

(Every character depicted in the story below is a consenting legal adult over the age of 18)

A/N: The nightmare does not end.

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Flying men capable of catching someone sent into low planetary orbit and bring them back safe and sound were one thing... but that's only the start of Kerrigan's 'presentation'. Alexei stands alongside Gerard as the rest of their officers sit in the provided chairs and watch the extremely powerful psionic put her 'soldier' through his paces.

Myk-Zod is fast. Myk-Zod is strong. Myk-Zod... is not human. Oh sure, he looks as human as can be, but Alexei really has his doubts. After all, there aren't many humans who can fly at supersonic speeds unassisted. There certainly any who can take a missile to the chest and come out the other side unscathed.

When Myk-Zod zooms away for a moment and then comes back holding a Siege Tank over his head with one hand, that about seals the deal for Alexei. This man is no man at all, no matter how chiseled his jaw might be. The Koprulu Sector has a third alien race that Earth knew nothing about, one that Sarah Kerrigan has apparently made contact with and managed to turn into her allies.

And if just one of them can do all of this... well, it explains how their entire fleet got blindsided and captured. It wasn't just Kerrigan working alone, it was her backed up by this newfound alien race. And if this was how powerful they were physically, who knew what sort of technology they might have at their beck and call.

On the one hand, part of Alexei salivated for answers. The researcher in him that had led to so much of his military career being spent in secret facilities dedicated to advancing the cause of humanity, wanted to know everything there was to know about these new aliens.

... But the Vice Admiral, the man who had been charged with helping to lead the Iron Fist Fleet alongside Gerard DuGalle... that part of him urged him to take a step back and consider things objectively. This wasn't just about him and his personal desire for knowledge. Nor was it about him and Gerard and their desire to complete their mission either, necessarily.

It was also about the people in the fleet who had come with them and trusted in their leadership to see them to victory. Over a million Terrans who had traveled all the way from Earth expecting to pacify the Koprulu Sector and bring civilization to it.

They were all in grave, grave danger right now. Because while Kerrigan was playing nice for the moment, it was obvious what she was leaving unsaid... if they didn't play ball, she was just going to wipe them all out and get ready for the next fleet to show up.

"Just so we're all on the same page, if you don't back down and return to Earth, I am ready to kill you all and try again with the next group of thugs the United Earth Directorate sends this way."

Ah. Okay, so she wasn't leaving it unsaid anymore. Alexei grimaces as he shares a glance with Gerard. The other man looks... tight in the face. Both of them had even been handed various types of guns at a certain point and allowed to fire them at this 'Myk-Zod'.

Not a single bullet had managed to penetrate his skin, even when the alien man had removed his top and left himself bare-chested. They'd shot him with every ordinance they were given and it hadn't so much as scratched him.

Alexei doesn't need to look behind him to get an idea of the mood of the rest of the fleet's officership either. He can feel it in the air... the palpable sense of dread and a certain sort of finality to it all. They're all brave men and women, Alexei truly believes that. However, this goes beyond bravery. They'll follow orders even if it means to their deaths, but they are clearly waiting to see what he and Gerard will decide.

And in turn, Alexei is waiting to see what Gerard will decide. Because as Vice Admiral, if the older man decides to stick it out and refuses to return to Earth, trying to call Kerrigan's bluff... Alexei will have to make a choice. Does he stand by Gerard's decision... or does he relieve his superior officer of command?

"... Very well. We will return to Earth."

Alexei doesn't quite sag with relief when Gerard finally speaks, but he certainly feels no small amount of the sensation. And the complete lack of protests or objections from the sea of men and women behind them is deafening in its silence. Nobody, not even the fool who had taken a trip into low orbit and soiled himself coming back down, says a word.

Kerrigan, meanwhile, just smiles thinly as her eyes flash blue. Alexei straightens up... but nothing happens. Nothing visible, at least.

"I believe you. And I believe everyone else here is in agreement. That's good. I would hate to have to make further examples."

Then, the red head pauses and shrugs.

"That said, there will still be consequences to your actions in the sector, no matter how minor they might be. Admiral, Vice Admiral... you'll join me for a private discussion about what exactly you'll be going home with. The rest of you will be provided with some food and water to tide you over while we... negotiate. Don't worry, the water will be cold."

Alexei stiffens, but in the end there's not much he or Gerard can do but follow Kerrigan over to a nearby bunker. At least they're getting out from under the hot sun. He's feeling unpleasantly sticky in his clothes by this point, the sweat making his uniform cling to his body.

But that uncomfortable feeling falls to the way side entirely when Alexei steps into the bunker behind Gerard... only for Gerard to step aside and reveal another Gerard sitting at the table within already. Alexei's eyes bulge as Gerard

DuGalle looks up at him from the table, his own eyes narrowing for a moment before sweeping to first his doppelganger and finally Kerrigan herself.

“Kerrigan. Was this little show meant to intimidate me into submission then?”

Alexei watches in horror as the Gerard who had been at his side for what felt like hours now... melts away. In his place, another woman takes his place. Blonde, impossibly beautiful... she moves to stand beside Myk-Zod, making Alexei's mouth go dry as he realizes in that moment that the two must come from the same species.

“Intimidate you into submission? No Admiral DuGalle. I know you're too stubborn for that. The show was for everyone else, to intimidate *them* into submission. Meanwhile, you and your... colleague here are the only ones getting a peek behind the curtain so to speak.”

Kerrigan looks to Alexei then and smiles thinly.

“Tell me Vice Admiral Stukov, did you doubt your superior for even a second out there? Did you suspect Gerard DuGalle was not who he seemed to be for even a moment? You've known the man for quite a long time, haven't you? The two of you have been each other's foils for decades. And just now, you sat and stood right beside one of my soldiers as she pretended to be your friend for over an hour and a half. Did you know? Be honest now.”

