

INSTRUMENT OF DESTRUCTION

By Tony "Thunder" Klepack

Emperor Straxus strode across the stage studying the large group of Destara assembled before him.

Several were visibly edgy in his silent appraisal. It had been a strained couple of weeks since Magma had rescued his comrades and defeated Straxus in combat—the first time anyone knew of the Emperor actually getting defeated in personal combat. Since then, the Renegades had made two successful raids on Destara outposts in key sectors.

In addition, Deceptar had disappeared without contact or explanation. Every one of Straxus' inquiries to the Amethyst Order had only revealed that Deceptar was otherwise occupied with a top secret project and could not be disturbed. It seemed an odd time for him to leave Straxus thought, for if the reborn Magma possessed the Tetrax, it would seem prudent for Deceptar to be advising him on a way to combat it—assuming that could be done. Unless Deceptar was hiding, waiting to see how Straxus fared against the Renegades weapon first. No, such thought was sacrilege and anyway, it did him no good to speculate aimlessly. If Deceptar felt he should know what he was up to, Straxus would eventually be told when their Master was ready.

The more immediate irritant was that his warriors knew he had been defeated by Magma. It was not enough he had to suffer that humiliation—no, his soldiers had to find out too! How they had found out, he was uncertain. No one else had been there when Magma had bested him nor had he filed a report. Had he let it slip somehow? Perhaps he had revealed it inadvertently through his actions? It didn't matter. His Destara had found out his infallibility had been permeated and some of their respect was certainly gone.

Also, it meant he was slightly closer to being challenged for leadership of the Empire, something he did not look favorably on. It was true he had defeated all challenges to his leadership in the past, yet he had become so feared and respected in recent centuries he had not even been challenged. Until last week, when a female named Kala Dirr had dared to do so. Deceptar's absence was so absolute, that he did not even notice the challenge as he normally did. Straxus had, of course, dealt with her easily but he deeply resented the fact he had been challenged in the first place. It was only a matter of time until someone else evoked the challenge once more.

Considering the Renegades continual attacks and the potential threat they posed, this was far from the best time to suffer challenges from the opportunistic idiots in his Empire who knew nothing absolutely nothing about leadership but naturally thought they were the universe's gift to the universe. People like that were the type who should never be leader in his opinion. And a female challenging him for leadership! There had been no such thing in millennia—not since the great Empress Jaxala'xus had ruled with an iron fist over her soldiers and brutally crushed her opposition with a fervor select few Destara leaders had ever displayed. But then, Straxus was counted among those select few—he only hoped this Renegade incident would not mark him historically as the leader who let the Empire be brought to ruin!

Straxus turned around and slowly trod back toward the auditorium's podium. His optics caught a glimpse of the Vexxa squadron's Commander, Stryfe, in the audience. He was definitely one to watch. He had usurped Magma's position as the squadron's commander and he was

certainly the type who would not content himself with such a mere rank. Straxus would not be surprised if he challenged him one day for the Empire's leadership. If that happened, he relished the thought of crushing the little opportunist's head module.

Straxus suppressed a laugh as he imagined "Emperor" Stryfe-or Stryxus to be accurate—trying to run the Empire. It would crumble in days!

He stepped up to the podium. "My fellow Destara," he began, "as you know, we now have a very serious problem facing the Empire." He activated an unseen holo-projector and footage of the Renegade attack on Nyn-Ja appeared in the air above them. "These Renegades from the Empire, who oppose our policies, our ideologies—our very existence!"

Straxus paused a moment for dramatic effect—and to let the venom fade from his voice. His hand pressed the remote in his palm and the footage winked out of existence.

"I am assembling a task force composed of my best warriors and those of you who have had prior battle experience with these rogues," Straxus continued, resisting the temptation to cast a glare at Stryfe. "I will allow anyone the chance to back out now if they wish. This is a most challenging assignment and the Renegades are formidable foes."

He stopped, giving them the chance to leave but no one stirred from their spots. Which was as he expected—to leave would have revealed to their leader and their fellow comrades that they were cowards which Destara, who had any sense of honor, simply did not reveal no matter their true thoughts or feelings on the subject.

"Excellent," he finally spoke. "Each of you will receive systems upgrades as well as detailed briefings on what we know about the Renegades, their weapons, their battle tactics and strategies to date."

Which they would all need he knew. Most Destara were not designed to take on other Syborians in battle situations and were unprepared—primarily in the strategy areas—to deal with such occurrences.

Straxus turned and begin to head for an exit way. He stopped and turned around, as if in afterthought, he said: "This is a war my fellow Destara." He raised his fist authoritatively. "A war we will win!"

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Light years away, the Destara mining outpost on An'araa continued it's dreary yet important operations.

Lieutenant commander Vima and her aide G'an' jogged down the catwalk to the nearby lift. "Hurry up, G'arr," she called behind her as several of her security officers held the lift doors open for them.

