

Chapter 515

Diana was mid report when the anomaly showed itself.

It *almost* looked like a glitch. Her first instinct was to write it off as such, but deeper training that hadn't been relevant since her very first war kicked her into autopilot.

Her right hand clenched into a fist as she slammed it through one of the few physical buttons in her office. The instant she did, her door snapped shut, locking itself thoroughly with several audible thunks. A second later, it was followed by the rest of the floor being pulled into lockdown with her as protocols tripped.

Every one of her screens froze. Knowing her and everyone else's connection to the outside world was cut off was actually a relief, but not one she got to savor.

Less than an instant later, a short man she couldn't properly sense stepped through the locked and barred door as if it didn't exist. He didn't phase through it or bypass it, it was as if the door couldn't bar his entry despite it cutting off all of Diana's senses.

As he stepped inside, his eyes fell onto her with a silent question, but she'd already prepared the information and sent it over with a flick.

She vaguely recognized seeing the man in front of her. It had always been from a distance at ceremonies with the highest echelons of military and civilian leadership, but none of that told her who he was.

Not that it really mattered.

He was the first person to respond, and from the darting of his eyes, he had been able to access the file she'd sent with the best Republic encryption she had access to. He may not have introduced himself, but she still knew what she needed to do.

"Reports from Yannkin's Cradle were normal until all of a sudden, they became identical to earlier reports. Matching reports currently amount to seven independent sources and three automated backups accounting for one hundred percent of information sources. All outside information is progressing as usual. Odds of a malfunction on the receiving end are negligible. Probable causes are covert high-Tier interference seeking to mask their presence... or a time anomaly. Estimated duration of twenty-eight minutes and eleven seconds."

At that last bit of information, the man nodded and stepped back outside the room.

Diana was left in a world of frozen screens for an agonizingly long few minutes before the man silently reentered again with his same trick.

"The rest of your cases have been shifted. Now your only assignment is watching Yannkin's Cradle."

As the feeds came back online, she instinctively processed the backlog of information. She highlighted any and all differences between reports, trying to stay analytical and neutral. Hope, and every other emotion obscured and obfuscated information, they didn't change it. That didn't stop her fluttering heart from hoping.

High-Tier interference with battlefields was exciting. Interesting. Rare enough to be noteworthy, common enough to still be somewhat routine. But *time anomalies*? Ones potent enough to be picked up from a remote monitoring position? Those hadn't been properly relevant since she'd first joined the war, since the Gladiators Tick and Tock had been killed... in Yannkin's Cradle.

The saying that 'Gladiators were never dead, only missing' was a both crushing weight and comforting refrain. One she was wholly unable to suppress as more and more information came in.

The very idea was too tempting for her. She *wanted* to believe. And that was dangerous, which kept her on edge and scared that one of her mistakes would be the failure point that returned them to their coffins.

Before the half hour mark that might have restarted the cycle, new information came in that wiped out most of her remaining doubts.

High Tier observers had identified a strange membrane, which had appeared cloaking Yannkin's Cradle. It prevented easy entry into the world's real space, which all but confirmed it for Diana.

When she shared that news, the man behind her vanished as if he'd teleported away. Or that's what she would have thought, except there were no spatial fluctuations at all. Not that teleporting inside one of the Republic's most secure information sites should have been possible at all, but today had suddenly become a *lot* more interesting, and she didn't question it.

At the twenty eight minute eleven seconds mark, the reported information restarted once again sending a thrill through Diana.

Janet's pen moved in sharp and speedy gestures as she added critiques to the bill in front of her. It was one she'd never accept, but one she saw at least once a decade from groups who wanted to restrict the amount of active cultivators being awakened every year.

The senators framed it as a positive to ensure resources were allocated to the most likely to succeed, but it was a crock of shit and they both knew it. Nowhere in the bill did they move to lower costs except where they lowered the amount of government sponsored awakenings.

According to them, less new cultivators would allow their overtaxed human resources such as crafters a moment to breathe. They had similar arguments for almost every facet of a cultivator's life from weapons to boarding. What was equally clear was that they wanted to

pocket the freed up resources while conveniently ignoring the fact that with fewer people paying into those systems would see to their inevitable collapse.

Janet wished she could say it was a new argument, but it was one she knew she'd been hearing until she escaped this prison and finally ascended.