The color drains from Alexei's face as Kerrigan speaks. Because they both know his answer already. They both know the truth. And in that moment, Alexei realizes... it's up to him to convince Gerard. Looking to the other man, he grimaces.

“I could not tell the difference, Gerard. She mimicked you perfectly. There wasn't a single hair out of place.”

The beautiful blonde winks and blows a kiss at him for his assessment, which Alexei does his best to ignore. Gerard, meanwhile, sits quietly, his face like

stone. But Alexei knows the man too well... he's not just shutting down. He's considering everything he's been presented with. Finally, Gerard sighs.

"What do you want, Kerrigan?"

"Half your fleet."

Both Alexei and Gerard's eyes bulge at that and the latter is immediately out of his seat.

"That is not going to happen!"

Kerrigan, unruffled, just chuckles.

"It's non-negotiable, I'm afraid. There has to be consequences or the UED is just going to send you or someone else back here again. I already know they'll be sending probes to test us for the next several decades, but we can handle those without much hassle. Dealing with you lot though... it's been such a *drag*."

A 'drag'. One of the most powerful fleets ever created by the UED for the express purposes of tackling the dual alien threat posed by the Koprulu Sector... and they were just a 'drag' to the denizens of this sector. Alexei can barely muster the strength to be offended at this point. Gerard though... he gnashes his teeth, looking quite frustrated. But of course, Kerrigan has them by the balls.

"All of your officers just saw you agree to a full retreat, Admiral DuGalle. So I suppose the question becomes... what will you do now? Will you tell them to fight after all? It might be hard to get them on board with you changing your mind. I suppose you could tell them that I replaced you with a shapeshifter, that my soldiers can not only do all of the impossible feats they just witnessed, but also perfectly mimic any of them at any time."

Alexei's blood turns to ice in his veins at that. It's not like he wasn't already thinking about the ramifications and he was sure Gerard was too, but to have Kerrigan lay it out to them like this...

“That sort of revelation does seem like it might damage fleet cohesiveness though. Why, if nobody can trust anyone, how are you all going to trust each other to get back home? How are they going to trust that you are who you say you are, if you’ve been replaced once before so effectively?”

Alexei swallows, even as Gerard remains silent. Kerrigan just pushes the attack though.

“I’m letting the two of you know the full capabilities of me and my soldiers for one simple reason... so that you can tell your superiors back on Earth to stay away from the Koprulu Sector. That’s it. Just stay away. Expand in another direction. Explore other frontiers. Not for our sakes... but for yours. For the sake of your fleet. For the sake of your men and women. And for the sake of Earth.”

Smiling thinly, Kerrigan thrusts her thumb back towards Myk-Zod and the female alien beside him.

“Unless you want a thousand of them to show up on your doorstep. That’s all it would take, you know. We wouldn’t need to send a fleet. We wouldn’t even need to think about you past sending them off. They’d deal with everything themselves.”

Gerard finally speaks, his tone a low growl.

“Taking half the fleet... you would force us to turn our remaining battlecruisers into glorified transport ships just to make room for everyone.”

Alexei doesn’t quite jolt in shock, but it’s a near thing. Because... as much as those words might have been argumentative, they were also a clear concession of he’d ever heard one. Kerrigan, meanwhile, just smirks.

“Good. That’s what I’m aiming for. Of course, we’ve done the math, haven’t we Myk-Zod? How many ships do they actually need to make it home safe and sound?”

Striking blue eyes land upon Alexei and Gerard as both men find themselves instinctively glancing over at the alien. Myk-Zod hasn't said a word all this time, but as he finally speaks, his tone is ice cold and emotionless, reduced to pure calculus.

"The current population of the Iron Fist Fleet could fit in as little as thirty-nine percent of the fleet's total tonnage."

Alexei blinks and glances at Gerard. Neither of them were necessarily mathematicians... but that did sound plausible, at least. Kerrigan, meanwhile, just chuckles lowly.

"There, see? I'm giving you a whole extra eleven percent to work with, DuGalle. Consider it a peace offering. Not to Earth, but to you personally. A balm on your wounded pride."

The gall on this bitch. And yet, she had the power to back it up. She had them entirely at her mercy and she knew it.

In the end, it doesn't surprise Alexei that they give up half their fleet and begin the strenuous process of loading everyone onto the ships they're being allowed to keep. It doesn't surprise him that there's no real fight for more, or any fight left in any of them truly. Even those losing their ships can't seem to muster much in the way of protest after what they've all witnessed.

Alexei is reminded of what Gerard had said to him over the skies of that piddly little colony world before Kerrigan showed up. Back then, his friend had thought he understood the dangers that the Koprulu Sector had to offer and that he had to make sure Alexei understood as well.

Now they both knew... neither of them had any idea what they were getting themselves into when they arrived in this sector. This place was a place of nightmares... and even leaving it behind, Alexei wasn't sure the nightmare would end.

After all, he was left wondering even now... whether the Gerard DuGalle in the bunker had been the real Gerard or just another doppelganger. And if it was the real Gerard... well, he suspected that the older man was wondering the exact same thing about Alexei himself...

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A/N: Remember to Vote, leave a Like, and let me know what you think!

Also, I'm thinking that our stay in StarCraft will be ending pretty soon. It definitely is starting to feel like I overstayed my welcome here based on the readership dropoff.

With that said, there's still at least a few more chapters before we move on I think. Until then, consider this your opportunity to suggest where Myk-Zod, Mystique, and Sarah should wind up next!