



ALL OUR STARS

VOLUME I

NO STAR BELONGS TO ONE PEOPLE.

A.K. KHALID

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Volume I

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All Our Stars: Volume I

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CHAPTER 1

The First Shot of the Rebellion

*Galactic Common Date 1094.358 • 24 December 1094 A.C. • Aboard Will of Telaz,
Somewhere in Telazon Space*

Senior Warlord Hertrak watched the Voss patrol return to Kraz in parade order.

That was the first insult.

Not the occupation. Not the patrol itself. Not the black-and-silver cruiser cutting through Telazon dark as if the route had always belonged to Voss engines and Voss fuel claims. Those were old insults. They sat in every occupied system, every renamed dock, every audited hull registry, every corrected schoolroom where children learned which colors were safe and which questions made parents afraid.

The parade order was new enough to be useful. It told Hertrak the Voss had forgotten danger. Or worse, that they believed danger had forgotten them.

The tactical well aboard Will of Telaz rendered the enemy in clean pale shapes: one assault cruiser leading the return line, five destroyers close around it, corvettes stretched into a fast outer screen, a relay tender tucked behind the cruiser where the escort geometry bent to shield it, and support craft trailing with the loose confidence of a force that expected maintenance, not battle.

Hertrak's lower eyes lingered on the relay tender while his upper pair watched the escort pattern around it. The cruiser was built to draw attention. The tender was the duller shape the formation protected.

Their route took them through a Kraz return lane, bound for jump-cooldown service, shield-feed replenishment, inspection, crew rotation, and dry-dock sequencing.

The information glowed above the well in old Republic blue and amber. Some emitters flickered at the edges, newer replacements still arguing with older Telazon hardware. Hertrak had refused three requests to standardize the display. The flaws were harmless. Better than that, they

were reminders. A hidden navy did not survive by replacing everything that looked old. It survived by knowing which old things still worked.

Beneath the old display, Will of Telaz's patched tactical intelligence did the arithmetic no officer could do by instinct alone: beacon timing, escort spacing, point-defense delay, and the narrow margin between surprise and pursuit. It had served inside the Kharad hull for more than a century, through crews who had grown old and crews who had not been allowed to. When it spoke, its voice was low, economical, and distinctly Telazon—the voice of an old warrior who treated the occupation as unfinished duty.

"Beacon authentication remains on schedule," Will of Telaz said. "The relay tender has accepted its next route packet without challenge."

He studied the Voss line until it became more than ships. It became habit.

The Voss had made habit into an empire. They measured Telazon worlds, renamed districts, corrected schools, categorized citizens, audited supply ledgers, rewarded informants, punished memory, and did it long enough that routine became a second occupation laid over the first.

A cruiser returned to Kraz because cruisers returned to Kraz. A tender followed because tenders followed. Patrol craft burned assigned routes because authority had told them the routes were theirs.

The Voss had taught themselves that order was reality. Hertrak had spent one hundred and seven years of occupation proving, one hidden cache and one preserved hull at a time, that order could be lied to.

"Time to handshake?" he asked.

Navigation answered from the right station. "Fourteen minutes, Senior Warlord. Their relay tender will open its scheduled beacon exchange after the next micro-correction. The authentication window is unchanged. Route is clear—no civilian or unscheduled transponders." Sensors kept Will of Telaz on passive collection. No active return touched the lane. Long-range scan remained routine. No suspicion profile had opened.

Hertrak did not smile. Smiles were for men who mistook confirmation for safety.

The command well stayed quiet around him, though ships were never truly silent—especially old ships pretending to be dead. Air moved through repaired vents. A stabilizer relay clicked somewhere beneath the deck, the same ugly rhythm that had annoyed three generations of engineers. The forward armor carried a low vibration from reactors

trimmed so far down that Will of Telaz felt less like a battleship than a held breath.

Beside the command well, Junior Warlord Trexx stood with his hands locked behind his back, posture disciplined and young enough that discipline still looked like work. His four eyes stayed fixed on the enemy formation. The lower pair tracked the escorts. The upper pair kept returning to the cruiser.