The only proposition she was more tired of hearing was the duo that always seemed to come at the same time. Motions to increase the number of veil worlds and motions to mandate awakenings. The latter requests had become slightly rarer with the advent of Tier 0 skills, but the former's frequency had increased by an equal amount, making it a wash in total work.

Those days made her wish she'd turned her pocket space into a prison so she had a place to throw idiots where she wouldn't have to deal with them.

It was a nice thought at least.

One that gave her the strength to make it through the last pages of the bill and dump it into the storage ring filled with similar proposals.

She still needed to go through the economic data today to prepare for when the war reached its middle stage, where the pinch would be felt. Each place her people identified and she fortified was one less problem they'd need to overcome after the war.

Her mind was already on her next tasks as she finished up the last bill, when her door opened and Hermand walked through.

She didn't bother to lower her perception to Tier 35 levels as would have been polite. Instead, she raised it to her maximum as she scanned the information packet he'd sent her the moment his foot had been through the door.

Janet was midway through the first report before the severity of the information dawned upon her.

Reaching out, she tore her way into chaotic space, already sprinting towards Yannkin's Cradle, not bothering with the Between. It couldn't handle the speed she needed to move at, which would have made its use a net loss.

She felt the other Tier 50s notice her movement and mirror her to investigate, but she didn't let that slow her down. Instead, she used it as motivation to move faster, knowing that every moment mattered.

Aofie was the closest, as befit her role as the defender, and she was also one of the two that Janet was most worried about.

While her personal and professional relations with the dwarf were cordial enough, no amount of feelings or sentiment would stop the other Tier 50 from strangling a threat in the cradle. At least if she thought she could get away with it.

In that same vein was Virgil, except worse. Janet did not have the same positive relationship with the woman. It had never been positive, and after the war with the Empire, their relations had deteriorated further as Virgil slipped even deeper into depravity.

Janet was confident Virgil would sabotage the moment if she could, even if it caused backlash.

Realizing where that line of logic led, Janet sent out high priority alerts to her Tier 48's, Khristian and Sly, commanding them to rush at the Federation and Clan borders respectively. She didn't want them to enter or break any treaties, but she hoped their own moving presences would cause the other Tier 50s to hesitate.

All she needed was to arrive first.

Through it all, Janet kept most of her attention on the only cultivator she truly feared at this moment.

Emmanuel. He out of all of them had the possibility of arriving before her via Gladiator Shadow's stolen Talent.

It was one thing to deliberately kill another Tier 50's Gladiator, but investigating an anomaly and that just so happening to prevent her wayward Gladiator returning home couldn't be called killing.

Which meant if any of them arrived before her, Tick and Tock might just stay dead.

After all, it had been over a hundred thousand years. If they did manage to buck the odds, they'd have crushed the record for longest time between presumed death and resurrection. Who could say that it had been the investigation that spelled their doom and not simple fate.

Whatever it may be, she wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth or risk someone else harming it by doing the same. She desperately needed a new Gladiator as Maya had both feet out the door.

Janet felt the wave, though she couldn't identify what it was or which of her myriad of senses noticed it, but that didn't make it any less real or accurate. Emmanuel had tried to forcefully divine her future, and that knowledge made her brace for the worst case scenario.

She was prepared to activate contingencies she'd hoped to save for a battle when he started to move. Thankfully, his presence didn't instantly relocate somewhere else, it moved through chaotic space like everyone else.

Her stress levels finally started to return to normal when she felt that. With that worry off the table, she used the remaining few moments of her travel to compose herself. She was simply thankful the Emperor wasn't willing to reveal any of the waypoints Gladiator Shadow had littered through their lands.

Everyone knew the teleporter had spread her net far and wide, reaching into the other Great Powers, but that was exactly why they'd bought her out at Tier 25 instead of Tier 35. When used at the right moment, such movement potential was far, far too powerful. Knowing when to use such powers was half of the game, and his lack made it clear Emmanuel didn't know the significance of her sudden rush.

When Janet arrived at Yannkin's Cradle she probed the node, excruciatingly careful not to penetrate the oil like film that had grown to encase the world. While she couldn't see much, she could see enough. There was undeniably someone playing with time on a massive scale. A scale that encased the entire star system. A scale that she'd never thought possible.

There had only ever been two time mages of such power and renown who'd been capable of such a feat before their deaths.

Or their *not* deaths.

The thought almost made Janet giddy.

