he did want got shoved into a storage ring set aside for exactly that. Their duchy could use the hyper sub-particle condenser to make high end rechargeable mana stones. He'd been meaning to buy a few before the war but the Federation had kept three on hand and hadn't gotten around to sabotaging them before his sweep through which saved him the trouble.

He was interrupted by two mid elite teams but he swatted them through a wall with [Telekinesis] as he finished storing the train car sized fabricators. He didn't bother chasing after them with his true prize so close but they did serve as a reminder to keep on task.

Matt stepped into a storeroom and smiled. Normally the room carrying such expensive valuables would be under heavy security with at least a few Tier 35 low level elite guards, but today it was undefended and ripe for the taking.

Except there was a rat in his meal.

Matt stepped behind the woman breaking one of the shield generators. She was clearly knowledgeable as she was targeting the refractor prisms, which were durable but prone to destructive failures if a flaw was introduced to the crystal. She was Tier 35 but she was also very clearly not a combatant from the way she clearly struggled to break into the shield generator's protective shells.

He contemplated ending her life but refrained. The Federation wasn't known for their heroic last stands. Chances were she'd drawn the metaphorical short stick and expected to die on this mission.

Matt grabbed her head from behind and squeezed the tiniest amount before fluctuating. "Surrender please."

The woman spoke as she frantically gestured at the generators but he ignored her shouts until she accepted her situation and gave up. When he received the confirmation he dropped her. She never touched the ground as he picked her up with [Telekinesis] and sent her out of the battlefield.

His good deed done, he proceeded to loot the place.

After some contemplating he even cut out the repair faculties deeper in the lab shoving them into a ring. They'd already been sabotaged, but clearly not by the woman he'd found. She'd have done the job right. Someone had simply punched a hole through the controller circuitry and called it good, clearly hoping to recover the units after he left.

It was an annoying repair but not a particularly difficult one.

Matt agreed with that assessment which was why he'd decided to take them.

Even if they didn't end up using any of it they could sell everything once it had been cleared and vetted by the Empire to make a tidy profit.

Matt felt an impulse to check the Ascender Net and see if Lila had messaged him already but he didn't tempt fate by doing so. Instead he started on the smashing part of the raid.

He used opposite facing layers of [Cosmic Pressure] to shred anything non reinforced around him like a particularly angry blender, but [Crescent Sweep] caused the most damage. His sword circled around him in random patterns as he caught and tossed the blade every few times it whipped passed him.

He even took the time to burn out their mana arrays in the central spire with lightning in a way he knew from personal experience would look *really* easy to fix, but in reality required a full replacement to prevent random but debilitating short circuits.

They were there for less than half an hour but during that time they thoroughly ruined both the shipyard and the ships inside.

One [Portal] later they were next to their ships and ready to go.

While the system had been isolated after they showed up, they had picked up enough chatter they knew they were on a countdown.

A net was being thrown. Soon it would tighten but that gave them time to maneuver in. And even when the net tightened the net needed to be strong enough to contain them. By that same metric the longer they took the more time the Federation would have to gather enough pinnacle elites to counter them.

That was the Ascender's game.

One they *had* to play.

Matt wasn't looking forward to what he knew would come but Liz was thoroughly enjoying their current freedom. "Onto the next location! If we move fast enough we can hit three or four before they get enough of a response to engage with us!"

Janet sat back down in her chair with a deep and emotion filled sigh as she finally let herself laugh. She enjoyed the sound even as it bounced back and around her office. She went as far as to wiggle in her seat before popping back to her feet with a grin.

In two small strides she walked over to a corner hutch that had been repurposed at some point in its long life for liquor. The furniture was so old at this point there were a dozen stories about the exact how, but Janet had come to her own conclusion only a decade into the post.

The job itself drove people to their vices.

Someone early had been a drinker and that was about it.

While things may have started that way, the corner hutch had long turned into a relic of the office less replaceable than the Tier 50 who sat in the seat.

