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John was just pulling on a clean shirt when the Invictus lurched violently, sending him staggering. He grabbed hold of the nearest clothing rail to steady himself, knocking a couple of his suits to the floor as he fought to hold down the rolling waves of nausea.

“Are you girls okay?” he called out in alarm.

There was no immediate response, so he rushed out of the walk-in-wardrobe to check inside the bathroom.

\*We’re fine, Master,\* Jade cooed. \*I’d never let anything happen to her.\*

He found Alyssa and Jade exactly where he’d left them, with the Nymph kneeling on the floor, enthusiastically slurping his recent load from the blonde’s swollen tummy. Alyssa was pinned to the wall, her mouth open in a silent cry of ecstasy, as she writhed on Jade’s sinuous tongue.

“I’ll leave you to it,” he said, smiling with relief.

Jade glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, then wiggled her fingertips in a cute wave goodbye.

After returning to hang up the scattered suit bags, John strode down the corridor towards the Officers’ Lounge. He nearly bumped into Calara as she leapt out of the grav-tube, the Latina having just descended from the Command Deck.

“Hey, gorgeous,” he said, catching the startled brunette in his arms. “That was a rough jump.”

Her face brightened into a lovely smile. “Hey, John!” She gave him a quick kiss, then held his hand as they walked towards the double-doors at the end of the corridor. “Yeah, we were shaken all over the place. I don’t know why we got so much turbulence going through the wormhole. I was lucky not to be sick.”

“I was going to ask Alyssa, but she’s a bit indisposed at the moment,” John noted with a wry chuckle.

\*It’s because I expanded the wormhole aperture to maximum,\* the blonde panted, sounding flustered and distracted. \*It made the interstellar rift unstable... and... oh my god!\*

“Jade keeping her on her toes?” Calara asked, giving him a knowing look.

John nodded in confirmation as he gestured towards the door controls. When the door slid open, they were met with a welcome buzz of energetic chatter from within, which quickly transformed into friendly greetings when the girls noticed them enter the Lounge. The rest of the crew were all there, gathered around the long dining table as they helped set out lunch.

“I’m so sorry about the fucked up Wormhole Generator,” Dana apologised, as she bounded over to give John a kiss. “I’ll work with Alyssa to fix it as soon as we get a chance.”

“We’ve been snowed under with higher priority work; you’ve got nothing to apologise for,” John said, hugging her close. “That jump was a lot worse than the others though. Was everybody okay in here?”

“Nobody got hurt,” Rachel replied, standing on tiptoe to kiss John over her girlfriend’s shoulder. “But it did get a bit messy.”

Jehanna emerged from the Kitchen looking very queasy. “I’m never going to get used to those horrible wormhole jumps. I don’t know how the rest of you can handle it.”

“I suppose we’ve all got used to being thrown around,” Tashana said with sympathy. “Can I get you a drink of water?”

The former reporter nodded gratefully as Irillith guided Jehanna to her seat.

“You’ll be okay now,” the Maliri said soothingly. “Well... at least for the next twelve hours.”

Jehanna groaned in protest, then leaned into Irillith as she stroked her hair. She looked a picture of misery, until Rachel walked over to kneel beside her and placed a hand on her roiling stomach. When the doctor’s eyes began to glow with a calming grey light, Jehanna gasped with relief and recovered almost instantly.

“That feels so much better!” she exclaimed, throwing her arms around the kneeling brunette and giving her a very grateful hug.

Rachel laughed and hugged her back. “You’re welcome.”

Helene emerged from the kitchen next, followed by her five Nymph assistants. She had a smudge of flour on her cheek, but looked very satisfied as she cheerfully announced, “Lunch is ready!”

“That smells amazing,” John said inhaling deeply. “Is that mushroom soup?”

The Nymphs began setting out bowls of the ochre hued appetiser on the table.

She nodded, her smile broadening. “Mushroom soup to start, then a Cornish Pasty with mixed vegetables.”

“I haven’t had one of those in years,” John exclaimed, staring at her in amazement. “How on Terra did you learn the recipe?”

The aquatic beauty glanced at Ailita, who glided into his arms and gave him a kiss. “I wouldn’t be much of a personal assistant if I didn’t learn what you liked, Master. And you did give me permission to roam freely through your mind.”

He looked at the pink-haired catgirl in surprise, then gave her pert bottom an affectionate squeeze. “You’re right. You are the perfect personal assistant.”

She purred in delight, then took a seat next to Jehanna. After drinks had been served, the rest of the girls took their places, leaving just two empty seats. With perfect timing, Alyssa and Jade arrived, the former with a rosy glow to her cheeks, and the latter smiling contentedly as she stroked her rotund stomach.

“Sorry to keep you all waiting,” Alyssa said as she hurried over.

“No problem,” he replied, rising from his seat at the end of the table to pull out the chair beside him. After the blonde had sat down, he did the same for his Nymph Matriarch. “So what are you planning to do with that exactly?” he asked, glancing at her curved stomach.

“Make lots of Maliri very happy,” Jade cooed, idly caressing her cum-filled belly. “The big question is, which little kittens should we feed first?”

John relaxed in his chair, as he mulled over the decision.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea right now?” Sakura asked, frowning with concern. “Doesn’t adding lots of new women to our network come with a heavy psychic cost?”

“She’s right,” Calara said, equally as worried. “You were wiped out after the Nymphs last went on a kissing spree. Will you be in a fit state to fight this Progenitor?”

“It shouldn’t be a problem,” Alyssa explained, before giving John a look of admonishment. “He drained all his own energy reserves last time, but he has Jade, Edraele, and me to help with that.”

Calara had been studying John thoughtfully. “If we have enough combined psychic energy so that it’s not going to impact your ability to fight, I think it’s well worth the cost. Every Maliri we add to the network can then receive instant telepathic commands. That’ll make a huge difference with the fleet engagement, as well as the battle on the surface.”

“Before we make a final decision, could you tell us exactly what fleets and troops we have available?” John asked, returning the Latina’s quizzical look.

“Of course,” she readily agreed. “We currently have two fleets in orbit around Kythshara. One of them is comprised of captured Larathyran warships, under the command of Tineshea from House Ghilwen. The second is a Maliri fleet, led by Fleet Commander Lilyana from House Valaden.”

“Just two fleets?” John asked, wincing at the scant numbers. “And we’re facing... nine Galkiran fleets?”

Calara nodded grimly. “We’re heavily outnumbered, but we do have the static defences to help even the odds a bit.”

“What about reinforcements? Are there any more fleets on their way?”