"I'm ...c-coming...commander," he said in gasps as he put most of his energy into speeding up. He was a bureaucrat, not a warrior like her. Still, he did his best to perform to both expectations and usually managed to do so adequately.

The double doors slid closed behind them and the lift started the descent to it's destination. Vima found the lift excessively snug as eight security guards, G'arr, and herself shared a space meant for only about half as many personnel. She began to wonder if they shouldn't have requisitioned a cargo lift instead.

"So, uh, what did they find?" The imposing figure of N'err, the outpost's security chief, asked her. He seemed to speak little and it always surprised her a little when he attempted casual conversation.

"Some type of artifact on level thirty three," she replied, trying to keep the enthusiasm

out of her voice but failing. "Apparently, it's got markings from the House of Har'kor."

She watched a look of puzzlement flash across N'err's face. "The house of Har'kor was ...an An'araan faction?"

Vima nodded. "There was six major house at the apex of their war. The Har'kor, the Atrei, the Ordos, the Ar'rakai, the Firja and the, uh..."

"Dor'ta," G'arr chimed in.

Vima nodded. "Yes, thank you."

"Whatever became of the An'araans exactly?" N'err asked her with an almost humorous quizzical look on his face. She figured history wasn't one of his strong points.

"Thermonuclear annihilation," she replied. "It's too bad. Their culture seems to have been most advanced."

Indeed, many discoveries to this point while mining had revealed much to the Destara including advanced bio-weaponry and cybernetics. The An'araans' civil wars had propelled their weapons technology far ahead of their respective cultures-it had been a fascination to all of them that an organic race could've been so inventive in so little an amount of time.

The lift's sudden arrival on level thirty three, currently the base's lowest (and newest) level, brought Vima out of her reflections and back to now. She stepped out of the lift, on to the rough terrain, and lead her group through the foyer/receiving area of the level and down a series of large short tunnels in the rock face. The whole area had a rough unfinished look about it and did not at all match the smooth steel and crystal designs of the upper levels.

They arrived at their destination: a wall of sheer rock forming the end of the tunnel they were in. Nearby, two Destara miners awaited them, standing over something metallic which was partly covered by a tarp. She couldn't quite tell what was underneath.

"Cryn, what have you found?" she asked the green and red miner nearer her. "Why did you order this level cleared? And what's so important about this artifact?"

"Sorry, Commander," the Destara replied, "it's just that it seemed the safe thing to do considering what we've found."

He pulled the tarp off the "artifact", revealing a Destara-sized mechanoid which appeared to be quite old.

"Amazing!" Vima squealed. "We knew they had advanced cybernetics, but this-we've never seen anything this advanced before!"

Cryn nodded. "It's in amazingly good shape, considering it's age." He studied the cave about them. "Of course, there's a lot of clay deposits down here. It's conceivable that this one sealed the air off in here and prevented as much decay as would otherwise be found."

Vima knelt down to examine the lifeless mechanoid more closely. "Why did you order this level cleared, though? This obviously isn't going anywhere."

Cryn smiled. "Of course not—we'll be lucky if it's circuits haven't corroded so much and we can download any images from it's systems. No, I was more concerned it might contain some of those bio-weapons on it. If it contaminated the area with something harmful to us, it would take forever to filter it out of here, considering how deep down we are."

"Good call," Vima agreed. "We're better to err on the side of caution. Proximal The scientific community's going to love this!" She reached down and turned the mechanoid on to it's back.

"Perhaps we should make sure it contains no weapons before you examine it further," N'err suggested.

"This thing's been dead well over a thousand years!" Vima countered. "I doubt any of it's weapons still work!"

"Still, we-" G'arr began, but stopped as he noticed the Mechanoid's optics were a dull red now.

Without any further warning, the Mechanoid's hand lashed out and struck Vima, knocking her against the stone wall.

N'err and his fellow security guards began materializing their weapons immediately. N'err was first to take aim, but he collapsed in flames as the Mechanoid fired a flame thrower at him.

The Mechanoid moved fast, considering it's centuries of inactivity. It leapt out of the way of the resulting laser fire and pointed it's clenched fists at them. Micro-designed barrels in it's knuckles unleashed several volleys of green-yellow energy blasts at them. Four Destara crumpled to the ground before the others could dive for cover behind the miscellaneous pieces of equipment scattered about the cavern.

At some point during the resultant firefight, G'arr managed to grab Vima's limp form and drag her behind a large stray crate. "Are you okay?" he asked her. "Yeah..." she groaned, "just a little ...dizzy is all."

"That's good to hear," he replied. "Might I suggest we call for more back-up down here? That thing's obviously very dangerous!"

"Do it!" she snapped, materializing her own gun out of it's interdimensional dwelling. She took a few shots at the Mechanoid, but missed as it took to the air and dodged the crossfire of energy-bolts coming at it.