Upon a first inspection, the world in question seemed almost normal through the miasma, with the war proceeding nearly identical to the previous reports. Though, there were minor and growing deviations as she watched. However, at the depths of what she dared sense she thought she saw the truth of the matter. Or something close to it, though she couldn't comprehend what was actually going on.

Yannkin's Cradle and everything inside of it was frozen in the first moment of the time loop. The unnatural silence of the temporally frozen world sent a shiver down her spine, but not for herself. As a Tier 50, she had a connection to the Realm itself, and that couldn't be so easily isolated. That was how she was sensing the anomaly in the first place, but she had enough empathy for the civilians caught up in the situation to know she didn't ever want to be in such a position.

Much of her remaining joy vanished as Aoife arrived. Not because of the Dwarven woman, rather that a moment later Virgil followed suit. Both women were wearing dour expressions, but neither said anything as they made their own scans.

They weren't nearly as gentle as she'd been, but neither did they try to puncture the film.

A click of a tongue made all three of them flinch as Winter Hornet appeared in a soft burst of ice as he tapped his awl into his off hand. Each tap made the hornet's stinger gleam with unseen menace that was perfectly matched by the smile on the bearded face.

"Pity. I'd hoped someone wanted to punch down and strangle them."

Janet felt the others scan Winter Hornet as she did the same. To her shock and dawning horror, she realized this wasn't some clone or projection when the presence she'd been tracking as it moved through Sect's territory faded like a particularly fluffy snowbank showcasing its hollow nature.

A few moments later, her connection to the Realm started to pick up on the man's presence next to them.

It seemed that while she hadn't been willing to reveal one of her trump cards, he had been. She was suddenly very grateful for the gift she'd given him. For as insane as the man was, he was consistent to a fault, and today she loved that. She probably wouldn't tomorrow, but that didn't matter in the moment, even as she knew she'd need to account for the man being able to temporarily bypass their Tier 50 senses.

That was problematic to say the least.

That he'd revealed it for the *hope* of having a justified reason to kill another Tier 50 would keep her up at night the next time she considered sleeping, but such was the way the Realm worked.

Today's allies could be tomorrow's enemies.

Aoife wasn't nearly so sanguine about the reveal before Virgil could. "Are you a Republic watchdog now, Hornet? Jumping at Janet's beck and call? How... pathetic."

Allister spoke as he and Emmanuel arrived right before Tobias and JR completed their octet.

"I think you can blame me for his stunt, but I can't say I'm sorry."

The metal balls that spun around Allister's head widened their path in an unmistakable act of aggression aimed at the Sect's leader.

"I caught *someone* using that technique a few months ago and he knew I was going to shop the information around. I said I'd give you that fight you wanted Hornet, so why are you running so much?"

Winter Hornet grinned as he wagged his awl once more. "It is as I told you, I am refining my technique. And as I am presently having *quite* the moment of inspiration, making tremendous progress with my understanding, I am disinclined to interrupt with a mere spar... but if the opportunity arose for a *true* battle, I would hardly decline such a matter."

Janet was more than happy to let the pissing match continue, but Emmanuel interrupted it by stepping forward and inspecting the world node.

Janet matched his movements as did everyone else. Though their individual intentions were unknown and she was prepared to fight all of them should any of them make a hostile move.

Emmanuel made a production of putting his hands behind his back as he leaned forward, his eyes glowing golden. Seeing that, Janet lowered most of her guard against him as everyone else fell back as the moment passed.

Just as Virgil was about to speak, Emmanuel did so, dropping Janet's heart into her shoes. "Do you want the good news or the bad news?"

"Don't toy with me. What did you see?"

The side eye her fellow Tier 50 gave her spoke volumes, but she didn't care to psychoanalyze him in the moment. All of her worry was on the anomaly.

Was she wrong? Was this not her Gladiator's moment of return?

"This is, as I'm sure everyone suspects, Tick and Tock's work. However, they are... how best to phrase this. *Attempting* to cheat death. They have not succeeded yet. They are not present for much of the time loop they have created, only appearing in the final moments of the loop and of their lives. I don't know why they're only appearing then, but I suspect it's not intentional, nor do I know what or even if they have a goal in mind. Time is so muddled it's hard to make much out of if I'm being honest."

Janet's mind raced as she tried to figure out how to salvage the situation, even as all the others relaxed at the news.

That was exactly what they wanted to hear.