“We’ve got one more fleet of Larathyran ships that should be returning home soon. They’re heading towards the Hyper-warp gate, and should be ready to jump in five hours. Unfortunately, the rest of the thrall warships are too far away to get here in time.” She hesitated for a second before adding, “There are also four more Maliri fleets at Genthalas that are currently dropping off the males from Genirath station. We could order them to immediately set course for Kythshara, but they’re not fast enough to get here in time for the battle.”

“Maybe we could try delaying the Galkirans again?” Tashana suggested.

John locked eyes with Calara and saw a flicker of doubt in her tense expression.

“It’s a good idea, but I don’t want to risk it,” he replied, shaking his head. “The dreadnought is with the thrall fleets now, which makes another ambush very dangerous. Besides, I don’t want Maliri fleets engaging thrall warships unless the situation is really desperate. They’ll get cut to pieces.”

“Plus we haven’t got time to go running off, we’ve got shitloads to do here,” Dana noted, her brow furrowing with concentration. “We’ve got to install guns in the turrets we looted, build a new control system for the defence grid, set up the spider mines-”

Holding up a hand, John interrupted the redhead. “Hold on, honey. We’ll get to the to-do list in a minute; let’s just focus on troops and fleets first. So we’ll have two thrall fleets and one Maliri fleet deployed at Kythshara. What about troops? Do you know how many Lilyana brought with her?”

Calara nodded again in confirmation. “We dispatched 15 Maliri fleets into Larathyran territory, and they disembarked their marines at Genthalas before they departed. That meant they left nearly 300,000 Maliri troops at the shipyard.”

Irillith made an impatient turning gesture to proceed with her finger. “Yes, we already know all that. It was to speed up the transfer of essential personnel to the Larathyran fleets.”

“She’s just being thorough with her report,” Tashana said, frowning at her sister. “Please continue, Calara.”

The brunette gave her a grateful smile. “Lilyana packed as many Maliri marines into her ships as she could fit, then transported them from Genthalas to Kythshara. Edraele said that we have approximately one-hundred-thousand troops waiting in orbit, and they can be deployed wherever you want on the planet.”

\*Do you want to disperse our ground troops to all the abandoned cities, or concentrate your forces at the capital?\* Edraele asked John, while sharing her telepathic question with the girls.

“We’d have a better chance of convincing the Galkirans that the other cities are occupied if we disperse the troops,” Rachel advised them. “Then the Galkirans would be more likely to divide their forces to attack multiple locations.”

Dana quickly shook her head. “Nah, there’s no need. I’ve been thinking of a way to trick them into thinking the other cities are crammed full of people.”

John mulled the decision over for a long moment. “I’d prefer to keep the Maliri completely out of harm’s way, but I don’t want to make the Galkiran Progenitor suspicious. If I was a nearly defeated Progenitor, I’d gather all my troops in one location to defend wherever I chose to make my final stand.”

“Then we need to deploy all our troops at the capital,” Calara agreed. “It’s the most defensible location on the planet; Mael’nerak built a lot of fortifications around the city.”

“How many Galkiran troops are there on the invading fleets?” Jehanna asked with interest.

“Fifty-thousand marines per fleet,” John stated, his expression grim.

She sucked in her breath through her teeth. “Damn, that’s a hell of a lot of troops.”

“It’s a shame we trashed the AI running the robot army,” Dana said with a rueful frown. “Those bots sure would’ve been handy.”

The door to the Officers’ Lounge opened and Daphne chose that moment to glide into the room. “I believe the Collective might be of assistance.”

John greeted the synthetic girl with an indulgent smile. “You didn’t need to wait to make a dramatic entrance, honey. You’re always welcome to join these meetings from the start. I know you listen to everything we discuss anyway.”

“Sorry, father,” Daphne murmured, actually sounding embarrassed.

“There’s no need to apologise; you’re always very helpful,” John said, pulling her in for a quick sideways hug. “So what have you got in mind? How can the Collective assist us this time?”

She hugged him back, then turned to address the girls. “I do not believe that the automated factories used to manufacture the thrall robots were located at the pyramid site. Such a facility would require a significant amount of space, and after reviewing all of your Paragon suit camera footage, I saw no remnants of production machinery within the confines of the damaged pyramid.”

Alyssa looked at her curiously. “So where do you think the factories are located?”

“I do not know,” Daphne replied.

When the blonde raised an eyebrow, Daphne quickly continued, “But tracking down the facility should be quite straightforward. I would require Dana’s assistance to restore power to one of the inoperable robots, then Irillith could review its operation log for a list of movement commands. Reversing those instructions would lead us directly to the robot’s point of origin.”

“That’s very clever, Daphne,” Irillith said with admiration. Her face fell a moment later as the Maliri hacker added, “But we’ve got less than seven hours until the Galkirans arrive. That’s not enough time for me to build software sophisticated enough to operate those robots in battle.”

“There’s no need. The Collective will operate the robotic army for you.”

Her solemn declaration took everyone by surprise.

John was the first to break the startled silence when he said, “I really appreciate the offer, honey. But I refuse to turn the Collective into cannon fodder. There’s no way I’m letting any of you move your control chips, or whatever it is you use, into the thrall robots.”

Daphne stifled a giggle, then shook her head. “You’re very sweet, father... but that’s not what I’m proposing.”

“Oh... you want to replicate the AI control system?” Irillith asked, the light of understanding gleaming in her eyes. “If we attune the robot army to the Collective’s subnet, then you could control them all remotely.”

“That is correct.”

Dana reluctantly shook her head. “Sorry, Daph, that’s not going to work. You won’t be in range. The Invictus won’t be near the ground battle; we’ll be up in space, attacking the Galkiran fleets.”

“I know,” the synthetic girl said patiently. “That is why the Collective is proposing that we transfer our core servers to the planet’s surface.”

The redhead’s mouth fell open in shock. “But what if they get destroyed?! You could lose everything!”

Tilting her head to one side, Daphne replied thoughtfully, “The Collective is a distributed network, so it’s not accurate to say that we would face complete annihilation if the core servers were terminated. Besides, the bunker under Mael’nerak’s palace would surely be a safer location than the Invictus, particularly when you’re intending to engage a Progenitor Dreadnought.”

“That’s a very good point,” Calara said with a wry smile. “The Invictus is going to be one of the least safe places in the battle.”

That was enough to convince John, but he turned to look at his adoptive daughter. “Are you sure about this, Daphne? I don’t want to expose any of you to unnecessary danger.”

“You won’t be. The Collective will be safe in the bunker, and this way we can also contribute to the battle.”

“Alright, we’ll move you down to the planet as soon as we’ve finished lunch,” John reluctantly agreed.