"C & C, this is G'arr! Send down reinforcements immediately! I repeat: we are under heavy attack and request immediate security back-up!"

Just then, the Mechanoid detonated something and everything went white around them.

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DESTARA FACILITY 88910-Ail-B-0101-T TO ANY DESTARA SPACECRAFT OR
BASE WE ARE UNDER ...TACK ...NEED ASSISTANCE DESPER...LY...VIRNA,
LIEUTENANT COMM ...AN'ARAAN FACIL-

"That's all that came through," Pathfinder said, pointing at the jumbled message on screen. "The signal transmitted for approximately ninety minutes before it just stopped."

"Where is An'araa?" Magma asked from behind him. "Is it deep in Destara territory?"

Pathfinder tapped rapidly on the keypad before him. "Yeah, it's quite deep in. Hmm."

"You just noticed it too, huh?"

"You mean why someone is attacking a base deep inside Destara territory and risking the whole Imperial fleet dropping out of Hyperspace behind it? Yeah, I noticed." Pathfinder replied. "A very peculiar strategy, to say the least."

"Right. Which is why I think we should investigate," Magma said. "This is obviously not an ordinary assault. Either the attacker is incredibly stupid or it has the technology and personnel to pull this attack off. If it's the latter, we can't just ignore an opportunity to ally ourselves with a possible power that could make a showing against the Empire."

"True," Pathfinder agreed. "But what if it's the former, instead? And even if your theory's correct, what makes you so sure this enemy would ally itself with us?"

"If it's the former, we can always retreat before reinforcements arrive. And as to your second question," Magma exhaled audibly, "I can't be sure they'd ally themselves with us. But we can't afford to miss out on this opportunity, just the same."

Besides, it wasn't like they could just travel back to Sybora Prime and destroy Deceptar--they had been ridiculously fortunate when they'd rescued their comrades that the whole planet wasn't alerted right away and that Deceptar hadn't called in reinforcements telepathically. By now, the Empire had surely upgraded their defenses around their home world and a second attempt would be sheer suicide--certain death, unlike the first attempt. And even then, Magma had several human deaths on his conscience from that attempt. No, to strike at Deceptar himself again would require timing and luck, and a potential ally with a lot of firepower could help their goals become accomplished a lot sooner than later.

Pathfinder nodded his agreement with Magma's plan, recalling from previous ventures that there would be no talking him down once he got an idea into his head. "Should I go get the others?"

"No, get the *Xarius* ready." Magma turned toward the exit way. Besides, I want to check on how far things have gotten out there."

Magma walked down a corridor and opened the inner door of the airlock to the outside.

He moved past the Lokos, the Destara gun ship that the Renegades had appropriated in last week's raid on Bolos. Its propulsion systems were in excellent shape, however, the weapons and shields had been damaged in its last use as a Destara vessel before they stole it and no one had even realized this fact until the vessel was sailing through Hyperspace alongside the *Xarius*. Still, once the systems were replaced, the ship's firepower, shields and armor would benefit their cause greatly.

He approached the large intricate framework which would soon become the complex forming their base. It was little now, but shortly it would be a spectacular sight to behold.

In the two future sub-levels, Thunderbolt, Firewind, Firestrike, Fury, Patch Up, Rock n' Roll, Lift Off, Apachi, and Earthquake worked with mechanical efficiency and precision, attempting to get the final quarter of the flooring finished. Earlier that week, the Renegades had already completed the uppermost roof of the complex, although it still looked strange without the future equipment it would have embedded in it.

"How's it going?" he called down to them.

"The wiring is done on this level," Thunderbolt replied. "We haven't got much more to do here."

Magma nodded his approval. "Hey boss man, how's about you 'n Pathfinder comin' down and helpin' us out?" Rock N' Roll called up. "That is, if you ain't too busy supervising' and all."

Magma smiled. "I'd love to, but I need some of you for a mission to check something out. Thunderbolt, Firewind, Fury, Rock n' Roll, Firestrike, and Earthquake, you're with me. You other three stay here and keep working--the faster the base is built, the better."

Lift Off and Patch Up just nodded, but Apachi looked visibly irritated at having been excluded.

"I'm sorry, Apachi," Magma told him, "but I can't take everyone with me this time. Next time, I promise you."

Apachi nodded slowly in resigned acceptance. "Good journey to you all," he said. He'd seemed to have accepted staying behind though Magma knew he still longed to come along. Battle was what the Amethyst Order warriors had been built for and despite their joining his

group on pursuing it's cause, Magma knew Apachi longed for the fight. Earthquake, on the other hand, seemed unusual in his pursuit of peace and seemed to enjoy the impromptu carpentry work they were doing. Perhaps he was just tired of destroying and wanted to create something instead?

As the Renegade group headed toward the Xarius, he knew he'd have to see about getting Pathfinder to another manufacturing facility soon to build those new warriors they'd discussed so they wouldn't be stretched so thin every time they embarked on a mission. And what if they needed to go on two missions? That was bound to occur sooner or later.