His dark shipboard uniform was layered close to the body for restraints and variable gravity, its only color the Republic's muted red-and-blue split shield and the narrow collar bars of a junior warlord. Hertrak wore the same severe cut, older at the shoulders and marked by the broader insignia of senior command.

Hertrak remembered being that age, though he had never been young in any useful sense; Voss rule did not leave Telazon children that luxury for long. But he remembered the hunger: the wish to see a Voss cruiser break, to make one clean strike large enough to answer every insult, to believe that if the Republic finally showed its teeth, the universe would understand what Telazons had carried in silence.

That was why Trexx stood beside him today and not in command. A young warlord had to see the first shot. He did not need to spend it.

"Speak," Hertrak said.

Trexx's shoulders tightened. "Senior Warlord?"

"You are thinking loudly."

A few officers kept their eyes on their stations. Trexx did not flush. A warlord could be corrected, but he could not be delicate.

"They are exposed," Trexx said.

"More than the model allowed for."

"If we commit the Rhazeks early, we can crush the escort screen before the cruiser turns. Then we force it to face Will of Telaz unsupported, destroy it, and scatter the support craft."

Hertrak let the young warlord hear the hole in his own answer.

Trexx filled it. "Then we pursue."

"No."

The answer cracked softly through the command well.

Trexx went still.

Hertrak did not look at him. He kept his eyes on the Voss formation.

"No pursuit beyond recovery boundary," Hertrak said. "No glory line. No chase through route debris. No second revelation because the first tasted good."

Trexx lowered his head. "Yes, Senior Warlord."

"This is not a battle for pride. It is not a battle to prove the Republic lived."

Trex looked at him then, confused despite himself.

Hertrik allowed it.

"Proof has already been paid for," Hertrik said. "By those who kept the ships hidden. By those who stole drive stock in quantities small enough to avoid audit. By those who carried munitions labels under false agricultural codes. By those who died in Voss stations without naming a route. By those who taught children to remember without speaking too loudly."

His hand settled on the forward rail.

The metal beneath his palm was old, dark, and worn smooth where other Telazon hands had held it under fire, under flight, under silence. The rail had been cast before the occupation. Before Voss inspectors learned to call Republic hardware obsolete. Before Telazon children were taught to treat old symbols as disturbances in public order.

"Today is not proof," Hertrik said. "Today is announcement."

Trex absorbed that. The old battleship absorbed it too, in her way.

Will of Telaz lay in darkness with her emissions buried beneath the cold signature of abandoned stone. Her armor carried scars from wars the Voss had not been able to erase because they had never found the hull to polish them away. Her three recessed bow batteries slept behind layered shutters. Protected heavy-torpedo apertures and point-defense nodes remained cold along the armored hull, their interceptor magazines and close-in cannons held under the same concealment discipline. Her electronic-warfare suite listened without transmitting. Her reactor output had been trimmed down to a whisper so tight that every engineer aboard had spent the last six hours angry at physics.

She was a Kharad-class battleship of the old Republic: preserved, patched, modernized where they could afford it and outdated where they could not, beautiful only if endurance could be called beautiful. The Voss thought ships like her were museum wreckage, scrap, or dead registry ghosts. They were about to become less certain.

"Skarrik wings," Hertrik said.

Task Officer Merakk's hands moved through the command field. "Wing One in shadow, three frigates. Wing Two in shadow, three frigates. Torpedoes cold. Launch windows holding."

A voice came over the narrow laser link, aimed so tightly that only Will of Telaz's receiver could catch it, low and steady. "Skarrik Haval's

Stone, center of Wing One. Captain Dargun. Wing One holds on your mark, Senior Warlord."

"Rhazek pair?" Hertrak said.

"In position," Merakk said. "Guns cold. Crews report ready."

"Mezotik screens?"

"Hidden along the recovery lanes. Engines masked. Search-and-recover teams standing by."

Trexx's upper eyes flicked to him. He had noticed. The screens were not forward for attack. They were placed to collect the wounded.

