

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

A/N: Hard men making hard choices run headfirst into the wall made of the consequences of their own actions~

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How long had Alexei Stukov known Gerard DuGalle? Quite a long time, truth be told. They had met at the Academy as mere Cadets, becoming fast friends and even faster rivals. They were both hyper-competitive individuals, the types to not let anything stop them from being the very best that they could be.

Eventually, their careers had diverged, however. Gerard had gone the more public, active route of service, but Alexei had wound up spending most of his military career engaging in top-secret research. He had done everything he could to push limits and explore boundaries, striving to increase the effectiveness of UPL troops in any way he possibly could.

After the UPL reorganized itself into the UED, Alexei found himself working alongside Gerard once again, this time as his Vice Admiral. Both of them were different men then they had been previously. The numerous battles Gerard had seen, the wars he had taken part in and in some cases decisively ended... had changed him.

Likewise, Alexei had seen things in laboratories that would turn away the average Terran, the sort of things that would make lesser men vomit and even his skin crawl from time to time.

When, ultimately, it came time to choose who would lead the Iron Fist Fleet, the UED's response to the reports coming out of the Koprulu Sector... well, it only made sense that it would be him and Gerard. Alexei did not even think it was ego talking when he said that there was nobody else more qualified.

And yet, even then, Gerard seems to doubt his conviction. They currently fly over a Koprulu Colony claiming loyalty to this nascent 'Terran Dominion', where

the Admiral has unleashed Zerg upon the colonists in a bid to... test something. Or perhaps show Alexei something. He insists that Alexei needs to see what the Zerg can do outside of tapes and laboratory dissections.

Admittedly, there is something to Gerard's words. What Alexei can see of the battle below with his own two eyes is something altogether different from the videos. Gruesome, raw, unedited and unfiltered. As Gerard holds him by the shoulder, his words hang in the air.

"I need to know you understand, Alexei. I need to know can go all the way."

Finally letting out a low breath, Alexei nods.

"I will. I will go all the way."

The Koprulu Sector needed them. It needed order and stability. Between the Zerg and the Protoss and the dissolution of the Terran Confederacy, now was the perfect time for the United Earth Directorate to assert proper control over their wayward colonies.

Gerard makes no attempt to stop Alexei from pulling a fresh cigar from his jacket pocket and lighting it. He simply pats him on the shoulder and steps away.

"Good. I knew I could count on you."

A moment later and a voice from the Battlecruiser's bridge comes over comms.

"Admiral, the colonist base will be overrun in a matter of minutes. Shall we intervene?"

Even before Gerard replies, Alexei already knows what he's going to say. It's the right call... the tough call.

"No. Take us into orbit Mister Malmsteen. We've seen all we needed to see here."

Alexei lights his cigar and then moves to click his lighter shut, even as he feels the Battlecruiser's engines begin to pulse, signaling their impending ascent. However... neither thing actually happens.

I don't think so.

He finds himself frozen mid-motion, freshly lit cigar hanging from his lips and lighter flame still right in front of his face as a feminine voice rings out through his mind... and not just his mind. Past the lighter's flickering flame, Alexei can see Gerard is just as frozen as well, the Admiral's body refusing to answer his mental commands. Alexei is suffering the same... he finds himself trapped, a mere passenger in his flesh.

Did you really think you could just come to the Koprulu Sector and begin doing whatever you liked? That there wouldn't be consequences for the UED's heavy-handedness? Did you really think we would let you get away with victimizing us, Gerard DuGalle? Alexei Stukov?

After a moment, Alexei flicks the lighter shut... but it's not his choice to do so. Just as it's not his or Gerard's choice to walk forward, their movements robotic and mechanical as they're brought back to the viewport they'd both been in the process of stepping away from.

If you won't clean up your mess of your own volition... then I'll have to make you.

And that's exactly what she does. However, she does not do so by forcing Gerard to give orders or anything like that... rather, the Battlecruiser begins firing on its own, meaning that she's controlling the entirety of the bridge crew at the same time as them.

