

Correlation of Forces

A Wild Sphere™ Story
By George Chiu
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Chapter Seventeen

As the members of the 2nd Zoroaster shifted around the ship's galley, Lieutenant Wolfe finished his portion of the final pre-drop mission briefing, "Local gravity is 0.92 Terran Standard, and atmo is a nitro-oxy mix within human tolerances. No need for breathers. All this is already loaded on your datapads for your later review." He smiled. "Major?"

Major Shen tabbed a button, bringing up a new image on the holoprojector. "Once Commander Rico is satisfied there are no hostiles in visual or sensor range, the *Lili Marie* will head to the LZ for our insertion. The regiment will disembark, assemble, and proceed south along the Old Trader's Road."

"Our primary objective is to safeguard the package and the Ambassador for the duration of this mission. We'll be taking two of the 5 Mg trucks loaded with the first part of the package, spaced between three hummers riding shotgun."

"Here are the vehicle assignments." The major tabbed a button to send the assignments to the datapads. "I'll take the lead humvee. Sergeant Lewis will cover the rear."

"Lieutenant Wolfe, I want you in the middle. You're also responsible for Ambassador Haddad's safety. Any questions?"

Sergeant Beth Arahanga frowned. "Only the Fifties and our small arms? Arent' we gonna need a bit more firepower?"

Shen shook her head. "We shouldn't run into anything we can't handle. According to the latest intel, the meeting point is supposed deserted, and we'll scout the ground route to the rendezvous point by air before disembarking. "

Private Chung asked, "What about the Crusaders? The meeting place is a great spot for an ambush."

"There's no real reason why they'd attack us, esp. since the package is a no-strings gift, and we've got more supplies to come." The major frowned. "But...remember to keep your armor in."

As she concluded the meeting, Shen said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I think you all understand how important this mission is to our country. If we lose this one, it really is game over. So look sharp, but stay frosty."

Standing at the doorstep to the modest two-story house in a quiet suburb of New Liberty, Longstreet bowed and said, "Good morning, General. Thank you for seeing me."

"Good morning, Minister. Please come in." After the foreign minister and her attaché stepped inside, Armistead continued, "I fought under your mother against the Federals during the first independence war. Good woman."

A sad look passed over the foreign minister's face. "Yes, I imagine she was."

Longstreet passed her coat to Commander Gunderson. Moments later, they were seated in the living room, where the former commanding general had set out hot tea and crumpets.

The minister began, "General, I need your help. A little bird told me that you had a part to play in some of the CSDF's recent...unusual deployments."

Hiding her face behind her cup saucer, Armistead protested innocently, "Minister, I'm just a foolish, old woman."

Longstreet smiled. "And I'm Santa Claus."

Armistead grinned and motioned toward Gunderson with her cup. "So I take it the good commander here is an elf?"

"The very best. I'm sure you know about my mission here and about some of the difficulties I've been encountering."

Armistead said vaguely. "I've heard a few things."

"You know that the Federation's joining the fight is in the best interests of both our countries. I need your help."

Sitting down her cup, the old general leaned back in her chair and scratched her chin. "There are ways to exert pressure on Lord Avanno..."

Achilles Wellington smiled at Captain Kochanski as she pushed aside the curtain and exited the holophone booth after finishing her call. "Now you look as happy as a tike in a sweets shoppe, Kris."

Kochanski grinned from ear to ear. "My new saber finally arrived. I'm off to the PX to pick it up. Are you free to practice sometime, sir?"

Nodding as he stepped aside to let his teammate pass, Wellington said, "Just let me know when and where, captain." He entered the holophone booth. Checking his wrist chrono, he pulled the curtain behind him shut, punched in the number, and waited for the machine to finish dialing.

After the holophone reached across the galaxy to make the connection in tachyon space to its sister unit, the ace pilot smiled at the face of his younger brother. Noting the younger Wellington's new rank insignia, he said, "Congratulations on your promotion, 1st Lieutenant Wellington. Though, I'm not surprised after all the good things I've been hearing about you."

Patroclus reddened and looked sideways. "Just doing my bit."

Achilles nodded, "So I hear. Just remember to take care of yourself. I've made a few calls to make sure you're being looked after." When Patroclus' eyes flashed, the elder Wellington instantly regretted his words.

"Damn it, I'm not a kid anymore!"

"Remember, now that mom's gone, all we have left is each other. I know it hasn't been easy for you. I'm sorry, I did the best I knew how."

Patroclus blinked and nodded. As he opened his mouth, a scream pierced the air.

Instantly, Achilles snapped into action. "Something's up. I'll call you again tomorrow, kid."

As his brother turned away from the holoprojector, Patroclus said quietly to the empty booth, "I'm shipping out again tomorrow."

Major Shen watched as the *Lili Marie* sliced and weaved alongside a mountain range, sometimes far too close for comfort. Commander Rico was flying the old freighter nap-of-the-earth¹ to avoid prying eyes. It meant more flight time, but secrecy was paramount for this mission.