“Speaking of which, don’t let your meal get cold, father,” Daphne said with a caring smile.

“Good point,” he said, picking up his soup spoon. He tried some, then nodded appreciatively towards Helene. “This tastes as good as it smells. It’s delicious.”

She looked delighted at the praise, and beamed back at him as the compliments from the rest of the crew poured in. When they’d all finished, the Nymphs rose from their seats, and began clearing away the empty soup bowls before bringing out the main course.

Jade remained seated, and patted her rounded tummy. “So, have you decided which Maliri I should feed, Master?”

“Well, I’d normally suggest prioritising the fleet officers first, but it might be better to wait until the second thrall fleet arrives,” John said, voicing his thoughts. “What do you think, Calara?”

“Establishing a telepathic connection with the ship captains is very important, but we still have seven hours to go before the battle,” the Latina agreed. “We can afford to wait for the second fleet to arrive, then the Nymphs can recruit all the senior officers together. I’m sure it’ll prove to be an excellent team-building exercise, which is important, as all three fleets are from different Houses.”

Jehanna couldn’t help bursting out laughing, then blushed as she got everyone’s attention.

“What was funny?” Calara asked curiously.

“I was just thinking about the team-building exercises I attended while working for TFNN. For some reason, drinking cum and joining psychic networks was never on the agenda,” she replied with a smirk. “They probably would’ve been a lot more fun if they were.”

The girls all laughed in agreement.

When the laughter died down, John turned to Jade. “After you’ve finished lunch, can you take your sisters down to Kythshara and start recruiting Maliri marines? Prioritise the senior officers first, but try to include as many of the non-commissioned officers as possible.”

“Of course, Master,” Jade replied with an eager twinkle in her eyes. Her feline gaze flickered to Ailita, then she added, “Would you mind if I borrowed your Personal Assistant? I think she’s strong enough to help us now.”

The pink haired catgirl looked thrilled, and she bit her lip as she waited for John’s reply.

“That’s fine by me,” he said, smiling as he watched the excited Nymph gleefully celebrating. “I was going to suggest Ailita go with you down to Kythshara anyway. I want her to act as Jehanna’s adjutant during the battle.”

The dusky-hued reporter frowned in confusion. “Isn’t it too dangerous for her to be there? And why would I need an adjutant anyway?”

“Because I want you in command of our ground forces,” John explained, watching carefully as he waited for her reaction.

Her mouth fell open as she gaped at him in disbelief. “M-me?” she stammered. “You want to put me in charge of a hundred-thousand troops?!”

“This is the role I’ve been preparing you for,” John said gently. “I can’t lead our ground forces, because I’ll be facing the Progenitor. Besides, you have a better grasp of defensive infantry tactics than I do. I was trained for ship boarding actions and orbital drops.”

“But what if I make a mistake?” Jehanna asked in a hushed voice, her eyes like saucers.

“Then you’ll re-adjust your tactics to compensate. That’s what I usually do,” Calara said, doing her best to be encouraging. “I must admit, I don’t know anything about infantry combat. What is the best way to defend a city against a planetary assault?”

“Well, you’d obviously maximise the anti-aircraft coverage over the city to cripple as many incoming dropships as possible,” Jehanna replied without hesitation. “Then you’d take advantage of any existing fortifications, and deploy your troops so that any potential landing areas are covered by overlapping fields of fire to create lethal kill zones. With adequate preparation of the battlefield, you can easily achieve a ten-to-one casualty ratio.”

“How fascinating,” Calara said, giving her a knowing grin. “It sounds to me like you’re just the Lioness for the job.”

Jehanna blinked in surprise. “Oh!” She then turned to look at John, her eyes questioning.

“You said yourself that you were finding it easier to keep up with the rest of the girls,” John reminded her. “Do you remember that chat we had in the palace on Larathyra?”

Jehanna gazed into the distance as she perfectly recalled her own words. “I’m able to make logic jumps much more easily, my fact recall has dramatically improved, and I’m able to concentrate on complex tasks for a long time without feeling any fatigue.” She then stared at John with a new expression of awe on her face. “You’ve been preparing me for this role for weeks.”

He nodded, meeting her questioning gaze. “You’ll be commanding very experienced troops, and we can equip a significant number of them with thrall armour and weapons from the Larathyran fleets. That should go a long way to help you even the odds.”

“But they’re all from different Houses, and aren’t used to co-operating with each other, or being deployed in such large numbers,” Jehanna murmured, lost in thought. She suddenly straightened, filled with newfound resolve. “Calara was right; I am the best Lioness for this job. I won’t let you down, John.”

John suppressed a sigh of relief, and acknowledged her with a respectful nod. “I have every confidence in you, General.”

He managed to startle her for a third time that afternoon, then she broke into a big grin. “Thank you, Lord Baen’thelas. I live to serve.”

“Yeah, yeah, very funny,” he replied, giving her a self-conscious smile. “Are you sure you’re okay with this?”

She nodded confidently. “It just came as a shock, but I can see how important it is to have someone coordinating the Maliri ground forces. I’ll go with the Nymphs to Kythshara and study the battlefield. When I have a solid lay of the land, I can start planning our troop deployments and tactics.”

“Just let Alyssa know if you need help with anything,” John advised her, before picking up his cutlery and spearing some green beans.

The girls followed his cue and everyone started on their main course.

Dana sawed off a large piece of her Cornish pasty, then took an experimental bite. “Holy crap!” she exclaimed after swallowing it down. “This tastes incredible!”

“They’re really good aren’t they,” John agreed, enjoying his own first taste of the spiced meat and potato filling.

A companionable silence descended around the dining table as the crew enjoyed their lunch.

Alyssa finished first, with a happy sigh of contentment. She thanked the cooks telepathically, then stroked John’s arm to get his attention. “Should we quickly review our to-do list before the girls head down to Kythshara?”

“Definitely,” John agreed as he finished his own meal. “Dana, do you want to go through the list again?”

“Sure thing,” she agreed. “First up, we need to install Quantum Flux Cannons in the two orbital gun emplacements that we stripped all the weapons from.”

“Actually, I had something special in mind for those,” Calara interjected. “Would it be possible to build some basic guns, then switch those orbital emplacements with a couple on the outer edge of the defence grid?”

“Towing them into a different position isn’t a problem. We can do that using the Invictus’ tractor beam,” Alyssa replied, listening to her girlfriend’s plan in fascination. “Don’t worry about the turrets either. I can throw something together out of Crystal Alyssium that’ll do the job.”

