Three Square Meals Ch. 166

Floating in the anti-gravity field inside the Valkyrie’s cockpit, Dana twisted her body to the left and held out her hands to keep herself stable. The mech mirrored her movements, banking to port and sweeping past the Invictus, as the battlecruiser slowly descended towards the grounds outside the palace. Lightly feathering the mech’s retro-thrusters, Dana landed in a crouch, then she quickly began shutting down the powerful strike craft.

By the time she emerged from the cockpit, the huge door into the Invictus’ Cargo Bay was already open, and there was a flurry of activity around the spaceship. Dozens of maintenance bots had started ferrying freshly built components from the Invictus into the Palace, where they would begin construction of critically important control interfaces. When they were finished, gunnery teams would be able to aim and fire the orbital defence grid, as well as the Quantum Flux Cannon turrets that Dana had just finished installing around the city.

Activating flight mode on her Paragon suit, Dana stepped off the catwalk on the Valkyrie’s shoulder, and floated down to land on an ornate flagstone path. She saw Alyssa waiting for her at the top of the Invictus’ loading ramp, and returned a friendly wave while bounding over to join her. As she got closer, Dana was startled to see that the blonde was frowning in disapproval.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, wondering what could have upset the easy-going teenager.

“You can’t leave the Valkyrie like that,” Alyssa protested, looking over Dana’s shoulder towards the squatting mech. “It looks like it’s taking a dump.”

The redhead glanced back and blushed. The lethal assault mech did look like it was struggling with acute constipation.

“Ah, who cares,” she said with a self-conscious shrug. “I’ll be taking off again soon anyway.”

“Just don’t let Sakura catch you parking it like that,” Alyssa warned her. “She’s very attached to the Valkyrie.”

Dana stuck out her tongue at the blonde and flounced past. “Did you finish making everything we need?” she asked, deliberately changing the subject.

Alyssa followed her into the Cargo Bay and pointed to the huge pile of gleaming white components that were stacked against the rear wall. “That’s all the parts required for the shield generator. While I’m assembling it for you in the forecourt; can you hook it up to the power grid?”

“Sure, no problem,” Dana agreed, turning her attention away from the collection of components to look to their right. “Hey, are those the new Signal Projectors? They look awesome!”

“Yeah, they were quite tricky to build,” Alyssa noted, glancing over at the angular devices.

Each one was shaped like a dodecahedron, with sophisticated projectors built into the five upper facings.

The redhead jogged over to the closest and knelt down beside it. “I reverse-engineered Progenitor tech, so they are very complex,” she explained, while deftly unlocking an access hatch and peering inside the outer casing.

“Does it meet with your approval, Chief Engineer?” Alyssa asked, watching her friend with amusement.

“Yeah, you did a sweet job putting them together,” Dana replied, giving her an enthusiastic thumbs up. “Nice work!”

“Thank you. The Nymphs will be here in a minute, then they’ll go and set them up for us.”

“Did you tell them that they have to be deployed at ground level in the centre of each city?” Dana fretted, darting a worried glance at the seven new Signal Projectors. “If they stick them on top of a building, it’ll look like everyone’s flying!”

“Don’t worry, I told them,” her friend said with a reassuring smile. “The Nymphs might act like fawning kittens around John, but they’re a lot more sophisticated than they seem. They won’t have any problems correctly installing these devices.”

They both heard the familiar roaring of the Raptor’s retro-thrusters as the gunship landed outside.

“That’s them now,” Alyssa said, offering a hand to the kneeling redhead.

They walked out to greet Jade and her five sisters, and by the time they’d reached the Cargo Bay door, the catgirls were bounding down the loading ramp at the rear of the gunship.

“What’s the matter with the Valkyrie?” Jade asked with concern. “It looks... uncomfortable.”

“Maybe it needs some roughage in its diet?” Neysa suggested helpfully.

Betrixa smirked as she added, “Or some mega laxatives.”

Dana rolled her eyes at the giggling Nymphs. “Yeah... very sophisticated.”

Alyssa winked at the redhead, then beckoned the catgirls to follow her back into the Invictus. “The Signal Projectors are all built and ready for you. Let’s go inside and give the Valkyrie some privacy.”

With a long-suffering sigh, Dana glanced back at the object of their amusement, then cringed at the awkward pose. “I’m just moving the mech, I’ll be there in a second!”

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“I’m sorry we had to end the reception so abruptly, Elder Othorion,” Edraele apologised to her guest. “I was thoroughly enjoying your company, as were the other matriarchs.”

He gave her a sympathetic smile. “Given the circumstances, I think you can be forgiven.”

Edraele glanced back at the other Maliri males that had been invited to the elegant party. Their crystal goblets had been set aside in exchange for comms devices, and the elders were now busy coordinating another rapid evacuation with their subordinates from each guild. Her concerned gaze flicked to the eighteen matriarchs, who had been happily socialising until they were interrupted. The women all turned to face her as she addressed them telepathically.

\*You all made a wonderful impression on our guests. I couldn’t be prouder of each and every one of you,\* she praised them, her voice filled with warmth. \*Unfortunately, it’s time for you to depart. There’s no need for formal goodbyes; the males are very pragmatic and understand this is an emergency. Now retire to your quarters and collect whatever necessities you require for travel. When you’re ready, return to my suite and Luna will guide you to a waiting shuttle.\*

The matriarchs acknowledged her orders with obedient nods. After a few murmured words to the elders they’d just been conversing with, they glided regally out of the reception room, escorted by their bodyguards.

Elder Othorion was watching their silent interaction with avid interest. “The elders on Genwynn Station told me that you were in constant telepathic communication with Lord Baen’thelas. I found that very hard to believe, but it seems you can also talk that way to the other matriarchs, can’t you?”

“Telepathy is one of the benefits I gained from pledging to serve Lord Baen’thelas,” Edraele said with an enigmatic smile. “There are some subtle nuances and restrictions, but in essence I’m able to communicate this way with any white-haired Maliri female.”

“How remarkable,” he said, studying her in fascination.

She turned coquettishly from side-to-side. “Do I pass your inspection, Othorion?”

The elder grinned and patted her arm. “You’re devastatingly charming, my dear... as I’m sure you’re well aware. I don’t know whether I should be beguiled or terrified.”

Edraele laughed, the lovely musical sound making many of the men glance her way and smile, even despite the dire circumstances. “I shall certainly hope for the former, but the alternative would be understandable, given my infamous reputation.”

Fleet Commander Aadya was approaching the pair, but Othorion held up his hand and firmly shook his head. She was so startled, the senior officer took an extra step back to provide them some privacy.

Othorion then gave the Maliri Queen a shrewd look, and any pretence that this was a gullible old man quickly faded away. “We’ve met before, Edraele... although I’m sure you don’t remember me.”

“We have?” she faltered, looking at him in surprise. “Please forgive me, I don’t recall that meeting.”

“I was visiting Geniya Station on business,” he quietly replied, a poignant note to his subdued voice. “Theran was an old friend of mine and I decided to renew our acquaintance.”

Edraele paled, her expression stricken.

“Now, what was it you said to me?” Othorion mused aloud. “Ah yes, I remember: ‘Get out of my way, you miserable little insect, or I’ll flay the flesh from your bones.” Shaking his head at the frightening memory, he added, “And you weren’t making an idle threat; I instantly knew that you really meant every horrifying word.”

Her shoulders slumped, and Edraele looked at him with profound guilt and remorse. “I’m truly sorry, Othorion. Not just for threatening you, but for what I did to Theran. There isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t bitterly regret what I’ve done. I was a monster, and I hurt so many people.”

The elder was watching her every move for the slightest hint of duplicity or insincerity. After carefully scrutinising the Maliri Queen to his satisfaction, Othorion looked genuinely surprised. “This isn’t some elaborate facade. You really have changed.”

Edraele let out a heavy sigh and nodded. “The cruel and malicious creature you met no longer exists. All that’s left is the woman you see before you, trying to atone for her many dreadful crimes.”

“How? Nobody can change that much, it simply isn’t possible,” he said doubtfully.

She stepped closer to him, then leaned in to softly murmur, “I was a bad girl, so Baen’thelas punished me for being naughty.”

When Edraele pulled back, she saw the shock in Othorion’s eyes, as he recalled the words from the cautionary tale about Mael’nerak. The children’s story had been created and spread by the Maliri males, as a warning to future generations about Progenitors. He suddenly looked at her with concern, which she found curious, considering the cruel nature of the tyrannical matriarch that had previously threatened him on Geniya.

Edraele reached out to gently squeeze his hand. “Baen’thelas is kind and compassionate; he’d never intentionally harm any of us. But rest assured that Matriarch Edraele Valaden is gone forever. She was replaced by Queen Edraele, and I promise to serve our people to the very best of my ability.” Locking eyes with him, those rich purple orbs seemed to gaze into his soul. “Do you understand what I’m saying, Othorion? I am not the same person that wronged you in the past.”

Shaken and awed by that knowledge, he whispered, “I understand.”

Stepping back from him, she glanced towards the House Perfaren Fleet Admiral. “Aadya will help you return to her ship, where you’ll be temporarily evacuated to Valaden. I wish you a safe journey, Elder Othorion. I very much hope that we can speak again in the future.”

“As do I, Queen Edraele,” he said with respect, executing a surprisingly elegant bow.

She inclined her head in return, then waited patiently as the rest of her guests departed, the males accompanying Aadya back to the Ettrian Keyrie.

\*Are you alright, Edraele?\* Alyssa asked with sympathy.

\*Not really, but we have enough to worry about for now,\* the Maliri Queen replied.

\*I’m so sorry, I had no idea that Othorion knew the twins’ father.\*

\*I should have expected it. If not Othorion, then another of the males was bound to have known Theran... and what I did to him,\* she said with deep regret.

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Underneath Mael’nerak’s palace on Kythshara, within his secret bunker, the command centre was teeming with activity. The room was filled with the click and whir of multi-tools, as maintenance bots quickly and efficiently assembled the new fire control systems for the defence grid. Working beside them was Alyssa, who was busy psychically shaping Crystal Alyssium into a new gunnery interface, under Dana’s watchful eye.

“That’s perfect,” the redhead said, as she slotted a new holo-projector into the outer casing. “Helene, can you grab me a couple of chairs please?”

The enthusiastic mermaid rushed off, and was back a few moments later with two high-backed seats, taken from the surrounding tactical stations. Despite being entombed in the bunker for over nine-thousand years, the chairs were both in excellent condition.

“Are these okay?” she asked hopefully.

Dana flopped back in one of the comfy ergonomic chairs and grinned. “Awesome, thanks!”

Helene laughed, then sat primly beside her. “How is... all this... going?” she asked, waving her hand in the general direction of the console.

“Pretty good,” Dana replied. “As soon as Alyssa finishes, we can connect the new gunnery interface to the fire control system that the Collective is putting together. After that, we just need to hook up the power, then bingo! We’ll be able to aim all those gun turrets.”

“That’s amazing,” Helene marvelled, glancing across the command centre at the huge holo-display that dominated the wall. “I still find it hard to believe that you can control things up in space from all the way down here.”

The holographic image was displaying a Tactical Map for the local system, with the planet Kythshara at its centre, surrounded by a network of gun emplacements. As she looked at the map, Helene blinked in surprise as several of the orbital platforms seemed to be slowly drifting in the same direction.

“The turrets are moving!” she blurted out, pointing towards the holo-map.

Tashana looked up at the tactical display, her eyes narrowing as she studied the sensor data. “It looks like they’re being towed by thrall ships,” she noted, before glancing at Alyssa for confirmation.

“Well, they were just sitting around with nothing to do,” the blonde explained, as she concentrated on psychically shaping the last components for the gunnery station. “And it saves the Invictus from running around like a headless chicken.”

Tashana nodded her approval. “Very nice. I’m sure Calara will be pleased.”

“She’s ecstatic,” Alyssa agreed. “We still have to set up the spider mines, but we’ve got plenty of time left for that.”

Irillith was seated beside her twin, the Maliri hacker’s eyes glowing with a muted violet light. “I’m detecting the bots as distinct nodes across the Collective’s planetary subnet, Daphne. It looks like they do have power, but they’re currently in a dormant state.”

“I’ll broadcast the startup routine as soon as I’ve finished modifying this motor-control procedure,” the synthetic girl replied, her face a picture of intense concentration. “Beginning test routine 0023: Initiating boot sequence.”

Amongst all the white-armoured robots and Lionesses, there was one dark figure that stood out from the rest. More precisely, the disarmed thrall robot lay sprawled on the floor, where it had collapsed after Daphne’s previous test routine. When she triggered the activation command, the automated soldier lurched upright into a sitting position, then twisted awkwardly onto all fours. It leaned back, then carefully straightened as it rose to its feet.

“That transition stage needs a little work,” Irillith noted with a critical eye.

“Their gyroscopic array is different from mine,” Daphne explained, as she made a number of rapid corrections. “It was not possible to directly replicate my automotive control systems.”

The robot moved a leg forward, then shifted into an awkward walk. Each step became smoother as Daphne updated its control software, until the thrall bot was able to pace back and forth with a natural gait.

“That’s a huge improvement, well done,” Tashana said, giving Daphne a congratulatory pat on the shoulder. “What about firing their guns? Are you working on some kind of weapon targeting system for them too?”

Daphne looked uncomfortable. “Not yet. I’ve been primarily focused on enhancing their mobility to an acceptable standard.”

“The Collective are pacifists, Shan,” Irillith gently reminded her sister “They don’t like the idea of hurting anyone, even the Galkirans.”

The Maliri gunslinger studied the thrall robot speculatively. “I guess it doesn’t really matter; they’ll be excellent decoys, even if they can’t shoot straight.” She winced and added, “But please try to make sure they don’t hit any of us either.”

