

Zompiewolf 731

Chapter 731 You Messed With The Wrong Man (2)

It seemed the Xyrans had taken the bait because not even an hour after 'arresting' Rea, Ashton received a call from them. Much to his surprise, as he picked up the ring, he saw Ibis on the other end.

In Ashton's mind, he wondered whether Astaroth had fed a twisted tale to the Xyrans. Still, upon seeing Ibis's friendly expression, he realised Astaroth couldn't have been in contact with the Xyrans or else Ibis wouldn't have looked so relieved after seeing him.

'Hm... I wonder what Astaroth has been up to if they hadn't contacted them yet,' Ashton wondered while waiting for Ibis to say something.

"Where were you!?" Ibis shouted through the device, the intensity causing Ashton to avert his gaze from the communicator.

"Is that all you have to say?" Ashton rolled his eyes. "I was expecting a different greeting from the Xyrans after one of their esteemed leaders tried to off me."

"I saw the clip..." Ibis mumbled. "But I'm still having a tough time believing lord Rood would have done something so- Wait, is Astaroth there? He's a Xyran... His alibi would be more believable to us."

"Ah, so that's how it is," Ashton scoffed. "You think I'll be in touch with someone who killed me? Do I look that stupid to you?"

Ibis appeared even more dumbfounded upon hearing Ashton's words. Although Ashton couldn't use [Heartbeat Sense] to verify if Ibis was pretending, as she wasn't in front of him, her expression strongly suggested that she was genuinely unaware of Astaroth's actions.

"He killed you?" Ibis said after a minute. "But then-"

"Well, he tried to kill me and left me on a desolate planet, so yeah, he pretty much killed me," Ashton made something up as he didn't want to reveal his resurrection skill to anyone yet.

Ibis looked like she wanted to say more, but Ashton stopped her. He didn't answer her call just to chat casually; he wanted to talk about how the Xyrans would make up for trying to harm him and tarnish his reputation.

This included their initial attempt on his life and their later efforts to change the story through a manipulated interview or a test, as Rea had called it.

"Right, my sincere apologies for getting ahead of myself," Ibis took a deep breath and got all professional. "So tell me your demands so we can push this matter aside and focus on the greater enemy."

"You know, Ibis, I've been thinking," Ashton began, his grin widening. "Considering all the trouble your people have caused me, I believe it's only fair that I get something of equal or more value in return."

"I assure you we will do our best-"

"I want half of the Xyran warships. All for myself."

"Yeah, and I want to rule over Andromeda," Ibis, initially thinking Ashton was joking, chuckled nervously. "We can joke later when we're done negotiating."

"Oh, I'm not joking," Ashton replied, his tone dead serious. "Consider it compensation for the attempted murder and that lovely little rigged interview your ambassador conducted."

"You can't be serious." Ibis' eyes widened, and her smile ceased.

The conversation had taken an unexpected turn, and Ibis was visibly taken aback by Ashton's outrageous demand.

"That's impossible, Ashton," Ibis, now stern-faced, shook her head. "No matter what a foolish ambassador might have done to you, we won't let you walk all over us."

"Well, then, I guess we're at an impasse, aren't we?" Ashton leaned back, maintaining his grin.

"We can offer you monetary compensation for your troubles, Ashton." Ibis, realising that Ashton wasn't joking, sighed. "But that's all the generous Xyrans are willing to do for you."

"Ibis, you can't just throw money at the problem and expect it to disappear."

"So stop being unreasonable, Ashton," Ibis sighed, growing frustrated. "You can't just demand our military assets out of nowhere and expect us to serve it to you on a golden platter!"

Ashton's eyes narrowed. He saw right through Ibis' attempt to shift all the blame onto Rea and wash their hands of the matter. He had already expected such a move. That's why he had imprisoned all the Xyrans on Earth to play them as bargaining chips.

Was it cruel of him? Definitely. Will doing so ruin his reputation with the Xyrans? Certainly. Did he give a flying fuck about it? Most certainly not.

The way Ashton saw things, the Xyrans had betrayed him thrice. Firstly, by not giving him the Soul Killer. Secondly, at the hands of Rood, and finally, after conducting the rigged interview.

After all that, the Xyrans would have to be delusional to think he would trust them again. Hell, had it not been for the resources they could provide him, he would have dealt with them by now.

'You want to play dirty, so let's play dirty.'

But Ashton remained unfazed, knowing it was time to play his trump card. "If you think that's unreasonable, you're in for a surprise."

"What do you mean?"

Ashton wasted no time answering Ibis. Instead, he gestured to Vimur, who swiftly dragged Rea into view, chained in plasma cuffs from head to toe. When Ibis saw Rea in that state, she clenched her fists, clearly taken aback by Ashton's unanticipated move.

"What is the meaning of this?" Ibis demanded, trying to keep her anger in check.

"Oh, just a little insurance," Ashton chuckled, revelling in the shift of power. "You do remember how many Xyrans are on Earth, right? It'll be a shame if something accidentally happened to them, won't you agree?"

"Is this the extent you're willing to go?" Ibis struggled to contain her fury, her eyes blazing with anger. "Dragging an ambassador like this? Threatening the safety of our people? I knew someone like you would be as scummy as this-"

"Woah, woah, relax with the insults or my hand might slip and hit your beloved Ambassador," Ashton replied, acting like an innocent child. "You wanted to play dirty, so I'm reciprocating in kind. Why does that make me the bad guy, huh?"

"You-"

Ashton disconnected the call before Ibis could say anything, leaving her even more frustrated.

"Son of a bitch!"

Chapter 732 You Messed With The Wrong Man (3)

The communication screen went blank, and the room was engulfed in silence for a moment. Vimur, ever loyal, looked at Ashton with a hint of concern in his eyes.

"That should get her riled up," Ashton commented, the smirk never leaving his face.

"Was all that really necessary, Ashton?" Vimur asked, his deep voice resonating through the room.

The plasma cuffs on Rea crackled softly in the background as Vimur offered her a seat. She had been blindfolded, and her ears blocked so that she couldn't see or hear what was happening around her.

Everyone thought Ashton was going a bit too far with his antics, but not everyone dared to call him out. But since Vimur was one of the 'dumb' ones, he didn't think about the consequences and blurted out whatever was on his mind.

"Necessary? No, perhaps not," Ashton, still wearing a cold expression, turned to Vimur. "But it sends a message. One that needs to be heard loud and clear. I'm not hurting them because they betrayed me, but to get a message through to Astaroth that I'm not the same guy he killed."

Vimur raised an eyebrow, prompting Ashton to explain further. Ashton's tone turned icy as he revealed a side of himself Vimur hadn't seen before.

"When I died on the Verge, a part of me died there for good. A part I used to call compassion. I had it for strangers, for those who needed help. But not anymore."

Vimur, though accustomed to Ashton's decisive and, at times, ruthless actions, couldn't help but feel a twinge of concern.

"You're saying you've forsaken compassion entirely?"