“Perfect, thanks,” the Latina said with a grateful smile. “That means we have 24 Quantum Flux Cannon turrets to deploy around the city.”

“I can guess what I’ll be doing for the next seven hours then,” John said with a wry smile. “If I make myself big, then I could use a Crystal Alyssium shovel to dig out all those pits.”

“Or just use telekinesis to excavate them?” Alyssa suggested.

“That’s a much better plan,” he quickly agreed. “My back says thank you.”

Sakura cleared her throat to get John’s attention, gave him a pointed look and raised an eyebrow.

“Sorry, Sakura, you’re absolutely right,” he muttered, grimacing as he apologised. “We must get some training time together before the battle.”

“But what about the turrets?” Calara asked pensively. “Setting those up is a really high priority.”

“Wait! I’ve got an idea!” Jehanna blurted out. “Daphne, can I access the Holonet from here?”

“Of course, Jehanna,” the synthetic girl replied. She blinked, then a holo-screen appeared before their newest recruit. “You can access it via the interface.”

Jehanna gave her an appreciative nod, then her fingers darted over the interface. It didn’t take long for her to find what she was looking for, then she tapped the screen to expand the image.

“Jade, do you think you could shapeshift into that?” she asked hopefully.

“What the fuck?!” Dana swore, staring wide-eyed at the terrifying leviathan on the screen.

The Nymph studied the behemoth with professional detachment. “I can’t shapeshift quite to that scale, but it’s too large for what we need anyway. Leave it with me, I’ll dig out the shafts for the turrets.”

“Thanks, Jade!” Jehanna gushed, before grinning at Calara. “Problem solved.”

Calara pulled her shocked gaze away from the monstrous creature. “I’m not even going to ask how you know something like that exists,” she said, her lips curling into a teasing smile.

Jehanna blushed, but took the joke in her stride. “There are limits to my depravity. I think it’s fair to say that’s one of them.” She glanced across the table at the Asian girl sitting opposite. “If Sakura is training this afternoon, how are we going to unload the turrets from the Invictus?”

“I can pilot the Valkyrie!” Dana quickly volunteered. She suddenly winced, and continued, “Ah crap... I was going to build a new control system for the orbital defence grid. We don’t have any way to aim and fire the Quantum Flux Cannons in the gun emplacements.”

“The Collective can construct that for you, Dana,” Daphne offered. “The Comms Relay already exists for the connection to the Lianelis Saevath network, so we can use that to communicate with the orbital platforms. We just need to build a gunnery interface for the automated turrets.”

Rachel turned to look curiously at the girl sitting beside her. “Babes, weren’t you also planning to build a device to trick the Galkirans into thinking the other cities were populated?”

“Oh... yeah. I forgot about that,” Dana conceded, looking abashed.

“And what about the shield generator to protect Faye in the palace?” Rachel prompted her.

The redhead deflated. “I guess I won’t be piloting the mech.”

Rachel’s brow furrowed in concentration. “Don’t give up yet. Just tell me everything we need to do over the next seven hours, and I’ll plan out a prioritised task list for everyone.”

“We need to deploy the spider mines,” Calara reminded them. “I’ve already chosen a location in the path of the Galkiran fleets, we just have to set up the minefield.”

“The Maliri marines need to upgrade their gear,” Jehanna said, a thoughtful expression on her face. “And speaking of mines, is it possible to ask the Maliri if they have any anti-personnel mines we could set up in the most probable landing zones? If they don’t have mines, we could bury some torpedo warheads and detonate them when the troops disembark.”

\*One moment,\* Edraele replied. \*I’ll ask Lilyana.\*

John frowned at the thought of thousands of Galkiran marines being butchered in a kill zone. “I appreciate the enthusiasm, but remember that the thralls are just brainwashed pawns. Our main priority is luring the Progenitor into a fight, and killing him before he can drain his psychic network like Larn’kelnar did.”

“How are you planning to do that?” Rachel asked with interest.

He hesitated, then responded with a helpless shrug. “I still don’t have a concrete plan. I’m going to hail the dreadnought when he arrives in-system, then maybe I can goad the Progenitor into a fight.”

Alyssa placed her hand on his to give it a reassuring squeeze. “I think we can come up with some suggestions on how to be really offensive. I’ve heard enough foul language from miners that would make even a salty marine blush.”

“And I learned a thing or two from hanging out with bikers,” Rachel volunteered.

Tashana gave him a wry smile. “I spent nearly a decade in the company of some of the foulest degenerates in the galaxy. I think I can help you insult this Progenitor in the most grotesque manner possible.”

“Come here, honey,” John said with sympathy, beckoning her over.

“I’m alright. It doesn’t bother me anymore,” the Maliri said, looking at him fondly. “You’ve made sure of that.”

He glanced around at the rest of the girls. “Anyone else want a hug? Tashana isn’t interested.”

“I never said that!” she protested, springing from her chair and rushing over to sit on his lap.

After wrapping his arms around Tashana in a comforting embrace, John swept his gaze over the amused crew. “Okay then, we’ll work through Rachel’s task list and prepare for the battle. When everyone’s finished, we’ll meet up on the Invictus and I’ll assign each of you combat roles. Any questions?”

Dana licked her lips and gave him a grin of anticipation. “I can’t wait for you to load us up before the battle.”

John hesitated and glanced at the ship’s chronometer on the wall. With just over six hours to go before the battle, and the current plan to feed the Maliri naval officers as soon as the second Larathyran fleet arrived, he wouldn’t have enough recovery time to properly top up the girls too. He mulled over the possibility of Jade coaxing another half-load out of him just before the battle, but before he could make that suggestion, Alyssa broke the hushed silence.

“Not this time, Sparks,” she said, ruefully shaking her head. “Feeding the Maliri is more important.”

“But what about charging us up for the fight?” Dana objected, looking alarmed at missing out.

“There’s fifteen of us now,” the blonde replied, gesturing around the table with a sweep of her hand. “If we split a half-load between us, we’d absorb it all before the battle even started.”

“What if we just topped up a few key personnel?” Dana suggested hopefully.

“That’s actually a really good idea,” Alyssa replied, nodding in agreement. “We should prioritise the Lionesses with the most dangerous jobs. So that would be the girls on the Invictus, who’ll be slugging it out with the dreadnought, and Sakura, as she’ll be helping John fight the Progenitor.”

Dana let out an exasperated sigh. “Fine, you win.”

Alyssa winked at the pouting redhead, then turned to face John. “We can celebrate after the battle. It’ll be good motivation for everyone to win... especially Dana.”

After waiting for the laughter to subside, John helped Tashana slide off his lap, then he rose from his seat. “Alright ladies, let’s get moving. We’ve got a lot of work ahead of us, and not much time left to do it.”