Magma sighed as he discovered a universal truth: there was always so much to do and always so little time in which to do it.

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"Time to intercept?" Straxus asked as he stepped on to the bridge of the Dark Fire.
"Three-point-five hours, Milord," Backblast replied from the helm station.

Straxus nodded his acknowledgment and walked over to the command console where he seated himself. It had been six hours since his ship had received a message relayed from the satellite network which had sent them a distress signal originating from a Destara mining outpost on a planet named An'araa. Strategically, the planet seemed like an unusual place for the Renegades to strike, but then, their strategy had always been hard to figure out. Since the attack was so deep in imperial space it was definitely the Renegades—none of the conquered slave races had been informed of the Renegades or the Human victory on Centaurai III and none of the yet un-assimilated races would dare strike so deep in their territory.

The newly formed task force was nowhere even near ready but they wouldn't be needed this time. The Dark Fire was ready for the Renegades and if he had to go down personally and destroy every one of them, he would.

That reminded him...

"This is the Emperor," he spoke into his comm-unit, "assemble a large, well-armed landing party for An'araa. You have three hours."

"At once, My Lord," the Destara's voice replied.

Straxus deactivated the comm-unit and turned to look at the large viewport and the swirling mass of colors in Hyperspace. He looked forward to encountering his enemies again and being allowed a chance at vindication.

* * *

Later.

The Renegades were well trained and well prepared for almost anything as they re-entered Realspace above An'araa.

Anything, except for a seriously damaged Destara mining colony and absolutely no sign of attackers in local space or invaders' vehicles on the surface.

"Thunderbolt, anything in this sector?" Magma asked.

Thunderbolt shook his head. "Should I scan for Tachyon wake trails?" "Do it." Thunderbolt's hands danced over the keypads in front of him. "There's no sign of anything ... how can that be?"

Magma didn't answer. It seemed impossible to him too. All star vessels using Hyperdrives or faster-than-light drives left trails of Tachyons where they had either jumped away from or jumped to. Since there weren't any, it suggested an impossibility. There were no neighboring planets to launch an attack from, and while the distress call had been garbled, it had clearly said they were under attack. Besides, the mining complex looked attacked on sensors and

a meteor would've either been shot down or have made a distinctive impact somewhere. The damage to the complex was far too spread out-like an attack would have done.

"So, now what?" Pathfinder asked. "Do we go down or what?"

Magma thought about it. Well, they had come this far...

"Alright. Take us down," he finally said. "When we land, I want Firewind to take up aerial patrol of the perimeter and Rock N' Roll to stay onboard, in case we need to make a quick departure."

The Xarius landed with no problem and no resistance from the base, not that Magma really expected any considering the damage the complex had taken.

Having scanned the immediate area for energy emissions and finding no life signs, he had their group move into the complex itself. The place was eerily quiet and all they found in their minutes of investigation were more damaged areas and several dead Destara personnel. There was no indication of the intruders' identities in the immediate area and more disturbingly, no rear guards of any sort-neither of the intruders themselves or of the Destara.

After several minutes of fruitless investigations, the group reassembled at the original corridor.

"This place is enormous," Pathfinder said, looking about the abandoned corridor they were in. "How are we ever going to find anything significant before this place is crawling with Destara?"

Magma looked down the corridor and at the lifts. "Did anyone check how many levels there are?" he asked.

"Thirty-three," Firewind replied. "At least, that's what's recorded on the lifts' mainframe. There's no easy way to tell if there are any levels hidden, or unfinished and not yet added to the listing."

"We need to narrow this down somewhat," Magma said. "Pathfinder, are the facility's internal sensors working?"

Pathfinder shook his head. "The whole system's shot. Something took out the power grid to the system's cameras.. there's no way we can get it working in what little time we have."

They were silent for a moment and then Earthquake suggested: "Wait a minute-why don't we just use the ship's sensors to scan for weapons' fire and/or life sign readings?"

Now why didn't he think of that? Magma activated his com-link and spoke into it. "Rock N' Roll, scan the complex for weapons' fire, life signs or any sort of anomalous energy signatures."

"Roger, boss," the voice on the other end replied. A few minutes of silence intermixed with the odd sound came across the link. Then finally, their comrade returned.

"I've got both life signs and weapons' fire on level nineteen," Rock N' Roll replied. "Can't tell how many're down there-there's too much radiation from the base's power reactors on level seventeen which're blottin' the sensor readings. "

"Understood," Magma said, "Keep an optic on the sky in case the Destara arrive. Magma out." He switched the com-link off and looked at the others. "Let's go."

The Renegades piled onto one of the nearby lifts-which was in surprisingly good shape considering the rest of the damage done to the base-and Pathfinder keyed in '7-9' and pressed 'ENTER'.