"What can I do?" Janet hated the words even as they came out of her mouth, but she forced herself to ask them. Her pride and personal feelings were small costs to save a Gladiator's life.

Emmanuel, the smug bastard, *shrugged*. "I have no reason to betray my ally and help an uninvolved third party recover an asset that might be used against me in a future war."

Aoife finally couldn't hold her silence any longer and spat out, "Oh you remember your obligations *now* of all times? How *convenient*."

"If that's permission to tell her I—"

Aoife's glower could have melted steel as she growled, "*No I do not*."

The final word caused a ripple to pass through chaotic space as the extra emphasis resonated a little too well.

All of them, even Virgil, blocked the wave from affecting the Clans reinforcements that had been rushing towards the world formerly known as Yannkin's Cradle ready to reinforce their beleaguered defenders.

Janet shot them a glare knowing that if they tried to enter the world they'd ruin any chance she had of saving her people.

Instead of crushing them out of existence, she sent Aoife a private message asking her to keep her people away.

Janet could recognize she was extraordinarily touchy about Yannkin's Cradle at the moment, and didn't want to ruin their larger plans.

The dwarf took a moment to visibly collect herself before she spoke in a calm and neutral tone Janet didn't like hearing. "I don't see how this has anything to do with any of us. It's a war action resulting in the possible resurgence of a Legend. None of us should interfere."

The words combined with Emmanuel's hints sent a cold wave down Janet's spine as she prepared to fight. Was Aoife changing sides over one Gladiator? That seemed... unlikely but she didn't discount it. She knew none of her peers would be happy about today's events, that was hardly a surprise, but she hadn't expected it.

However her assistance came from an unexpected source.

Virgil took a step closer to her. "You can join the war on my side and I'll immediately transfer the occupation of Victory's Fall to you. From the earlier reports, we nearly had control of it. Without outside interference it is rightly under Federation control, and as such, mine to do with as I will."

Janet was tempted and didn't bother to hide it.

Aoife immediately picked up on that and transferred her glower to Virgil, though Emmanuel caught his fair share. "We already settled on who was fighting who. I'd put forth that any such late entry over five years into the war would constitute a breach of terms by the Federation and Republic. Besides, I never said I would interfere. I simply meant we as Tier 50s have no need to be involved at all. Let the children do as they will. That's part of the point of this war after all."

Emmanuel looked up with a slight glare to them all. "Yes, because waiting for my Ascenders to reach Tier 35 before immediately declaring the war so you can hope to kill them is letting everyone do as they wish. Call that what you will but this could be constructed as punching down. That might break the point of the war. Unintended or not, they are Tier 35's and that's now a Tier 15 battlefield."

JR waved a wing at the world as he picked up the thread Janet hadn't wanted to face yet. "Emmanuel has a point, they *are* Tier 35 and actively interfering with a Tier 15 battle. Even if we all know they won't be killed for such an offence, we could ban them from this war. There is precedence for non intentional interference being handled in such a way."

Janet was about to launch into an argument about how the duo weren't in this war yet and were still legally a part of their last war where Yannkin's Cradle was still called that. She'd use that fact to reclassify it as a Tier 35 battlefield, when Emmanuel did it for her.

"And let them escape this war when you all conspired to strike at *my* Ascenders? No, I'm a proponent of equal treatment. I won't push for punishment so long as they rejoin this war as soon as they are healed and mentally stable. If I'm risking my best assets at their weakest moment, I want Ascenders Tick and Tock to be in equal danger. The timing of their return put

them right at the beginning of the war and it's perfect for them to officially rejoin. Even if they are seriously injured. Besides, they have more than enough time to heal and return before we've finished. The realm is a more dangerous place than it was a hundred thousand years ago and as such I'd prefer them not to have time to readjust in safety."

Janet wanted to say he was wrong but he wasn't. They were still Gladiators and would be able to handle themselves, at least once they'd healed, but they'd be weaker than their peers. Closer to strong pinnacle elites than true Ascenders. Much of that difference could be covered by *equipment*, but it would still take time - such very risky time - for them to grow accustomed to the last hundred thousand years of advancements and refinements.

Having been part of the spearhead to ensure the timing had worked out the way it had, Janet was suddenly a lot less happy to be on the same side of the equation as Emmanuel. It was never likely, but statistically that initial foray into Tier 35 was one of the only periods where Gladiators ended up 'going missing' or getting injured in some way that permanently removed them from the battlefields with any shape of regularity. Before the war most of the Tier 50s had been more than willing to delay around that opportunity and now she was in the same place.