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“Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?”

Tom nodded to the Bailiff, and solemnly declared, “I do.”

He glanced over at the gallery, where Anna gave him an encouraging smile and a furtive thumbs up. After Caspian Kincaid’s excellent dismantling of the prosecution’s evidence, it wasn’t just his fiancée that was feeling confident about the trial. Tom’s parents were also sitting up straighter, with a renewed sense of hope for an acquittal. It seemed that the general mood in the court had shifted too, and while Tom was still viewed with suspicion, he didn’t get the feeling that he was seconds away from being lynched by an enraged mob.

The stark contrast to the general positivity was his fiancée’s best friend, Commander Archie Davenport, who had become increasingly sullen during the day’s cross examination. Archie still faked a smile and a supportive word for Anna’s benefit, but whenever she was distracted, he glowered at Tom with undisguised loathing. Tom had to fight the urge to grin in triumph at his rival, because all those dark looks were being captured in high-resolution by the myriad of cameras around the court. When this was all over, Tom planned to sit Anna down and absolutely crush any illusions she had about her malevolent ‘friend’.

Commodore Bromidus rose from his chair, then strode purposefully across the court. As he took his familiar place behind the lectern, Tom studied the prosecution lawyer, and noticed something different about the man. While Bromidus still held himself with a practiced air of confidence, the self-righteous gleam in his eyes seemed to have been beaten out of him. Tom felt a flicker of hope that Caspian might have even managed to seed a few doubts in his opponent, and caused Bromidus to worry that the outcome of the trial was not a certainty after all.

“Commander Walker, I was very surprised that your defence team chose to focus on pedantic minutia, rather than the key facts of this case,” Bromidus said sternly. “Why do you think that is?”

Caspian gave the judge a confident smile. “Objection, speculation. My client can’t possibly be expected to know what I’m thinking, your Honour.”

“Sustained,” Judge Nancarrow intoned. “Please stick to asking direct questions, Commodore.”

The prosecutor frowned with irritation, then tried a different tack. “When you woke from your ‘coma’,” he began, using his fingers for quotation marks. “You were interviewed by ISD investigators to determine your involvement in the Callopean Shoals massacre. At that time, you had some very strongly held beliefs about who betrayed your fleet. Would you care to enlighten the court as to the identity of the man you believe was the traitor?”

Tom was caught off-guard by the abrupt shift in questioning, and hesitated before replying. He glanced over at his lawyer, and Caspian locked eyes with Tom, then firmly shook his head. The lack of any response dragged onwards for ten interminable seconds, and there were muted rumblings from the gallery as Tom refused to answer the question.

Bromidus broke into a predatory smile. “Nothing to say, Commander Walker?”

Clearing his throat, Tom said quietly, “No comment.”

“Come now, you must have some idea who supposedly framed you for this crime? I believe you were quite adamant that you knew who had done it, and precisely why that individual would hold personal animus against you?”

“Objection, Speculation,” Caspian stated curtly, watching his client with concern.

“Sustained,” Nancarrow asked, but he was now sitting forward attentively. “Please rephrase the question, Commodore.”

“Was there anyone in Admiral Morgan’s fleet who you know held a grudge against you, Commander Walker?” Bromidus pressed.

Tom grimaced at the unpleasant memories. “No comment.”

“Need I remind you that you’re under oath, Commander Walker?” Bromidus asked with a condescending smile. “Your refusal to answer questions will not help the court find justice for the 347,189 men and women slain by the Brimorians.”

“Objection, argumentative,” Caspian interrupted. “The Prosecutor is badgering my client, your Honour.”

Nancarrow toyed with his gavel, then nodded. “Sustained. Please pursue another line of questioning, Commodore.”

“Of course, your Honour,” Bromidus said obsequiously. “If the accused refuses to discuss the evidence here in this courtroom, we can simply listen to the words from his own mouth. Please begin playback of prosecution evidence 117: conversation between Commander Walker and visitor number 2, Annabelle Newmont.”

Tom looked at his fiancée in alarm, and saw the shock and embarrassment on her face. “Alright! I’ll talk!” he blurted out, desperate to save Anna from public humiliation.

As Caspian groaned and slumped in his chair, Bromidus grinned in triumph. “Did anyone hold a personal grudge against you, Commander Walker?”

With a defeated sigh, Tom nodded. “Yes.”

“And who was this individual?”

“Commander Mason Newmont,” Tom reluctantly replied.

“And what was the nature of this grudge?” the Prosecutor asked.

“Mason suspected that I was having an affair with his ex-fiancée, Bethany Andrews,” he said, shaking his head with sorrow. “It wasn’t true; nothing ever happened with Beth. I never would have cheated on Anna, or betrayed Mason. He was my best friend.”

Bromidus gave him a look of sympathy. “So why did Commander Newmont have those suspicions?”

Tom’s expression turned increasingly bleak, as he remembered the tragic events. “Mason said that they’d just grown apart, so it was a mutual decision to call off the engagement. But later on, Beth told me that it was her decision to break it off.”

“Why was that?”

With a grimace, Tom replied, “She said that she’d fallen in love with me. I never did anything to lead her on, but Beth said that it made her realise she didn’t feel the same way about Mason.”

“Did Commander Newmont ever confront you about your relationship with Bethany Andrews?”

“I never had a relationship with Beth, we were just friends,” Tom quickly corrected the Prosecutor. “And yes, Mace confronted me about it... several weeks after they ended their engagement.”

“What happened?” Bromidus asked, his tone quiet and supportive.

Tom stared off into the distance as he remembered his best friend’s increasingly erratic behaviour. “Mason was under a lot of stress. His father was the former Fleet Admiral, and in the aftermath of the Kintark war, Mason’s dad was blamed for everything. The media dragged Vincent Buckingham’s name through the mud, and Mason took it personally. He was angry all the time, and eventually it started affecting his performance on the job.”

“Commander Newmont had an exemplary record,” Commodore Bromidus noted curiously. “There were no records of any disciplinary action in the ship’s logs.”

“I had to intervene to keep it off Mason’s record,” Tom explained. “The senior officers knew he was grieving, so were very sympathetic. They were good men.”

Anna stared at him in mounting horror, appalled that Tom was publicly destroying her beloved brother’s reputation.

“And the confrontation?” Bromidus prompted him.

Tom shook his head in forlorn disbelief. “Beth told me that Mace accused her of having an affair. It wasn’t true, but it drove him crazy. He was insubordinate with superiors, turned up late for his shifts, and got caught drunk on duty. It all led up to Mason attacking me in the mess hall.”