Daphne brightened, all her previous reticence evaporating. “I will begin work on the appropriate software immediately.”

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Lynette tossed her peaked hat on the coffee table, then collapsed on the sofa, slumping into the plush upholstery. “Thank God that’s over with.”

Raising an eyebrow, Charles walked over to the drinks cabinet. “I thought you’d be in the mood to celebrate? That meeting couldn’t have gone any better.”

“Celebrate?” she asked, with a weary laugh. “I might have been able to put a positive spin on it for High Command, but we’re still losing 57 colonies. No matter what way I look at this, I still can’t help feeling like it’s an unmitigated disaster.”

“Drink?” Charles offered, setting up two tumblers.

She brushed a hand back through her lustrous brown hair. “Yeah, definitely.”

As he poured out the liquor, Charles gave her a thoughtful look. “For what it’s worth, I think you’re being much too hard on yourself. You inherited a dire situation with the Outer Rim colonies, and even though they were determined to leave the Terran Federation, you still managed to convince them to end the rebellion before it got started.”

“For about five minutes,” Lynette muttered sourly.

“But the attack on the border fleet was completely out of your control,” he reasoned, handing her the cut-glass crystal.

“Thank you,” she replied, before taking a hasty swig of the amber liquid. The alcohol burned her throat as it went down, making her wince, then she sighed and relaxed in the chair.

“And even after the Galkirans wrecked your chances of getting the colonies to stay, you then somehow managed to convince High Command that it was actually a big victory for us.” He took a sip of his drink, then chuckled with amusement. “I’ve never seen Cartwright that happy before. For a moment, I thought the old buzzard was going to get up and dance a jig.”

Lynette cracked a wry smile. “Yeah, me too.” Her smile faded, then she reluctantly admitted, “I really can’t claim any credit for that. It was all Alyssa’s idea to put a positive spin on the Outer rim seceding. I thought she was being incredibly cynical when she first pitched her plan, but I have to hand it to her, she understands the Admiralty far better than I did. High Command just ate it up.”

“You said it yourself: we’ve all been taught that any insurrection should be immediately crushed, using maximum force as a deterrence to other colonies,” Charles said quietly. “Maybe we were all just desperate to avoid this escalating into a situation where we had to use orbital bombardments on civilian cities to suppress the rebellion.”

She reached out to clasp his hand, and gave it an affectionate squeeze. “I know that was your motivation, but not everyone was quite so eager to let the Outer Rim ride off peacefully into the sunset.”

Charles stretched out his legs, crossing his ankles as he rested them on the coffee table. “Even if we let the colonies go without a fight, I still don’t think they’re going to have a peaceful future, not if they have to deal with a mass migration of troublemakers.” He glanced at his fiancée and raised an eyebrow. “Are you actually planning to deport convicts to the Outer Rim?”

Lynette shook her head. “We won’t have to. Those colonies will be desperate for migrants, and they’ll do all the work for us. If we start cracking down on criminality within the Terran Federation, while they start advertising the Outer Rim as a paradise of new opportunity, then they’ll lure in just the kind of people that cause us problems.”

“But we could also end up triggering a brain-drain,” Charles said with a worried frown. “I know you were exaggerating about the current state of the Outer Rim; not all those colonies are strip-mined backwaters. Cicarus II has a substantial industrial complex, and Lithotania is nearly as well developed as planets in the Core Worlds. There’s also scores of planets we haven’t colonised yet, which can still be exploited for their mineral wealth. Aren’t you worried about entrepreneurs leaving the Terran Federation in droves?”

“Honestly... no,” Lynette replied with calm certainty, before relaxing and closing her eyes.

Charles waited patiently for a few moments, then nudged the brunette with an elbow. “I know you’re just trying to get a rise out of me. Come on, out with it. Why not?”

She grinned, then put aside her drink and cuddled up next to him. “Sorry. I blame it on the booze.”

He put his arm around her shoulders. “You’re forgiven. So why aren’t you worried? You seem more sad for the Outer Rim than anything else.”

Lynette let out a heavy sigh. “Because I genuinely believe they would’ve been better off staying with us. They’ve chosen the absolute worst time to secede from the Terran Federation, because the harsh truth is... they don’t really matter anymore.”

Charles fell silent for a moment, then his eyes widened with sudden understanding. “Because of all the worlds we just captured from the Kintark Empire. That means three-hundred new planets fully under the control of the Terran Federation, with no unstable rebel governments to deal with in the short-term, and no long-term threat of Kirrix invasions.”

“Clever boy,” she murmured, leaning up to give him a tender kiss on the cheek.

“The Outer Rim colonies can’t possibly compete with that, can they?” he mused aloud.

“No, it’s not even close,” Lynette replied, resting her head on his chest. “The worlds beyond the Dragon March will be the new gold rush, not the planets in the Outer Rim. With the Kintark population evacuating, there won’t be any contention over staking claims on prime resource extraction sites. All any citizen needs to do is purchase the land rights from Colonial Administration. To all intents and purposes, those are virgin worlds, ripe for exploitation... but with plenty of existing infrastructure to make the process even cheaper and more efficient.”

Charles took a moment to consider the benefits and risks of each region. “If I wanted to make my fortune, that’s where I’d go. All the best business opportunities will be in the former Kintark colonies... in the opposite direction to the Outer Rim.”

“Yes, exactly. That’s why I intend to honour those financial assistance packages I negotiated with the governors; the colonies are going to need that money just to survive. It’s also why I think we should be as generous as possible with the fleet donations.”

“I don’t want to see the Outer Rim overrun by Kirrix either,” Charles said, grimacing at that horrific thought. “Don’t worry, Lynette, you can leave that with me. I have more control over refits and ship construction than anyone else in the Admiralty. With all the new fleets being brought into active service, nobody will even notice if I’m a bit overzealous with tagging fully operational vessels for early retirement.”

“You’re a good man, Charles,” Lynette said, snuggling into him. “I’m very lucky to have you.”

“Yeah, you’re hitting way out of your league,” he smirked, patting the stunningly beautiful young woman on the shoulder.

She heard the self-deprecation in his voice, and promptly rose from the chair. “Come on,” she insisted, holding out her hand. “Time to call it a night.”

“But I was comfy,” Charles protested, and swilled his half-full glass of whiskey. “And I haven’t even finished my drink.”

Lynette peeled off her Fleet Admiral’s jacket, and tossed it on the sofa with a flourish. She then started unbuttoning her shirt as she sauntered towards their bedroom, only pausing in the doorway to give him a coy smile over her deliciously nude shoulder. After idly dropping her discarded shirt on the floor, she then disappeared inside.

Downing the last of his drink in three gulps, Charles hurried after his ravishing fiancée, fumbling to remove his tie as he went.

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Jehanna listened with interest as the House Loraleth Field Commander made her report, while Faraine’s two counterparts waited patiently for their turn.

“We’ve just secured the fortifications along this ridgeline,” the Maliri officer informed her leader, pointing to the defences on the holographic map. “I can confirm that your scouts were correct: there are anti-aircraft gun emplacements interspersed between the bunkers.”

“Will your troops have any trouble operating those guns?” Jehanna asked, noting the locations of each battery.

Her report was interrupted by the staccato squeal of tachyon fire, and as Jehanna looked up from the map, she saw a stream of purple pulses arcing skyward.

“Ahh... no, General,” Faraine replied, her lips curling into a smile at the perfectly timed burst of gunfire. “I believe that won’t be a problem.”

Jehanna broke into a grin too, then her gaze fell to the closest intersection. Several slabs of ferrocrete had been levered up, and clumps of dirt were being sprayed out from a freshly excavated pit. A squad of golden-armoured marines were watching from a safe vantage point nearby, the white haired Maliri chatting together as they stood beside a floating hover-truck. Secured to the back of the vehicle was a long cylindrical device, the curved outer case still gleaming in the fading twilight.

“What about mining the drop zones?” Jehanna asked the House Loraleth officer. “How’s that progressing?”

“As you can see, the Nymphs have been a huge help digging trenches for the warheads,” Faraine said, turning to watch as well. “That’s the third one Marika has prepared for us.”

The fountain of soil and rock came to an abrupt end, then a huge tabby-striped tiger leapt out of the pit. She lashed her tail with bliss as the marines petted her, then Marika bounded along the boulevard towards the next intersection.

Faraine returned her attention to the map, then she pointed to the ground leading towards the fortifications. “We’ve set anti-personnel mines to cover their most likely routes of attack. Even if thrall armour is as tough as you say, the explosions should cause a significant amount of disruption to any assault.”

“Good. We want to stir up as much chaos and confusion as possible,” Jehanna said with an approving nod.

Alvaerelle cleared her throat. “May I ask a question, General?”

“Of course, go ahead,” Jehanna replied, turning to face the House Valaden officer.

“You said that Lord Baen’thelas wants to avoid a massacre, but if the Galkirans can land significant numbers of troops, we’ll be forced to engage them at very close range. I don’t see how we’ll be able to minimise their casualties without a significant risk of our own troops being overrun.”

“Our highest priority is preserving the lives of your marines. I want you to plan safe evacuation routes just in case any of your positions are overwhelmed,” Jehanna said earnestly. “But we should at least try to wound rather than kill the enemy whenever possible.”

“Understood,” Alvaerelle replied with a sharp nod.

Before the next Field Commander could begin her report, Jehanna frowned as she heard the faint sound of a steady beat. It grew steadily louder until she recognised the distinctive crunch of marching boots heading in their direction. The Maliri officers glanced at each other in surprise, then the group turned to see who was approaching.

The main street curved around a tall building on the corner, and as Jehanna watched, ranks of troops appeared along the road, marching in perfect time with each other. The soldiers were unmistakeably female, their black armour marking them as thralls. That might have been cause for great alarm, if not for the cute synthetic girl strolling ahead of them, and the floating white maintenance bots that accompanied each brigade of automated thralls.

[Get on the ready line!] the closest maintenance bot barked. [Move it out, Goddammit!]

Jehanna was startled to see that the floating robot was wearing a green helmet, and had somehow acquired a lit cigar in its six-fingered hand.

[Move it out, Move it out, Move it out!] the bot yelled as the thrall troops marched into position.

The automated troops stood at attention in parade formation, their long-barrelled underslung guns held in a sturdy grip.

Gliding past the front line of black-armoured thralls, the maintenance bot growled his approval. [Absolutely badasses!]

“Excellent work, Sergeant AP-One,” Daphne said as she walked up to the shocked observers. Turning to Jehanna, she continued, “Troops from {Collective addendum: thrall simulacrum array} ready for your inspection, General.”

“How many are there?” Jehanna marvelled, her gaze sweeping along the endless lines of troops that were continuing to march towards the impromptu parade ground.

“17,843 battle-ready units at present,” Daphne replied. “Additional chassis are continuing to be manufactured and will reinforce our positions as soon as they come online.”

“This is amazing!” Jehanna exclaimed, smiling with relief. “Thanks, Daphne. They’ll be a huge help.”

She gave the Lioness a sharp salute. “Affirmative.”

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An avalanche of razor-sharp ice shards slammed into John’s psychic shield, fracturing hexagons and threatening to overwhelm the barrier. He channelled more energy into replenishing the protective globe, then peered into the howling storm, searching for the deadly assassin who had unleashed the ferocious blizzard on him. It was hard to see anything in the swirling snow and whistling ice, Sakura’s white armour the perfect camouflage in the glacial hurricane.

Suddenly she hit John from his left flank, both ninjato coming for him at incredible speed. Each high-velocity stab cracked even more hexagons, with some completely shattering under her onslaught. John only managed to recover by forcing her back with several wide sweeps of his blade, giving him a precious few seconds to reinforce his shield.

Sakura backed away from him and made a quick gesture with her hand. All at once the howling winds faded into faltering gusts, and the whirling ice fell to the floor in a noisy clatter. She gave John a wry smile as she deactivated her own psychic barrier.

“I nearly had you there,” Sakura said with satisfaction.

“That was very close,” John agreed, lowering his sword and dismissing his own hex shield. “If I keep him distracted, then you open up with your abilities, he’s bound to assume that the psychic attacks are coming from me. Then if you can strike at the opportune time, he’ll never see it coming.”

“You really think it might work?” the Asian girl asked, her brown eyes shining with excitement.

John gave her an approving nod. “I was barely able to keep my shield up, and I knew exactly what you were planning. If we’d been able to coordinate an attack like that against Larn’kelnar, he never would’ve survived as long as he did.”

The Lioness frowned as she considered the other possibility. “What if he does manage to survive? Should I keep attacking him, or withdraw and wait for the next opportunity?”

“He’ll be shocked and off-balance at just the thought of being attacked by a psychically enhanced thrall, so we should keep up the pressure while we have the element of surprise,” John reasoned. “If you ambush him from the flank like that, move to the rear after the initial opener, then we’ll be attacking from opposite sides.”

“I only came at you from the side, because I knew you’d be anticipating an ambush from behind,” Sakura explained, giving him a sly grin. “This Progenitor won’t have any forewarning, so I’ll go straight for the backstab.”

“Sounds like a good plan. I think you should stay on the offence for as long as he’s focused on me. As soon as he switches to attacking you, then I want you to go completely on the defensive,” John advised her, as he tried to predict how the battle might play out. “I’ll be more aggressive to try to get his attention again, and give you room to manoeuvre.”

Sakura paused and gave him a speculative look. “If he does go after me and leaves himself exposed, are you going to start draining his shields, like you did with Rachel back on Arcadia?”

John frowned as he tried to remember that incident. He’d been attacking a lifelike model of Larn’kelnar, with Rachel shielding the dummy to help him practice breaking through hex-barriers. At some point, frustration at not being able to penetrate the shield had turned into anger, which had morphed into a grief-fuelled rage after the loss of Faye. John couldn’t recollect anything that transpired afterwards, but Rachel and Alyssa had told him how he’d started to suck the power right out of the barrier during that frenzied assault.