Though as she thought about it further she realized she was actually in a better spot. She still had Maya who was in the active Tiers.

Even as her mood turned around she didn't let that show keeping her expression matching the others. Emmanuel's conclusion made far too much sense and from the gaze of the other Tier 50's they'd agreed with him.

Whether he intended to or not, Emmanuel had shifted the tone of the meeting from punishing the returning duo to getting them back onto the battlefield as fast as possible.

Aoife at least was smart enough to use the pretence Emmanuel had given them and said. "In that case I'll even authorize the usage of Maya inside our borders. So long as she doesn't try to interfere with anything else in the war. As for the Tier 15's, I doubt either myself or Virgil is particularly bothered if they are lost in Tick and Tock's return. It's a population war after all and they have to go. I see no need to make a fuss about the *how*."

Janet heard and accepted the unspoken 'and you'll pay me for the privilege' tacked on at the end

Virgil must have as well, because she tossed her hat into the ring as if she'd been waiting for it. "As do I."

The woman even had the gall to nod at Janet as if they'd collaborated on the deal to force Aoife into this position.

Gritting her teeth, Janet accepted this as part of the price to get her Gladiators back.

That commitment was put to the test as Emmanuel added his own agreement, but Janet held her tongue. He had helped enough that it was foolish to argue instead of just paying his pound of flesh. She could already see JR, Tobias, Winter Hornet, and Allister all scheming on

how to get into her vaults as well, but she'd be flayed before she let them do so without having helped her at all.

They couldn't let her win without cutting her down but she understood.

No matter the monetary costs, so long as this succeeded it would all be worth it. Especially if they could immediately rejoin the war effort and escape any potential punishment when doing so.

It was as close to Janet's best case scenario as possible and would be a coup for her presidency.

Maya had many faults, but her competency wasn't one of them. Janet was incredibly grateful she'd continued to pay the increasingly ridiculous costs to keep the woman's services in the war Tiers. She'd caught a lot of flack about the ballooning Gladiator budget, but this was why such moves were always the smart ones.

Janet didn't hesitate and sent the message even as she felt Aoife doing the same. However, the dwarf's message didn't need to go nearly as far as hers did, with it ordering the reinforcements to keep away from the world node as she'd asked earlier.

It immediately became obvious that none of them were going to miss the show as they each separated slightly as they waited for Gladiator Maya to arrive.

They had a unique show at their finger tips, and that was nearly impossible for beings of their caliber, so none of them would miss it. All eight of them watched as time progressed out of synch for one world in the Realm.

Janet couldn't claim to fully understand what was going on, but by watching she understood enough to comprehend some of it. Time was progressing, but from her count less than an actual second had passed since the loop must have initialized. Then half an hour after that all important second played out, the overlapping visible timeline rewound back to that initial moment.

Or not exactly. Not even a Gladiator could actually turn back time, which meant a fraction of a second progressed before another loop began. Then time played itself out like usual until the end where the explosion happened. There the process repeated itself. Over and over again.

Janet desperately wished she could see inside properly, but she didn't have future sight. If she looked too hard she was liable to penetrate the veil, and that would undoubtedly kill any chances the duo had to make it out of this alive.

Tobias, however, must have gleaned something out of the repeated cycles as they waited for Maya to be rapidly relocated. Janet almost wished they hadn't bought Gladiator Shadow out of the war, but that was a step too far, even for her. She was very glad that menace was prevented from joining in these wars, especially with a potential new Gladiator on her side.

"I'm fairly sure they are feeling at least a part of that explosion as it rips them apart."

Janet had no idea what he was talking about, but Winter Hornet seemed to. Not that his words put her at ease. "Birth was hard the first time. Why should rebirth be any different? Besides, isn't it more fun this way? What better chance to see the worth of forgotten legends than by watching them gnaw their way out of death's embrace."

Tobias snorted at the words, but didn't argue with Winter Hornet. Instead his gaze turned to JR.

"Speaking of rebirths, was it really necessary for you to make such an excellent armor for an *Empire* Alpha? I'm sure I'm not the only one who noticed the anomalies present in that armor. Do you have something you'd like to say?"

JR ruffled a few feathers, mimicking a human rubbing their fingers together. "I always welcome reviews from those who have experience with my work. Do I have permission to utilize your feedback for marketing purposes?"