Turning away from the holoprojector just as endless waves of ice swiftly began to emerge from the blanket of darkness under the cold glare of the local primary, the major turned to her XO and senior NCO as they entered the room. “Good morning, gentlemen. We’re an hour from insertion at the LZ. What’s the status of the regiment?”

Lieutenant Wolfe smiled and replied, “The vehicles and package are ready. Everything’s been triple checked.”

Sergeant Frank Lewis added, “So are the men. I’ve gone over everyone’s gear personally. We’re locked and loaded, major.”

“Good work, lieutenant, first sergeant. Now, tell everyone to get some rest. We’ll need it later.”

Wolfe paused at the door. Waiting until the First Sergeant was out of earshot, he turned around to face Major Shen. Very carefully, he asked, “Permission to speak candidly, sir?”

The major nodded. “What’s on your mind, lieutenant?”

The lieutenant began hesitantly, “Is your father...”

“Shen the Butcher? Yes.”

Wolfe blinked. “Is it true he did all the things they say?”

The major nodded. “There’s even more that’s still classified, apparently.”

Wolfe looked baffled. “But... why did he do those things?”

“Sometimes, lieutenant, the right thing and the necessary thing aren’t the same.” Shen turned back to try to find peace in the scenery.

Wellington kicked open the doors and jumped into the courtyard. The screams were coming from the tent of Colonel Christian Grove, Commander of the 13th Utah. With the hard fighting done, Grove’s regiment had come in to collect their share of the spoils and medals. A circle of Utah men surrounded the tent, fighting to peer in.

Suddenly, four of the encircling onlookers stepped back as a screaming, crying, half-naked woman in a torn dress burst out of the circle and collapsed in a heap in front of the mobile armor pilot. As the Utah men laughed, the woman looked desperately to the left, then right, then wrapped her arms around the major’s legs.

Fac contorting in rage, Wellington roared, “What in the name of all that’s holy?”

Flanked by two towering, beefy NCOs, Colonel Grove pulled on his pants as he stepped confidently out of his tent. Spying his prey, shivering in fear and shame around the mobile armor pilot’s legs as he walked up, Grove snarled, “What the fuck are you doing, Wellington?”

Holding his ground, Wellington glared and replied, “I was about to ask you the same thing.”

“Just having some fun, *major*,” the colonel said, emphasizing the last. “People should know when they’ve been defeated.”

¹ A method of stealthy flight whereby the pilot avoids detection by flying very close to the ground and using the geographical features as cover.

Several other members of the Nightmare Legion approached to back the major up, but the Aggies were outnumbered more than forty-to-one by the Utah men. Still, Wellington was undaunted. “The Calieri Convention is very clear that civilians are to be left unspoilt.”

The colonel gave him a blood-freezing smile. “Rules only count IF they can prove something after they catch you breaking them.”

Wellington’s eyes flashed. “This is wrong!” Reaching down, the major raised the girl to her feet and draped his uniform jacket around her shoulders. As he did so, she hurriedly got behind him.

Grove sneered dismissively. “Don’t be a child. Right and wrong don’t matter, only winning and losing. Now give me the girl, Wellington.”

Seeing Captain Kochanski returning from the PX with two other Legionnaires, Wellington shouted, “Saber!”

Immediately, Kochanski tossed Wellington her sword. Catching the sword in midair with his left hand, he drew the blade in one fluid motion with his right.

Holding out the sword and pointing the tip of the blade at Grove’s nose, the major said in a deadly low voice, “If you want her, come and claim her.”

A legendary duelist, the two NCOs hastily backed away from Wellington, leaving Grove to face the enraged major by himself. Beads of perspiration began dripping down the colonel’s face.

As the staring match began to turn into a rout, the 13th Utah’s Sergeant Major, Tom Laredo, moved into a clear line of sight to Wellington. As Laredo went for his pistol, he screamed as his right shoulder shattered. First Sergeant Bernie Rourke raised up the tire iron. “Let’s let those two settle this like gentlemen, Sergeant Major.”

Turning, Grove blanched further when he saw that Rourke was not alone. Dozens of Rangers had also joined the scene.

Trying to look as dignified as possible, Grove said haughtily, “Another time, major,” and began to beat a swift retreat.

“Colonel?”

When the colonel turned around, Wellington sliced a deep, disfiguring gash using the tip of the saber in Grove’s left cheek.

“Next time you want to have some fun, you know where to find me.”

When the doors of the dropships opened and the Allied prisoners were herded out, Colonel Nam Jae Yang closed his eyes as painful light flooded in. Since there were so many POWs gathered at Dalfur than could be reasonably handled, the blue suits had stuffed them into anything they could find. The colonel had spent the trip in a mostly emptied fuel tank of a fuel truck.