Hertrak said nothing. The lesson would arrive soon enough.

The Voss patrol adjusted course by a fraction: a small, routine burn, the kind of correction made ten thousand times by ships that expected nothing larger than traffic discipline to govern the dark. The tender moved exactly where the model had promised.

A fat-bellied utility hull, armored just enough to survive debris and pirates, valuable enough to make heavier escorts bend around it, dull enough for Voss captains to ignore. It carried shield-feed canisters, coolant reserves, replacement emitter coils, inspection drones, machine registers, and dry-dock sequencing cores.

To a young officer, it looked less important than the cruiser. To a warlord, it looked like weaker patrols tomorrow, broken patrol schedules, and the occupation's routine losing a piece of its spine.

"Launch mark in thirty," Merakk said.

No one spoke. The silence had a job. It held the crew inside the shape of the strike and kept the first shot from becoming a cheer before it became a weapon.

Hertrak placed both hands on the forward rail. His fingers curled around old metal. His gripping feet settled against the deck brace beneath him, not from fear, but from habit older than the occupation. Telazon ships had been built for bodies that could hold through sudden motion, bodies made for canyon walls, stone braces, and gripping the world when the world tried to throw them down.

With the maneuvering drive dark for concealment, there was almost no weight in the command well. The crew remained against the deck by grip and brace, not gravity.

He thought of Torvek Ral, but not for long. Long memory was indulgence during a firing sequence.

An older warlord's hand on his shoulder, and a last order that had not allowed him to die cleanly. The bitterness of being commanded to survive

when everyone young enough to crave honor wanted to spend himself instead. The inheritance of hidden routes, hidden hulls, hidden names.

Do not give the Republic a beautiful death.

That had been Torvek's command. Hertrak had obeyed for more than a century.

"Ten," Merakk said.

The Voss cruiser continued on parade line.

"Five."

Trex stopped breathing. Hertrak did not correct him.

"Three."

The old Republic waited inside the dark.

"Two."

The patrol's route home waited ahead, unseen.

"One."

Hertrak said, "Begin."

The first torpedo salvo came from nowhere. The three Skarrik-class torpedo frigates of Wing One burned out of sensor shadow and opened their tubes before the Voss could turn surprise into doctrine. Their torpedoes coasted dark for three seconds before their drives lit in a short, brutal flare.

The enemy was far beyond naked sight. Across the command well, the salvo existed only as probability cones and delayed sensor returns. Guidance updates tightened while the Voss point-defense lattice spent its shrinking intercept window.

The Voss formation woke violently. Point defense opened across the cruiser's flanks. The corvettes flared outward to catch the first tracks before they reached the heavier line. Destroyers held closer and cut between the relay tender and the incoming fire, armored bows swinging toward the threat with the reflex of a navy that had not grown soft, only arrogant.

Two torpedoes died in white light. A third broke apart under a corvette's point-defense beam and spun itself into fragments. The surviving tracks split. One drove wide and forced a destroyer to roll out of its guard position around the tender. Two struck the relay tender along its cargo spine. Another punched into the aft shield-feed housing and detonated half a second later.

The relay tender came apart like a machine remembering it could die. Cargo modules split open. Shield-feed canisters scattered into vacuum. Maintenance cores tumbled away, flashing in emergency beacon light. A

dry-dock sequencing block spun free, still transmitting pieces of an arrival schedule no one would keep.

Trex's eyes widened, not at the explosion but at the target.

Then the Voss cruiser returned fire.

The assault cruiser swung its bow toward the attack at last, lateral thrusters bringing its forward plasma arrays across the dark toward Skarrik Wing One. One frigate evaded cleanly. Another took a glancing strike across the shield envelope and rolled hard enough to tear plating from its own spine. A third was slower by the width of a breath.

"Fire on me," Dargun said over the laser link, level and quick. "Narrow Road, you are venting. Burn for the screens."

The plasma array fire caught Haval's Stone through the midhull. Its shields flashed blue-white, collapsed inward, and the ship broke into three burning sections. The laser link went silent.