“I still don’t know exactly what happened,” he was finally forced to admit. “I remember getting increasingly frustrated at not being able to break Rachel’s shield, but then I started thinking about Faye, and how Larn’kelnar had killed her. After that it’s all a blur.”

“Do you think it came from you? Or was that an innate ability of your runesword?” Sakura pressed him.

With a helpless shrug, John replied, “I honestly don’t know. When I forged Kyth’vindathys, the instructions for creating that blade came from all the Kyth’faren knowledge my father encoded in my DNA. If it is a runic ability built into the sword, I’m not sure how to consciously trigger it.”

Sakura gave him a pained look.

“Yeah, I know,” he said grimacing in frustration. “You don’t need to remind me how useful it would be for taking down Progenitors. The problem is that I can’t even recreate the same circumstances to try to draw out that ability again. I’ve done my grieving for Faye, and I don’t even feel any lingering hatred towards Larn’kelnar now.”

“I’m not surprised, Master,” Jade interjected as she padded into the Dojo. “You incinerated him in righteous flames, conquered his empire, stole all his ships, and bedded his beautiful daughter, making her your matriarch. I can’t imagine a more glorious vengeance than that.”

“Hi honey,” John said, greeting the cheerful Nymph with a smile. His expression faded into a frown as he realised what Jade had just said. “Hey! I didn’t recruit Auralei out of revenge. I had no idea she was even related to Larn’kelnar.”

Jade padded over to him, nimbly stepping over the ice that was strewn across the floor. When John removed his helmet, she stood on tiptoe to give him a tender kiss. “I know, Master. But when Auralei’s on her knees, gazing up at you with complete devotion in those lovely dark eyes, it does make filling up her tummy even more satisfying, doesn’t it?”

John flushed with embarrassment, unable to deny the truth to his telepathic companion, who eagerly listened to his every passing thought.

“Don’t worry, your secret’s safe with me,” Sakura said, breaking into a grin.

\*I won’t say a word, handsome,\* Alyssa said earnestly.

\*Nor I, my Lord,\* Edraele promised with equal sincerity.

\*I never imagined you had such fantasies, John,\* Auralei added last. \*I’m shocked.\*

He winced for a moment, then realised that the Larathyran Empress was already well aware of his most intimate thoughts. \*You’re all very naughty matriarchs, teasing me like that.\*

A chorus of telepathic laughter echoed through his mind, and John couldn’t help smiling at the lovely sound.

“Speaking of full tummies...” Jade purred, giving him a suggestive smile.

“Is the third Maliri fleet here already?” John asked in surprise, having lost track of time sparring in the Dojo.

“Not yet, Master, but they’ll be arriving soon,” Jade explained, with a twinkle in her feline eyes. “My sisters are waiting for me in the Raptor, but I can ask them to join us if you’d prefer?”

“I would actually,” John replied, surprising Jade and Sakura. He held out his hand towards the Asian girl, and added, “Come on, you can help me feed my insatiable pack of horny Nymphs.”

Sakura blushed, but didn’t hesitate in sheathing her swords and clasping his hand. She gazed at him adoringly as they left the Dojo together, with Jade following after them, watching the raven-haired beauty with a fond smile.

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Luna stood in front of the retinal scanner, and waited patiently as the device scanned her face. She was wearing an exotic set of spectacles, the tiny curved lenses only millimetres away from her yellow irises. Gadgets designed to trick retinal scanners were a relatively new invention amongst the Maliri, but the woman Luna was mimicking was much, much older. The scanner flashed green, then the golden door beside her spiralled open, granting admittance into Valada’s ancient bunker.

“Make yourselves at home, ladies,” she said, gesturing to the yawning portal.

The eighteen matriarchs accompanying her gathered their travel bags and headed inside, the Maliri gazing into the ten-thousand-year-old facility in hushed silence.

\*Please thank your daughter, Edraele,\* Luna said as she followed the group into the bunker. \*The biometric data that Irillith provided worked first time.\*

\*I’ll pass on your regards,\* the Maliri Queen replied. She hesitated for a moment, then added, \*I know you’re eager to return to Genthalas, but please try your best to calm the matriarchs before you leave. They’re worried about John, and I’m having difficulty reassuring them when they’re concerned about my safety too.\*

\*I’ll do my best,\* Luna agreed, doing her best to ignore the flicker of trepidation she felt at having to offer comfort to the eighteen noblewomen.

While John had done a splendid job of reassuring Luna that she was their equal in his eyes, the reserved former assassin still held herself at a respectable distance from the House leaders. For someone unused to public speaking, even the thought of addressing this relatively small group felt daunting.

Luna started in surprise as she felt soft fingers clasp her hand and give it a reassuring squeeze. She glanced to her side, and saw Auralei watching her with sympathy.

“I’ll take care of the matriarchs, Luna,” she whispered, giving the apprehensive Maliri a reassuring smile. “Go be with Edraele, and keep her safe for us.”

Feeling a flood of relief, Luna gave the Larathyran Empress a heartfelt hug. “I owe you one,” she murmured in her ear.

“Don’t be silly, you’ve done so much for me already,” Auralei replied, giving her a gentle kiss on the cheek.

Luna handed over the spectacles with Valada’s retinal data, and passed on the instructions she’d been given for operating the facilities inside the luxurious suite. With a furtive wave goodbye, she slipped out through the door, then sprinted away down the shadowy corridor outside. The sound of those fleeting footsteps drew the attention of several matriarchs, who glanced back at the open doorway with anxious frowns. Their questioning gaze settled on Auralei, and soon she was being deluged with questions.

“Has Luna returned to Genthalas?”

“Why did she rush out? Has the battle started?”

“Is Lord Baen’thelas alright? Have the Galkirans reached Kythshara?!”

Auralei glided into the room, doing her best to emulate her mentor’s regal presence. “The fighting hasn’t started yet, but I promise I’ll let you know as soon as the Galkirans begin their assault,” she said with calm confidence. “Edraele will be preoccupied with overseeing the defence of Genthalas, so I’ll keep you updated on both battles as they progress.”

The rest of the matriarchs all turned their attention to the Larathyran Empress, desperate to hear any new information she might provide.

“How long do you think we’ll be down in this bunker?” Kali Loraleth asked with a worried frown.

Valani Naestina glanced around the opulent lounge. “The suite is much nicer than I thought, but it might start to get a bit cramped with nineteen of us sleeping here.”

“We won’t be here that long,” Auralei said, walking over to the closest of several couches furnishing the luxurious room. “You should make yourselves comfortable, and we’ll enjoy a pleasant evening together while we wait for victory.”

“How can you be so certain?” Nakiasha Torcyne asked, while nervously nibbling a nail.

Auralei laughed and performed a graceful pirouette, her elegant dress flaring outwards as she spun. “The last I checked, I don’t have your lovely azure complexion... and why might that be?”

Phelora Romenor shared a confused glance with Kehlarissa Venkalyn. “Because you’re Larathyran, not Maliri?” she tentatively suggested.

“Exactly!” Auralei declared, her eyes shining brightly. “My father was the last Progenitor foolish enough to attack John. Larn’kelnar held every advantage when he ambushed the Invictus, but he still suffered a crushing defeat. We have nothing to worry about; I’m living proof of how powerful John and the girls are in battle.”

“If the outcome of this war is such a foregone conclusion, then why are we hiding down here in this bunker?” Tsarra asked, not quite convinced despite Auralei’s passionate delivery.

Auralei approached the House Perfaren matriarch, then gently brushed the back of her fingers across Tsarra’s stomach. “You know why.”

The Maliri bit her lip, then placed her hand on top of Auralei’s slender green fingers.

They shared a smile, then the Larathyran turned to look at the rest of the matriarchs. “All of you are precious to him. Why would John take any chances where your safety is concerned? Edraele has been quite explicit in her plans for each and every one of you.”

There was a mixture of blushes, as well as eager smiles of anticipation, all except for Emandra Holaris who couldn’t help looking sceptical. Auralei noticed the older woman’s pained expression but didn’t draw attention to it, as she glided over to the entrance.

“Now, shall we see what supplies the palace servants have provided us with? I don’t know about anyone else, but I could certainly do with a nice relaxing drink while we wait for good news.”

With their fears put at ease, the matriarchs gathered around the floating trolley that they’d brought down to the bunker with them. It was piled high with enough food and drink to keep them well supplied for several days, and soon everyone was involved with transferring everything to the kitchen pantry.

\*Thank you for calming them, Auralei,\* Edraele said gratefully. \*Now I owe you one.\*

The Larathyran Empress returned Nyrelle’s friendly smile as the Young Matriarchs began preparing some delicious snacks for the impromptu soiree. \*You’re quite welcome. But I do have one question for you?\*

\*By all means, ask away,\* the Maliri Queen replied.

\*Who were you testing tonight, Edraele?\* the green-skinned beauty asked without rancour. \*Were you hoping that Luna would feel confident enough to console the matriarchs, or were you curious to see if I had grown sufficiently bold to comfort them myself?\*

Edraele paused for a moment. \*I was hoping for the former, but I had no qualms about placing my trust in the latter.\*

\*But Luna isn’t preparing for a leadership role,\* Auralei gently reminded her fellow matriarch. \*It’s her nature to fade into the background and carefully watch from the shadows. I’m sure John could easily bolster her confidence if you asked him to, but for what purpose? In my limited experience, every relationship has one partner who is naturally stronger than the other. You lead and Luna follows, just as John leads and we all follow him.\*

\*My goodness. You really are quite remarkable, darling girl,\* Edraele said with sincere admiration. \*I’ll apologise to Luna for any discomfort she experienced and promise not to subject her to that again.\*

\*I’m sure she’ll forgive you immediately.\*

\*Thank you, Empress,\* Edraele said, with a new level of respect ringing in her voice. \*For what it’s worth, you passed my test with flying colours.\*

Auralei beamed with pride, then hurried to join the Young Matriarchs when Kali beckoned her over to accept a brightly-coloured cocktail.

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The Hyper-warp gate crackled with power as it came to life, sending lightning arcing around the curved structure. Glowing runes lit up along the circumference, then a pitch-black circle appeared at its centre, blocking any view of the starfield behind. A squadron of sinister looking starships suddenly burst forth from the wormhole entrance, the captured Larathyran cruisers quickly peeling away from the gate, to clear a path for the rest of the thrall fleet.

Emalyne held on tight to the armrests of her command throne as her new flagship emerged, the Dominator-class battleship having leapt thousands of light years in the blink of an eye. It took a moment for her protesting stomach to settle down, then the House Loraleth officer rose to her feet as she studied the floating map. The holographic image of the system flickered briefly, then redrew itself with a flood of new data provided by Tactical Command based on Kythshara.

There were a host of objects hidden within the nebula, and Emalyne blinked in surprise when she saw what was in store for the invaders. A familiar white battlecruiser was weaving its way through the dense grid of defence turrets, heading out towards the periphery of the system. She followed its departure with a wistful gleam in her eyes, then watched the much smaller strike craft that had left the Invictus and was now descending towards the planet.

\*Welcome home, Emalyne. Your Matriarch sends her kindest regards,\* Edraele greeted her warmly. \*Lioness Calara will be contacting you shortly. She will be taking command of our forces in the battle, so please follow her instructions to the letter.\*

The Maliri officer longed to be able to reply in the same fashion, but had to remain silent.

Sensing her frustration, the Maliri Queen added, \*I understand how you feel. It’s something we can work towards in the future.\*

A moment later the comms officer looked up from her station. “We’re being hailed by the Invictus, Fleet Commander.”

“Accept the call,” Emalyne ordered, her heart skipping a beat.

Much to her disappointment, it wasn’t Lord Baen’thelas that appeared on the holo-screen, but a beautiful Terran girl.

Emalyne recognised Calara from the narrowly averted civil war, and acknowledged her with a respectful nod. “Good evening, Lioness. Queen Edraele informs me that you are in command.”

“It’s wonderful to see you again, Emalyne. I’ve been eagerly awaiting your arrival,” Calara said, her friendly smile coupled with a sigh of relief. She gave the older woman a look of sympathy as she added, “John would have liked to welcome you home personally, but he’s indisposed at the moment, preparing for the battle.”

Realising that she hadn’t masked her disappointment quite as skilfully as she hoped, Emalyne flushed with embarrassment. “That is perfectly understandable,” she stammered awkwardly. “Umm... my fleet is at your disposal. What are your orders?”

The Latina’s eyes momentarily flicked off-screen before focusing on her again. “We have just over two hours until the Galkiran armada arrives. Please follow the flightpath down to the city, then ask all your fleet captains to gather at your flagship. Jade and her sisters will be waiting to give out some Nymphs’ kisses to your officers. They’ll start with the most senior, but will try to recruit as many of you as possible.”

All around Emalyne, the sombre Bridge suddenly came alive with excited whispers, and the Fleet Commander could sense the electric atmosphere amongst her crew. She should have sternly admonished the command staff for their lack of composure, but she didn’t have the heart to dampen their soaring spirits.

\*You’re more than welcome to renew your own connection with Lord Baen’thelas... if such a thing would interest you, Emalyne?\* Edraele asked coyly.

“Set a course for the planet!” Emalyne barked, unable to stop herself from grinning with anticipation.

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Sakura let out a contented sigh, a serene expression on her face as she slumbered in John’s arms. He kissed her on the forehead, then smiled fondly at the Asian beauty when she murmured that she loved him, while still remaining fast asleep.

\*You should be sleeping too,\* Alyssa admonished him.