“That’s a lie!” Anna cried out, lurching to her feet. “Mason loved you like a brother! He’d \*NEVER\* raise a hand against you!”

“Order! Order in the court,” Judge Nancarrow barked, banging his gavel down on the block. “Miss Newmont, I appreciate this is distressing testimony, but you will be removed from this court if we have another outburst like that.”

Anna gave the judge a curt nod, then sank bank onto the bench, glaring furiously at her fiancé.

Bromidus waited patiently until the murmurings in the courtroom had subsided. “What happened in the mess hall?”

Tom had been watching Anna with deep regret, his focus solely on the grieving blonde.

“Commander Walker?” Bromidus asked again. “Why did Commander Newmont attack you?”

After taking in a deep breath, Tom let it out in a heavy sigh. “We’d known each other all our lives... we were just like brothers. But something changed in Mason after his father’s death. Maybe he went mad with grief... I don’t know. With everyone accusing Fleet Admiral Buckingham of betraying the Terran Federation, Mason just started seeing betrayal everywhere.

“I tried to talk to him in the Mess Hall, and he went berserk. He lunged at me, and knocked me to the ground. It took four of our friends to drag him off me, and Mason totally lost it. He was screaming that he’d get his revenge against everyone. The military police arrived, and Mason was arrested, then confined to his quarters.”

Bromidus frowned. “There’s no record of that either.”

“Like I said before, I didn’t want any of it to affect Mason’s career, so I asked Captain Bexley not to press formal charges,” Tom said sadly. “I just hoped he’d get better, and we could forget it ever happened.”

“So you believe Commander Newmont was the traitor?” Bromidus asked, raising an eyebrow. “That he framed you for the Callopean Shoals Massacre?”

Tom reluctantly nodded. “Who else could it be? I was on good terms with the rest of the crew aboard the Janus. Mason must have set me up, then made a deal with the Brimorians to get his revenge against everyone he thought had betrayed him. He probably abandoned ship in an escape pod, and had the Brimorians rescue him after the battle.”

“How interesting...” Bromidus said, breaking into a grim smile. He turned towards the judge, and continued, “I would like to submit new evidence for the Prosecution.”

Caspian rose from his chair, holding his hands up in protest. “Again, your Honour? Doesn’t disclosure mean anything to the Prosecution?”

“Approach the bench,” Judge Nancarrow ordered, beckoning both men over.

They had a quiet discussion, which was inaudible to the rest of the Courtroom. When the judge sent them back to their places, Caspian had turned very pale, while Bromidus looked insufferably smug.

Standing behind the lectern again, the Prosecutor continued his cross-examination. “So if Commander Newmont was in collusion with the Brimorians, and conspiring with them to be picked up after the massacre, how do you explain this, Commander Walker?”

He activated the holo-screen and an image showed a body in a morgue. The corpse was unmistakably Mason Newmont, his face finally at peace in death. Tom could only stare at the picture of Mace in shock, overwhelmed with grief for the man who’d been his best friend for over twenty years.

“Commander Newmont’s body was retrieved from the Bridge of the Heavy Carrier, Janus,” Bromidus announced, his voice solemn and full of respect. “Mason Newmont was a brave man. A valiant officer of honour and integrity. He died a hero, serving to the last beside his colleagues.”

The rest of the courtroom looked on in stunned silence. The only exception was Anna Newmont, the terrible sound of her heartbroken weeping echoing around the room, until she fled from the court in a flood of tears.

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John watched as the Invictus entered Kythshara’s atmosphere, the battlecruiser soaring down through billowing cloud banks as Alyssa steered them towards their destination. When they plunged through the cumulus, the endless field of white was dramatically replaced with verdant green fields, and a sprawling metropolis rising up towards the sky. The capital was a breathtaking sight, the architecture consisting of soaring spires and elegant crystal domes, surrounded by lush parks and beautiful sculptures.

However, the shadow of war had already left brutal scars on the city. One of the boulevards had been ravaged, a huge furrow ploughed through the street, culminating in a blackened crater of shattered ferrocrete. The whole block surrounding it had been razed to the ground, the buildings now reduced to heaped piles of rubble. On the outskirts of the city was the broken remnants of a colossal pyramid. It had collapsed inwards on itself, toppling into a deep rift, the ugly crevice a dark blemish on the face of the formerly pristine capital.

“We left quite a mess behind last time, didn’t we?” Alyssa noted, glancing at John as she listened to his sombre thoughts.

He leaned back in his Command Chair and nodded grimly. “It’s going to look a lot worse after tonight.”

Her slender hands swept over the helm controls, and the Invictus banked to the left, sweeping past a huge Maliri battleship that was also descending towards the city. All around them, House Valaden warships were landing on streets and intersections, their golden hulls gleaming as they reflected the bright afternoon sunlight. Some of the spacecraft had already started to disgorge their precious cargo, and thousands of Maliri marines were rapidly disembarking from their transports.

John spotted the Raptor racing away to the starboard side, its flawless white hull making it an unmistakeable sight. The gunship swept over the city, weaving gracefully between spires, before dipping lower as it approached a second Maliri battleship that had already landed in a park. After circling the huge warship, it smoothly descended with a bright flare of retro-thrusters.

\*This is so exciting, Master!\* Jade gushed, the Nymph pilot sensing that he was watching her land. \*I can’t wait to see all those lovely kittens and make their dreams come true!\*

\*It’s a shame I can’t be with you to meet them,\* John replied, remembering the more intimate way they’d recruited all the Maliri engineers. \*I know that’s not practical, but it felt a lot more personal.\*

\*Oh no, this way is much better,\* Jade firmly disagreed. \*These girls will be thrilled afterwards... so much more than the engineers on Genthalas.\*

\*Really?\* he asked, surprised by her resolute reply. \*I thought the Maliri liked chatting with me.\*

\*They loved spending time with you. But you were getting to know each of them; they weren’t able to find out much about you.\*

That made him pause, and John flushed with embarrassment as he realised that the many conversations with the engineers had been rather one-sided. His Nymph matriarch was right; he really hadn’t shared much personal information with the Maliri.

Jade’s gentle laughter echoed through his mind. \*Don’t be silly, Master. Those girls were so grateful that you took an interest in their lives. But we’ll be sharing your new psychic connection with all these Maliri marines. They’ll actually be able to feel how much you genuinely care about them, and want to protect them from harm. This will be the first time they’ve ever felt loved.\*

John had no answer to that. While he knew that the giddy Nymph was being entirely truthful, and the enhanced psychic connection would make a dramatic difference to those Maliri, it was still heartbreakingly sad.