The command well recorded the loss without drama.

A name vanished from the board.

Trex stepped forward.

Hertrak did not.

"Hold," Hertrak said.

The Voss commander was recovering. That deserved respect, if nothing else. The cruiser did not chase the frigates. It angled first toward the tender's debris field, then realized there was no tender left to protect and shifted to locate the heavier guns it had not yet seen. Its destroyers tightened around it in a heavy support screen. The corvettes spread wider, small screens searching for the hidden attackers. They were too late.

"Rhazek pair," Hertrak said.

The Rhazek pair emerged from concealment at the Voss flank and opened with disciplined kinetic fire. Their first salvo hammered the nearest destroyer, collapsing its shield geometry and punching through the upper hull. Their second caught the destroyer behind it as it tried to screen the cruiser. The Voss escort line staggered, not panicked, and there was a difference.

"Skarrik Wing Two," Hertrak said.

Merakk relayed the order.

The three frigates of Wing Two fired from below the route plane. Their tracks rose through the debris of the dead tender, using Voss wreckage as sensor clutter. Corvettes burned to intercept, fast enough to chase the torpedoes but too far spread to cover everything. Destroyers split their heavier fire between the Rhazek guns and the incoming tracks.

The assault cruiser forced its bow around, exposing a weaker flank of its shield geometry.

The second Skarrik, Blue Oath, died under concentrated plasma fire from two destroyers. It did not vanish quickly. Its drive failed first. Then its torpedo rack cooked off in ugly internal flashes. The frigate turned end over end, still broadcasting telemetry, still pushing target data into the network while its hull gave itself away.

The tactical lattice fused torpedo telemetry, escort motion, and shield-stress returns. A firing solution tightened across the well as the cruiser rolled.

Trexz whispered, "Now."

Hertrak heard him. This time, the young warlord was right.

"Will of Telaz," Hertrak said. "Forward batteries. One sequence."

"Solution holds," Weapons said. "Three battery houses ready."

The deck did not shake. Kharad engineers had built better ships than that. But the firing passed through the ship as pressure, as if some deep organ had clenched.

The three forward kinetic-artillery batteries fired one round each in measured order. One. Two. Three. The heavy kinetic rounds crossed the dark on separate lines, and for the next twenty-two seconds nothing aboard Will of Telaz could change them.

The cruiser saw them coming and began an evasive burn, but its earlier turn and damaged shield face had narrowed its choices. Will of Telaz had fired at where those choices would carry it.

They arrived almost together. The first struck the cruiser's weakened shield and flattened it. The second hit the forward armor belt and drove through layers of Voss composite. The third entered where the second had broken the ship open.

For an instant, the assault cruiser remained whole. Hertrak had seen that before. Ships often refused to understand their own death for a fraction longer than physics allowed.

Then the bow folded inward. The cruiser's forward section broke open, venting atmosphere, plasma, and structural fragments. Its dorsal emitter line flickered once, tried to re-form, failed, and died in pieces. The remaining Voss ships scattered on separate escape courses.

"Forward pressure?" Trexz asked, voice tight.

"No. The cruiser is finished, and the destroyers are leaving."

"We can still kill them."

Hertrak looked at him. Trexz stopped.

"Say the lesson," Hertrak said.

The younger warlord swallowed whatever answer had come first.

"We do not spend victory foolishly. We recover our wounded, hide what remains hidden, and do not help the Voss understand the size of the hand that struck them."

Hertrak nodded once.

The surviving Voss destroyers fled toward broken route markers. Some would reach their garrison. Some would transmit before they died. Fragments would reach Voss command. Reports would contradict each other, and panic would put old words back into new mouths: *Battleship. Republic. Warlord*. Let them choke on all three.

"Status," Hertrak said.

Merakk's voice roughened as he read the board. "Wing One: one destroyed, one crippled and venting, one under power. Wing Two: one destroyed, two recoverable. The Rhazek pair report shield scoring and minor armor damage. Meztok screens are moving for recovery."

"Names?"