\*The Nymphs did a good job of wearing Sakura out,\* John replied, relaxing back on the bed. \*She needs the rest more than I do.\*

\*The two of you burned through a fair bit of psychic energy with all that sparring,\* the blonde reminded him. \*Don’t forget that you also used the Soulforge earlier. You need to make sure you’re fully rested before the battle.\*

\*Acknowledged, XO,\* John said, closing his eyes, but finding sleep elusive. \*How are all the battle preparations going?\*

\*We’re nearly there,\* she confidently replied. \*Most of the prep work on Kythshara is done. The Maliri marines are getting geared up, the Nymphs are adding the fleet crews to the psychic network, and I’ll start deploying the spider mines in a minute. Just a few bits and pieces left to do, then we’ll be ready and waiting for the Galkirans to arrive.\*

John was suitably impressed that the girls had managed to achieve so much in such a relatively short span of time.

\*Nice job, honey,\* he said, understanding that Alyssa had been the driving force behind their frenetic pace of activity.

\*Thank you,\* she said quietly.

He stroked Sakura’s back as he waited, knowing the teenager well enough to anticipate the impending discussion.

\*I’m not that predictable,\* she protested.

\*Yes you are.\*

Alyssa let out an exasperated sigh. \*Alright, I guess I am that predictable. I want to help you fight the Progenitor.\*

\*I don’t think that’s such a good idea,\* John countered. \*You can make a huge difference in the ground battle, and more importantly, help keep the girls safe.\*

\*What girls?\* she persisted. \*You’ve already taken steps to protect Jehanna and Rachel. Sakura doesn’t need my help, and she’ll be joining you in the big fight anyway. Everyone else will be hiding in Mael’nerak’s bunker, or fighting in space against the thrall fleets. I know I can make a huge difference against the Progenitor, and don’t forget, he is our priority target.\*

\*I’m not underestimating how powerful you are, and I know our primary objective is to kill him, but I also want to minimise the Maliri and Galkiran casualties,\* He patiently explained. Before Alyssa could protest further, he continued, \*Besides, we can’t just dog-pile the Progenitor, we’ll get in each other’s way. Let me and Sakura try to take him down first, then if that doesn’t work, you can be my wild card.\*

\*Alright, that’s a much better plan,\* Alyssa said with satisfaction. \*Now get some rest. I’ll wake you both up when it’s time.\*

John stifled a yawn as he started to feel drowsy. He’d been sparring non-stop with Sakura for hours and a quick power-nap was actually a very tempting proposition. He held the athletic girl closer, her luscious body soft and warm where she lay draped over him, and soon joined her in a peaceful slumber.

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The newly captured Larathyran vessels approached the outskirts of the city, following their flightpath down towards the landing site. Fleet Commander Emalyne was observing the final stages of their descent, and saw that two other allied fleets were already in position. The first was made up of Lilyana’s golden-hulled Maliri ships, neatly parked together in rows, and the second group was led by Tineshea from House Ghilwen, the black hulls of her thrall warships bristling with deadly gun batteries.

“Order the fleet to set down over there,” Emalyne ordered, pointing towards the open fields to the right of Lilyana’s Maliri ships.

The communications officer acknowledged her orders with a nod, then began broadcasting commands to the other vessels in their group.

Emalyne rose from the onyx command throne. “I’m going down to greet our guests. When the fleet has landed, you’re all welcome to join me.”

She left the Bridge with the animated chatter of her crew ringing in her ears. The Maliri Fleet Commander couldn’t blame them for being excited, as she felt the same sense of soaring exhilaration at the prospect of renewing her psychic connection to Baen’thelas. News of the Nymphs’ impending arrival had spread like wildfire through the sinister battleship, and the sight of grinning Maliri seemed oddly out of place in the gloomy, crimson-lit corridors.

The doors to the elevator split apart, and Emalyne eyed the serrated edges with wary distaste. She couldn’t deny the power of the captured thrall warships, but the sinister design aesthetics left a lot to be desired. When the lift reached ground level, Emalyne headed straight towards the closest dropship bay, having memorised the deck plans during the flight back home. As she entered the hangar, it was a relief to see that the hull doors were wide open, giving her a spectacular view of Kythshara shrouded in twilight. The brightly-illuminated city was a welcome change from the foreboding interior of her new flagship, and she took a deep breath of fresh air as she stood on the loading ramp.

A huge formation of troops had gathered around the parked spacecraft, with orderly rows of marines waiting to board the thrall warships. The female troopers were dressed in uniforms rather than golden battle armour, but the most shocking thing about them was their radically altered appearance. Many of the marines now had snowy-white hair instead of the usual black, drawing attention from everyone around them.

Across the intervening field, the reason for those long queues was quite apparent, as squads of newly equipped Maliri marines disembarked from Tineshea’s fleet. Emalyne watched them leaving the thrall ships in their thousands, the ground troops returning to their defensive fortifications to await the invaders. For some reason, the sight of all those black-armoured troops sent a shiver down her spine, and Emalyne couldn’t help feeling strangely unsettled.

A rousing cry rose up from the marines surrounding her ship, the Maliri cheering and waving at someone in their midst. When the crowds parted to clear a path, Emalyne saw that it was for not just one person but two, and the approaching celebrities were actually a pair of huge tigers. Under any normal circumstances, the hulking felines bounding towards her would terrify anyone, but the Maliri officer knew her honoured guests by reputation.

“Leylira, Betrixa, welcome aboard,” she greeted the two tigers as they skidded to a halt.

The enormous great cats began to shimmer, their profiles becoming indistinct as the Nymphs started to shapeshift, and a few seconds later, a pair of statuesque catgirls stood nude before her. One of them was orange with black stripes, that matched her long mane, and the other a blue-eyed blonde with light tawny coloured markings.

“Hey!” Betrixa said with a beaming grin. “You must be Emalyne, right?”

The Maliri bowed to them both respectfully. “That’s correct. I am at your service.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Leylira purred, her voice smoky and seductive.

Despite her languid manner, the second Nymph’s amber gaze quickly swept over the hangar, with the keen-eyed sharpness of an apex predator.

“Are your senior officers on the way?” Leylira asked, raising an eyebrow. “Time is short, and we must proceed with haste.”

“They should be here shortly,” Emalyne explained, before noticing hurried movement outside.

She immediately recognised Yathanae and Diruhe, who were now commanding two of the recently captured Larathyran battleships. The Maliri captains were striding briskly towards her own ship, accompanied by a retinue of their senior crew. Behind them, emissaries from the other parked vessels in her fleet were also quickly making their way towards the rendezvous point.

Betrixa turned around and called out, “Who wants to be intimately connected to Lord Baen’thelas? Come this way for a Nymph’s kiss!”

The pair of catgirls were soon surrounded by a huge crowd of excited Maliri officers, each of them frantic to accept Betrixa’s offer. Emalyne approached a watching sergeant for assistance, and soon several squads of marines were helping to move dozing fleet officers out of the way, so they could sleep off the after-effects without fear of being trampled. The Nymphs worked quickly and efficiently, bestowing a sensuous but fleeting kiss on all who desired it.

As the Fleet Commander watched the last of her bridge officers being embraced by Betrixa, she heard a telepathic voice drift through her mind. \*It’s your turn, Emalyne. Who would you prefer?\*

Her gaze was immediately drawn to Leylira’s spectacular figure, and Emalyne blushed when she realised the catgirl was watching her with a knowing smile. Leylira then prowled towards her, the sultry approach making her stomach flutter in anticipation. The Nymph gathered Emalyne in her arms, with a startling strength that the Maliri knew she could never hope to match.

\*You’ve already served us well, Emalyne,\* Edraele said, her voice full of sincere gratitude. \*Fight hard in the battle to come, and I know Lord Baen’thelas will want to reward you personally.\*

Leylira gave her a warm smile, then brushed her full lips against Emalyne’s, the tender kiss surprisingly gentle and comforting. The Maliri eagerly responded, and as the Nymph’s tongue caressed her own, she tasted a familiar sweetness. Emalyne let out a euphoric moan, as she felt the renewed connection to Baen’thelas with every fibre of her being, and then she was lost in a blissful daze, oblivious to Leylira carefully handing her over to a pair of grinning marines.

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Tom Walker nodded to his lawyer as he walked over to join him for the verdict reading.

“Good luck, Tom,” Caspian Kincaid said, but it was obvious that the man had little hope of success.

“Thanks,” he muttered in reply, but his attention was focused behind him.

Tom’s father was present, his stony expression betraying no emotion as he sat looking straight ahead. Tom tried to make eye-contact with his father, but Admiral Lawrence Walker was either lost in concentration, or deliberately ignoring him. Notably missing was Tom’s mother, who was clearly desperate to distance herself from the disastrous trial. Even though he could’ve predicted her absence, it still really hurt that she was prioritising her position in high society over the fate of her own son.

To Tom’s surprise, his fiancée had returned, but after one look at the hate-filled glare Anna shot him, he wished that she’d stayed away from the courthouse. Despite his best efforts to protect her during the trial, she clearly hadn’t forgiven him for blaming Mason for the Callopean Shoals Massacre. In Anna’s eyes, her beloved brother could do no wrong, so accusing Mason of such a heinous crime was the absolute worst form of betrayal.

He desperately wanted to plead with her to believe him. To somehow convince Anna that he was telling the truth about everything that led up to the Brimorians ambushing the fleet. Even if he was in a position to argue his case, and there was no chance of that in the middle of the courtroom, he could tell her mind was already made up. Tom knew that the man sitting next to Anna for ‘moral support’ must have played a decisive role in turning her against him. One look at Archie’s smug expression confirmed all his darkest suspicions.

The bailiff walked into the room and called out, “All rise for Judge Nancarrow.”

Fortunately, Tom was already standing, so he simply turned to watch the judge enter the courtroom and take a seat behind the imposing desk.

“Alright, bring in the jury,” Nancarrow stated.

The court watched in silence as the military officers were led into the room. When they had all taken a seat, then everyone else in the courtroom sat down as well.

“Foreman, has the jury reached a verdict?” the judge asked the Vice Admiral nearest to him.

“We have, your honour.”

“Is it unanimous?” he asked solemnly.

“Yes, your honour.”

“The defendant will stand and face the jury,” Nancarrow intoned.

Tom rose to his feet and looked at the grim-faced military officers, who had spent the last few hours deliberating his fate.

“On the count of conspiracy to commit treason, what is the jury’s verdict?”

“We the jury, find the defendant Commander Thomas Walker... *guilty*... of treason.”

There was a shocked gasp from the courtroom, followed by several victorious exclamations from the bereaved families. Tom felt his stomach sink into a pit of despair, and he had to lean against the desk to stop himself collapsing.

The judge banged his gavel. “Order in the court! Order!” When the noise from the crowd had subsided, Nancarrow turned towards the foreman. “On the count of conspiracy to commit murder, what is the jury’s verdict?”

“We the jury, find the defendant Commander Thomas Walker... *guilty*... of conspiracy to commit murder on all 347,189 counts.”

The audience in the courtroom erupted. There were heart wrenching sobs from grieving mothers, while the rest of their families responded with jubilant shouts and angry curses directed Tom’s way.

Something metallic hit the side of Tom’s head, and to his shock he watched Anna’s engagement ring tumble to the floor.

“How could you betray Mason?!” she hissed, her beautiful face twisted into an ugly mask of hatred. “You backstabbing bastard! I hate you!”

“I’m being set up!” Tom pleaded with her. “I’m innocent, Anna! You’ve got to believe me!”

Anna spat in his face. “Fuck you!” she snarled, before grabbing her friend’s hand and marching out of the courtroom.

Archie followed after her, but not before glancing back at Tom to make sure he had his full attention. He leered suggestively at Anna’s retreating form, then gave Tom a brazen smirk, making his intentions perfectly clear.

When Tom glanced over to where his father had been sitting, Admiral Walker was nowhere to be seen. Being deserted by both parents was a bitter blow, but it was the brutal rejection by his fiancée that really crushed Tom. It felt like the walls were closing in on him, as everyone close to Tom abandoned him when he needed them the most. They’d known him for his entire life; how could they believe he was capable of such horrific crimes? How could they all betray him like this?

In a shocking moment of razor-sharp clarity, he wondered if this was how Mason felt as he began his shocking descent into madness.

Tom barely paid any attention as order was re-established in the court. Nancarrow’s voice sounded like a monotonous dirge as the Judge sentenced Tom for his supposed crimes, and it was no surprise to anyone when the sentence was death by public execution. By that point, a firing squad actually sounded like a welcome blessing to Tom, because then he’d be able to escape the agonising heartbreak.

He made no effort to resist as the bailiff cuffed him, and he was led away in chains.

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It was dark and depressing aboard the Progenitor dreadnought, the only source of light shining from blood-red lamps that cast an ominous crimson pall over everything aboard. The gloomy, oppressive surroundings matched the young woman’s mood as she lay back on the bed, staring blankly up at the ceiling. Sleep proved elusive, as it had for the past few weeks, stalked as she was by horrible nightmares filled with guilt and regret.

After tossing and turning fitfully, Jessica flung away the covers with a despondent sigh, then padded into the adjacent bathroom. She leaned against the counter and stared bleakly at her reflection in the mirror. The woman gazing back at her was a vision of loveliness. Flush with the bloom of youth, her spectacular figure, pretty face, and lustrous mane of chestnut hair would have brought her fame and fortune as a model back on Terra. But despite her flawless outward beauty, Jessica’s eyes were haunted by remorse, the knowledge of what she’d done to her family tormenting her soul.

It was still hard to believe that she’d callously turned her back on her parents, not even thinking about them once for the past forty years. They had parted on bad terms when she’d joined the military, but Jessica had planned to return home after her last voyage, and do whatever it took to mend their battered relationship. Instead she had run away to be with Rahn, and never let her parents know the truth of what really happened to her. They had grieved for their daughter over the next three decades, mourning her loss until the day they died.