As he was exiting, Nam stumbled. Looking down down, he saw the ashen face of Private Linsey Clark. An asthmatic, Clark had been complaining about chest pains for most of the trip. However, in the total darkness of the cramped tank, there was nothing to be done. With so many others to worry about, the colonel had lost track of her when she’d eventually quieted.

Kneeling, he felt for the private’s carotid artery. No pulse. Before he could ponder this grim new knowledge further, Nam was shoved forward toward the area where the other prisoners

were assembling and then marching out. As he fell into place, Captain Lisa Walton stepped up beside him and deadpanned, “Not dead yet, colonel?”

Despite himself, the colonel smiled grimly. “Not yet, captain.” He frowned. “Though too many of us already are. Sitrep?”

“Been asking around and looks like most of our people are already louxia, but there’s easily three times that number of prisoners here, and there are more dropships coming.”

Nam nodded. “Must be herding us all together, for transshipment or whatever, who knows.” Looking at the sky, he scratched the stubble on his chin. “Where are we?”

Walton pointed out the peculiar triangular arrangement of moons. “I do believe this is Jurai. And, I think we’re somewhere in the southern hemisphere.”

Commander Rico appeared to bid Shen’s team farewell, but he wasn’t alone, flanked by a pair of marines and a navy corpsman.

“We’ve already got a medic.”

Rico grinned. “You’ll be doing them and us a favor.” The *Lili Marie* was designed for a crew of six,² and twelve passengers. Unsurprisingly, with forty people onboard, calling conditions cramped would be an understatement. Even hotbunking all the way to Dawnhaven, it was barely manageable, and everyone was keen to hit dirt and stretch their legs.

“This is going to be dangerous.”

“You could use the help.”

Nodding, Shen addressed the marines. “You men know how to handle a Fifty?”

They both replied. “Yessir.”

“Well, grab a seat then.”

As Lord Avanno walked around the grounds of his palatial estate with his Seneschal, Gustav Schneider, trailing two steps behind him, the latter remarked, “Milord, it will be sunset in twenty minutes.”

“Loose the hounds.”

Schneider nodded. “Yessir, and Lady Silba has just arrived. I have ordered that she be sent to the sitting room.”

While he headed back into the house, the Patriarch of the House Avanno asked, “And how is the other matter proceeding?”

“Young Miss Longstreet still hasn’t broken.”

Avanno raised an eyebrow. “How long has she been in the tank?”

“Three days, milord.”

Curling up the side of his mouth, Avanno snarled, “Call for an Inquisitor!”

Schneider nodded and then motioned discreetly with his eyes toward the corner of Lord Avanno’s mouth before departing to make the call.

Before entering the sitting room, Avanno wiped away the spittle. Waiting for him was Maunsi Silba, dressed in a flowing dress of deep purple with a raised, stiff neckline, looking as regal as regal as one of the celebrated ice statues of New Ostyak. Her gaze held as much warmth.

² While not ideal, *Horizon*-class ships are designed to operate under a crew of six: Captain/Pilot, Navigator/Co-pilot, Systems Operator, Chief Engineer, Second Engineer, and Engineering Tech/Loadmaster.

When the Matriarch of the rival House rose upon seeing him, he asked graciously, “To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit, Maunsi?”

Sitting back down, Lady Silba frowned and got straight to the point. “Lord Avanno, Holder of the Sceptre of the Eminent Lion,” she said, pointedly addressing him by his full title, “The other House leaders and I are... concerned about how you’re handling the situation with the Republic, especially the issue of your treatment of Minister Longstreet. Most unseemly.”

Lord Avanno smiled. “My dear Maunsi, I’m just having a bit of fun.”

His response brought a raised eyebrow. “But there’s no profit in this.”

“There is for me.”

When Silba opened her mouth to protest further, Avanno quickly cut her off. “Excuse me, Lady Silba, there’s an urgent matter I simply must attend to.”

The House leader raised an eyebrow, but rose wordlessly and left for her waiting ground car.

The ship shook as it touched down. Engines roaring, the 2nd Zoroaster’s tiny convoy sped out of the cargo bay and unto the frozen tundra. Tabbing her com unit, Major Shen said to Commander Rico, “King One, this is Knight One. Keep the engines hot. We may have to get out of here mashang.”

Rico’s reply came as the *Lili Marie* rumbled back into the sky. “Roger wilco, Knight One.”

The convoy turned south onto the Old Trader’s Road. In moments, they were at the rendezvous point. Which was empty, and quiet.

Suddenly, a solitary figure stepped out of the treeline and moved to a point ten meters in front of the lead humvee.

“Wolfe, bring up the Ambassador. I’ll meet you at the front of the convoy. Corporal Flynn, you’re with me.” Shen pulled the slide to her sidearm, chambering a round. Reholstering her pistol, she opened the door. “Okay, let’s try to be as friendly as possible.”

They were greeted by dozens of guns to the face.

Dr. Rubén Mendoza said, “It’s been a long time, Ambassador.”