Other presidents had jokingly said as much and she didn't think they were wrong.

Nowadays the hutch served as a place of triumph and despair all in one.

According to traditions stronger than any law, the acting President should only open it on days of great joy or sorrow.

She'd only indulged in it exactly once so far.

The day of her inauguration she'd taken her first drink as Dicomaty took his last.

As she opened the hutch today she took in a deep breath saving every flavor. The wood had a natural scent close to sandalwood though with a slightly nuttier aroma she found delightful.

With a quick flip she took one of the glass cups and placed it on the spot that represented great joy.

She shut the hutch and left it closed for a moment even as she remembered her confusion at seeing Dicomaty go for a positive glass of liquor before his own ascension. The her of yesteryear had thought he'd reach for a glass filled with liquid sorrow but she understood better now.

If she was lucky she'd never have to taste what the hutch spat out for the gloomier occasions. Dicomaty had said he'd taken a drink from that side exactly once, and it had been more than enough motivation to never have to do so again.

Janet wasn't so cocky as to believe she could rule for thirty thousand years without flaws, faults, or mistakes but today was not that day. It could have been, it was a hair away from that outcome, but it *hadn't*. There had been a dozen places where things could have gone vastly different with just a little less luck, but she was content with the results.

She sniffed at the glass and took a sip wondering if the drink could match the sweet concoction she still remembered from her inauguration.

It was smokey and dark with a flavor that came onto her fast but without being overwhelming. Then as she swallowed the flavor changed as she started to pick up on some of the spices used.

Janet licked her lips, savoring the sip without breathing out and expelling any of the flavor.

It was fantastic and even better than her first drink. A small part of her feared she'd never top this moment, and therefore never get a better drink from the hutch. Instead of pushing it down she let the fear settle in as a small challenge to herself.

If she managed it, good for her. If not, she'd still succeeded today. No failures or successes of tomorrow could change that.

She spent a full hour savoring that single glass before she carefully cleaned and returned the sturdy vessel to its spot where she forced herself back to work.

Even after her break she found it hard to concentrate on the backlog of information from before Tick and Tock's return. A part of her still could hardly believe that she wasn't dreaming.

Instead of fighting it, Janet shifted her workload to the more recent pieces of bureaucracy that made it across her desk. Ones involving her returned Gladiators. Enjoyable ones for a change.

A Great Power wide celebration was approved without much more than a few cuts to the proposed budget where she felt the planners had gone overboard. Three days was more than enough of a state mandated break. Any more than that would be unnecessarily painful this early in the war. After the war, should the duo want one, they could set aside a whole month but right now they had more important things to deal with.

Thankfully the lower rungs of government had already found and allocated a proper Gladiator sized budget which only required a glance from her. It wouldn't be easy but when Maya left the war Tiers they'd get more than half of it back.

Janet took a moment to make a note to herself for later. She needed to use this momentum to make the Gladiator Trials shake off some of their dust. She didn't expect them to produce a Gladiator on command nor did she particularly want another one right now, but they hadn't seen that many notables in the last few thousands of years either.

A feat *none* of the Gladiator Trial equivalents in the other Great Powers had failed to deliver on. All of them had shown some promising candidates even if only due to the Tier 0 skills and aura Concepts, where theirs had simply trudged on with nary a blip.

They needed a kick in the pants and possibly a reorganization.

They had more than enough lessons learned from their study of the Empire's Path that they could learn from if nothing else. Besides the throwing in of children to the meat grinder wholesale. She refused to follow *that* path like Winter Hornet.

As much as she hated to admit it, she recognized that she owed Emmanuel. Whether intentionally or not, he'd helped the Republic shift sentiment without her and Aoife's formal alliance being uncovered.

While on a personal level she doubted she'd ever like or agree with the man, she'd been forced to take a new look at her fellow Tier 50. *Again*. She didn't like that it wasn't the first time she'd needed to do so but it was.