"Not for those on my side, like you," Ashton's gaze remained fixed, and he shrugged. "From now on, no matter who betrays me, they will face the consequences. Whether I destroy them or make them desire to destroy themselves, I'll make sure of it."

Vimur understood the weight of Ashton's words. The man who once had room for empathy now seemed driven solely by a calculated and unforgiving mindset.

It worried Vimur, but he respected Ashton's decisions as he knew his captain would only do what was best for them even though it might cause him harm.

Before Vimur could delve deeper into the conversation, Ashton's communicator beeped again. Ashton gestured for Vimur to remain silent. The room held an air of anticipation as Ashton accepted the incoming call, his expression unreadable.

"That happened faster than I thought," Ashton mused before accepting Ibis' call. "Yahallo! How may I help you?"

"Cut the crap!"

Ibis, usually composed and diplomatic, couldn't mask her anger. The humiliation of seeing Rea, an ambassador of the Xyrans, treated like a criminal struck a chord deep within her. Pride was a pillar of Xyran culture, and Ashton had strategically aimed where it hurt them the most.

"Oh, feisty. I can see why Astaroth was so fascinated with you."

"Is this your idea of negotiation, Ashton?" Ibis spat, her tone laced with fury. "You think you can disgrace us and get what you want?"

"Negotiation is a two-way street, Ibis," Ashton chuckled, unfazed by Ibis' outburst. "You wanted to play hardball, so here we are."

Ibis, struggling to maintain her composure, shot back, "This won't end well for you, Ashton."

"Says the ones who wronged me not once or twice but thrice!" Ashton shrugged. "You should be thankful I'm still willing to discuss this. Had it been Kro'Han, your body would be floating somewhere in space."

"Is this the extent you're willing to go?" Ibis gritted her teeth, realising that Ashton wasn't going to let things go. "Threatening us with hostages?"

"I'm willing to go to any extent to protect my interests. Some would call it dedication," Ashton's grin widened. "Besides, you started this game, Ibis. I'm just playing by your rules."

"A war, is that what you want?" she inquired, attempting to gauge the gravity of Ashton's intentions.

"You should remember what happened the last time your people tried something like this," he retorted. "Yes, I took some losses, but the Xyrans were decimated. I'm well aware of my significance in the current situation."

Ashton saw Ibis change expressions yet again and pushed even more. "Even if that wasn't the case, you people need me more than I need you. Especially after your beloved decided to side with Kro'Han and take Soul Killer with him."

Ibis got silent. Every word Ashton said was accurate. If Astaroth had sided with Kro'Han, their only hope was Ashton, as his Precursor gene was the only 'weapon' to keep Kro'han in check.

After all, even though they had 'won' a war against Precursors, they had only managed to kill a few. Most of the Precursors had been dealt with their own kind, led by Jo'Han.

Their 'victory' was nothing more than an inside joke amongst the council, and Ibis knew Ashton was more or less aware of the truth.

"So? What's it gonna be, Miss Representative?" Ashton taunted, a wicked smile playing on his lips.

This time, Ibis struggled to hide her anger. The game of negotiations had taken a dark turn, and Ashton revelled in his strategic advantage over the rest of them.

"Give me some time to discuss your terms with the rest of the council," Ibis conceded, her tone betraying a hint of frustration.

Ashton maintained his wicked smile. "Take all the time you need, but remember, the clock is ticking, and your citizens' lives are on the line."

"Believe me, I would rather die than forget what you did today," Ibis said as she took a deep breath. "Neither will I let you forget about it either."

"What can I say? You messed with the wrong man."

With a final, steely look, Ibis disconnected the call, leaving Ashton alone with his wicked satisfaction.

As the silence settled, thoughts churned in Ashton's mind. Threatening them was a gamble, a calculated risk to bend the Xyrans to his will. Thankfully, they were oblivious to the truth behind Ashton's words.

He wanted the Xyran warships, as they were the most advanced fleet. But he also wanted to smoke out any more rats hiding in Xyran ranks while serving Kro'Han, and thoroughly humiliating them was one way to get them acting weird.

The game had just begun, and Ashton was determined to come out on top, no matter the cost.

Chapter 733 Forgotten Sister (1)

Days passed like an eternity for Astaroth as he moved through the vast expanse of planet Euphoria. His only goal was to find 'Her,' a girl he once called his sister.

They weren't related by blood; they didn't even share a species. Jaline was someone Astaroth had found during one of the many wars he had fought, and ever since then, they had been inseparable until he died and lost all contact with her.

Since his return to Xenithar, he had questioned everyone who had known her. But to his surprise, nobody remembered her. It seemed like she had been erased from their memories, but Astaroth wasn't sure how it was possible.

Astaroth desired Soul Killer to investigate whether it had been employed on her. Soul Killer, not merely ending a life, had the potential to erase a person from everyone's awareness. Perhaps Astaroth retained memories of her because he was dead while the Soul Killer was used on his sister.

But using the Soul Killer wasn't easy and required permission from the entire council. Astaroth didn't want to believe that the council would have gone as far as killing an innocent just to 'get back' at him.

However, as no council member remembered his sister, Astaroth was certain someone had used the Soul Killer and went to check the records.

Because the use of the Soul Killer resulted in everyone forgetting about the person it targeted, the Xyran council found it necessary to maintain a record of each time it was employed.

Unfortunately, Jaline, Astaroth's sister's name was nowhere in the record, which both gave him hope as well as pissed him off.

At first, he found relief in the absence of Jaline's name from the records. Yet, he couldn't ignore the possibility that someone might have wielded the Soul Killer without authorisation, bypassing the need to document the information.

That's why when Kro'Han told him about her, Astaroth used the Soul Killer on Ashton's severed heart, as he didn't want to remember doing something so horrific.

But as he still remembered about Ashton, it meant one of two things. Either he didn't use the Soul Killer properly, or secondly, Ashton wasn't dead. Even though Astaroth hoped it was the latter case, he didn't know how he would be able to face him when their paths crossed again.

'I'll sort that mess when the time comes,' Astaroth thought, staring out the window. 'I should focus on finding Jaline... if only these cultists disappeared, it would make my life easier.'

The ever-watchful eyes of the Cult of Cosmos were a constant hindrance to him, even at that very moment. Astaroth was never left alone, their relentless surveillance making it nearly impossible for him to try and locate Jaline.

Kro'Han didn't trust him, and as long as Kro'Han's mistrust lingered, the cultists would be on his ass, reporting every move Astaroth made to their lord and saviour.

The unpredictable nature of the Xyran made him a potential threat, and Kro'Han wasn't willing to take any chances, especially after their last meeting.

Initially, Kro'Han's sole interest in the cult was to use them for a specific task – delivering the powerful Precursor warships to him. Once they accomplished this mission, Kro'Han planned to discard them like insignificant insects, indifferent to their existence.