The lift moved with efficiency as the five of them were quickly transported into the

depths of the base. All of them stood silently, waiting, and watching as the level numbers counted down to nineteen.

"Everyone," Magma said as they cleared the last few levels. "Be ready for anything." Fury switched the safety off on his rifle. "I always am," he sneered.

The double doors rescinded into the walls and they stepped onto the quiet level.

"What the-?" Thunderbolt exclaimed, seeing no adversaries.

"Where is everybody?" Pathfinder asked, echoing that sentiment.

And then, it all happened at once. A mechanical hum, someone yelling, "Get down!", something appearing and then volleys of green-yellow energy bolts hurdling at them!

The blasts caught Earthquake square in the chest, slamming him backward into the lift. Another volley caught Firestrike in the shoulder—the sparks flying out of his shoulder as Thunderbolt dragged him down out of the line of fire.

"What the hell was that?" Pathfinder exclaimed as he and the others took cover behind two stacks of crates on either side of the pathway leading back to the lift.

"I don't know," Magma replied, as he peeked out from behind their cover. He watched as a winged mechanoid circled and landed a few feet in front of them in a large circular clearing, surrounded on all sides by equipment crates. It was about their size and looked emotionless with its mask and visor design.

Behind it, three Destara suddenly leapt up from behind their cover and began firing on it.

Magma surveyed the others. "Thunderbolt," he whispered, "you're closet to the lift. Check on Earthquake's condition."

Thunderbolt nodded and turned, crawling into the exposed lift.

In the clearing, the Mechanoid had turned and started firing green-yellow energy bolts from gun barrels built into its knuckles. One shot caught one of the Destara in the head module, killing it instantly. The other two ducked behind the crates they were using for cover.

"I don't get it," Firestrike said, as they peeked at the searching mechanoid. "Is this being part of the alien force or did it do all that damage by itself?"

A good question. They hadn't seen anything else to indicate it was part of a group and yet, how could it have caused all that damage? And Rock N' Roll hadn't been able to scan how many were down here, so who knew if it was alone?

"I don't know, but we can't stay on the defensive forever," Magma replied. Besides, if there were more of those, they'd have a hell of a time stopping them all—this one looked pretty dangerous!

"Earthquake is alright," Thunderbolt whispered from the lift. "He's just a bit dazed."

"They sure build those Amethyst Ord—" Pathfinder never finished his sentence as the Mechanoid, sensing the sound from their area, opened fire on them and forced them to stay down.

"Time to go on the defensive!" Fury snapped, tensing to spring up and shoot.

Firestrike motioned at him to wait and then slowly rose to his feet, holding his rifle above his head with both hands. He walked out onto the path between the crates.

The Mechanoid instantly locked onto him, but hesitated to fire, sensing his lack of aggression.

"What are you, nuts?" Fury gasped. "That thing's a killer!" He was about to move into action once more, when Magma put a loose hand on his shoulder, indicating for him not to.

"We mean you no harm," Firestrike told their adversary. "Why do you attack us?"

The Mechanoid kept its fists aimed but showed no sign of either aggression or comprehension.

"Do you understand?" Firestrike asked it. He slowly placed his rifle on the floor before him, wincing with pain as his damaged shoulders servos reacted to the new movement. "We don't wish to fight you."

"I..." it suddenly spoke. "Do...understand ...meaning ...talk ...more..."

"It's slowly assimilating our language!" Pathfinder exclaimed. "Talk some more to it," he told Firestrike.

Behind them, Thunderbolt and Earthquake emerged from the lift, trying not to show any hostility or make any sudden moves. On the other side of the clearing, the two Destara rose from their hiding place. They both still held their weapons but were smart enough not to initiate any action against the Mechanoid.

"We are Transformers," Firestrike told it. "Mechanical life forms like yourself. I am a Renegade." He pointed at the red symbol on his chest. "They," he pointed at the two Destara behind it, and it turned to observe them, "are Destara. See the purple symbols on them?"

"Yes..." it replied, turning to look back at him.

"We are two different factions. We are enemies of each other and at war—"

"War..." it said, "I understand war ...I...am weapon."

"It's true," one of the Destara said. It was the first time that Magma noticed it was a female. "It was part of the An'araan faction called the Har'kor."

"Yes," it replied. "Unable to say name proper in this language. 'Har'kor' sufficient."

"What were you exactly?" Magma said as he rose to his feet. The other Renegades did likewise although none of them, Magma included, dropped their weapons like Firestrike did. "What was your role in that society?"

"We protected our houses in war... at first, they used crude chemicals and other weapons.. .after many cycles, they invent us. First, Ordos House invent sentry robots then Atrei, and Har'kor and others. Over cycles we become more and more advanced...) was prototype of newest, most powerful, generation of sentries. Designed to bring Har'kor's enemies to their final defeat."

"But, why did you attack us?" The female Destara asked. "We're not An'araans!"

"You are intruders. I must defend my House.. .destroy its enemies."