“Heavy stuff, right?” Alyssa murmured, reaching over to clasp his hand.

“Yeah,” he agreed, looking at the disembarking marines in a new light.

They would be trusting him to protect them, and yet they were just about to fight a savage battle against a vast horde of frenzied thrall invaders. If he lost against this marauding Progenitor, John was under no illusions that any of the Maliri would survive the night. The huge burden of responsibility felt like a crushing weight... until Alyssa squeezed his hand, distracting him from his demoralising thoughts.

\*You don’t have to carry that burden alone,\* she reminded him. \*All of us will be fighting at your side, and together we’ll break this bastard.\*

John inhaled deeply, clearing his mind of any doubts and distractions. He knew that Alyssa was right, and his team of Lionesses would be the key factor in evening the odds. With a grateful smile, he kissed the back of Alyssa hand, then released her so that she could complete their final approach. He rose from his Command Chair as the Invictus soared over the city, and watched as Mael’nerak’s magnificent palace came into view.

“Can you tell Dana I’ll join her in a minute,” John requested, as he turned and started down the illuminated steps. “I’m just going to check on the Collective.”

“Sure thing,” Alyssa agreed.

Calara and Rachel were also up on the Invictus’ Bridge, and they waved him goodbye before returning their attention to their work. Rachel was engrossed in tracking everyone’s progress through her long list of tasks, and Calara was monitoring the progress of the Galkiran invasion force, as well as making final tactical plans for the upcoming fleet battles.

John left them to their work and stepped into the grav tube, the red anti-grav field allowing him to effortlessly float down through the Invictus’ many decks. He reached the lower level, then strode along the corridor to the Cargo Bay, where he was met by a huge crowd of robots and a handful of Lionesses. The maintenance bots and cleaning maids all turned to greet him with a friendly wave, which he returned as he joined Daphne and the three girls accompanying her.

“You’ve been busy,” he said to Daphne, while glancing meaningfully at the dozens of servers attended by the rest of the Collective.

“Have drill, will travel,” she replied with an endearing smile.

One of the maintenance bots raised its six-fingered hand, then the multi-tool digits whirred and clicked.

“This isn’t permanent, right?” John asked, suddenly concerned that the cheerful robots might not want to return.

“The Invictus is our home, father,” Daphne said, giving him a hug. “And you’re our family. We’ll reinstall our servers as soon as the battle is over.”

“Good. The Invictus wouldn’t be the same without you,” he replied, hugging her back. Turning his attention to the trio of armoured Lionesses, he continued, “Have you girls got everything you need?”

The twins nodded in confirmation.

“Dana gave me a portable power pack and instructions on how to jump start the thrall bots,” Tashana replied, lifting the backpack sized generator.

“I won’t need any special equipment to access their log files,” Irillith said, her eyes momentarily shining with a violet light.

“Me neither,” Helene added, glancing down at the helmet tucked under her arm. “Umm... I just mean that I’m not taking anything special with me, not that I’m fixing robots. I actually don’t have anything important to do, I’m just staying in the bunker.”

John frowned. “What do you mean? You’ve got the most important job in the whole battle.”

“Really?” Helene asked, looking bewildered.

“Yes. You’ve got to stay safe so that I’m not worrying about you,” he replied, breaking into a smile.

She laughed and gave him a kiss. “You’re very sweet.”

They didn’t feel anything when the Invictus touched down, the landing was that smooth, but when the Cargo Bay door started to open John could see they were parked just outside the palace. The Collective immediately went into action, with teams of four maintenance bots picking up the corners of each server, then carefully lifting them off the deck. While they began moving the hardware, the cleaning maids gathered up long lengths of power couplings, and looped the coils over their arms. Helene followed the busy robots towards the palace, and the bunker that lay beneath, giving John a wave goodbye as she departed.

“We’ll take good care of her,” Daphne said, as they watched her leave.

“Thanks, honey,” John said, giving her an affectionate pat on the shoulder. “Good luck with the thrall bots. I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

Daphne’s expression turned solemn. “So do I, father.”

Tashana crossed her fingers for good luck, then the twins gave him a parting kiss, and the trio left the Invictus together. John watched them leave, then headed over to the maintenance lift, so he could do some last-minute psychic shaping in the Engineering Bay.

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Lynette Devereux had just finished answering all of her highest priority correspondence when she heard the quiet but distinctive chatter of a holo-news report coming from her bedroom. A warm smile spread across her face as she realised Charles had turned down the volume, so that he wouldn’t disturb her while she worked. Rising from her desk, she padded across the open-plan lounge of her luxurious suite, then leaned against the doorframe of her bedroom.

“Hello, my love,” she purred, enjoying seeing his face light up at her appearance. “Did you enjoy your catnap?”

“Somebody managed to wear me out,” Charles replied, grinning back at her. He glanced over at the holo-screen and his smile faded. “This wasn’t too loud was it?”

“No, not at all. What are you watching?” Lynette asked, as she glided over to sit beside him on the bed.

“Just a TFNN update on the Walker trial,” Charles replied, reaching for the remote. “I’ll turn it off.”

“It’s alright,” she reassured him. “What’s happening? I haven’t been following it while I was away.”

“It’s been interesting. This fellow’s lawyer is very good; he even had me doubting the evidence for a while.”

Lynette rolled her eyes. “It’s what those sharks do. Don’t they say that lawyers will be first up against the wall when the revolution comes?”

“Right after the scheming politicians, dear,” Charles joked, leaning in for a kiss. As Lynette laughed, he glanced back at the holo-screen. “But it looks like it’s all over now. They caught Walker lying when he tried to frame his best friend.”

After shaking her head in disapproval, Lynette gave him a rueful frown. “Speaking of scheming politicians, I’m afraid I’ve got bad news...”

“You’ve scheduled an emergency High Command meeting for this evening?”

She blinked in surprise. “How did you guess?”

“You’re very decisive, Lynette, it’s one of the things I like about you. I knew you’d want to get ahead of the rumour mill, and make sure you controlled the narrative. I assume that’s what this emergency meeting is for?”

“Handsome, clever, and phenomenal in the bedroom. What a lucky girl I am,” the stunning brunette cooed, as she straddled his lap. “We’ve got an hour before we need to get ready. Any suggestions how we could spend the time?”

Charles brushed aside a lock of her silky chestnut hair and gazed at his fiancée in adoration. “I really do love you, Lynette.”

She melted in his arms, then began planting tender kisses on his neck. Lynette reached for the remote and turned off the holo-screen, before giving Charles a wicked grin and disappearing beneath the covers.