However, with the arrival of Astaroth, Kro'Han recognised a chance to achieve dual objectives. By directing the cult to monitor Astaroth, he found a way to extract some value from them. Simultaneously, this precaution ensured that Astaroth couldn't stab him in the back.

Meanwhile, frustration brewed within Astaroth as his attempts to break free from the invisible chains became increasingly futile. He played along, pretending to be the obedient servant, while his mind tirelessly devised strategies to elude the ever-present surveillance.

Just then, someone called him out, and as Astaroth emerged from his quarters, he found the Pope, the cult's leader, awaiting him.

Kro'Han's most loyal servant and fanatic, the Pope, wasn't fond of Astaroth. Probably because he was upset the Kro'Han valued Astaroth more than him, even though he was rebellious and untrustworthy.

"The Lord summons you, Astaroth," The Pope announced.

Astaroth's gaze pierced the Pope's hooded eyes before he nodded. Kro'Han hadn't called him once, so he did find it strange that the Precursor was calling him now. Still, he followed the Pope as it allowed him to leave his captivity.

Upon reaching a designated spot, the Pope told Astaroth to go ahead and create some distance from the Xyran. What followed was a sinister turn of events.

A sudden onslaught of attacks erupted from the cultists. A flurry of spells hit him, each strike aimed at incapacitating Astaroth. However, to their astonishment, Astaroth remained unfazed, his formidable strength and resilience rendering their efforts futile.

"You fuckers are terrible at acting. You know that?" Astaroth scoffed as he emerged from the dust and smoke. "I knew you were planning something the moment you brought me out, you fool."

With a surge of power, Astaroth retaliated. He wasn't once hailed as the deity of war for nothing. The cultists crumbled in the wake of his wrath, mere echoes in the vast emptiness of the castle's corridors.

He was but a blur in front of his enemies before their blood splattered all around the castle floors. Still, the Pope, standing at a distance, observed with a twisted smile.

He believed he had ascended to S-grade after being blessed by Kro'Han. Hence, that put him on the same level as Astaroth, and with the help of the cult, he would get rid of a nuisance like him. He didn't waste any time declaring his intentions towards the Xyran.

"Lord Kro'Han chose the wrong herald, you infidel!" the Pope roared while raising his staff. "and I shall correct that mistake-"

Astaroth, however, found the entire situation absurd. He couldn't suppress his laughter at the Pope's audacity and gave him a piece of his mind.

"You should talk about your employment to your employer, not to an intern, fucking moron!" Astaroth scoffed as another cultist fell to his knees, dead. "And S-Grade? You think that's where I'm at?"

In the blink of an eye, Astaroth closed the distance between them. The Pope's confidence faltered as Astaroth's hand moved with supernatural speed, severing the Pope's dominant arm. Pain contorted the Pope's face, a grim realisation of his inadequacy.

"Don't make me laugh," Astaroth scoffed.

Chapter 734 Forgotten Sister (2)

The desperate cries for help echoed through the castles as cultists, driven by their loyalty to the fallen Pope, rushed to his aid. Their intentions were clear—to rescue their leader from the clutches of Astaroth as their plan had failed.

They were sure if they could stall Astaroth for long enough, Lord Kro'Han would come to their aide. Yet, before they could even take a step towards the Pope, Astaroth moved like a hurricane, his blade slicing through the cultists mercilessly.

The Pope, frozen in despair, watched as Astaroth effortlessly dispatched his followers. The realisation dawned on him – Kro'Han's favouritism towards Astaroth was not without reason.

Astaroth's strength surpassed the combined might of the entire cult, and the Pope found himself at the mercy of a force he couldn't comprehend. The lust for power had blinded him to the obvious facts, and now was the time for penance.

"Fucking rats," Astaroth spat, wiping a bloodstain off his face. "Now, where were we?"

Astaroth's golden eyes bore into the Pope's soul, and he stomped on his legs without a word. The Pope's cries of pain echoed in the chamber, a desperate melody that fell on deaf ears. Astaroth demanded information, his voice cold and unforgiving.

"Where is Jaline?" Astaroth growled, his foot pressing harder against the Pope's broken legs.

"W-Who?"

"This fucker-" Astaroth crushed and increased pressure on Pope's other leg.

The Pope, writhing in agony, struggled to answer. Pain and fear had rendered him mute, and the realisation struck Astaroth that the Pope might not even know Jaline by name.

Understanding his 'fault', Astaroth described her as a woman with flowing ebony hair, eyes sparkling like stars, and ashen skin. The Pope's eyes widened in recognition; he knew the woman but remained silent.

"Looks like I underestimated a fanatic's loyalty," Astaroth scoffed before shoving his blade into the Pope's shoulder. "Just like you're underestimating my rage."

"I-I don't k-know!"

"Fine... have it your way."

Astaroth's patience wore thin, and he crushed the Pope's leg. Blood and broken fragments of bone splattered everywhere. The Pope's screams tore through the chamber, but still, he held his silence.

Frustration etched across Astaroth's face. He couldn't afford to waste more time. Jaline's fate hung in the balance, and Astaroth needed answers.

The Pope, unable to withstand the pain any longer, relented, "She is here! O-On this planet!"

"Don't tell me what I already know! Tell me where Kro'Han is hiding her!"

With a swift motion, he raised his foot to deliver another blow, but someone interrupted him before he could act. It was Kro'Han who materialised there out of thin air.

"I see you two have been getting along," Kro'Han smiled, walking towards them. "And here I was worried you two would kill each other before I got a chance to."

The air seemed to thicken with Kro'Han's presence, a force that demanded submission. The Pope couldn't have been happier at that moment, with tears of pain and relief rolling down his cheeks.

"M-My lord... Please, save your servant from t-this monster!"

"Of course," Kro'Han smiled, patting his head. "I promised I'll be your salvation, didn't I?"

The Pope's relief at Kro'Han's arrival was short-lived as Kro'Han's hand closed around his head, crushing it with a sickening crunch. The Pope's lifeless body crumpled to the ground, a testament to Kro'Han's ruthlessness.

"If only you kept your mouth closed for a moment longer, you'd have lived to see another day," Kro'Han said as he wiped the blood and goey brain tissues on the Pope's regal clothes. "Now.. what should I do about you?"

Silence fell upon the chamber, broken only by the echoes of the recent carnage. Astaroth's gaze met Kro'Han's, the tension between them thickening. Kro'Han, displeasure etched across his features, stepped over the fallen cultists, his eyes locked onto Astaroth.

"Did you think you could defy me, Astaroth?" Kro'Han's voice rumbled, a dangerous undertone underscoring his words. "You thought there would be no consequences, hm?"

"Consequences? For me?" Astaroth, undeterred, stood his ground. "Take a look around you and think for a moment, you ancient dumbass."

"You didn't learn anything from our previous encounter, did you?" Kro'Han's face distorted with anger. "No matter, I'll ensure to engrain the lesson to your bones this time."

With a swift movement, he launched an attack towards Astaroth. Astaroth, however, moved with unparalleled agility, dodging Kro'Han's assault with ease. The unexpected turn of events left Kro'Han momentarily off-balance.