Emmanuel let out a bark of laughter as Tobias smothered his frustrations with a snort.

"In any case," JR continued, "The design was predominantly Titan's. I merely lent my expertise to its creation."

Janet wanted to call out the obvious deception, but Tobias did so for her, creating a new storm in chaotic space with the exhale.

"I've seen what that armor can do, and as such, I find that assertion hard to believe."

Emmanuel finally spoke up as interest peaked. "Ninety six percent original. Did all of you forget that Titan is hardly some fool who can only hit things? Speaking of which, don't think just because neither of us have made a fuss of it that we didn't notice all of the aura escape talismans being used throughout your Great Powers. A quarter of your people not paying for the runes might be hideable but it's nearing half and that is much less so. I can take the time to identify them if you need a list. I wouldn't mind, but if I have to go through that much effort I would go the extra step and send it to Titan as well. Just to be thorough you understand."

Janet kept her mouth firmly clamped shut rather than bring anyone's attention back to her. The armor was impressive, but clearly made with the war restrictions in mind, which made any attempts at leverage over Emmanuel or JR weak at best. But then again, she was fairly sure Tobias was just making his displeasure at JR working so closely with the Empire known and he wasn't angling to be paid.

She was okay with that. As such she let the bickering play out as she tracked Maya's movements one spent teleporter at a time.

As Winter Hornet joined the argument she was once more reminded why the Tier 50's never gathered unless they had good reason and typically separated the moment they could.

Milton Barrett didn't know where things had gone wrong. Or rather he did, but he still couldn't understand how the events had led to him joining the Tier 15 battlefields where he was going to die.

He'd been screwed over by fate and destiny in equal measures. It hardly seemed fair, but for all of his internal complaining, there was nothing he could do to change the situation beyond giving it his all and hoping that combined with everyone else's was enough. A nagging part of himself knew it wouldn't be but he refused to give up.

That would be accepting death, and he didn't want to die.

Death would be the end, and he didn't want this to be the end.

Milton caressed his trigger once, twice, then a third time, following a rhythm only he could hear.

One shot, two shots, three shots. The cannon behind him started to glow as the mana pulled from deep in the fortified planet's crust wasn't able to disperse properly between shots but he didn't let that stop him or even slow him down.

The orbital platforms the Federation had established to pepper them and their all protective shielding fell one by one. Not solely through his efforts, though he took out more than his fair share, but from the dying struggles of the defending army.

Milton hardly heard the screams. They'd become so familiar as to be expected at this point. Death was all he knew.

After what felt like an eternity they did stop, but not before he nearly joined the corpses piled everywhere. Federation regulars and enhanced bone soldiers were more numerous, but far from alone. However, the shield reengaging at the last moment saved him from a fiery end.

As Milton realized he was the highest ranking dwarf left, he almost wished it hadn't.

General Ickthor looked haggard as he spoke to the survivors before the meeting. Milton didn't need his worried expression to know things were bad. It was plenty obvious when half of the section heads were humans who'd been forced to take up the mantle of leadership as he had.

He couldn't help but silently wonder which of the humans still alive under his command would be left to take over for him. He realized it was a moot point if they didn't survive the next wave.

He didn't know from where, but he had an inkling that he wouldn't be a part of any such meetings after this one.

That thought almost made him laugh as General Ickthor tried to keep the troops from falling apart. "We've done our best to hold and we've succeeded as best as anyone can ask or

expect. However the battle isn't over, the enemies are still at our shields! Therefore we still need to do more, and I think I know how. We need to take a gamble."

Any mirth Milton found in the words faded when the general looked to him and a sinking feeling landed in his gut.

"And that gamble relies on you Lieutenant Barrett." Milton was too shocked to speak, which the general took as acceptance as he continued. "Those cannons have the same flaw as ours; they are prone to exploding upon being hit. We need you to hit them at just the right moment and cause a cascade that can take out their ship. That's our best shot with what we have. We will be defending your position and will make that our last stand. Worst comes to worse, we overload the battery ourselves, taking out every Feddie we can!"

Milton wanted to give a reason why the idea wouldn't work, but held his tongue, pledging his support.

He was targeted almost immediately, but soon the rhythm of battle faded and he let his cannon fall silent as the Federation ship was forced to bring its own cannons to bear.

There was a silent tempo in the move that commanded him to wait. Just a moment longer.