As atrociously as she’d treated her mother and father, Jessica’s behaviour towards them paled into insignificance compared to the way she’d failed her son. Until John’s sudden reappearance into her life, she hadn’t given a single thought to the baby she’d abandoned, her every waking moment consumed by her obsession with Rahn. Her love for the handsome Progenitor had been all-consuming, driving away all feelings for anyone else from her subconscious.

And now her relationship with Rahn had come to an ugly end, leaving Jessica utterly bereft amidst the tattered remnants of her previous life.

Her mother was dead. Her father was dead. And her son hated her.

Jessica let out a broken sob as she remembered John’s parting glare. She’d never be able to forget that final look, filled with a lifetime of pain. She had deeply hurt him when she abandoned him as a baby, only to reopen that wound by choosing his homicidal father over him once again. She had begged John to spare Rahn’s life, not knowing that the source of her obsession had attempted to kill their son only moments before. If only she’d known beforehand, things might have turned out very differently.

Hanging her head in shame, a heavy tear rolled down her cheek. As much as she wanted to place all the blame on Rahn for destroying the relationship with their only child, Jessica knew that she was lying to herself. Even if she’d witnessed the terrible confrontation between father and son, nothing would have changed. She would have still taken Rahn’s side without hesitation.

Alyssa had patiently explained the influence a Progenitor had over the women they enthralled. Jessica had paid no real attention at the time, confident that her love with Rahn was so pure that he could never do anything like that to her. But in those blissful days of reconciliation, just before she’d attempted to reach out to her son again to beg forgiveness, Rahn had admitted that changes had been made. He might have done so subconsciously, but he was still the direct cause of her all-consuming obsession, which had inflicted so much pain on the Blake family.

Jessica now knew the truth; that her personality, her desires, and her morals had all been altered at a fundamental level. The problem was that the changes were so absolute, she could no longer remember what it was like to be anyone different. Jessica lifted her head again and studied her reflection, wondering who the stranger was that watched her just as warily in return.

“Who are you?” she whispered, her faltering voice tinged with fear.

The beautiful brunette in the mirror didn’t reply, but Jessica could see the dreadful answers reflected back in that haunted stare.

Feckless daughter.

Unfit mother.

Traitor.

Murderer.

She flinched away, unable to face the guilt and condemnation she saw in those damning eyes. With a ragged sigh, she staggered back into the bedroom and collapsed on the bed. Jessica had spent many long evenings weeping in despair, but this time the tears didn’t come. She came to the uncomfortable realisation that she’d only been crying because she felt sorry for herself, and all the bawling in the world wouldn’t bring back her parents, or atone for being a terrible mother to her son.

Jessica had absolutely no idea what she should do now. She had tried to make amends with John, but he’d made his feelings about forgiveness perfectly clear. It was far too late to apologise to her parents, and if she handed herself in to the Terran Federation for sabotaging the Cora, she’d be swiftly executed for her dreadful crimes. In the introspective mood she was in, Jessica was honest enough with herself that she wasn’t feeling sufficiently guilty to face capital punishment.

For the first time in her life, Jessica Blake felt totally lost and alone. She was stuck aboard a nightmarish ship, with no place left to go, sharing the vessel with a man she both loved and loathed in equal measure. Even now, part of her longed to rush into Rahn’s arms and beg him for forgiveness, just so that they could go back to being the loving couple they were before.

However, there was something stopping Jessica from debasing herself like that. The situation had changed, and Jessica knew that she could no longer be truly happy just losing herself in her obsession with Rahn. Being reunited with her son after all those years weighed heavily on her mind, and long-suppressed maternal instincts refused to be ignored any longer.

With a forlorn sigh, she stared up at the ceiling, and wracked her brain for a solution.

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The Invictus touched down outside the palace for the second time that day, landing beside the Raptor and Valkyrie that were already parked outside. A small group was gathered by the dropship, the armoured Lionesses and nude Nymphs exchanging friendly chatter, as they waited for the battlecruiser’s arrival.

\*Everyone’s back onboard,\* Alyssa informed John a few minutes later, once the crew had entered the Invictus. \*We’ll wait for you in the Briefing Room.\*

\*See you there,\* he replied, while buttoning up his shirt. John glanced over at the en suite bathroom. “How are you feeling, honey?”

Sakura gave him a strained smile as she emerged. The Asian girl was fully dressed again after their shower, and had her long raven hair tied back in a ponytail.

“Worried mostly... a lot could go wrong.” She let out a deep breath to calm herself. “But I’m feeling excited too. We had no time to prepare for the battle with Larn’kelnar, but this time it’s a very different situation.”

“You’ve been training hard for this,” he said with a nod of approval. “I’m very lucky that you’re watching my back today.”

“Thank you,” she said gratefully, her smile broadening.

He held out his hand to her, and she eagerly grasped it as they walked out into the corridor.

Sakura glanced at him as they walked, a curious expression on her beautiful face. “You don’t seem at all worried, but the stakes are far higher than they’ve ever been before. Why are you so calm?”

John was quiet for a moment as he considered how to reply. “Sparring with you helped a lot; it reminded me what my role will be in the battle. I’m trusting the girls to deal with the Galkirans, and I just need to focus on fighting the Progenitor. Only one of us is going to survive today, and I need to make damn sure it’s me and not him.”

She thought about that for a second, then nodded in agreement. “You’re right. He dies, then the invasion is over. That’s all I need to focus on too.”

He could sense a subtle shift in the former assassin as she went quiet beside him. The nervous tension faded away, and was replaced with an icy calm, her body a deadly weapon just waiting to be unleashed on their formidable foe.

They stepped into the grav-tubes and floated up to the Command Deck in comfortable silence. Conversation seemed unnecessary between them, as everything important had already been clearly said. John opened the door into the Briefing Room, then followed Sakura into the packed room, where all his Nymphs and Lionesses were waiting.

“Good evening, ladies,” John said, as he walked over to his seat at the head of the table.

“Hi John,” they all chorused back.

“Alyssa tells me that you’ve all done a superb job preparing for the battle. I’m amazed that you managed to finish everything in time, so well done everyone,” he said, patting the blonde’s shoulder as he sat down beside her. “Before we start planning battle deployments, are there any new problems we need to discuss first?”

Everyone shook their heads, then waited for him to proceed.

“Alright then, let’s get started. I think we should fight this battle with three distinct teams,” John began, looking around to make sure he had everyone’s full attention. “Team One will be crewing the Invictus, the Raptor, and the Valkyrie. Their job will be to support the defence grid and the Maliri fleets, and their primary objective will be to cripple the dreadnought and the Galkiran armada.” He glanced at his Tactical Officer and continued, “As usual, Calara will be commanding those forces.”

She responded to the expected request with an unruffled nod as confirmation.

Dana raised her hand and bounced up and down excitedly in her chair. “Can I pilot the Valkyrie? Sakura’s going to be with you, trying to kill the Progenitor, so we’ve got nobody to fly it. Come on, please!”

“Hold on, Sparks,” Alyssa replied. “We’ll get to individual assignments in a minute.”

John waited for her to finish speaking before he continued, “Team Two will be deployed on Kythshara; their primary objective will be supporting our ground forces against the thrall marines.” His gaze settled on the Protectorate’s most recently promoted general. “As we discussed before, Jehanna will be leading the defence of the city.”

She gave him a mock salute, but her expression was deadly serious.

“And finally, I’ll be acting as bait, to lure the Progenitor into a duel down on Kythshara,” John said, exchanging a brief glance with Sakura.

“I have a question,” Rachel said quietly. “What do we do if the Progenitor doesn’t take the bait? What if he waits in his dreadnought and doesn’t even approach Kythshara?”

John leaned back in his chair, his expression turning grim. “That’s our worst case scenario. I really hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“Why?” Helene asked, frowning in bewilderment. “If the Progenitor doesn’t want to fight, then isn’t that a good thing? Won’t it make defending Kythshara much easier?”

“If we can’t defeat the Progenitor, then there’s no chance we can save his thralls,” John quietly explained. “They won’t retreat, and they won’t surrender. We’ll be forced to kill them all.”

“I won’t be able to just cripple their fleets either,” Calara interjected, looking equally bleak. “I’ll be forced to destroy every Galkiran warship to neutralise them as a threat. And not just the ones here at Kythshara, but *all* the fleets we’ve incapacitated over the last week.”

“Oh no!” the mermaid gasped, her face falling. “That would be awful!”

“Let’s just hope it doesn’t come to that,” John said, watching her with sympathy. “When I contact the Progenitor, I’ll need to make him so furious that he’s desperate to kill me personally.”

“Don’t worry, we’ve got you covered there,” Alyssa said, giving him a sly wink.

“Okay then, let’s go over individual assignments,” John began, his eyes falling on each Lioness as he mentioned their names. “Obviously Calara will be manning the Invictus’ guns, and Irillith will be at her most effective hacking thrall warships. That means we just need a pilot.”

“Not me,” Alyssa quickly interjected. “I’ll be on the surface.”

“I will be too, Master,” Jade reminded him, well aware of his plans for her.

“Which means Leylira is our best candidate,” he said, looking at the tigress. “Do you think you can handle the Invictus in combat against thrall fleets? Those Dominator class battleships are far more dangerous than anything you’ve gone up against before.”

“This one promises to be cautious, Master,” the Nymph said solemnly. “I won’t expose Calara and Irillith to any unnecessary danger.”

“Thank you. I know you’ll keep them safe,” he said with a grateful smile. “So that leaves the Raptor and the Valkyrie.”

“I’ll take the Valkyrie!” Dana blurted out, her blue eyes sparkling with excitement. “I can totally handle it. Plus you fixed that target fixation thing, so I won’t get in any trouble this time! Please!”

“Alright, Dana’s flying the mech,” John agreed, before turning to lock eyes with the cheetah catgirl. “How about you, Betrixa? Are you up to flying the Raptor?”

“Of course!” she exclaimed, before flashing a mischievous grin at her older sister. “I’m clearly the best gunship pilot we’ve got, so I’m the obvious choice.”

“That’s true, you are the best pilot available,” Jade said with playful sincerity.

Betrixa narrowed her eyes with suspicion, but before she could reply to the banter, she was interrupted.

“Hey, hold on a second!” Dana protested, looking incredulously at him. “I practically beg you to let me fly the Valkyrie, and all you can say is: ‘Alright’?! Who are you? And what’ve you done with John? I should be getting a stern lecture about safe flying right about now!”

He chuckled, then glanced at the Latina sitting beside him. “Care to elaborate on your plans, Calara?”

“I have a special mission in mind for you two,” the brunette informed them. “I want the Valkyrie and Raptor providing air cover over the city. If the Galkirans do launch a planetary invasion, your job will be to help take down as many of the incoming dropships as you can.”

“Remember that you don’t need to destroy them,” John reminded the eager pair. “The thrall marines will be geared up in body armour, so any crash landings shouldn’t be fatal. The survivors will be knocked about though, and it’ll cause mayhem in their ranks if transports are dropping out of the sky all over the city.”

“It’ll also be much easier for the Maliri to pick them off in isolated squads,” Jehanna added. “The Galkirans will be disorientated and outnumbered if they crash land behind our lines.”

Calara glanced at each of the volunteer pilots. “Any questions?”

“Shoot down the dropships, but don’t blow them to bits. Easy!” Betrixa said enthusiastically.

The redhead nodded her understanding. “Seems straightforward enough. I’m sure I can handle it.”

Now it was John’s turn to eye her mock suspicion. “Who are you? And what have you done with Dana? How come you’re not pleading to be involved in the main battle against the Galkiran fleets?”

“Are you kidding me?” she retorted. “I saw what happened to Sakura when they opened up on the Valkyrie in that last battle. I don’t want any part of that.”

“Good, I don’t want you anywhere near the fleet battle either,” Calara said grimly. “There’s going to be a hell of a crossfire when we hit them with everything we’ve got.”

The room went quiet as everyone imagined how deadly that space battle was going to be.

“After the Galkirans finish deploying their troops, your primary objective will be to stop their dropships providing close air support to the ground forces,” Calara went on to explain. “They’ll be slow and vulnerable when they take off again, so you should be able to inflict a lot of damage.”

“But don’t take any unnecessary chances,” John reminded the pair. “Calara won’t be anywhere near the surface battle, so she won’t be able to intervene if you get in trouble.”

“Got it,” Dana said, acknowledging the orders with a thumbs up.

Neysa exchanged a glance with Marika, then the tawny-haired catgirl raised a hand to get their attention. “We weren’t named as part of the Invictus’ crew. Are we manning the ships’ guns as usual? Or do you have something different planned for us?”

“I wish you were joining us on the Invictus, but you’re right, we do need you elsewhere,” Calara said with a rueful smile. She looked down that table towards the synthetic girl who was listening attentively at the far end. “Do you want to tell them, Daphne?”

“The Quantum Flux Cannons in the orbital defence grid are now fully operational, as are those we installed around the city,” Daphne informed John and the girls. “Unfortunately, the Collective does not have the requisite programming for space combat, so we require a gunnery team to man those weapons.”

“You can count on us,” Neysa said solemnly. “If we’re going to be deployed in the bunker, I assume the secondary purpose for our presence there, is to protect the inhabitants from harm?”

Her hazel eyes briefly lingered on Helene then Daphne, before flicking back to John for confirmation.

John was about to confirm her astute question, when Daphne replied, “I would be very grateful if you could protect the Collective, but I will not be present in the bunker for the duration of the battle.”

“You won’t?” John asked in surprise. “Where are you planning to be then?”

“I will be accompanying Jehanna,” she replied. “I’ll be her liaison with the Collective, and will issue commands for the automated thrall troops.”

He frowned with concern, but Jehanna quickly interjected, “I know you want to keep Daphne safe inside the bunker, but she’s vital to our defence of the city. I have no way of coordinating with the robot troops without her.”