"How did you-"

"Ever heard of something called deceit?"

Astaroth seized the opportunity, pushing Kro'Han back with a strength that defied expectations. Kro'Han, his pride wounded, glared at Astaroth.

"You dare raise your hand against me? Do you want Jaline to die?"

"You think you're in a position to threaten me?" Astaroth smirked, a bold defiance in his eyes.

"Have you lost your mind, you fool?" Kro'Han, seething with rage, warned Astaroth of the consequences.

Yet, Astaroth remained unfazed, closing the distance between them. His voice, low and steady, cut through the tension.

"The cult is no more. You have no one but me to help you now. Threaten me all you want, but remember, I'm only here because of her. Touch a hair on Jaline's head, and I will make you regret it, even if it means I'll fight you till either one of us is dead."

Astaroth leaned in, his eyes locked with Kro'Han's. "Either I'll die, and you'll be trapped on this planet for the rest of your miserable existence, or it'll be you, and believe me, if I kill you, no matter what I did to Ashton or anyone else for that matter... Everything will be forgiven."

Kro'Han's face contorted with anger, but Astaroth wasn't finished. "The way I see it, it's a lose-lose situation for you. So, I suggest you get off your high horse and think before you act for once."

With those words, Astaroth brushed past Kro'Han, leaving the seething ruler bewildered in the wake of unexpected defiance.

The once unchallenged tyrant now found himself questioning the unfolding events, realising that the balance of power had shifted in ways he hadn't foreseen.

Chapter 735 Silence Before The War (1)

The atmosphere in the dimly lit meeting room was tense as Otiga, Ashton, Mazton, and Anna gathered to discuss their next move. Otiga, with a no-nonsense attitude, broke the silence with a heavy sigh. Her gaze fixed on Ashton; she couldn't help but express her disbelief.

"You threatened the Xyrans?" Otiga's question hung in the air, a mix of surprise and concern etched on her face. "That's the best thing you could come up with? Don't you have enough enemies at this point?"

The room fell silent, all eyes turning to Ashton, who sat with a sly smile playing on his lips.

"Well, I did what I had to," he replied, his tone unapologetic. "Besides, by gaining their ships, we will have better security around Earth."

Otiga looked slightly puzzled, as she had expected Ashton to use the Xyran spaceships for a direct assault on Kro'Han. She had envisioned a strategy to take the fight to Euphoria, striking at the heart of the enemy before they did the same to them. However, Ashton's intentions seemed to differ.

"Why keep the ships stationed on Earth?" Otiga questioned as she went into interrogation mode.

Ashton leaned back in his chair, still wearing that cunning smile. The fact that even Otiga hadn't thought of such a plan brought him some confidence.

"Decoys," he stated simply.

Otiga furrowed her brows, puzzled. "Decoys?"

Mazton, as curious as ever, interjected, "Yeah, Ashton, elaborate on that. What do you mean by decoys? If the ships are top of the class, then it wouldn't make any sense to turn them into decoys, would it?"

"Top of the class?" Ashton scoffed as his gaze flickered between Otiga and Mazton before he spoke, "No matter how advanced the ships are, they wouldn't stand a chance against the Precursor fleet I saw on the Verge.

He continued, "I'm confident Kro'Han has those ships stationed on Euphoria and charging with our spaceships directly there would lead to the quickest defeat in the history of space warfare."

"Wait... Precursor spaceships?" Otiga mumbled, her eyes widening in surprise. "You survived an attack from those ships?"

"Nope. Me and Astaroth... fck, even thinking about him makes me feel weird," Ashton sighed, and Anna placed her hand on his, bringing him some solace. "We barely managed to take one such ship down. But when we saw hundreds more of them, we gave up."

He paused, letting the weight of his words sink in. "That's why I want the Xyran ships stationed strategically around Earth, acting as a defensive layer.

At the same time, 'hopefully', they'll be ready to destroy a few of those Precursor ships if Kro'Han decides to launch an attack on Earth. Because I don't think any of our weapons would make a dent on them."

Mazton closed his eyes. The sight of their previous war with the Precursors resurfaced in his mind. The destruction those ships caused was still fresh on his mind.

Hell, just half a dozen such ships were enough to destroy his homeworld, which was twice as big as Earth. Going by that logic, even if three Precursor ships managed to get to Earth, it would be over for them.

Finally, he nodded in agreement. "Given our current state, a defensive strategy is certainly better than an offensive one."

Otiga, still trying to wrap her head around the unexpected plan, asked, "But why do you think Kro'Han would attack Earth after we get the Xyran ships? Nothing is stopping him from attacking Earth right now."

"yes, if Kro'Han wanted to attack us, he could have done so long ago," Ashton's gaze became more intense as he replied, "Yet he's stayed on Euphoria, which makes me wonder if he's trapped there, and that's why Kro'Han had been recruiting people like the Cult and Astaroth. Maybe he needs others to execute his will."

He leaned forward, his eyes narrowing. "Now that Astaroth is with him, he has the Precursor ships and someone who can command an entire fleet. That means Kro'Han and Astaroth might decide to attack us at any moment."

"That's what I'm saying!" Otiga waved her arms around. "The only way to ensure our survival is to abandon this planet-"

"And keep running?" Ashton yelled. "What makes you think Kro'Han will be trapped on Euphoria forever?"

"I- don't know..."

Ashton sighed and calmed down, knowing that giving in to his emotions wouldn't benefit anyone. "Once he is free from whatever's binding him to Euphoria, he will kill us all. Have no doubts about this."

"Which is why our best chance is to wait for Astaroth to make the first move," Anna chimed in, "Without Kro'Han's presence, we have the best shot at defeating him, and once he is gone, Kro'Han would have no one to depend on."

This means Kro'Han will be trapped on Euphoria for a longer time, giving us time to devise a proper plan to dispose of him. That's why we had to blackmail the Xyrans to get their advanced spaceships."

"What about the cult?" Mazton pointed out. "Even without Astaroth, Kro'Han would still have them at his disposal."

"Don't worry about it," Ashton assured them. "The Cult has been taken care of."

"How do you know?" Mazton raised an eyebrow.

"I got some informants of my own," Ashton said but didn't elaborate.

Otiga, after humming and hawing for a moment, reluctantly agreed. "It's a ridiculous plan, but it might buy us some time to work something out in the long term."

She continued, "Still, it won't guarantee victory. The Precursor ships might punch through the Xyran ships, making all hell break loose."

"If that happens, then it happens," Ashton, unfazed by the uncertainty, shrugged. "We'll deal with it when the time comes. But our focus would have to be on Astaroth... I'll take care of him then."

Otiga sighed, realising the gravity of their situation. She shifted the focus to the practical aspect of their plan.

"Alright, everyone, prepare for the exchange. Ashton, you'll take the Xyran hostages and deliver them to a planet midway between Earth and Xenithar, as you're the only one they seem scared of."

