

MATTER OF STATE

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Chapter One

A few weary-looking men were gathered around a standard-issue hololith table, badly scratched and flickering wildly, its blue-hued column of light shooting up almost to the ceiling.

Most of the men wore grim expressions on their faces the signs of battle fatigue and intermittent sleep etched in the hollow looks they exchanged silently. Metallic echoes reverberated all around them, as if the walls were about to burst open and fill the small recreation hall with the cold, harsh void outside.

Still, nobody seemed to be bothered; however fragile they looked at first glance, their rock-solid attention was aimed at two pairs of hands dancing through the holographic projection, picking up tiny icons, shuffling through virtual inventories and linking up unit pieces. It was a peculiar sort of dance; sometimes rough and sometimes graceful. But it was in a constant flow; the two players of quadrachi never paused.

One pair of hands looked unmistakably feminine, while the other pair of hands looked scaled, leathery, and claw-like. One claw-like hand made a gesture and the holographic projection froze in place. A few counters showed up and a timer appeared and started counting backwards. The woman smiled thinly, peered through the projection straight into the eyes of her opponent:

“Want to surrender already, Han?”

Han’s quite large nostrils flared up and he made a snorting sound. He did not smile back and started to scratch at the hololith table, right at the spot where most of the surface had already been mostly eaten away - almost down to the optronics inside. The timer

silently kept edging closer to zero, while the Han's labored breathing became more pronounced. Metallic creaks and reverberations could still be heard, but now more than ever noone seemed to even notice them.

Han had been focusing on a particular quadrant of the projection when he said with a slight grin, revealing a quite lethal set of serrated teeth:

"Aren't you enjoying this Major Ciarandor? I thought this was a pleasurable experience for humans," his voice a deep rumbling sound like a frothing river.

"Only when playing against a Keplerian, Han. The blood-bet makes it so much more interesting," Major Ciarandor replied with an almost gleeful look and an imperceptibly wily smile.

"There's no meaning in loss without pain, Major. Wouldn't you agree?"

"It's what makes us learn from our mistakes, Han. Will you forfeit while the timer's ticking? Or shall we play?" the Major said, showing the table with both hands.

"Have I ever let you down, Major?" said Han suddenly laughing wildly with bulging

eyes, fully revealing both sets of teeth in a jaw designed for killing.