John considered their reasoning, then reluctantly replied, “Okay... but we need to equip you with a portable shield generator. I’m not letting you go anywhere near combat without basic protection.”

Daphne twitched her nose, then a shimmering blue field materialised around her. “Dana has already made the necessary modifications to my chassis.”

He glanced at the redhead and raised an eyebrow.

“Don’t look at me like it was my idea,” she protested. “They asked really nicely. Plus I thought you’d be pleased that Daphne has a built-in shield.”

John grunted, but made no further comment. “Moving on to Team Three: Jehanna will be leading our ground forces, with Ailita as her adjutant, and Daphne as a liaison with the Collective. I’d like you to join them too, Rachel. You’ll be there as a field medic, and I want you to focus on stabilising the critically injured so we can heal them after the battle.”

“It’d be a sensible precaution to conserve psychic energy in case the battle drags out, so I assume no regenerating missing limbs until afterwards?” the brunette asked, looking at him quizzically. “And what about healing minor injuries to get troops back in the fight?”

“I trust you to make your own judgement calls,” he said with confidence.

She smiled at him. “Thank you.”

“I’ve also asked Ilyana and Almari to join the ground team,” John added. “They’ll be there as your personal bodyguards, and strictly focused on your protection. If they order you to retreat because you’re about to be overrun, you will listen to their warnings. Am I understood?”

“Yes, John,” the girls chorused together.

Satisfied with their sincerity, John swept his gaze over the remaining Lionesses. “Sakura, and Alyssa will start the battle supporting the ground troops. If I can lure the Progenitor into a duel, then Sakura will join me in taking him down. Alyssa will be our comms hub, as per usual. If the fight with the Progenitor goes badly, then she’ll be ready to assist in taking him down.”

They both nodded in agreement, having discussed their roles with him prior to the meeting.

“That just leaves Tashana and Jade,” John said to the last two girls. “Tashana, I want you to support the Maliri front lines for the entirety of the battle. You’re extremely accurate with your pistols, so you’ll be very effective at neutralising the Galkiran marines without having to kill them.”

“I guess that means you don’t want me to welcome them to Kythshara with a huge fire tornado?” she asked with a wry grin.

John didn’t share her smile. “I want you to use restraint for as long as possible. If it looks like the Maliri positions are going to be overrun, then you’re free to use any measures necessary to defend our troops.”

She hesitated, a look of concern in her violet eyes. “Are you absolutely sure? You didn’t see what I did to the Brimorians on the Kintark homeworld.”

“I want to save as many thralls as possible, but protecting Maliri lives must take precedence.”

“Understood,” she said quietly.

“And finally there’s Jade,” John declared, his eyes falling on the Nymph matriarch. “Do you want to tell everyone your role?”

“I’m guarding the Palace to keep Faye safe,” the green-hued shape-shifter cheerfully announced.

“Jade will also be acting as our reserves,” John explained to the rest of the crew. “We have no way of predicting everything that might go wrong in the battle, but Jade is quick and powerful enough to make a difference where she’s needed the most.”

“Which just leaves you,” Alyssa said, raising an eyebrow. “Our Progenitor bait.”

“Well, I think it’s a fairly safe assumption that he’s here specifically to kill me. We only have two thrall fleets in the system, so he must be operating under the belief that the Maliri Empire is on the verge of collapse after we narrowly defeated Larn’kelnar. Hopefully that’ll make it easier to goad him into a duel, especially if he thinks I’m making a final stand.”

“What if he has a different objective?” Rachel asked, watching him intently.

John gave her a helpless shrug. “That’s always a possibility, but I can’t even guess what other reason he’d have for making a beeline for Kythshara. A Progenitor’s normal tactics are to grind down an opponent’s thrall forces, drive them back to the throne world, then destroy the Soulforge so that the Dreadnought can’t escape while cloaked. That exactly mirrors what we’ve seen so far.”

“Not quite,” Calara said, a thoughtful look on her face. “He did send one fleet to attack Genthalas. Why would he do that if his sole objective is to eliminate you? If I was in his position, I’d throw everything I’ve got at Kythshara, then mop up the survivors after you were defeated.”

“Perhaps it’s because we faked the destruction of Genwynn station?” Tashana suggested, sitting forward in her chair and glancing at each of them in turn. “Could he be trying to prevent us from doing that to Genthalas?”

“With just one fleet?” Calara asked dubiously. “We’ve proven countless times that the Invictus can destroy an entire thrall fleet on its own.”

“Yeah, but a real Progenitor would never abandon his Throneworld to defend a shipyard,” John replied, intrigued by the Maliri archaeologist’s speculations. “I think Tashana’s on to something. One thrall fleet should be enough to destroy four Maliri fleets as well as Genthalas... but why the big rush to take it out? If this Progenitor just wanted to blow the place to bits, the best plan would be to finish me off first, then obliterate Genthalas with his dreadnought.”

“Exactly,” Tashana agreed.

Calara gave the Maliri a look of admiration. “I think you’re right. I think they might be attempting to capture the shipyard.”

“But why bother?” Dana asked, frowning in confusion. “If he’s like all the other Progenitors, don’t they just use the Soulforge on their Throneworld to build all their shit? His must still be working, because that dreadnought is able to cloak. That means Genthalas is useless to him as a shipyard.”

“There’s always the possibility that this guy has just gone insane,” Sakura said, her eyes narrowed with distaste. “Don’t forget why Larn’kelnar tricked all the alien empires into attacking each other: he just wanted to play at being the puppetmaster, instead of being forced to be a hapless puppet. He killed millions of people out of misplaced anger towards Xar’aziuth.”

“I guess we’ll find out what he’s up to soon enough,” John said, before glancing at Calara.

The Latina had already predicted his next request. “I’ll modify our defensive tactics accordingly and update Edraele,” she murmured, her focus now on rapid tactical planning.

“Well done, honey,” John praised Tashana. “That was some smart thinking. If you are right, hopefully Calara can exploit that to give the Maliri a fighting chance.”

“Absolutely,” Calara confirmed with a predatory grin.

Tashana beamed in delight. “I’m glad I was able to contribute something useful.”

“You always do,” John said, before sweeping his gaze over all the girls gathered around the conference table. “That goes the same for all of you; I couldn’t be prouder of everything we’ve accomplished as a team. We’ve already achieved the impossible, cutting thirty enemy fleets down to just eight, giving us a fighting chance of actually winning this battle at Kythshara.”

He paused for a moment as they glowed in response to his praise.

“I could go on and on about how you’re all incredible women, and how lucky I am to have you in my life, but I don’t want to sound like I’m giving a farewell speech. The odds are stacked against us, as they usually are, but I have the utmost confidence in my Lionesses... and my Nymphs... and the Collective,” he said, glancing at the respective groups.

“I know you’re all going to give everything you’ve got to win this fight, and I couldn’t ask anything more from you. You’re my family... and you mean more to me than I could ever put into words,” John said earnestly. “My number one priority will always be to protect all of you, and keep you safe from harm. This Progenitor is a threat to my family, so he has to be destroyed. I promise that I’ll do everything in my power to crush this bastard, and win victory for our side.”

They were all touched by his passionate declaration, exchanging fond glances with each other, and adoring looks at John.

“Group hug?” Dana asked with a broad grin. “It is our tradition.”

“Of course,” John replied, smiling at the girls as he rose from his chair.

They gathered around, embracing John in twos or threes, which gave each of them a precious few moments of intimacy with him for the last time that evening. The final pair were Alyssa and Calara, who had stepped aside, and waited to let everyone else go first. He hugged the blonde and brunette, sharing a deep kiss with each of them in turn.

“Was this your idea?” he eventually asked Alyssa.

“I thought it’d be nicer than a big scrum with you squashed in the middle,” she replied, nuzzling into him. “You like?”

“Much better,” he agreed, squeezing them both affectionately.

They both let out contented sighs, savouring every second in his arms.

John finally kissed Calara on the top of her head to get her attention. “I could stay like this all evening, but we better start getting ready. Before we go, can you give us a quick overview of your tactical plans, so we all know what the Maliri fleets will be doing in the battle?”

“Of course, Admiral,” she agreed, reluctantly releasing him.

He glanced over at Jehanna next. “You too, honey. Just give everyone a rough outline of your defensive plans, so we all know what our troops will be doing in the ground battle. When you’re finished, we’ll get geared up.”

Jehanna responded with a confident nod. “Yes, Sir!”

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Luna tapped her foot impatiently as she waited for the shuttle to land. As soon as the airlock door spiralled open, she bolted from the vessel, and strode at double time across the hangar. Despite the evacuation of hundreds-of-thousand of Maliri, the corridors of Genthalas were still teeming with personnel. However, rather than good-natured engineers starting or ending their shifts in the drydocks, the Maliri she passed were grim-faced marines, who were busy constructing barricades and setting up squad support weapons for the new defences.

She swept past the obstacles, the troops acknowledging her fleeting presence with looks of curiosity and admiration. It was a strange feeling for the reclusive assassin to see all the dark-haired troops respond to her in such a fashion. She had been surrounded by engineers, matriarchs, and their bodyguards for the last several months, all of whom had already been recruited into John’s psychic network. Those Maliri were largely immune to the genetic conditioning her appearance triggered.

Luna self-consciously brushed her fingers back through her hair, knowing that it was her long white mane that was drawing their interest. She started to gather it up, to make it less obvious in a pony tail, but after a moment’s hesitation, she changed her mind. Shaking her flowing mane loose and letting it billow out behind her, she strode purposefully towards the command centre. In the past, Luna had been rightfully feared for her sinister reputation, so she found it pleasantly refreshing to be looked on in a much more positive light.

The guards admitted her to the Command Centre without so much as a word, and as Luna walked swiftly up the steps to the raised platform in the middle of the room, she saw that Edraele was already there. The Maliri Queen was standing beside a Tactical Map of the local system, studying the holographic depiction of Genthalas Shipyard and the defensive forces arrayed around it.

Fleets from John’s favoured Houses were manoeuvring into position as they prepared for battle. Luna saw a pair of matching icons for House Perfaren over the starboard forces, while those on the port side were from House Aeberos and House Naestina. The Fleet Commanders from each group were currently in a conference with their Queen, the faces of the four white-haired women appearing in a holo-screen.

“We have reason to suspect that the Galkirans could be planning to capture rather than destroy Genthalas,” Edraele informed the Maliri officers. “If that proves to be the case, then we have contingency plans ready to exploit that eventuality. It might be our only chance of winning this battle without sustaining huge numbers of casualties.”

“Are the Galkiran warships really that formidable?” Aadya asked, her brow furrowed with concern.

Edraele met the anxious gaze of her senior officers. “Yes, they’re absolutely lethal. Do not make the fatal mistake of underestimating thrall vessels; they have greatly superior firepower, durability, and manoeuvrability. Our only advantage is weight of numbers, but I will do my utmost to guide you to victory in this battle.”

They nodded their understanding, but didn’t look particularly reassured.

She broke into a wry smile, and continued, “Fortunately for us, I will only be relaying instructions provided by Calara. As you might recall, she was the architect behind the tactical planning utilised in “The Game” during our narrowly averted civil war.”

The light of recognition flickered in the Fleet Officers’ eyes, and they all broke into relieved smiles.

“Please excuse me for a moment, ladies,” Edraele said, pausing the holo-conference.

She turned to face Luna as her bodyguard reached the Maliri Queen.

\*I’m so sorry, Luna,\* she said earnestly, pulling the yellow-eyed assassin into a tight embrace.

Caught completely by surprise, Luna didn’t even have a chance to resist as Edraele held her close. After a moment’s hesitation, she returned the spontaneous hug, but her eyes darted around the Command Centre, worried about any undue attention they might be receiving.

\*I no longer care who sees us together,\* Edraele explained, placing a tender kiss on her lover’s cheek.

\*Umm... what’s all this about, Edraele?\* Luna asked, pulling back to look at her quizzically. \*Are you feeling alright?\*

The regal monarch carefully studied her face. \*Yes... and no. I’m worried that you might harbour some resentment towards me for pushing you into comforting the matriarchs.\*

Luna looked at her in bewilderment, then broke into a peal of laughter. \*You’re worrying about *that* on the eve of battle?! I swear to you, Edraele, I gladly put it behind me the moment Auralei volunteered to speak to the matriarchs.\*

\*That’s a relief,\* Edraele said, her expression showing the same emotion.

After smiling at her affectionately, Luna glanced towards the holographic display. \*You should finish your briefing as quickly as possible. You need to be fully equipped in Paragon armour before the Galkirans arrive. Calara might be right about them wanting to capture Genthalas intact, but I’m not taking any chances.\*

\*Yes, dear,\* the Maliri Queen replied, touched by Luna’s protectiveness.

Luna gently caressed her hand, then Edraele turned back to resume the briefing with the Fleet Commanders.

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The Armoury was buzzing with activity, as robotic arms swung down to secure armour plates into position around pert female bodies. John didn’t have time to lament the hiding away of all that nubile flesh, as the armour equipping frame rapidly garbed him in his own suit of Lion armour. A whirring series of clicks notified him that the body armour was locked into place, then he stepped away from the surrounding frame and approached the weapon racks.

His hand felt drawn to his runesword, moving of its own accord to take a firm grasp of the hilt. He hefted it in the air, shifting to a double-handed grip, and stared at the long sword in fascination. The runes etched into the blade seemed to welcome him with a cheery glow, almost as if the ancient Kyth’faren artefact was eager to get started on the grim business of war.

The runesword had been specifically designed to be a deadly weapon against Progenitors, and in many ways, John realised the same could be said about him. In less than an hour, he might be facing another of those tyrannical monsters in ferocious melee combat, the fate of multiple civilisations dependent on who would prove victorious. Without conscious prompting from him, a lick of fire appeared at the crossguard, before quickly curling up along the length of the blade.