Merakk looked down at his station. The question was not administrative among Telazons.

"Skarrik Haval's Stone destroyed," he said. "Captain Dargun. Skarrik Blue Oath destroyed. Skarrik Narrow Road crippled. Casualty estimates pending."

The command well went still. Trexx stared at the names.

They had won. That was true. The Voss had lost a cruiser, multiple destroyers, scattered corvette screens, a relay tender, support craft, maintenance cores, shield-feed reserves, and the silent comfort of a route they had believed secure. The garrison would feel the delay. Patrol cycles would shift. Dry-dock schedules would break. Someone in a Voss office would discover that routine could bleed.

And still, Telazon names had vanished from the board.

Hertrak closed his eyes for one breath.

"Did they complete it?" he asked.

Merakk answered carefully. "The tender was destroyed. The cruiser line broke. The route is marked. They completed it, Senior Warlord."

"Then mark the task. Names first."

Trexx turned toward him. A task completed was not a song. It was a debt recorded cleanly.

"Recovery boundary holds," Navigation reported. "Voss survivors continue withdrawal. No new contacts."

Hertrak straightened. Now came the part that mattered, and it was not the shot. It was the message.

"Open narrowcast package," he said.

Signals looked up. Every officer in the command well understood at once.

For one hundred and seven years, the Republic had spoken in hidden ledgers, coded messages, maintenance thefts, false manifests, old songs sung too softly for informants, and the silence of people who knew survival sometimes meant lying to power with a calm face.

Now it would speak in a voice meant to be found.

Trexz went very still beside him.

"To whom?" Signals asked.

"Every route cell cleared for first signal. Every hidden station with standing war seal. Every warlord channel. Every Republic receiver still alive enough to listen."

Signals' hands hovered over the controls. "And beyond?"

Hertrak watched the last pieces of the Voss cruiser burn.

"Let fragments reach the Voss."

Signals' throat moved once. "Yes, Senior Warlord."

Hertrak stood in the light of the tactical board: old battleship beneath his feet, dead Telazon frigates on the board, Voss wreckage behind him, hidden roads ahead.

He spoke the words that had waited longer than many civilizations knew how to wait.

"Send this message."

The command well held its breath.

Hertrak said, "The Republic endures."

Signals entered the first line.

"The war has begun."

The signal went out, not wide enough to reveal everything and not narrow enough to remain private. Across hidden receivers, dead civic relays, smuggled comm buoys, false maintenance channels, cold habitats, old shipyards, and listening posts buried under one hundred and seven years of obedience, the message went to work.

The Republic endures.

The war has begun.

Will of Telaz turned away from the burning Kraz route and slipped back toward darkness.

Behind her, the Voss learned uncertainty. Ahead of her, the hidden Republic woke.

CHAPTER 2

The Shape of the Technocracy

Galactic Common Date 1094,361 • 27 December 1094 A.C. • Capital District, Hiberia

Ruins could be read. Fragments were different. They were systems interrupted before they understood what had happened to them.

The first Telazon strike reached Hiberia as fragments: a relay tender destroyed on the Kraz return chain, one Turus-class cruiser lost, Muk-class destroyer escorts crippled or scattered, Icnim-class corvette screens degraded, support craft missing or silent, passive records burned through by radiation, debris, and panic. Survivors contradicted one another with the sincerity of officers who had lived through surprise and mistaken survival for clarity.

Irsk Nolis had the fragments on the wall of his study before the cold had left the windows of his quarters. Security's AI-assisted, state-audited analysis lattice had already sorted survivor telemetry, Kraz traffic records, maintenance schedules, and probability scars into the preliminary shape of a failure. Nolis did not trust that shape yet.

On the lower half of the wall, a loop of the Turus's destruction ran without sound: three heavy rounds arriving almost together, the shield flattening, the armor belt opening, and then the bow folding inward. He did not watch it a second time.

The duty officer from the Security watch stood three paces inside the door with a slate held against his chest. He had come in person. Some reports were not sent.