"I hate to say this, but—" Firestrike began, but never finished as a large section of the ceiling off to their far left was incinerated by some sort of energy burst. No one sure if it had been an explosion or a vessel's weapons shooting through the base from orbit.

As the smoke cleared, everyone was surprised to see Straxus and two dozen other Destara fly down out of the hole and land on the floor. Immediately, they drew their weapons on the Renegades and the Mechanoid. Pathfinder noted that Straxus' particle cannon's barrel was smoking and he realized what they had just seen.

"Magma, you and your Renegades are under arrest for crimes against the Destara Empire," Straxus said as he and the others advanced. He noticed the Mechanoid and walked closer to examine it.

"That's amazing," Pathfinder whispered to Fury. "Straxus shot through eighteen levels! How strong *is* he?"

Fury's remark was lost as the Mechanoid spoke again. "This was a deception!" he snapped. "You're trying to destroy me so the Har'kor House will be defeated!"

"No!" Firestrike snapped. "Listen to me, we're not with them! We mean you no harm!"

"And what are you?" Straxus asked it. "Some ally of the Renegades that helped them damage this facility?"

"My Liege," the female Destara interrupted. "I am Lieutenant Commander Vima and this is my aide G'arr."

"Where are the others?" Straxus asked her. "There's supposed to be one hundred and eighty-three Destara on this planet!"

"It," Vima motioned at the Mechanoid, "we accidentally uncovered it while mining. It was a sentry robot of the An'araans. It attacked us and killed everyone else over the last seventy-two hours. Until the Renegades arrived, I was certain we would die too." As it was, it was only blind luck they'd survived thus far—a combination of G'arr's ineffectualness as a soldier and just picking the right places to hide. Until their group's luck had ran out and the sentry robot had found them and began picking them off piece by piece. She figured it had been her exposing them when she went to the surface control center and managed to get a distress signal off. It had somehow found them then and destroyed the comm systems' power grid and anyone or anything else it could find. They were now the only Destara left alive in the entire base.

"I see," Straxus said. He turned and looked at the Mechanoid silently for a moment and then said: "And do you have a name?"

It was quiet a moment too, as if trying to figure out what these enemies' ploy was. After being unable to determine what, it spoke: "H v-vy M'tall."

"Heavy Metal?" G'arr asked, repeating the sounds as best he could.

"Interesting." Straxus stepped closer to the Sentry. "I am the leader of the Destara, Straxus. We could use an ally like yourself."

"Like ... myself?" Heavy Metal asked.

"You are a sentient machine like ourselves," Straxus explained. "You would be welcome among us."

The Renegades didn't like where this was going and Magma could tell Vima didn't either—perhaps, it was because she was trying to avoid getting killed by it for the past three days! He couldn't allow the Destara to utilize this thing against helpless slave worlds like Centaurai III. If it came to it, he'd have to destroy Heavy Metal first.

"I must... defend my House," Heavy Metal replied to Straxus.

"Of course," Straxus said. "But what if we could help you? We would be honored to do so."

"You ...would?" Heavy Metal asked in an astonished tone.

"Don't believe it!" Firestrike yelled. The An'araans—every last one of them—are long dead! They died in a thermonuclear conflict centuries ago!"

"It's a lie!" Straxus exclaimed. "He seeks to—"

"NO!" Heavy Metal snapped. "You are all trying to confuse me! You seek my destruction so the Har'kor House will be destroyed!"

"Heavy Metal, don't—" Firestrike never finished as the Mechanoid opened fire on all of them at once.

The Renegades dove back behind their cover, but the Destara were not quite so fortunate. Almost immediately, G'arr and several others crumpled to the ground dead.

"You will either join us, or die!" Straxus yelled aiming his particle cannon at the Mechanoid. He attempted to shoot, but neglected to remember it had not yet had sufficient time

to recharge from his massive feat before.

Seeing his own weapons were useless on Straxus, Heavy Metal soared into him and flew him across the floor into a wall! A Destara soldier came charging to his leader's rescue but Heavy Metal moved faster and impaled the warrior through the head module with his claw. Heavy Metal began taking to the air once again, but Straxus moved from the wall and punched him, sending him crashing to the floor a few feet away. Straxus charged at him, but Heavy Metal avoided him at the last second by flying into the air above him.

As the An'araan construct began soaring up the hole Straxus had created earlier, Straxus jumped back to his feet and fired a salvo of missiles out of his shoulder launchers.

For a moment, it seemed as if the projectiles would hit their target. At the last moment, however, Heavy Metal turned in the air and came back at Straxus. The heat-seeking missiles followed suite and as the Mechanoid avoided the Destara Emperor at the last moment, they found a new target, exploding against Straxus and throwing him to the floor violently.

Heavy Metal turned and flew upward, escaping into the confines of the Destara Complex.

Nearby, the other Destara had gathered the Renegades together and had stood watching the battle with their captives, when Fury had suddenly smashed his elbow into the guard next to him.