Captivated by the blue flames, he watched as they danced playfully before his eyes. The fire swayed to and fro with a hypnotic rhythm, and the thought of plunging this burning blade into his foe filled John with a giddy surge of anticipation.

“Hey, knock that off,” Dana said, elbowing him playfully. “You’re going to trigger the fire extinguishers.”

“Yeah, I’d rather not squelch into battle,” Rachel joked as she slotted a magazine into her Tachyon rifle.

John blinked in surprise, and when his train of thought was interrupted, the spectral flame abruptly guttered out and died.

“You okay?” Alyssa asked, her cerulean eyes watching him intently.

He gave her a confident smile as he sheathed the sword across his back. “It’s been a while since we last went into battle. Calara did a hell of a job thinning out the thrall fleets, but I’m glad I can actually join in the fight this time.”

“You battle-hungry barbarian,” the blonde teased him.

Tashana grinned with excitement as she loaded her brace of pistols. “Thumb-twiddling on the Bridge gets boring pretty fast, right Baen’thelas?”

“Exactly,” he agreed, reaching for a Tachyon rifle. John glanced at Alyssa and saw she was making no move to lock and load her own weapon. “How about you? Not planning on sullying your dainty hands today?”

She curled her lip in mock distaste and adopted a haughty expression. “Haul around a weapon like a lowly peon? I think not.”

John lowered his rifle and gave her a stern look. “You can’t just rely on your psychic abilities. You should be equipped with a Tachyon rifle just in case of emergency.”

“Nah, I’ve got it covered,” she drawled, waving away his concerns.

He rolled his eyes at the blonde, but trusted that she had something sensible planned as an alternative. All around him, the rest of the girls had finished equipping themselves for battle, so he led the way to the express grav-tubes. They dropped down to the lower deck in pairs, and when he stepped out of the red anti-gravity field, Alyssa peeled away from his side towards the Raptor.

A matching pair of long cylindrical objects rose off the deck as she approached, the white outer casings sparkling as they reflected the overhead lights. When Alyssa sashayed back his way, John realised she was actually being flanked by a pair of Tachyon Cannons, and the two-metre-long barrels dipped up and down, as if nodding in confirmation.

Dana laughed and shook her head in admiration. “Show off.”

Rachel glanced down at her substantially smaller Tachyon rifle and pouted. “I want one.”

“They came in pretty handy against the robot thralls,” Alyssa explained, patting the gleaming barrel floating beside her.

“Weren’t your last ones hooked up to the Raptor?” Tashana asked, studying the heavy weapons curiously.

The blonde nodded. “Dana made some tweaks for me so I can stay mobile.”

“I altered the schematics to include a built-in power core,” Dana said, pointing towards the extended rear of the Tachyon Cannon.

John removed his helmet and eyed the long guns with a sceptical frown. “I’m impressed by your ingenuity, but the plan is to wound the Galkirans, not blast big holes through them.”

Alyssa took off her own Paragon to give him a peck on the lips. “I can take out their shields a lot faster with Tachyon Cannons. As soon as I knock those down, then I can knock the thralls down.”

A glowing battlehammer appeared in the air beside her and made a downward swing, as if thumping an unfortunate thrall on the head.

“Alright,” John reluctantly conceded. “Just be careful about cracking skulls with that thing.”

“Just little love taps, I promise,” she agreed, her face lighting up with a beatific smile.

Dana walked up to John and gave him a fleeting kiss. “I’m going to go fire up the Valkyrie. Good luck against the Progenitor, I hope you kick his ass.”

“Watch your back out there,” he warned the eager redhead.

“I know; you guys won’t be able to bail me out if I get in trouble,” she said sombrely. “I’ll be careful.”

He waved goodbye, then watched as she dashed off to the Mech Bay.

“I’m heading off too, Master,” Betrixa announced.

The cheetah catgirl got her own smouldering kiss before she bounded away towards the Raptor.

“Shall we head inside the Palace, Father?” Daphne asked, as she waited patiently by the hangar door.

“Let’s go,” John agreed, heading towards the ramp.

It was dark outside, night having fallen on Mael’nerak’s old capital city. The group paused outside, and watched as Leylira powered up the thrusters along the Invictus’ underbelly, the white battlecruiser slowly lifting off the ground. The roar intensified and the nose began to climb as the warship gained height, then when the Invictus had gained enough height about the spectators, the main engines blazed to life.

John watched as his ship roared away, rapidly gaining altitude until it was just a sparkling speck in the sky. For a long moment, the Invictus was indistinguishable from the twinkling stars visible through the Mists of Loralar, and then it vanished out of sight as it ascended to high orbit.

\*They’ll be fine. Calara will look after them,\* Alyssa said confidently, although her voice wavered with concern.

To John, it sounded like she was trying to convince herself. \*I know. She won’t take any unnecessary risks,\* he agreed, giving her a reassuring smile.

They turned back to the palace and walked up the marble steps into the glittering reception hall. John was accompanied by six battle-ready Lionesses, and four Nymphs in sundresses, who all wanted to witness his first contact with the Galkiran Progenitor. Alyssa, Sakura, Jehanna, Rachel, Tashana, and Helene all followed John through the opulent interior, as they made their way towards Mael’nerak’s bunker. Jade would eventually stand guard outside the palace, while Neysa and Marika would be stationed inside the command centre, manning the Quantum Flux Cannon batteries. Ailita was the fourth catgirl in the group, the sweet natured, pink-haired Nymph bouncing along beside Jehanna.

They entered the bunker through the massive reinforced bulkhead, where John was warmly welcomed by the Invictus’ full staff of cleaning bots. After returning the synthetic maids’ friendly greetings, he glanced down at Daphne with a confused frown.

“Where are all the maintenance bots?” he asked the automated girl. “I thought the Collective were staying safely inside the bunker?”

“They all volunteered to lead the synthetic thrall battalions,” Daphne replied.

John looked at her in alarm. “What?! You can’t be serious!”

“They won’t be leading a charge from the front, Father,” she patiently explained. “It’s more accurate to state that they will be acting as observers, to ensure our newly acquired robotic troops do not accidentally fire on friendly forces. The cleaning robots will be remotely operating squads of thralls, and directing their shots where instructed.”

“It’s going to be very dangerous out there,” John warned the Collective’s spokeswoman. “I never would’ve agreed to this if I realised it meant that the maintenance bots would be so exposed.”

“The thrall robots might be cannon fodder, but my friends are not,” Daphne stated solemnly. “The Collective wishes to help protect the Maliri from harm, and we can safely do so from the back lines.”

“Alright... I’ll trust your judgement,” he said, before glancing at Jehanna. “Make sure you give the Collective plenty of warning if it looks like any of our positions might be overrun.”

“I’ll watch out for them,” she agreed, patting Daphne on the shoulder.

John glanced up at the Tactical Map, showing all their warships and gun emplacements arrayed around Kythshara. “How long until the Galkirans arrive?”

“Seventeen minutes,” Alyssa replied.

He suddenly looked at her in alarm. “They don’t still have access to our sensor data do they?”

The blonde smiled and shook her head. “We cut them off a few hours ago, when we started repositioning the defence grid. The Galkirans wouldn’t have been able to see the gun emplacements anyway, but they could have seen our thrall fleets towing the turrets into new positions. Calara didn’t want to take any chances.”

“Thank God for that,” he sighed with relief. “Or Calara in this case.”

Alyssa turned to look him in the eyes. “I know you missed most of the tactical planning because you needed to train for the duel, and now you’re worried we might have missed something. We all really appreciate how much trust you’ve placed in us, and we’ve been as thorough as possible. We covered everything, I promise.”

“I do trust all of you,” he said, relaxing as he realised how true that statement was.

Jehanna stepped forward, a bright smile of anticipation on her face. “Are you ready, John? It’s showtime.”

He took a deep breath, then nodded, watching Jehanna as she focused her cameras on him.

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\*Prepare yourselves, this is the moment we’ve all been waiting for,\* Edraele alerted her wards in the psychic network. \*Lord Baen’thelas is ready to address our forces.\*

She glanced up at the huge holo-screen that overlooked the Command Centre, joining the rest of the Maliri in breathlessly waiting for John’s appearance. When his handsome face appeared, a wistful sigh echoed around the huge room, all the personnel gazing at him with adoration in their eyes.

“Good evening, citizens of the Maliri Protectorate,” John began, looking directly into the camera. “I’m standing before you inside Mael’nerak’s palace on Kythshara, on the eve of battle with the Galkiran Empire. It’s fitting that this should be the site of the final confrontation between our forces, at the heart of Mael’nerak’s old empire. I’m sure you all know the old legends about him: how he came to the Maliri and took away all the bad girls.”

“Well, I’m similar to Mael’nerak,” John said, his eyes beginning to glow with a soothing blue light. He spread his arms as if inviting his audience to see him as he truly was. “But the big difference between us, is that I came to the Maliri to protect rather than enslave, and to recruit the very best of you to fight for our future. I selected the bravest, the brightest, and the gifted, then you all volunteered to defend our civilisations against the legions of enemies lining up to try to destroy us.”

Edraele glanced at the captivated women in the command centre, and smiled as they sat taller in their seats, preening with pride.

“I *claimed* the Maliri, and pledged to protect you from harm, because you are an incredible people with limitless potential. You’ve already proved this to me many times over, as have your matriarchs, who have all dedicated their lives to forging the strongest empire in galactic history. With that growing power comes many enemies, and the Galkirans are the second Progenitor empire that has tested its mettle against us.”

“Yes, I said the second,” he said nodding for emphasis. “The first were the Larathyrans, led by a cruel, manipulative monster called Larn’kelnar. The Larathyran Empire was very powerful, with many fleets of mighty warships, but their weakness was the hubris of Larn’kelnar himself. He sought me out and we duelled one another, in a long and arduous battle. But he had no idea that I was backed by the Maliri, and your unwavering loyalty gave me the strength to persevere, and ultimately crush that psychopathic monster.”

John smiled with satisfaction at his audience. “When we defeated that malignant tyrant, we liberated his thralls from millennia of slavery. Now the Larathyrans have become our steadfast allies, and their Empress has gifted us with hundreds of powerful new warships, equipped with the deadliest of weapons. Crewed by brave Maliri, those fleets are now racing home, ready to defend our people against anyone that dares to threaten the Protectorate.”

There were excited murmurs from the personnel near Edraele, as John confirmed the rumours and speculation about the missing Maliri fleets.

“Now history repeats itself, and the Protectorate finds itself under attack once again. This time by the Galkiran Empire, who are dominated by yet another malevolent Progenitor. I have every confidence that we will be victorious; that our heroic forces will triumph over an enemy that has dared to rampage through our territory.”

“I feel that confident in our victory because of you. The way you’ve responded to the changes in Maliri society has been truly remarkable, with sworn enemies putting aside past differences, and working together as a unified people for the first time in over nine millennia. With everything you’ve already managed to accomplish in just a few months, just imagine what we can achieve in the coming years, decades, and centuries.”

John gave them a wry smile. “I’m sure it would be easy to dismiss this speech as empty rhetoric. To view everything I’ve said with world-weary cynicism, instead of believing that I genuinely mean every word. But I want you to share my confidence. I want you to know in your hearts that our cause is righteous, and that working together we will win victory after victory, until the Progenitor menace has been eliminated from this galaxy forever.”

He paused for dramatic effect, then continued, “And fortunately, I can prove just how sincere I am, right here and now.”

The muted blue glow grew steadily brighter as John stared into the camera, his unwavering gaze piercing the souls of every ward in the network. Shocked gasps echoed around the command centre, as the white haired Maliri felt his glorious presence reach out to them through their psychic connection.

Luna could feel it too. A comforting warmth filled her heart, reminding her of that wonderful feeling of being held protectively in John’s arms. But the sensation continued to grow, reminding the former assassin that she was part of something much greater than herself. She turned around to study the command staff seated at their Tactical Stations, and one look told Luna that they all felt the same way, the wide-eyed Maliri staring at each other in awe.

Years of distrust and suspicion fell away, to be replaced by a shared sense of purpose and belonging. For most of the Maliri, this was the first time they’d felt anything like this before, and it was easy to see how deeply it touched them all. Those women then turned towards Luna, and gazed up at the raised platform with looks of wondrous disbelief, their faces bathed in a soft purple light.

Luna was mystified why she would be the centre of attention and looked back at them in confusion. Suddenly she realised that the purple light was getting brighter, and to her shock, the source was coming from directly behind her. She whirled around and saw that Edraele was now levitating high above the platform, a shimmering purple radiance blazing from her eyes. The Maliri Queen was oblivious to everyone else in the room, her expression one of blissful euphoria.

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Gahl’kalgor stood with his arms extended out to the sides as robotic limbs garbed him in his sinister black battle armour. He felt a thrill of excitement as he donned his wargear, the preparations for the final confrontation with this upstart Progenitor reminding him of past glories. When the armoured plates were locked in position, he walked over to his private armoury, where dozens of viciously barbed weapons hung against the wall. He removed his helmet and set it aside, so he could fully admire his prize possessions.

His gauntleted fingers brushed over each of them in turn, as Gahl’kalgor recalled the brutal wounds they’d inflicted on his slain foes. The Progenitor’s hand suddenly froze on the hilt of a razor-sharp Xilyn knife, his Gladiatora’s favoured weapon, and he was assailed by a flood of unsettling memories. He had taught the blade’s use to his matriarch many long centuries ago, with Valeria proving to be a quick study, stoically withstanding every agonising lesson he inflicted on her.

There was a strange and unfamiliar ache in his chest. For some reason, memories of his matriarch and her long years of suffering filled him with a disturbing feeling, one that he’d never experienced before. He remembered those adoring amber eyes clouded with pain, but Valeria always endured the agony without complaint, no matter how sadistic the torments.