That didn't make the Empire an ally, let alone a friend, but she acknowledged that this iteration was at least *trying* to do the right thing for the masses.

If nothing else she intended to reach out after the war and see if they could lessen hostilities between Great Powers. Maybe they could establish a small trade treaty or the like. Nothing binding, just enough to soothe the existing tensions.

After a lot of digging, dedicated analysis, and a lot of spirit searching she'd come to accept that at least half the reasons for the decline in relation between their Great Powers post coup was exactly the Empire's reforms. Despite the formerly despotic Great Power falling more in line with the Republic on important issues such as mortal protections, they attempted to solve the goals in vastly different ways.

Instead of giving mortals their own worlds the Empire had integrated them into general society. While not a bad thing, it held up a mirror to the Republic and their own long standing

beliefs. Many of the Empire's actions did so in small and large ways, and Janet could see the Republic, herself included, hadn't reacted well.

She knew what it meant, every Tier 50 was keenly aware of the signs, but she knew better than most that change was always hard. It was even harder when it came to changing Immortals in positions who were all too willing to stagnate.

Thankfully she didn't think she'd need a coup and radical reforms to fix some of the Republic's flaws. There was already enough flux for her to tap into it and use some of it for her own goals.

They were in the middle of a low Tier boom and lasting change was easiest to start at the bottom.

Following that line of thought and the individual mainly responsible, she quickly brought up some stats about what Emmanuel had said about the aura escape talismans. After seeing the numbers she took a minute to think. She hadn't known things had gotten quite so bad and had to consider her response.

Intentional copyright theft was hardly new across Great Power borders, given the normal difficulty of enforcing actual repercussions. She understood that and how it might desensitize people to the danger, but doing so to a Gladiator was stupid on so many levels she couldn't quite believe that her people had been the worst offenders across the Great Powers.

While many Empire inventions' theft could be 'justified' as being made by morally corrupt individuals for nefarious purposes such as the former Bottled Concepts, Gladiator Titan did not fall into that category. Between the aura potions and Tier 0 skills being spread freely with zero subterfuge or obfuscation, Titan's Torch was one of the few independent organizations that had near universal respect.

Its owner may have a little less so given his own status, but Gladiator Titan was as close to a paragon of mortals as anyone realistically could become. Stealing one of the few high Tier items he sold for profit was a slap in the face.

Janet hardly wished for a defection from one of the other Great Powers, but if she could choose she'd take Gladiator Titan over Gladiator Shadow ten times out of ten. Their methods and philosophies were different, but she thought they shared a lot of the same goals in regard to mortals and society at large.

She couldn't help but wonder what other things might be caused by the man even as she wished to have him in her faction.

She pushed those thoughts away as she looked through more recent information. There she saw the information about The Senses Cabal and the Republic's efforts to turn the group to their benefit. So far the group had steadfastly refused to accept such help which was something she could respect. It was the only thing she could find to praise that regressive group but she was still in a good mood.

So much so that she sent an order to cease the previous efforts. Even if they did succeed she wanted nothing to do with helping target Ascender Titan solely because he was shaking things up in a foreign Great Power.

Janet had long since carved away at her own morals under the brutal reality that was leadership until only a small core remained, but they still existed.

With that in mind she quickly drafted an informal reminder that stealing from someone cutting their way through armies might be bad for people's long term survival plans. She was willing to get more forceful, but she refrained for the moment.

She'd just gotten a second Tier 35 Gladiator and she couldn't be seen as acting in another Great Power's defence too soon. It would give her detractors ammunition later down the line even if none of them would have done anything different in her shoes.

And it wasn't like Titan needed the money. She understood it was the principle of the theft that bothered Emmanuel more than the money itself which was a stance she could empathize with. Doing the right thing and still having people steal from one's plate was detestable.

Titan's Torch had an inadvertent stranglehold on the Tier 10 and higher aura rift market. They could have quadrupled prices and people would have found ways to pay if they'd cared about money. It was about the principle of the matter and her message made that, and her stance clear.