"Now!" Magma yelled, taking advantage of his soldiers action. Instantaneously, the remaining five Renegades had sprang to action, attacking their enemy about them.

Of all the Renegades, Fury fought the hardest, stabbing his opponents fiercely with his twin swords. His enemy fell dead around him-their impaled bodies and split head modules reigning down on the hard ground and spilling Energei, much to his delight.

A few feet away, Straxus recovered. He noticed the battle nearby, but decided instead to pursue Heavy Metal. Checking his internal sensors and seeing his particle cannon was still effectively useless, he picked up the photon rifle from the Destara Heavy Metal had impaled earlier. He didn't know why he pursued the An'araan construct instead of assisting his own soldiers--perhaps he just had something to prove to himself.

He flew up through the hole in the ceiling the Destara had used to enter and Heavy Metal had used to escape through. After two levels of travel, he notice another hole in level seventeen's wall, one he hadn't recalled from the way down-not that he had really been paying meticulous detail or anything. Upon closer inspection, he noticed a slightly acidic substance had caused the new entryway.

He crashed through the wall beside it and entered a giant chamber. He instantly recognized the large machinery in the room as the Complex's main power reactors. He wondered why Heavy Metal would've come in here ...there didn't seem much to gain.

CLANG!

Straxus looked up in time to see Heavy Metal soaring down at him from the rafters. Instinctively, he flipped backward and, landing on his feet, opened fire with the rifle.

The crimson energy bolts hit their intended target and Heavy Metal crashed to the floor uncontrollably with a sickening THUD!

He slowly climbed back to his feet, though it was clear he was injured. Straxus waited, watching for Heavy Metal's last futile attack with weapons that were nothing against his armor. Hah! Perhaps Magma had defeated him on Sybora Prime, but he was obviously still worthy of

Destara leadership—his success against this archaic automaton proved that at least.

Predictably, Heavy Metal revealed hidden missile launchers in his shoulder compartments. "You will not take Har'kor House. Though I will die in the process too, at least I will have the satisfaction of knowing you died with me!"

"Fool! Your weapons are useless against me!" Straxus hissed. "It is a pity you would not join us when you had the chance!"

He raised the photon rifle and fired. The crimson energy bolts tore into Heavy Metal's armor and he toppled to the ground like a puppet whose strings had just been cut. Straxus smiled and walked closer to his enemy's wrecked body to examine his handiwork.

With surprising speed, Heavy Metal lashed out and kicked the Emperor away from him. He leapt to his feet and turned around to face the power reactors. Straxus rose to his feet and realized what Heavy Metal was planning a moment too late. The Mechanoid's missiles—all of them—sped toward the base's power reactors!

"NO!" Straxus yelled, knowing all too well how helpless he was to stop it.

The projectiles exploded into the reactors, causing a massive energy discharge which blinded his optics momentarily. The unleashed energy flung Straxus backward and he crashed out through the wall he'd entered the level through originally. He managed to stop his uncontrolled descent before he crashed into level nineteen's floor and instead landed gently on the scorched metal plating of the deck. Nearby, both sides were still locked in combat and oblivious to his arrival.

He looked up the dark pit above him and saw some small fires two levels up. No doubt the shockwave had destroyed Heavy Metal—it had thrown him pretty hard, so he sincerely doubted the An'araan construct had survived it.

Straxus shook his slight dizziness off and set off toward his warriors—he had a funny feeling that the base's reactors were damaged enough to go critical and he had no intention of still being down here when that happened.

EYEPEP, EYEPEP, EYEPEP

ATTENTION! ATTENTION! REACTOR DESTABILIZATION... SAFETY SYSTEMS UNABLE TO COMPENSATE ..ALL PERSONNEL EVACUATE IMMEDIATELY... THIS IS NOT A DRILL!

The abrupt computer warning got everyone's attention immediately. The alarm continued its shrill blare and the computer began repeating its message.

"How the hell did that happen?" Pathfinder wondered aloud.

"I don't know," Magma replied. "Maybe damage from Heavy Metal earlier. At any rate, we've got to get out of here—now!"

Earthquake secured the lift and the other Renegades began falling back toward it. All, but Fury, who kept striking the Destara—some of whom were trying to escape and some of whom were still shooting at his comrades.

"Fury! Come on, we're leaving!" Earthquake yelled as he provided cover fire from near the lift.

Fury did not reply. Instead, he continued his killing spree against the Destara as if he was obsessed with that sole purpose and nothing else mattered.

"Fury!" Thunderbolt snapped. "Fall back! That's an order!"

"He's going to get us all killed!" Earthquake grumbled, as he caught a nearby Destara

with a laser blast, stopping it before it could strike Fury from behind.

Thunderbolt adjusted his weapon. "Fury!" he yelled. As before, Fury ignored them and continued his assault, having switched to his guns since the remaining Destara were getting out of range of his swords. Thunderbolt sighed, and then opened fire on his team mate.

