

## EPILOGUE

President Sinclair sat in his office aboard Zertex Command... Four? Nine? He couldn't recall. He really should get them painted differently or something, he thought.

Through the window behind him, far in the distance, a neighboring star was in the early stages of a supernova. It was an impressive sight, and would become even more so over the next few weeks and months.

He ignored the window and stared at the comm-device on his desk, gently kneading his tiny basketball, and waiting for the light on the intercom that would signify an incoming transmission from Legate Jjin. Assuming all had gone to plan – and Sinclair had made the plan himself, so had no reason to believe it wouldn't – the Symmorium Sentience would now be fully under the control of Zertex.

Alternatively, if things had gone badly, it would be dead. Or destroyed. Or whatever happened to it when a fleet of some of Zertex's best ships rained enough firepower to destroy a planet on it. Without their 'god' the Symmorium themselves would be easy pickings. He could have every last one of them eradicated within weeks.

Or enslaved, maybe? He'd thought about it for a long time, but could never decide which appealed most – cleansing the galaxy of their presence, or condemning every member of that proud warrior race to a lifetime of slavery. He could put them to work in the Poktar mines, where the heat and the pain and the relentless darkness would eventually drive them mad.

Alternatively, he might put them on clean-up duty out on what was left of the planet Trissk, following Zertex's recent weapons tests out that way. He'd been informed that corpses still lay piled high in the streets, charred and scorched and mangled beyond all recognition. Yes, that would help shake whatever fight be left out of them.

Perhaps he'd even keep one of them for himself. A Symmorium, that is, not a burned Trisskian corpse.

"Although..." he said, thinking aloud. "That *would* make quite a statement."

He could put it in a display case in the corner, perhaps. Or mounted on the wall behind him. It would be an interesting conversation piece.

He made a mental note to investigate the possibility later, and went back to thinking about the Symmorium. Ambassador Druka would seem an obvious choice for a slave. Sinclair could have him run little errands around the office. The president smiled at that idea. He could even get the ambassador a funny costume of some kind. Perhaps a novelty hat. Yes, that would really help liven the place up.

Sinclair bounced his little basketball off the desk a few times, and increased the intensity with which he was staring at the comm-device, as if he could make the light come on through sheer willpower alone. Jjin should have been in touch by now. What was keeping him?

*BLEEP.*

“Aha!” said Sinclair. He reached for the ‘answer’ button, then paused. It was never good to seem too eager. He gave his basketball five rhythmic squeezes, then tapped the ‘video call’ button and turned his chair to face the window, just as the view of outer space became the inside of a ship.

“Legate Jjin,” said Sinclair, smiling broadly at his second-in-command. “Good to finally hear from you. I was growing concerned.”

On screen, Legate Jjin said nothing.

A brief flicker of irritation knotted Sinclair’s eyebrows. He began passing the basketball from one hand to the other. “Legate Jjin? Can you hear me?”

Jjin’s mouth began to flap up and down. Words emerged from the speakers, but they weren’t in sync with the mouth movements, and definitely weren’t Jjin’s voice. They were a mockery of it, a childish impersonation of Jjin’s usual booming gravitas.

“Yeah, I can hear you, honey. Ooh, you sure look handsome today. Gimme a kiss. Mwah.”

Sinclair failed to catch the basketball. It bounced once on the floor, then rolled into the corner. Slowly, ever so slowly, the president stood up.

“What is this?” he said, although it wasn’t clear if the question was addressed to himself or Jjin. Or the person who *looked like* Jjin, at least, and whose mouth was still flapping up and down.

“Oh, I do like a bad boy,” the voice continued. “And you’ve been a really bad boy, Hayel. Naughty president! Naughty...”

The voice broke into laughter. “Sorry, is it me, or is this just getting weird?”

“*Getting* weird?” said another voice. “This shizz was weird right from the start, man.”

“Like, he’s right,” added a third voice. “This is *totally* fonked up.”

Legate Jjin’s mouth stopped flapping and his face collapsed like half-set meringue, folding into itself and becoming a churning blob of green that quickly shrunk out of sight.

Sinclair’s fingers bunched into fists as the grinning face of Cal Carver leaned in from the right of the screen and waved. “Did it work?” Cal asked. “Did you think that was him?”

“Carver,” Sinclair hissed. “What have you done? Where is Jjin?”

Cal stepped fully into view, his face becoming suddenly serious. “I’m sorry, Hayel. There’s no easy way of saying this, but Jjin... He’s... Well, he’s in space Heaven.” He held up his hands. “I take full responsibility. We were messing around, you know, having a bit of a wrestle, and I accidentally incinerated him with the thrusters of our ship.”

Sinclair opened his mouth to reply, but Cal jumped in again.

“And by ‘accidentally’ I mean ‘on purpose’. And by ‘our ship’ I mean ‘the ship we have now stolen from you and you are never getting back.’ Just so we’re clear.”

While Cal had been speaking, Mech, Miz and Loren had stepped into shot behind him. “You picked the wrong guys to fonk with,” said Mech.

“Yeah, like, we totally kicked your guys’ butts,” added Miz.

“Hey! We can say ‘butt!’” said Cal.

Loren stepped forward. “Oh, and just in case there’s any doubt, *sir*,” she spat. “I quit. Consider this my resignation.”

She extended her index finger in quite an aggressive way. Cal smiled encouragingly. “OK, middle finger. I said middle finger. Good try, though. We’re getting there.”

Cal shot Sinclair a ‘Hey, she tried,’ look, then continued.

“The Symmorium... Uh...”

“Sentience,” said Mech.

“Thank you. The Symmorium thingy is safe,” said Cal. “And those guys are... Well, they’re less than happy with you, let’s put it that way. I would *not* like to be in your shoes when...”

Cal stopped. He frowned as a thought occurred to him.

“Wait. If we’re all here, who’s flying the ship?” he asked.

Everyone looked at Loren as her eyes went wide. “Shizz,” she muttered, then she turned and darted off screen. The *Shatner* rocked as something slammed into its hull.

“Uh, we better go,” Cal said, staggering as the ship shook again. “You take care now, Hayel, you hear? You have a great day. I’m kind of missing you already.”

The president’s screen went dark, then the view of outer space returned. Sinclair stared into the void, his anger building like the light of the distant supernova.

His space chair *squeaked* as he lowered himself into it. He looked around for his little basketball, but couldn’t find it, so slammed his fist several times against the desktop, instead.

Then, once that was out of the way, he reached for the intercom. “Janet,” he barked.

His secretary’s voice came back immediately. “Yes, sir?”

“Jjin failed. We need to dispatch troops.”

“To attack the Symmorium?” asked Janet.

“No,” Sinclair said, trying to calm the rising anger in his voice. “To get Cal Carver.”

“Very good, sir,” said Janet. “Who should I send?”

Sinclair glanced behind him at the screen.

“Sir?” said Janet. “Who should I send?”

A grin twisted its way across Sinclair's face.

"Everyone, Janet," he said. "Send *everyone*."