Ashton nodded. "Fine, I'll make the arrangements as you said and get those ships. I also have to meet my informant on the way."

Chapter 736 Silence Before The War (2)

Onboard the formidable Xyran mothership, Commander Ibis found solace in the repetitive target practice. Instead of a conventional target, a holographic projection of Ashton served as the focal point for her seething rage.

Each pull of the trigger sent searing plasma bolts towards the flickering image until, with a final burst, Ashton's hologram vanished, marking a symbolic 'death.'

Taking a moment to steady herself, Ibis removed her helmet, revealing a face contorted by frustration and lingering anger. The battle in the virtual realm provided a temporary outlet for her emotions, but the reality of their predicament gnawed at her core.

"I knew I shouldn't have trusted him... or Astaroth," She mumbled as she was about to start with another round when she heard a knock. "Come in!"

She was expecting a report on the Xyrans that Ashton had held captive, but instead, an attendant appeared from the door, carrying a communicator.

"I think I instructed everyone to not disturb me!"

"Commander, the council has contacted you," the attendant informed, respectful and somewhat scared. "They said it was urgent, so I had to-"

"Fine..." Ibis, visibly annoyed, sighed but relented. "Leave it there. I'll call them in a second."

The attendant followed orders and exited the chamber. Alone again, Ibis took a moment to collect her emotions before picking up the communicator.

"These geezers won't let me live in peace," she muttered as she dialled back to the council.

After Ashton's communication, the council unanimously decided to demote Ibis from a council member to a mere Commander, reverting to her previous title before joining the council.

They deemed her responsible for the debacle with Ashton, believing that her failure to control Earth had led to their humiliation in the galactic community and Ashton's betrayal.

Though Ibis had a lot to say, she chose to keep silent about the council's own mistakes, like blindly trusting Rood and Astaroth, even handing him the Soul Killer. Still, the bitterness brewed within her whenever she had to exchange words with the council.

Dialling back to the council, Ibis braced herself for what awaited her on the holographic screen. A representation of a Xyran council member materialised, ready to discuss the impending exchange with Earth.

"Commander Ibis," The councilman got straight to the topic of discussion. "We need to discuss the upcoming exchange."

Ibis responded with a controlled tone, masking the underlying annoyance as they had already discussed it hundreds of times.

"Councilmen, with all due respect, we've discussed this multiple times. I will act in Xenithar's best interests—"

"You are no longer a council member for you to cut me off like this," the councilman roared. "Do you need another demotion to get that through your head?"

The threat stoked the embers of Ibis's fury. Ibis clenched her fists, struggling to contain her anger. The councilman's disrespectful tone fueled her frustration.

While she held a council position, he had never dared to raise his voice before her. Now, with an undeserved punishment hanging over her, he treated her like filth below his feet.

The councilman must have noticed Ibis' expression, and his tone unexpectedly softened as thoughts of rebellion crossed her mind.

The Xyran council might have stripped her of her title, but the daughter of the great Seraph still commanded a certain influence over the common folks of Xenithar.

Ibis knew this but didn't want to cause any more drama; though she was still seething, she listened as he mumbled an apology.

"Don't take my words too harshly," the man offered. "Like you, everyone has been on edge since the human's revelation about Lord Rood. Still, I was in the wrong and would like to apologise for what I said."

"It's fine... sir," Ibis managed a forced smile, replying. After all, she knew better than to let her anger cloud her judgment. "Rest assured, I will deal with the miscreant swiftly. After all, our priority is the safety of our people."

"Yes," the councilman replied. "Still, we cannot afford to lose our warships. Negotiate with him, but do not yield to his whims. We must ensure our strength remains intact."

Ibis nodded, and the councilman continued, "Offer him other things, but if Ashton remains stubborn, then... you might use them."

Hearing that, Ibis' eyes widened in shock, "But without him, the chances of defeating Kro'Han would drop significantly."

"Be as it may," the councilman replied. "Besides, in his condition, the council doesn't think he would be that useful either way. It is best to eliminate uncertainties before a war, and Ashton's support to us remains doubtful."

"I understand," Ibis nodded. "I will convey your orders to 'them' so they can act accordingly."

"Do as you will," the councilman said, but he had something else to tell her before leaving. "Oh, and do not tell Lucifer anything about our conversation."

He continued, "He was once Ashton's handler. He could still be in contact with him, which will cause problems for us if the plan leaked."

"Rest assured, sir. This conversation will remain between the council and myself."

"Very well then. I'm hoping to hear some positive news from you soon."

As the communication ended, Ibis contemplated the council's words. The internal conflict within the Xyran leadership would have to be put aside as the external tensions with Earth were at an all-time high.

Besides, Ibis knew she could get promoted whenever she liked, as she had much influence. But for now, she wanted to focus on Ashton and not think about the council.

She knew the consequences of failing this negotiation could be severe, not only for the Xyran people but for their entire galaxy.

"But that doesn't mean I can't find a way to punish you," Ibis mumbled and dialed another number.
"Yes, it's me. Your squad has been instructed to be on standby during the meeting."

"Going all-out, are we?" a mechanical voice emerged from the other side.

"Not going all-out against that man would be the worst mistake of our life," Ibis said, shaking her head.
"Just do this job, and I can have your charges dismissed."

"Very well then, I'll be waiting."

Chapter 737 Silence Before The War (3)

The desolate planet echoed with silence as Ashton stood alone, waiting beside the ship filled with Xyran hostages. The desolate surroundings only made the wait even longer. "I should not have arrived here so early," Ashton sighed as he swung Balmond around to pass his time as there was nothing else to do. As he stood there, Rea, unable to contain herself longer, taunted Ashton with a sneer, "How long do you think you'll live after today? My guess is a couple of years at most."

"A couple of years? How you're generous, aren't you?" A smirk played on Ashton's lips as he responded, "Believe me, I'm itching for something to go wrong during this deal so that I can put you all ungrateful bastards in your place. Knowing how egotistical your kind is, I'm sure I won't be disappointed."

"You only won last time because of the element of surprise," Rea retorted. "Now that we know your capabilities, you stand no chance against us, even with your summons."

"That could go both ways. Last time, I had my people to defend, so I couldn't go all out," Ashton nonchalantly shrugged in response, "But on a planet like this? Nothing is holding me back anymore. So if I were in your shoes, I would pray that your so-called council isn't full of morons and values your life to some extent."

Before Rea could respond, the distant sound of thundering engines interrupted their exchange. Ashton looked up, a wry smile forming as he saw hundreds of Xyran ships hovering over the desolate planet. The awaited moment had arrived.

"Finally... Maybe I should demand more ships from them for lacking punctuality," Ashton mumbled, crossing his arms. "Nah, that'll be petty even for my standard."

Within moments, a smaller ship descended from the fleet, heading towards them. From it, Ibis disembarked, accompanied by six Xyrans whom Ashton assumed to be her bodyguards. The tension in

the air was as high as ever as the two parties faced each other, with the hostages caught in the middle of the brewing storm.