Fury turned and stumbled toward them. A look of betrayal crossed his face as he collapsed.

"Cover me!" Thunderbolt yelled at Magma and Earthquake as he ran toward his fallen comrade. He grabbed Fury's limp body and narrowly avoided two energy beams. He dashed for the open lift. As soon as he was inside it with the others, Magma and Earthquake followed.

Just as they were about to step onto the lift, Earthquake materialized his Hydrogen missile gun and launched one at the remaining Destara. He leapt aboard the lift.

"Hit it! Now!" he yelled.

The lift soared upward for the surface.

"Destara, fall back!" Straxus yelled at his remaining warriors as the lift doors sealed. Several, Vima included, had already departed for the surface.

As the remaining ones turned to leave, it was then he saw Earthquake's projectile speeding toward them! He quickly turned and soared up the self-made abyss toward the surface.

Behind him, Earthquake's missile exploded, destroying all of the remaining Destara on level nineteen. The explosion soared up after him as well, but exhausted its energy before it could reach him.

It wasn't that he'd worried about surviving the missile's explosion just that he had no intention of being buried under tons of rock and metal when the base's reactors went. Which wouldn't be long, he knew.

Curse himself for allowing that Mechanoid to fire its missiles at the reactors! And the Renegades had escaped yet again! He swore he would destroy them one day-and it was a promise he meant to keep!

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The Xarius soared off An'araa, making sure it kept as far away from the orbiting Dark Fire as possible.

Rock n' Roll had the ship powered up when they arrived at it. It seemed that three Destara had been guarding Rock n' Roll when Firewind had surprised them and the two Renegades had correctly guessed that their comrades would be in a hurry.

Fury was still unconscious but otherwise unharmed-Thunderbolt had, only stunned him, after all.

It was unfortunate they did not find an ally in their war with the Destara, Magma knew. Still, he doubted Heavy Metal had survived to join the Destara or be salvaged by them. He'd briefly noted Straxus flying after the Mechanoid when the fighting with the Destara had begun. He doubted that Straxus had left the Mechanoid alive. ..perhaps, one of them had been responsible for the base's destruction?

At any rate, as Hyperspace took the Xarius to safety, Magma knew that one day they would succeed in getting an ally for their cause. And on that day, they would be able to win this war.

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Epilogue

Straxus listened to the silence and characteristic hum of the Hyperdrive in the background. This time alone in his quarters was the most time he ever got to himself. To forget the stresses of his rank and just relax.

However, this time he could not forget the problems plaguing him so easily. The Renegades had defeated the Destara—his warriors—twice now. Both times his warriors and he himself had been humbled, acted like fools when confronted with so serious a foe. Granted, this time he had a third factor, the An'araan Mechanoid Heavy Metal, to deal with. But still! He'd had the Renegades right there and instead of securing them first-or just executing them outright-he'd given them an avenue of escape.

Of course, he was not entirely certain if Deceptar still wanted them alive or if he didn't care if they survived one way or the other..though, hadn't he mentioned something about wanting to control the Tatrix's power and add it to his own? Yes, it was best to try and capture them for the time being. Until he heard otherwise from Deceptar, that was what he would continue to try and accomplish.

In three weeks, the task force would be completed with it's upgrades and tactical training. But would it be enough, he wondered. Yes, they had various instances of the Renegades tactics recorded, but he needed to know more. What were their limitations? Would his warriors have the weapons and abilities to destroy them in the right conditions?

That was the main problem he foresaw. He was certain that, despite their exertions up to this point, he hadn't observed instances where all of the Renegades had been pushed to their utmost limits to survive. Indeed, he didn't have the soldiers to push them to that point. Not yet, anyway.

Or did he?

The answer to this problem suddenly occurred to him. There *were* Destara who could adequately test the Renegades. He wasn't ecstatic about utilizing that particular unit to test the Renegades' abilities but they were the only ones truly capable of the task at hand. Besides, surely the Renegades could not kill all of his elite assassin unit and a few casualties were acceptable.

Straxus walked over to the desk and activated the comm-unit on top of it.

"Communications, give me an ultra-violet channel to coordinates 816-21Y-597-B."

"Yes, my Liege," came the disembodied reply.

Straxus seated himself and activated the small screen in front of him. The familiar Destara logo appeared on it and after a moment, so did "Incoming Transmission".

"The channel is ready, Liege," the communications officer on the bridge replied. "Bridge out. "

Straxus pressed the button on the red and purple keypad before him. A black, red and silver face appeared on screen. The optic band and mask betrayed no emotion.

"My Emperor." The robot's voice was calm and cool. It betrayed no emotion either. The Destara did not make any other acknowledgment of Straxus' rank, though that did not surprise the Destara Emperor.

"Razorwing," Straxus began. "I have a mission I believe you will find most interesting..."