Alexei is not unfamiliar with psionics, to be clear. Earth has its own fair share of those types. However, never before has he encountered one as powerful as this. Down below, through the smoke and the shadows, he thinks he sees fast moving shapes working as well, destroying what Zerg the Battlecruiser's cannons cannot kill.

The process does not take long. But it also seems to last an eternity, trapped in his own body as he is. Until finally, it's over. The dust clears. The fighting stops. And the colony... the colony stands. No sooner does this realization hit then the doors to the room slide open and both Alexei and Gerard are forced to turn and regard the woman stepping inside.

Red hair, form-fitting bodysuit... they'd been briefed on all of the major movers and shakers in the Koprulu Sector, of course. They were taking such a large fleet that there shouldn't have been a single individual who mattered more than the other billions upon billions of Terrans. But some... some individuals proved to be the exceptions to that rule.

Arcturus Mengsk, for instance, was a man who had taken the assassination of his family by the Old Families of the Confederacy and turned it into a rebellion that ultimately shattered the entire dynasty.

Jim Raynor was another man who's name had come up a few times. A mere marshal turned commander in the Sons of Korhal movement, and yet he was at every major battle... every major victory.

And finally... Sarah Kerrigan. A woman who had rewritten the Psionics Scale with her very existence. A woman who was said to be so powerful that her mind could stretch from one end of the Koprulu Sector to the other.

Obviously, they'd all taken such claims with a grain of salt back on Earth. There was always an element of... propagandizing to such things. How to separate fact from fiction, myth from man... that was as important a skill as anything else.

And yet, just in case they had brought a truly massive fleet. The Iron Fist was ready for anything the likes of Mengsk, Raynor, and Kerrigan could throw at them. Or so Alexei had thought. Until now.

"Gentlemen. Earth really thought they could just send you to set up shop and nobody would have a complaint, hm?"

Sarah Kerrigan stands before them with a smirk on her lips that doesn't quite reach her eyes. Except, Alexei isn't sure how he knows that... because he can't see her eyes at the moment. Not when they're both glowing bright purple.

Psionics were usually marked by a telltale light blue glow, weren't they? What did it mean that Kerrigan's eyes were purple instead? Certainly something powerful, if his assumption about how many people she was controlling in this moment was correct.

"Such active minds... racing thoughts, trying to figure out how you're going to get out of this. How you're going to escape."

Alexei would have tensed up if he had control over his body. Kerrigan looks between him and Gerard as she steps up in front of them. Then, she shakes her head.

"There is no escape. Not right now, anyways. Not until we've made sure this lesson has... *stuck*."

Then, she reaches out and Alexei fights as hard as he can even as he feels like he's being drowned or smothered. A heavy weight lays upon his mind, forcing him into the sweet black oblivion of unconsciousness.

His last coherent thought before the darkness takes him is that... they might have bitten off more than they could chew here.

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It feels like only a moment has passed before he wakes up again. Alexei Stukov's eyes snap open, under his control once more, and he finds himself seated in a chair. He goes to stand up, only for a hand on his shoulder to keep him down.

"There's no point, Alexei."

Gerard's voice is rough and raspy as he keeps Alexei where he is. They're seated next to each other... but they're not alone. Settling back in his seat, Alexei looks around... and his mind boggles as he realizes he sees a sea of familiar faces. But then of course they're familiar... each and every one of them is an officer in the Iron Fist Fleet. His and Gerard's subordinates, one and all.

Captains, Commanders, First Officers... the last goes on and on. This is the leadership of the UED's expeditionary fleet to the Koprulu Sector... and they're all sat on folding chairs in the middle of a damn field. The sun beats down from overhead and Alexei grimaces when he makes the mistake of looking up into it. At the same time, he finds himself wondering why Gerard told him to stay seated... only to finally notice *her* standing in front of all of them.

Sarah Kerrigan, with her arms crossed over her chest and her eyes no longer glowing that infernal purple, watches them all with a gaze that says they're less than nothing... the scum beneath her boots. As her eyes land upon him in particular, the corner of her lips turns up however, a half-smirk that makes Alexei bristle.