"The Turus is lost, Director," the officer said. "The relay tender went first. Several destroyers are crippled or lost, and survivors are still reporting. We have a profile of the attacker from a destroyer's last sensor sweep."

The profile resolved on the wall: a broad old hull, heavy forward mass, layered armor, and three distinct forward battery signatures blooming through static. The model gave its best answer.

KHARAD-CLASS BATTLESHIP — OLD TELAZON REPUBLIC PATTERN.

Confidence: imperfect.

Meaning: intolerable.

"Escorts?"

"Skarrik torpedo frigates, confirmed by weapon profile. Two wings. Rhazek heavy cruisers are probable, and the screening returns are fragmentary." The officer paused. "Every Kharad in the registry is listed as scrapped or lost. There is no ship name, Director. We have the class only."

Nolis looked at the silhouette until it stopped being a profile. A battleship, with frigates beside it in formation, had crossed a patrol lane, destroyed a Turus, and left.

"There is one more item," the officer said. "A security buoy near the Kraz chain picked it up. It was repeated through dead civic hardware before the noise took it. Low confidence."

He played it.

Static filled the study. A voice emerged beneath it, Telazon, an older male, strong enough to survive translation only in pieces.

"...Republic..."

More static.

"...endures..."

The fragment broke, then returned.

"...war has begun..."

No one moved for three seconds.

Nolis felt the shape of it more clearly than the words. It was not a public broadcast. It was not a plea. It was a narrowcast, allowed to leak: hidden receivers first, Voss ears second. He disliked its efficiency.

"Kraz Command requests authorization to change patrol density," the officer said, "and to delay nonessential refinery transfers until the route is resecured."

"Approve the first. Deny the second." Nolis did not look away from the wall. "Exidor requires continuity. Kraz suffered an attack, not a license to freeze the sustainment chain. If one strike slows the flow out of Exidor beyond what it must, the enemy will have achieved more with the tender than with the cruiser."

"Yes, Director. The strategic marshal is already tightening patrols. Every return line will have additional escorts, with heavier Turus mass at the head, and scouts are deployed along the Kraz chain to find the fleet."

"I want every scout report as it arrives, before anyone summarizes it."

"Yes, Director."

The officer left. Nolis stood alone with the wall.

Voss analysts had spent a century cataloguing Telazon resistance as dockworker stoppages, arson, smuggled speeches, hidden weapon cells, and riots. Small fires, extinguished in sequence. None of them had been the size of a battleship, and none of them had held a formation.

"Lattice," he said. "Convene the Directorate. Emergency session, Apex Tower. Systems and Science."

The Lattice answered in the level tone Security had trained into every audited system. "Acknowledged. Directors Shova and Zhalir have already requested the footage and the audio."

Of course they had.

A transit car was waiting at the base of his tower with its doors open and its route set. He had not summoned it. The Lattice anticipated the movements of directors the way it anticipated weather. Nolis took the seat facing forward, and the car merged into the morning flow without a sound.

Hiberia's capital district lay under low cloud. Silver light came down through the haze and lay flat on the towers: government spires, security terraces, elevated transit lines running in clean parallel arcs, and processional avenues kept clear by systems that treated congestion as civic filth. Every vehicle held its lane. Every lane held its hour. Pedestrians crossed at intervals the city had calculated for them, and no one was ever surprised by a crowd. Nothing in the district stood where it did by accident.

He knew Telazon districts only through survey. Their streets climbed instead of running, with ledges and gripping posts where Voss corridors insisted on flat floors. Their old civic patterns were cut by hand into stone, in warm rust and clay colors the occupation had spent a century covering with gray panels. Voss analysts called the arrangement organic. Nolis called it disorder with a sentimental name. Things belonged in their places because someone had assigned them there, audited the assignment, and corrected it when it drifted. The Telazons had never understood that, or had understood it and refused.

"Voice comparison is running against the Republic command archives," the Lattice said. "Candidates will be ready before arrival."

Two messages waited in the cabin. Director Shova: Systems had the Kraz chain ledgers open, and the failure began in the route schedule. Director Zhalir: Science requested the original audio, unfiltered.