General Ickthor screamed at him, but when Milton ignored him he reached over to try and force his fingers to squeeze the trigger, but he held firm.

They needed to wait.

One more moment.

Even without his Talent Milton was fairly sure he could have picked the moment to fire. The Federation ship loomed over him and the fortress world as it brought its main cannon in line to fire.

If they'd kept their distance they'd have been in less danger, but the commander seemed to be in a rush. Milton didn't know why they were risking so much to finish off an already fallen foe but he knew that it opened up an opportunity.

He just needed to wait.

The ship's hull had fully obscured the stars when Milton fired.

His shot was perfect.

Colliding just outside the bunker, the explosion was so large it *defiled* reality rather than simply destroying it.

In fact it It—

In the brief instant before he died, Milton caught the briefest glimpse of someone in the middle of the explosion. Two someones, their bodies falling apart just slightly slower than the reality around them.

If he'd lived slightly longer, he would have seen one of the figures standing there even as he dissolved from the bottom up staring at him. The man's hands continued to swipe through the air until the figure behind him was an instant away from death.

In the *moment* before that happened, he shoved his hand into the nothingness.

Maya had wanted to bend a few laws to arrive at Yannkin's Cradle, but part of the orders she'd been given had come with transportation already lined up. She was pretty certain all of her teleporters had damaged anchors in the Between's as she slipped through the endless liminal space in record time, but even so, she still didn't believe the report until she saw the proof herself.

Yannkin's Cradle was a sea of calm amongst the war, with small ripples of chaotic space indicating battles over other world nodes. But out of them all, this single world remained still.

She was smart enough to know that indicated at least her Tier 50 was there, but she'd gotten a good enough impression to suspect all of them had probably sent at least a clone.

That made her happy.

She had an audience, which was the best present she could ask for. She wouldn't have so many opportunities to show off once she Tiered up and left the war Tiers. What better send off could she have than to pull a fellow Gladiator out of a desperate situation?

Even if it didn't beat Aiden's feat, it was close enough she'd have a rebuttal when he next tried to brag.

After she'd completed her first inspection, a message directly from Janet arrived letting her know she had another six minutes before the loop cycled.

Maya took that in and closed her eyes as she formulated a plan.

She'd never interacted with time magic on this scale before, and everything she knew was theoretical at best. Time mages were stupendously rare, and she'd never fought a truly competent one. Not that such distinctions mattered at this moment.

She'd only get one shot. She'd either succeed or fail.

It was that simple when it came down to it.

Maya tapped into her Domain as she commanded Reality itself. "*I'm a Tier 15.*"

It wasn't easy, but after her stunt with leveraging herself and everyone else down Tiers during her fight with Aiden, she'd taken steps to add that rule to her arsenal. It wasn't something she could always do, and she'd never been able to go as low as Tier 5 without Aiden's particular blend of assistance, but she was getting better at it. She'd managed Tier 15 exactly once but she could be Tier 15 again.

She *had* to be.

Maya wasn't messing with time, though she'd be tapping her newest best friends for lessons when they'd put their lives back together, that was beyond her. No, she was simply pulling a blanket over the Realm's eyes for a moment. A quilt of the pattern she'd preselected to say *exactly* what she wanted.

Things weren't simple, such grand and complex workings never were, but the first pivot was enough to let her make a second one. To go deeper. To change *more*. It wasn't a second law simply an addendum to the first.

"I belong in Yannkin's Cradle right now. I'm a Tier 15 soldier and that's my battlefield. A soldier must be on her battlefield."

That one was harder. She was stretching. She wasn't a part of either active side.

Which *wasn't* true. Maya pushed harder. Tick and Tock were there and they were Republic Gladiators just like her. That meant they were on the same side making anywhere they were her battlefield. That was the leverage she needed and she felt herself ready like a taught bow.

Maya held herself in that suspended state for the remaining minutes, not willing to leave anything to chance. It cost her willpower by the bucketload, but she had enough to see this mission through and that was all that mattered in the moment.

She needed that mindset.

She needed to be ready.

When time started to flow backwards, Maya nearly jumped in too early but held herself back. She only let go of her power in that single moment between loops.

If she'd come in as a Tier 35, her spiritual weight would have taken the membrane of time magic crashing down with her, ruining what trick Tick and Tock were using to keep themselves alive. However it was a Tier 15 battlefield and she was Tier 15.

Where else would she belong?