"Welcome."

She does not shout. She does not yell. She does not have to. Every last one of them goes still. They all hear her, not just with their ears... but with their minds.

"The UED sent you to conquer the Koprulu Sector. To 'restore order' to our 'lawless' corner of the universe."

She pauses briefly, sweeping her gaze back and forth over all of them.

"They sent you to die."

That gets quite the reaction from the assembled. Perhaps not every man and woman in the crowded field is as sure of their convictions as Alexei and Gerard, but plenty are. And plenty more are steadfastly patriotic and sycophantically loyal to Earth and its leaders.

“We’re more than ready to die for the cause, you psychic bitch!”

One of the Captains, more outspoken than most, lunges to his feet with spittle coming out of his lips. Alexei could sigh... as much as he appreciated the sentiment, he’s not surprised by what happens next. Sarah lifts up a hand... and the Captain is surrounded by a glowing corona of energy... before being lifted off his feet entirely.

He barely has time to shout let alone scream before he disappears in the blink of an eye, thrown up into upper atmosphere by Kerrigan’s mind. Silence falls at that, only the sounds of nature around them filling the space.

Finally though... Gerard rises to his feet, back straight and shoulders squared as he stares down the incredibly powerful monster in their midst.

“You are a powerful creature, Kerrigan. Nobody can deny that. But you are only one woman. One woman cannot protect an entire sector by herself.”

Kerrigan arches a brow but doesn’t repeat her trick on Gerard at least.

“Can’t I, DuGalle?”

Gerard is not intimidated. He continues to stare her down.

“You still need food, water, and sleep. Even if you kill all of us, even if you destroy the Iron Fist Fleet, the United Earth Directorate will not be dissuaded forever. They will send probes. They will find out what happened. And they will look to where you are weak to take advantage of that.”

Alexei can already see where Gerard is going with this. His use of ‘they’ to distance himself from the UED is a classic opening gambit. He’s trying to ingratiate himself with the powerful woman, a bid to bring her on side. And indeed, an instant later...

“Join us, Kerrigan. Join your power to ours and help us bring stability to the Koprulu Sector. You can have a seat at the table. You can become one of my

chief advisors in how to deal with the Zerg, the Protoss... even the likes of Mengsk.”

Gerard’s eyes harden, his jaw firming up a moment later.

“Otherwise it won’t matter what you do to us or the fleet today. Not when tomorrow, you might find a probe depositing poison in your food or placing a bullet in your head.”

The stick. The carrot. And... the stick again. Classic Gerard. That was his playbook to a tee. Alexei stays quiet, knowing better than to speak up at this point. Kerrigan, meanwhile, seems to consider the Admiral’s words for a long moment... before finally smiling a smile that *definitely* doesn’t reach her eyes.

“That’s quite the offer, Admiral. There’s just one problem... you think I’m operating alone.”

Gerard scowls.

“No allies you could possibly make here in this backwater sector can compare to the might of the UED, Kerrigan!”

“So you say.”

And then Kerrigan looks up. Alexei hates to say it, but it works on him... he looks up too. So does Gerard to be fair. So does everyone else. They all look up just in time to see a speck in the air above them steadily getting larger. Alexei’s eyes widen as he realizes what’s coming back down again... or rather who.

The screaming reaches their ears a moment later, however... the descent is not fast enough. The fall is not a fall at all, as it turns out. After a moment, the Captain that was previously ejected from the ‘meeting’ into upper atmosphere arrives back on the ground... held by the scruff of the neck by a man who seems to be flying entirely under his own power.

Alexei takes in the handsome, squared jaw newcomer and tries to figure out what's going on. As the Captain is deposited back on the ground, a bad smell fills the air, letting everyone present know he's soiled himself. Meanwhile, the new arrival stays floating, hovering a foot off the ground with ease.

"Everyone, meet one of my soldiers. His name is Myk-Zod. And he's here to show you exactly why you really don't want to stay in the Koprulu Sector."

... Alexei was beginning to think their briefings for what to expect in this Sector had been woefully underprepared. What the hell was going on?!

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