Janet was idly wondering if she could use this incident to her advantage, when a wispy dwarven woman knocked on her door.

She was invisible to everyone else but that was due to the Dandelion Wish that let her consciousness travel without her cultivation base. The Natural Treasure was one of the few replenishable ones in settled space but the new shoots took centuries to form and each was only good for five or six uses.

Janet didn't mind having to give the dwarf another one so soon, but it was another added expense she didn't want to deal with right now.

Aoife must have noticed something about her because the moment she sat down she raised a hand in an empty toast.

"Quite the coup you pulled out."

Janet smiled right back. "Don't be shy. I'd say that was a 'we pulled it off'. This is a boon for both of *us*."

"Is the new addition of Legends, ones nearly killed by me and mine, going to be a problem between *us*?"

Janet had known this was coming and shook her head forcefully. "Absolutely not. Tick and Tock are important but more importantly they are smart. They might hold a grudge but I doubt it will be a problem. I'm actually quite hopeful about their reintegration and I believe that once they've created new roots they will only hate you all to your bones. They probably won't melt them down or anything excessive."

Aoife sighed. "That's probably the best I can ask for. I can't say I'd be any happier or more understanding if I was them. If you or they want Yannkin's Cradle back for some reason I can make sure it gets passed to Virgil so you can buy it off of her."

Janet shook her head. She'd already asked and the duo wanted nothing to do with the hollowed out husk of a world.

"We'll pass. Did your investigation find anything?"

Aoife sighed and moved to the table but her arm moved through it. "No, but Emmanuel did say something I believe might be the cause."

Janet raised an eyebrow but the response was only one word.

"Wun."

"You're kidding me." Janet found that word and its implications hard to swallow.

Aoife sighed even as she nodded. "He *has* been working on large scale balance shifts. A self induced golden age even if on a smaller scale. Get enough things to go right and all of that. The odds were so astronomically slim for things to work out the way they were, he's my people's best guess too."

Janet threw out the other possibly she'd been considering. "You don't think Emmanuel used Georgios' Talent to do this?"

Aoife looked pained as she replied. "Future sight is powerful but not that powerful. I already looked into as many things as feasible. As far as we can tell, there weren't any more outside hands than usual. The closest I could find was the Barrett clan's fall being related to the Empire helping the O'Neil clan rise back up. As much as I hate to admit it, I knew they were searching for outside help and got it from the Empire well before the Empire moved. My people had even already checked the Dwarves out to ensure the help was purely financial and not a replacement job. Everything after that was all Milton's doing as he tried to run away from the frontlines. I *personally* looked, and three of his transfer requests nearly got approved. It was, quite literally in one case, a dice roll. If Emmanuel can not only see something as unlikely as Tick and Tock's return, but bring something so absurdly, infinitesimally unlikely to pass with so few tells? If he can do that we might as well ascend now and save ourselves the trouble. I just can't see how he managed that. As much as I hate to admit he's right, after our alliance I do think it's more likely Wun's luck stuck to the biggest thing it could as he was trying to make things better. That just happens to help you instead of any of the dozen things I wanted him to improve."

Janet didn't miss how the other woman turned the *possibility* of Wun's workings into a certainty but she didn't refute her claims. Her ally feeling responsible meant their bonds grew deeper. And as uncertainty in the Realm grew with each passing year, that was vital to ensure the Republic made it through with the fewest damages.

Both of them had felt the growing tension and uncertainty after their return from deep chaotic space and the revelations they'd returned to find. The Realm was in a time of upheaval and it was their responsibility to ensure their Great Powers didn't just muddle through, but came out ahead.

Janet turned and smiled at Aoife as she gently shifted the conversation to their plans for *after* the war. She didn't want to let the conversation turn sour by lingering on her newly returned Gladiators any more than she had to.

The thought, a dozen times inspected, still sent a thrill through her but she did her best to keep the expression off her face lest Aoife *assume* anything.