He sent Zhalir the unfiltered file and began to draft the public language, because the first explanation would be the one that held. Restorationist attack on support vessels, route infrastructure, and patrol units. Risk to civilian order, drive-stock access, and system stability. The Telazons would call it a battle for their republic. The Technocracy would call it disorder, and calling it that first was most of the work. States survived by naming events before events named themselves back.

And still he returned to the old hull. The Telazons had preserved a republic in songs, ship names, outlawed colors, warlord titles, false work orders, and the stubborn discipline of citizens who knew memory could become a logistics system if enough of them kept carrying it. Voss education classified such thinking as irrational. Voss Security classified it as dangerous. Nolis belonged to Security, and he chose the more useful category.

Apex Tower stood where the district's three main avenues met, and the rest of the capital was arranged to face it. The car stopped at its base. Nolis stepped out into the cold and went in.

There was no throne at the top of it. No inherited banner, no heroic statue, no dead ruler watching the living pretend that obedience was devotion. Authority in the Technocracy was distributed, balanced, audited, corrected, and when necessary, sharpened. Nolis had always found comfort in that. Today he found less.

The lift rose through floors of audit offices and records vaults, each exactly as busy as it was supposed to be. He watched the numbers climb and thought of the hull on his wall. One hundred and seven years. Fleets broken, schools rewritten, colors outlawed, names struck from registries, and the Telazons still persisted in resisting. He had read their history as a closed file. It amazed him that they had not agreed it was closed.

The Directorate Chamber was cold by design, and not only in temperature. The floor was polished black and gave back no warmth. Pale walls rose in clean planes that denied ornament until the geometry became ornament, and light entered through high slits of armored weather glass, turning the overcast sky into a silver wash above the angles. The chamber existed to make hierarchy look like geometry.

Three equal stations overlooked the circular Directorate seal worked into the floor: dark gunmetal and restrained bronze around a blue-lit central triangle, the three directorates divided into measured arcs around it. Security. Systems. Science.

Jal Shova of Systems stood at the left station, broader through the shoulders and wider through the face, his gray skin carrying a slate-

charcoal cast. He moved route projections across his display with economical gestures. Fatigue showed only in how little motion he wasted. Vex Zhalir of Science stood at the right, leaner and quieter, his gray skin carrying a muted green-blue undertone that made him look almost clinical. His pale eyes moved through analysis windows most officials would have needed a staff to interpret. Nolis took the Security station between them.

"This is not unusual beyond scale," Shova said. His voice carried the controlled irritation of a director whose ledgers had been made to confess failure before he had authorized the confession. "Telazon restorationist violence has appeared before."

"Past rebellions did not have battleships," Nolis said.

The chamber accepted the sentence poorly. Precise language had that advantage. It did not need volume to injure an assumption.

"It is a hull one hundred and seven years old," Shova said. "A preserved hull."

"A maintained hull."

Shova stopped. His hands stopped moving across the display.

"Drive stock," he said slowly. "Specialists. Munitions. Crew rotation. Dry-dock discipline. False records consistent enough to survive inspection. A battleship does not survive a century under occupation because zealots hid it beneath a slogan."

"And it came with frigates," Nolis said. "Two wings of Skarriks. They killed the tender before they touched the cruiser."

"They knew the tender's authentication handshake," Shova said, "and the beacon timing behind it. They knew the maintenance rotation. They knew the patrol would return toward Kraz with enough regularity to be predicted and enough value to justify the strike." He looked at the map as though it had lied to him. "Our route security failed first. Kraz traffic control made habit predictable, and our audits let whatever sits beneath it stay invisible."

"You are describing a state beneath the state."

"Yes."

The word stayed in the chamber longer than Nolis would have liked.

"Play the voice," Zhalir said.

Nolis played it. Static, the older male voice, three fragments. Zhalir listened with his head slightly bowed and his eyes unfocused. Incomplete data offended him less than unexamined data.

"Again," he said. Then, to the air: "Lattice. Report the comparison."