Yanking his fingers back from the serrated dagger, he stared at them suspiciously, and couldn’t help picturing them dripping with Valeria’s blood. He quickly grabbed his pair of axes, and backed away from the weapons rack, the reminiscing over vicious blades having lost any appeal. The door chime suddenly rang through his quarters, making the distracted Progenitor jump in surprise.

“Enter,” he snapped with a grimace.

The door behind him split open, and Ashryn entered his quarters. She was equipped with a fleet officer’s standard battle gear, her body clad in a suit of black armour, and a deadly pistol holstered on her hip. The one exception was that she carried her helmet under an arm, allowing her long white hair to cascade down over her shoulders.

“Fleet Commander Ashryn reporting as ordered, my Lord,” she said hesitantly, watching his face for a reaction.

Gahl’kalgor still hadn’t decided how he felt about this intriguing thrall. She now looked almost exactly like Delsanra, except that his mother’s hair was as black as a midnight ocean, and Ashryn’s was now as blindingly bright as white sea spray on crashing waves. Despite his conflicted feelings towards her, the Progenitor was in need of a senior officer for his dreadnought, what with Valeria temporarily banished from his side.

He eyed Ashryn speculatively, other possibilities coming to mind. If this devoted thrall proved to be a capable commander, it might be time to end Valeria’s reign as his matriarch. As quickly as that thought came to him, he just as rapidly dismissed it. The thought of snuffing out the life of his pet Gladiatora left Gahl’kalgor feeling hollow inside, like a gaping pit had opened up in his stomach.

“Come with me,” he gruffly ordered Ashryn, masking his sudden discomfort with a frown.

They left his quarters, and she fell into step beside him, the heels of her boots clicking on the decking. He could sense her watching him as they walked along in silence, her uncertainty making him feel even more on edge.

“You have a question? Speak your mind,” he demanded impatiently.

“I just... wondered if you had made a decision, my Lord?” she asked in a hushed voice. “About me.”

Gahl’kalgor could hear the fear in her reply, Ashryn frantic with worry that he would dismiss her from his presence. She had sailed dangerously close to the wind with her little stunt earlier that day, but his instinctive reaction had not been to punish her, quite the opposite in fact.

He came to a sudden stop, catching his anxious companion by surprise. “I am not... displeased with you,” he said, struggling to convey such unfamiliar sentiments.

She had turned to face him, then walked back a step to close the distance. “Who do you need me to be, my Lord?” she whispered. “Ashryn... or Delsanra?”

Raising his gauntleted hand, he gently cupped her beautiful face. “Perhaps both?” he replied cautiously, before his eyes narrowed in warning. “But never at the same time.”

“I understand, my Lord,” she said, looking greatly relieved.

After glancing each way down the corridor to make sure there were no other thralls within earshot, she stepped closer to him, her eyes softening.

“Delsanra will be our special secret,” she said lovingly. “You need only tell me when you miss her, and she’ll be there to take care of you, Kal.”

Gahl’kalgor swallowed around the lump in his throat when he saw her warm maternal smile. Her manner was so like his mother it made his heart ache to see her again, and he was suddenly overwhelmed with gratitude towards this marvellous thrall. He’d never felt this close to anyone in over a thousand years, not since the treasured days of his childhood.

“Thank you... Ashryn,” he faltered, having to remind himself that this wasn’t Delsanra standing before him.

She turned away from him, then straightened her shoulders and looked back with a sultry smile. “I like being Ashryn for you too, my Lord. You need only ask, and I’ll be ready to sate your every desire.”

The sudden switch between personas was so dramatic, that he didn’t feel any lingering guilt or remorse when her behaviour turned sexual.

“Just ask?” he muttered, doubting that the solution could be that simple.

She nodded enthusiastically, then her expression turned wistful. “With enough practice, I’ll get better at anticipating who you need me to be.”

Gahl’kalgor paused and gave Ashryn a speculative look. There was a way she could know exactly what he needed without any risk of making a mistake, or him even having to say a word. It was a thrilling idea, and would make her transition between roles even smoother and more seamless. This time, the thought of replacing his recalcitrant matriarch was not quite so troubling.

“I foresee we have a long and satisfying future together, Ashryn,” he said, gracing her with a smile of approval.

Grinning in delight, she leaned in to give him a grateful kiss. “Thank you, my Lord!”

They set off again down the dark corridors, with Ashryn floating along beside him in a cloud of bliss. When Gahl’kalgor reached the Bridge, his entrance drew the attention of every thrall there, and there followed a flurry of shocked gasps when they set eyes on his white-haired companion. Ashryn met their curious stares with confidence, proudly showing off her new look to the astonished Galkirans.

Gahl’kalgor took his seat on the Command Throne, and indicated for Ashryn to stand beside him in the spot usually reserved for Valeria. The significance of such a gesture was not lost on her, or anyone else on the Bridge, and Ashryn bit her lip to stop herself from beaming with joy.

“Captain Ashryn is now in command of this dreadnought,” he announced, further cementing her elevated position with the crew.

With that business done, he glanced at the Tactical Map, and confirmed that they were fast approaching his enemy’s Throne World. However, the holographic display looked different to when he’d studied the system before, and now the only feature visible was the vast nebula blanketing the region. There was no sign of the warships that had been stationed around the planet the last time he’d looked.

“Where are his fleets?” Gahl’kalgor demanded incredulously. “Have they left the system?!”

The senior tactical officer shook her head. “We lost all sensor contacts, my Lord.”

“Access their comms broadcasts again,” he ordered. “Update the display with current data.”

“We cannot, my Lord,” the communications officer ruefully reported. “Our access to that data feed was cut off three hours ago. We attempted to restore the connection, but their sensor data is now heavily encrypted, and our specialists are still unable to break it.”

He grunted with irritation. “No matter, we already know what pitiful forces await us. Order all fleets to commence the attack as soon as we arrive in-system.”

The Galkiran thrall acknowledged his order with a respectful bow, then broadcast the message to the hundreds of ships in the armada. The fleet command interface chimed a few moments later, and Gahl’kalgor accepted the incoming call from one of his fleet captains. Keylessae appeared in the holographic display, a pensive frown on her scarlet face.

“My Lord, may I request that we hold position before launching the assault?” she requested politely. “Our shields projectors are near critical levels and need time to recover before the battle.”

Gahl’kalgor let out an exasperated sigh. “Send out new orders to all fleets, to recuperate shields when we reach the system,” he commanded the comms officer.

“Ah... may I make another suggestion, my Lord?” Kylessae asked, cringing at having to do so again.

“What now?” he demanded, his eyes narrowing at being questioned for a second time.

“They have used mines extensively in the past,” she explained fearfully. “Perhaps we should hold position here to recover our shields instead of getting too close to the system?”

“Are you scared of this upstart?” he sneered, looking at her with contempt. “We’ve beaten him back to his Throneworld! This war is already won!”

“But what about the risk of minefields, my Lord?” Keylessae pressed. “The Maliri could have extensively mined the whole system.”

“Extensive minefields?” he replied, mocking her with a condescending laugh.

He expected the Bridge crew to snigger along with him, but they stayed so ominously quiet, you could have heard a fishing hook drop.

Gahl’kalgor frowned at the awkward silence, then curtly added, “I studied their sensor data extensively. Fear not, Keylessae, there are no mines lurking in the shadows.”

Ending the call before she could harass him with further trivial concerns, the Progenitor leaned back on the Command Throne and watched as his armada approached the nebula. When the Galkiran fleets reached the outer periphery of the gravity well, they began to drop out of hyper-warp, then clustered together like a shoal of fish cowering from a deep sea predator. To see his forces behaving in such a craven manner was galling, and he gritted his teeth with irritation.

The thrall warships held position and finally dropped their shields, letting the overworked shield projectors recover after hours of overextended use. As Gahl’kalgor had confidently predicted, there were no hidden traps waiting for them. He glanced at Ashryn and gave her a smug grin, enjoying being proven right. She lovingly caressed his shoulder, gazing at the Progenitor in adoration.

Suddenly the holographic map was ablaze with detonations, as dozens of vessels were ripped apart in fiery explosions. Gahl’kalgor gaped at the Tactical Map in shock, as ship after ship was savaged by mines. Even raising their shields didn’t help, as the spider mines were already on their hull, and the blasts continued without pause.

By the time the minefield was exhausted, an entire fleet’s worth of ships had been crippled, with nothing left of their engines but mangled wreckage. Gahl’kalgor didn’t care that the women crewing those vessels had survived, he was too infuriated at being openly humiliated in front of his thralls. Cheeks flushing bright red with embarrassment, he darted an angry glare around the Bridge, planning to make an example of anyone that dared to laugh at his expense. The crew all seemed to be engrossed in their work stations, and not one of them raised her head to so much as look his way.

A chime echoed around the fearful silence on the Bridge, and the comms officer spoke up a moment later. “We’re being hailed, my Lord,” she informed him, cringing at having to speak up.

“Is it Keylessae again?” he bristled, eyes narrowing dangerously. “What does she want this time?”

“Ah... n-no, my Lord,” she stammered. “The call originates from the planet.”

“Answer it,” he snarled, before quickly composing himself, and making his face an impassive mask.

An adversary contacting him before the final battle was a first for Gahl’kalgor, as his prey were usually too panicked about their impending demise to be interested in conversation. His quarry’s face filled the holo-screen, and Gahl’kalgor was far from impressed. This haggard male was close to middle age, much older than any of the Progenitors he’d slain in the past.

“So, this is Baen’thelas,” Gahl’kalgor stated, looking at him with contempt. “The righter of wrongs.”

Ignoring the sarcastic jibe, Baen’thelas simply nodded in confirmation. “You seem to know who I am, but we still haven’t been introduced. Who are you?”

“Lord Gahl’kalgor,” he declared in a cold, imperious tone.

Rather than be intimidated, this seemed to amuse his adversary. “So Lord Gally, how did you like my welcome gift?” he asked with a playful wink.

The frivolous tone was infuriating, as was the shocking disrespect. “It was pathetic,” Gahl’kalgor sneered, managing to control his temper. “You weren’t able to destroy one of those ships, that’s how pitiful your minefield was.”

Baen’thelas broke into a mocking grin. “Pitiful? Really? I seem to recall you started your little invasion with 29 fleets. Where are the rest of them, Gally? Did they get lost?”

Gahl’kalgor gripped the armrests of the command throne tighter, wishing his gauntlets were wrapped around this buffoon’s throat.

“They’re busy obliterating any traces of your wretched empire,” he bluffed, his lip curling into a sneer. “I only needed a handful of fleets to drive you back to your Throneworld.”

“How are they ravaging my empire... with no engines?” Baen’thelas asked with a knowing smirk.

Bristling at his lie being exposed, Gahl’kalgor leaned forward to scowl at him menacingly. “There’ll be no running away from me this time, you gutless worm! Perhaps you should change your name to something more fitting, like Kiwak’thungol? Coward who runs from battle!”

His insult didn’t have the desired effect, and instead of being offended, Baen’thelas burst into laughter.

“You’re calling me a coward?” Baen’thelas scoffed, shaking his head in disbelief. “You spent the last week cowering behind your thralls, too scared to fight me man-to-man. You’re like a frightened little boy, hiding behind his mother’s skirts.”

“Don’t talk about my mother,” Gahl’kalgor snapped reflexively.

Baen’thelas paused, his head tilted slightly to one side. He looked oddly like he was listening to someone, either that or he was having some kind of seizure. Perhaps old age was finally catching up to him?

“That wretched tugboat of yours wouldn’t last a minute against my Dreadnought,” Gahl’kalgor boasted, taking advantage of the momentary lull in conversation. “Need I remind you how I nearly destroyed that ugly abomination in just one salvo? I’ve slain dozens of Progenitors and you’re the only one that was too stupid to build his own flagship!”

He heard titters of laughter around the Bridge from his thralls, and Gahl’kalgor grinned in triumph, sensing he finally had the upper hand in this exchange of insults.

“You killed your mother, didn’t you?” Baen’thelas asked, all levity gone from his voice.

“W-what-“ Gahl’kalgor stammered, staring wide-eyed at him in horror.

“You heard me,” Baen’thelas said, his expression cold and damning. “Did she beg you for mercy? Plead with you to stop? She loved you, and you murdered her.”

Leaping up from his chair, Gahl’kalgor stabbed a finger towards the holo-screen and screamed, “Stop talking about my mother!”

Baen’thelas looked at him with utter contempt. “Did you fuck her before you choked the life out of her? Or did you rape her lifeless corpse before she got cold? A sick freak like you probably has her stashed away somewhere, so you can dump another load in her when you miss your mommy.”

Quaking with fury, Gahl’kalgor grabbed one of his gleaming black axes and lurched over to the Comms Station. The thrall sitting behind it took one look at the apoplectic madness contorting his face and dived away from the console.

“STOP! TALKING! ABOUT! MY! MOTHER!” he raged, punctuating each howl with an overhead chop from his axe.

Despite absolutely obliterating the console, the comms channel was still open, with Baen’thelas’ image being routed directly from the comms array to the holo-screen.

“You know where I am, mother fucker,” John spat, his eyes narrowed with disdain. “I’ll be waiting on the planet for you... unless you can only fight harmless old women.”

Before Gahl’kalgor could hurl a furious retort at the screen, the signal was cut, and Baen’thelas’ face disappeared in a flurry of pixels.

The only sound in the entire Bridge was Gahl’kalgor’s heavy panting, his eyes still wild with crazed fury.

“Full power to the engines!” he roared, never wanting to kill anyone as badly as he wanted to butcher Baen’thelas. “Get me down on that planet! I want that bastard’s head on a fucking spike!”