Ibis approached, her expression unreadable, and Ashton welcomed her with a nod. The atmosphere crackled as Ibis stared at Ashton with nothing but utter disgust. "Ibis, or should I say commander Ibis now?" Ashton greeted, his tone neutral. "I heard the news of you getting demoted, and I can't help but feel sorrow for you-

"Cut the crap," Ibis spat, her eyes reflecting both rage and defeat. "We are not here to play games, Ashton. So let's get straight to the point."

Even though she dismissed Ashton's words, Ibis was surprised that he knew about her demotion, as only those on the council knew that fact. But if Ashton also knew about it, then it meant the council had a spy. Ibis didn't even want to think about it. If Ashton had an insider within the council, he could have already been aware of Ibis's plan following their exchange. In other words... her life was in danger.

'It's not the time to think about all that,' Ibis shrugged the thoughts out of her head. 'Let's proceed with the plan for now and see what happens later.'

"Straight to the point, huh? Of course, Let's do what we're here for," Ashton gestured towards the hostages on the ship. "I'll release the hostages as soon as I'm handed the control of the ships."

"Release the Xyrans, and you'll get your warships. As promised."

Ashton sighed and shrugged, "I was expecting you to yield, but it seems that won't be the case."

"Yeah, I should give you the key before the release so you could capture us all again?" Ibis rolled her eyes. "I don't think that's happening."

Ashton chuckled. He didn't know why Ibis was acting out now as if he wanted; he could have either taken over the ships or destroyed the fleet by now. Still, after the shit he had been pulling recently, it shouldn't have been a surprise that Ibis wasn't trusting his words. Meanwhile, Ibis glanced at Rea. A silent signal passed between them as she informed her about the attack she'd initiate following their release. With a nod from Rea, the plan was in place. "See, Commander, I'm not here to break our promises," Ashton remarked, a hint of mockery in his voice. "Unlike you."

"Accusing me of dishonesty? Just how low are you willing to fall, Ashton?" Ibis remained composed, "You know what? Let's not waste time searching for your answer. You'll get the keys, so release the hostages."

With Ashton's signal, a bunch of skeleton soldiers appeared out of nowhere, and the hostages were set free. A cautious calm settled over the scene as the exchange unfolded. The Xyran hostages, uncertain of their fate, looked warily at Ashton, their captor, before joining their comrades. Ibis inspected the hostages to ensure their safety, her gaze finally meeting Ashton's. "The hostages are free. Now, I trust you'll keep your end of the bargain."

True to her word, Ibis gestured toward the fleet of Xyran ships, "They're all yours. You might think you have won, but remember, Ashton, crossing us again will have severe consequences."

"Consequences like death?" Ashton couldn't help but laugh at the notion. "Feel free to try, but only if you're ready to sacrifice your own."

"We'll see about that..."

As the Xyrans boarded their ships, tension lingered in the air. Ashton watched Ibis closely. The Xyran ships ascended into the desolate sky, leaving Ashton alone on the barren planet.

As the distant hum of the Xyran engines faded, Ashton stored the master key to the Xyran fleet's AI in his inventory before turning around.

"How long do you people intend on hiding?" Ashton smirked as he turned around. "I sent your people away already, so come on out and get this over with."

Just then, a dozen Xyrans removed their camo cloaks, revealing themselves. During Ashton's training, both Vulcan and Flintmace had told him about them. The elite soldiers amongst the Xyrans excelled in assassinations... the Infiltrators.

Chapter 738 Can't Touch This (1)

Ashton's laughter echoed throughout as he faced the formidable group of Xyran Infiltrators. They were strong, there was no doubt about it, but their strength meant nothing to Ashton. "Infiltrators, huh?" he chuckled. "I remember you lot. Back then, dealing with you was a pain in the ass."

Memories of simulated battles under the watchful eyes of Flintmace and Vulcan flooded Ashton's mind. Back then, if someone caused him the most trouble to defeat, it would have to be the Infiltrators.

They were masters of stealth and disguise, making it difficult for Ashton to track and defeat them as they kept disappearing before his eyes. But they were mainly troublesome because they mostly struck in groups, which was odd considering most assassins preferred to work solo.

But things had changed. During those training sessions, Ashton wasn't allowed to use most of his skills, and he had yet to discover his Precursor lineage. Now, facing the Infiltrators without those constraints was an easy job.

However, there was a twist. Since Ibis had orchestrated such an elaborate plan to most probably 'assassinate' him, Ashton didn't want to end it in one go. He needed to teach the bitch a lesson, and he decided to play along and humour her by engaging with the Infiltrators without depending on his Precursor genes. Besides, giving them hope before shoving them into the pit of endless despair would be the most appropriate lesson for the galaxy's overlords. "Here, catch," Ashton nonchalantly tossed the Xyran ship's main key to the nearest Infiltrator. "Take care of it for me. I'll take it later from your corpse."

The Infiltrators, initially stunned by Ashton's audacity, broke into laughter. This one guy, even if he was a Precursor, dared to mock the unstoppable force that the Orion Empire itself feared? The Infiltrators couldn't believe their ears, but if the prey was willing to play with them, so be it.

"You're a funny one," one of the infiltrators laughed. "I never expected to meet a brain-dead precursor out here."

"Oi, no need to make fun of a dying man," another one chimed in. "Always send off your prey with respect and humility."

"You're no fun, Jacko."

In their eyes, Ashton was a half-baked Precursor. Their squad was considered the best among Infiltrators, and hence, they were confident in taking down a 'human'.

Besides, they had a leader who had not only fought but survived against Precursors during the war. A feat that only a few had achieved, let alone continued to work in the same field centuries after the war. Ashton, however, remained confident in his abilities. He might not be strong enough to defeat Kro'Han single-handedly, but facing a group of Xyrans posed no significant threat in his eyes.

"Fine, let's do this your way," the squad leader, Linas, laughed.

The area buzzed with anticipation as the Infiltrators shifted into combat stances; even then, their laughter didn't stop. Before them, Ashton stood, a lone figure against a formidable group, a smirk playing on his lips. He knew exactly how things were about to go down. The Infiltrator who caught the tossed key examined it, a grin forming on his face. "You're quite the cocky one, aren't you, Precursor?" he taunted, his comrades nodding in agreement.

Ashton shrugged, his smirk widening as he pointed above them. "Just trying to make this interesting. I wouldn't want the audience to get bored."

In a ship above them, Ibis and the rest of the crew intently watched the sight below, and Ashton seemed aware of it. Besides, Ibis hadn't expected Ashton to be this confident before the Infiltrators. But they sketched it up as a torch flickering before dying. "You're a strange one," Linas shrugged.

The Infiltrators exchanged glances. Their amused smiles were suddenly replaced by seriousness. Half-baked or not, they knew they were up against a Precursor and shouldn't take him lightly, yet their confidence remained unshaken.