"Comparison complete," the Lattice said. "Source quality is degraded."

VOICE MATCH — REPUBLIC COMMAND ARCHIVES.

Torvek Ral: confirmed deceased. Voice excluded.

Remaining candidates: one unaccounted for.

Best match: HERTRAK, FORMER JUNIOR WARLORD.

Confidence: moderate.

The name entered the chamber with old records attached to it. Hertrak. Former Junior Warlord under Torvek Ral during the last confirmed phase of Republic resistance, if the older files could be trusted. His death had never been confirmed cleanly. His inactivity had been easier for Voss administration to file than prove. His name had remained in Telazon memory longer than law permitted.

"Moderate," Shova said.

"The sample is three words and the archive is a century old," Zhalir said. "I would not call it more. I would not call it less."

"A Kharad answers to a senior warlord," Nolis said. "The title was retired with the Republic's military structure. Law retires titles. It does not always retire obedience."

"A useful superstition," Shova said.

"A useful command signal. Hold Hertrak as a candidate. Privately. Security models require a candidate authority. Sentiment does not."

A marker opened above the Lattice display. "The recording is spreading," it said. "Dock channels, civic relays, and cold-habitat receivers across Telazon space."

"Then it was meant to," Nolis said. "If this is Hertrak, or someone using his name, given Telazon history this will not be the only attack. The war has begun. That is what the recording says, and inside this chamber we will use the word. Outside it we will not."

"The first public response must not look frightened," he added.

"We are not frightened," Shova said.

"Then our language should not tremble."

Public language would change by reclassification. Rebels became war-bringers. Citizens in unrest became armed restorationists. The Republic became illegal civic residue, liberation became destabilization, occupation became administration, and conquest became stabilization.

"And if they circulate our dead cruiser?" Zhalir asked.

"We circulate the tender," Nolis said. "Restorationist attack on support vessels, route infrastructure, and patrol units. We do not argue over the old Republic. We argue over disorder."

Shova drew the measures onto the display as he listed them. Patrols would no longer move singly along vulnerable return lanes, and Kraz-bound traffic would consolidate into escorted groups. Relay tenders would receive destroyer-priority protection, with beacon handshakes randomized and rekeyed. Maintenance schedules would be classified upward, and support craft would no longer trail in predictable formation behind patrol cruisers. Civilian transponder silence in certain lanes would be treated as abnormal, not convenient. Known former Republic shipyards would be reclassified, and old civic industrial platforms audited again.

"Schools and youth networks should receive guidance," Zhalir said. "Old colors, songs, and Republic phrases may spread faster than weapon cells."

"You would put children inside the monitoring model?" Shova asked.

"Children become adults," Zhalir said. "More dangerously, adults use them to remember."

Nolis approved the line without saying so.

"Rewards should be refreshed," he said, "for hidden routes, stock caches, repair zones, and obsolete Republic hulls. Survey drones go beyond the public chains to correlate calibration wakes and beacon timing. If they preserved a concealed network, Systems maps enough of it to build an independent Voss approach chain. Destruction is a denial measure. It is not the opening reflex."

"The strategic marshal commands the theater from Exidor," Shova said, "with Kraz as the forward base. He has the ships to hunt it."

"Whoever commands that hull has kept it hidden for over a hundred years," Nolis said. "He cannot have done that without a shore. The marshal finds the battleship, locates the support behind it, and destroys both. Until then, we close every door the Telazons have been using."

"Begin with the routes," he said. "Then the audits. Then the names."

Shova sent the first order. Zhalir sent the second. Nolis sent the third.

Across Voss-controlled Telazon space, systems began to tighten. Patrols shifted. Notices were drafted. Informant schedules were refreshed, old shipyards received new attention, and children wearing the wrong colors would soon find adults watching them with sharper eyes.

Nolis looked down at the circular seal in the floor, its blue triangle fixed inside the three divided arcs.

If the Telazons wanted a war, the Technocracy would answer in the only language it had ever held: order, and enough of it.

END OF SAMPLE

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