The skirmish commenced with blinding speed. The Infiltrators, masters of covert operations, moved with synchronised precision. Their attempts to overwhelm Ashton with a flurry of coordinated strikes showcased the years of training and experience that defined their reputation.

However, Ashton moved with ease around them, with his hands tucked into his pockets, making their fight look like a casual sparring session. Ashton's movements were barely noticeable, each step calculated to evade the strikes of the Infiltrators. He managed to outmanoeuvre their attempts at stealth and surprise with a series of swift manoeuvres.

"Is this the best you've got?" Ashton taunted, effortlessly deflecting a barrage of attacks. "I expected more from the elite Infiltrators."

The Infiltrators, growing frustrated by Ashton's seemingly effortless defence, intensified their assault. Yet, Ashton continued to dance through their strikes, his movements becoming more unpredictable and laughable.

Amid the chaos, Ashton seized an opportunity. With a quick and precise strike, he disarmed one of the Infiltrators and swiftly incapacitated another with a well-timed kick. The tides of the battle began to turn, and the Infiltrators, once confident, found themselves struggling to keep up. But no one was more anxious than Ibis. She knew if the Infiltrators failed, no one in the entire galaxy could save them from Ashton's revenge. "You guys really need to step up your game," he remarked while smiling, seizing the momentary lull in the skirmish. "I thought you were the best among the Infiltrators. Maybe I overestimated your reputation."

The Infiltrators, a mix of frustration and determination etched on their faces, regrouped. They knew they had to adapt to Ashton's unpredictable style if they stood a chance.

Suddenly, Linas leapt at Ashton from the side, but instead of attacking him, he reached into his cloaked armour and threw something at him. Ashton instinctively dodged the attack and heard a hissing sound. Linas had used a grenade on him, but not just any grenade. It was filled with shrapnel coated with an acid that Ashton had never seen before. "Aiming for the eyes to blind me, huh?" Ashton smirked before kicking Linas away. "It was a good strategy, but not good enough."

Chapter 739 Can't Touch This (2)

A few minutes later, the infiltrators found themselves sprawled on the ground, gasping for breath. Ashton had singlehandedly beat them black and blue. But that wasn't enough for them. The Infiltrators surrounded Ashton like a pack of hyenas. However, none of them made any moves until... one did. Ashton was busy analysing the grenade Linas had hurled when he saw one of the assassins move from the corner of his eyes. Even so, Ashton didn't bother turning around. Instead, he raised his arm, grabbing the Infiltrator by his neck. Ibis, watching from a smaller spaceship hovering above the scene, observed the sudden change in Ashton's demeanour with surprise and concern, just like the rest of the squad. "F-Fucking bastard... Put me-" The young Infiltrator cursed him, gasping for air. However, as Ashton gradually increased the pressure around his neck, Xyran couldn't complete what he was saying. The colour from his face began draining.

The other Infiltrators, momentarily stunned by the unexpected turn, looked on in horror as their comrade's life hung in the balance.

"You don't have to worry," Ashton mumbled as the Infiltrator struggled more. "I will raise you well. But for that, you'd need to die first."

Ashton's expression remained cold and unwavering as he squeezed tighter, the life draining from the Infiltrator's eyes. Everything fell silent, the echoes of their laughter replaced by the desperate gasps of the dying assassin.

Ibis felt a chill run down her spine from her vantage point in the spaceship. She hadn't expected such a level of brutality from Ashton. She had anticipated two scenarios of how their fight would end. Either Ashton would be defeated and forced to work for them, or he would dispatch them swiftly. But Ashton had turned into a sadist and was thoroughly enjoying dealing with the Infiltrators. "What is he doing?"

Ibis muttered to herself, her eyes fixed on the scene unfolding below. The Infiltrators, now fully aware of Ashton's strength, hesitated momentarily, their confidence wavering. Based on the information Ibis shared with them, Ashton hadn't been a Precursor for long. Yet the level of control he had over his abilities was surprising. "Well, that was entertaining," he remarked, surveying the aftermath of the skirmish. "I hope you enjoyed the show..."

Ashton released the lifeless body, letting it crumple to the ground. The surviving Infiltrators exchanged wary glances, realising they were dealing with a force beyond their expectations.

As the defeated Infiltrator lay on the cold ground, Ashton raised his hand, hovering over the corpse. Ashton's voice, low and resonant, cut through the silence. "Rise."

A surge of dark, menacing energy emanated from Ashton's hand, enveloping the fallen Infiltrator. Linas was taken aback when he saw the fallen warrior's wounds begin to heal, and life returned to his seemingly lifeless form. The resurrected Infiltrator slowly rose, his eyes now gleaming with an unsettling crimson hue. Ashton's expression remained impassive as he looked at the other Infiltrators.

"A handy move, won't you agree?" Ashton asked, but the Infiltrators were too shocked to reply. But the shock among the remaining Infiltrators deepened more. The fallen warrior, now resurrected, glanced at his comrades before unsheathing his shadowy blade towards them. The other Infiltrators, torn between disbelief and the reality before them, exchanged uneasy glances. They didn't know what they were supposed to do now. After all, they couldn't attack a comrade like that.

Ibis, recognising that the situation had spiralled out of control, felt a chill of fear creeping up her spine. In a desperate attempt to salvage what remained, she turned to flee. Thinking as long as they lived, they would eventually bring Ashton down. "Pilot, get us out of here!" she shouted, her voice strained.

"Y-Yes, Ma'am!" The Pilot, already at the controls, frantically attempted to lift the spaceship off the ground. However, no matter how hard he tried, the vessel remained firmly anchored. "What's with the holdup!?" Ibis yelled.

"Ma'am, the ship isn't... moving!" the Pilot hastily replied. "Something is pulling us back."

"Pulling us back... Don't tell me!?"

Panic set in as the realisation dawned upon Ibis – Ashton hadn't merely pointed at them earlier. Instead, he had used his Precursor aura to trap them in their place.

"Leaving so soon?" Ashton taunted Ibis through the fallen Infiltrator's radio. "I'm not done with the show, you know?"

"This isn't over," Ibis, her composure wavering, attempted to regain control. "We'll find a way out of this."

"You can try." Ashton's smirk widened. "In the meantime, I'll pass some time toying with you overconfident soldiers here."

At the same time, Linas surveyed the aftermath of their failed confrontation with Ashton. His bruised and battered team exchanged uneasy glances, uncertain of their next move.

"Stand down," Linas commanded, his voice firm but laced with a hint of defeat. "What?"

The Infiltrators hesitated to follow his command. As they knew what awaited them if they were to surrender to the 'enemy'. But Linas was having none of it as he raised his voice.

"We've already lost this fight!" Linas yelled the words echoing in the chamber. "We can't defeat him. It doesn't make any sense for any more of us to give away our lives in vain."

They were about to be defeated. That much was inevitable, but Linas's team hesitated because of the strict Xyran military laws. If they were lucky, they would be sentenced to life imprisonment or exile. But if they were unlucky, they would be executed and turned into mindless foot soldiers. However, since they already had heresy charges on them, using which Ibis had blackmailed into attacking Ashton, they knew they would be executed upon return to Xenithar.

However, if they were going to die, the Infiltrators would rather do it on their own terms. Hence, they reluctantly lowered their weapons. Soon, the clatter of discarded firearms filled the air.

Linas was the last to drop his weapon and place his hands behind his head. The others followed suit without any hesitation. Watching the scene unfold from a distance, Ibis barked into the radio, her voice tinged with frustration. "What are you doing? Fight back! Don't let him win!"

"Don't let him win?" Maintaining his composure, Linas responded calmly, "We've already lost, commander. There's no point in continuing this futile battle. It's over."

"If you don't fight, I'll double the charges on your heads!" Ibis, infuriated by the apparent surrender, threatened.

Linas scoffed, his gaze unwavering. "As long as we're allowed to live, it doesn't matter if we're branded as heretics or not."

Ibis's demands fell on deaf ears as Linas and his team stood defiantly, their weapons discarded and their hands raised in surrender. "Smart choice," Ashton, observing the scene, approached them. "There's no need for more bloodshed... as long as you're willing to join my side."

Chapter 740 Can't Touch This (3)

Ibis, realising that her orders fell on deaf ears, seethed with frustration. She could see the Infiltrators dropping their weapons and raising their hands in surrender through the feed, and her anger escalated to levels she had never even dreamed about.

"Stop this nonsense!" Ibis yelled into the radio, desperation evident in her voice. "Your families will have to pay the price for your-"

With his hands behind his head in a gesture of surrender, Linas calmly interrupted her, "Ibis, it's over. Don't disgrace yourself by involving our families in this."

"Disgrace? Do you even know what that word means?" Ibis struggled to maintain control, grappling with the reality of their defeat. "This was a disgrace. You've disgraced the Infiltrators!"

Linas, unyielding, retorted, "Siding with the strong isn't a disgrace; it's a way of survival."

"You pathetic bastard!" Unable to contain her frustration, Ibis shouted, "You've betrayed us! You've betrayed everything we stand for!"

"No, Ibis. We're adapting to survive. That's what true Infiltrators do." Linas replied with a hint of sorrow in his eyes.

Linas knew very well what betrayal meant for a Xyrans. But for him, his squad was the only family he had, and as such, their safety took precedence over anything. Even Ibis's commands. As Ashton approached the Infiltrators, Ibis continued, saying, "You'll regret this, Linas! I will make you regret this, even if it's the last I do."

"We'll deal with the consequences when they come," Linas, still in a surrendering posture, glanced at Ashton. "But we won't be senseless martyrs in your quest of senseless 'revenge'."

By this time, Ibis recognised things were going south and needed a strategic retreat. So, she devised a plan to flee the planet. While their ship wasn't the biggest one they had, it was big enough to store several smaller aircraft. They would use those ships to get away from the chaos.

"Everyone, get to the hangar! Use those to make a break for the nearest warship," Ibis urgently relayed through the radio. She believed that even Ashton, formidable as he was, couldn't stop so many individual aircraft with his aura.

As the Xyrans hurriedly made their way to the smaller crafts, a sense of urgency hung in the air. The plan seemed like a viable escape strategy, and Ibis hoped to salvage something from the skirmish to save face.

However, before they could set their plan into motion, Ashton's laughter reverberated through the radio, sending shivers down their spines. "Going so soon?" he said. "I don't think so."

The next moment, the ship jolted violently, and gravity seemed to reclaim its hold. The Xyrans stumbled as their ship plummeted back to the planet's surface, crashing with a deafening thud.

Ibis, struggling to regain her bearings, felt a surge of panic. The ship had been forcibly pulled back to the ground, thwarting their escape plan. But more importantly, she realised they were now at one place where they didn't want to end up. Before anyone could comprehend the abrupt turn of events, the sturdy walls of the ship were torn open, revealing Ashton with an unsettling smile.

"Where do you think you're going?" Ashton's voice cut through the chaos, his eyes glinting with amusement and determination.

Ibis caught off guard, assessed the situation with a sinking feeling. Their escape had been abruptly halted, and with Ashton's presence before them, it didn't look like they would last long. Ashton, towering over the torn opening, surveyed the Xyrans with a sigh. His gaze locked onto Ibis, who met his unsettling stare with a defiant glare.

"You thought you could just slip away?" Ashton remarked, his tone carrying a hint of mockery. "You caused unnecessary trouble for me, so it's rude of you to think you can just leave without paying the price."

Maintaining a semblance of composure, Ibis retorted, "You may have stopped our escape, but we're not like those backstabbers. We won't give up so easily."

"Let's not waste any more time," Ashton's smile widened, and he gestured for Ibis to leave the damaged ship. "We have things to discuss. This time, for real."

Reluctantly, the Xyrans filed out of the wreckage, with Ibis following behind. Upon witnessing Ashton's strength and how he singlehandedly overwhelmed them all, the Xyrans became somewhat submissive. Ashton led them to a more open area within the cavernous chamber. The atmosphere hung heavy with unspoken tensions and the uncertain turn of events.

"Your plans fell apart, Ibis," Ashton addressed Ibis directly as they gathered. "What's your next move?"

"We adapt. We always do," Ibis, undeterred by the setback, replied, "This doesn't change our objective."

"So you still want to kill me?" Ashton chuckled a low rumble that echoed through the chamber. "Your persistence is commendable, but you can't deny the reality of your situation. Surrendering is your best option."

Ibis, unwilling to concede defeat, shot back, "Like that's ever going to happen."

"Your loyalty towards your kind is commendable but misplaced, Ibis," Ashton sighed and sat down on a nearby rock. "There's a bigger picture here, one you fail to see."

"Stop with the lies," Ibis mumbled. "The bigger picture I'm concerned with is your pic on your grave."

Ashton smiled and was about to say something. However, a sudden movement caught him off guard before he could utter another word. Linas had launched an unexpected attack on him from behind.

But Ashton didn't do anything and let Balmond do the work for him. While the soulblade parried Linas's attack, Ashton's newly resurrected soldier slashed Linas in half, his blood splattering around the area.

As Linas fell to the ground, Ashton turned back towards Ibis. A sly smile played on his lips as he addressed Ibis, "Did you forget I have a handy ability to sense if someone's lying to me?"

Ashton had seen through Linas's facade during the so-called surrender. Besides, the code words between Ibis and Linas had not escaped Ashton's attention. Also, since Ashton knew Ibis to be calm-headed, her over-the-top acting about being betrayed gave her plans away. Also, Linas did not seem to be someone who would give up without putting up a fight, so Ashton already had his senses on high alert. Now confronted with the repercussions of her failed plan, Ibis struggled to find words. Ashton, revelling at the situation, decided to take matters a step further. With a wave, he gestured towards Linas's lifeless form. "Let's make this interesting, shall we?"