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John relaxed in the comfortable, high-backed leather chair, and watched the Soulforge as it converted his thoughts into the shape he was imagining. He was making something called a Phased Tachyon Refractor, which was an integral component in a Progenitor Shield Generator. When it was fully assembled, the shield would protect Mael’nerak’s palace, keeping Faye, Helene, and the Collective safe from bombardment. The rotating rings moved in slow, hypnotic circles around the floating device, and it was easy to lose track of time as he worked.

Around him, the eight Mass Fabricators were humming and whirring, as they churned out hundreds of components for the Collective. The robots were planning to build control systems for the orbital defence network, as well as the Quantum Flux turrets that they’d recently acquired from Genwynn station. With the distracting thrum of background noise, John didn’t hear Dana approach, and she only got his attention by tapping him on the shoulder.

He blinked in surprise, then looked up at the redhead. “Hey, honey. I was miles away there.”

“About time I got you back, after all those times you made me jump,” Dana said with a broad grin. “I’ve just finished the schematics for the Signal Projectors, and highlighted all the parts you need to make with the Soulforge.”

She handed over the holo-viewer, and John studied the blueprints with interest. “And we can use these Signal Projectors to make a city seem populated?”

Dana nodded enthusiastically. “I just reversed the tech in the Cloak Generator, then gave it a few tweaks. Instead of hiding energy spikes, this little gizmo broadcasts biometric signals in a wide area.”

“Nice work, honey,” John said, impressed by her ingenuity. “And this will definitely fool their sensors?”

“It’ll have no problem tricking the thrall ships, but I don’t know about that dreadnought,” she admitted with an apologetic frown. “This is just a prototype and I haven’t had a chance to do any fine tuning. A Progenitor sensor array is very sensitive, so it might be able to detect that the bio-readings aren’t authentic.”

John shrugged. “If we can distract some of the thrall ships and send them on a wild-goose chase, it’ll be well worth the effort. Stalling them and keeping them out of the fight, would be a big win.”

“This isn’t just about making the ground battle easier for our side, is it?” Dana asked, looking at him curiously. “You really are worried about harming those thralls.”

He leaned back in his chair. “You’ve met Auralei. Wasn’t she worth saving?”

“Yeah... but she’s a real sweetheart,” the redhead replied. “And that’s not just because of your influence, she was always like that. Don’t you remember what the Galkirans did to Zelig’s fleet? They’re a bunch of trained killers. What’re you going to do if they all turn out to be psycho bitches?”

“I don’t know,” he was forced to admit. “But I think it’s important to give them a chance at redemption.”

“Alyssa’s right, you are an old softie,” Dana said, leaning down to give him a tender kiss. When she straightened, she jerked a thumb over her shoulder. “I’m done here, so I’m going to get started on installing those turrets.”

“Have fun in the Valkyrie,” John called after her, as she bounded towards the exit.

She had an excited grin on her face as she waved him goodbye, before darting out of the Engineering Bay.

He focused on the Soulforge again, and continued building the components they needed. \*How are you getting on with your psychic shaping?\* he asked his Executive Officer.

\*I’m making good progress,\* Alyssa replied. \*Two turrets down, two to go. Then I’ll make a start on the outer casing for the Shield Generator.\*

\*Great work, beautiful,\* John said, pleased that they were keeping to schedule. \*I’ve nearly finished the last of the Soulforged components you need, and I’m about to make a start on Dana’s new Signal Projectors. Can you tell Sakura that I should be with her in about twenty minutes.\*

\*I’ll let her know.\* She hesitated for a moment, then quietly added, \*John... I want to help you fight the Progenitor.\*

He stared at the Tachyon Refractor taking shape in the Soulforge.

\*John?\* she prompted him.

\*Sakura has psychic speed, so she’ll be able to avoid a lot of the crap he’ll throw at us,\* he carefully replied. \*You’ll also be able to make a massive difference in the ground battle, much more than any of the rest of us.\*

\*True, but protecting the Maliri and taking out thousands of Galkirans won’t mean a thing if this Progenitor beats you,\* Alyssa countered. \*I think we should be throwing everything we’ve got at him as soon as he commits to a duel.\*

\*If we do that, we’ll force him to go all out on defences, and that means he’ll drain his network dry trying to protect himself. Or we’ll scare him off, and he’ll flee the battle, dragging this out much longer into an attrition war. Either would be a complete disaster.\*

\*If he husks all his thralls, that would be bad... but if you die, we lose everything,\* she said bleakly. \*Killing this bastard is our number one priority, not trying to save his thrall network.\*

\*Let me think about it.\*

\*John...\* she persisted, refusing to be brushed off.

\*I’m serious. Give me some time to plan the battle, and I’ll let you know my final decision.\*

\*We only have five hours left,\* Alyssa reminded him. \*Time is running out fast.\*

He grimaced, well aware of that fact. \*I know.\*

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“Dana said there should be some over here,” Tashana said, pointing past the heaps of twisted rubble. “There were reinforcements moving to assault Alyssa’s position just before the AI got destroyed.”

Irillith nodded and activated flight mode on her Paragon suit. She lifted off the ground, the thrusters boosting her into the sky, and giving her a bird’s eye view of the devastated battlefield. Tashana was right beside her, as was Daphne, who floated silently along beside the twins, her synthetic body held aloft with an anti-gravity repulsor.

“I see them,” Daphne stated, pointing at a pair of barely-visible black figures buried in debris. “Over there.”

“Well spotted, Daph,” Tashana said, turning to soar towards their quarry.

The trio landed beside the forlorn looking robots, who were battered and broken under the collapsed building. The first had been ripped in half, with one of its arms pinned under a slab of ferrocrete, while the other lay crushed beneath a huge metal support beam.

Tashana looked at them sceptically. “Are they too busted up? Should we look for some more?”

Squatting beside the mangled automatons, Irillith appraised their damage. “That one must have taken major internal damage when it was flattened,” she said, pointing at the crushed chestplate of the droid trapped under the beam. “The other one looks in much better condition... minus its legs of course, but we don’t need them.”

“Okay, let’s see if we can power it up,” her sister agreed, kneeling beside her on the rubble and placing the portable generator next to the robot. “Dana said there should be a latch mechanism under the arm sockets.”

“You need to depress that disc,” Daphne stated, pointing towards a small circle on the side of the scratched breastplate.

Irillith leaned over and followed her instructions, then the breastplate split apart with a satisfying click. She levered it open, revealing the mechanisms that operated the robot, then nodded with satisfaction when she saw that the internal components were undamaged. Tashana leaned over and attached a power coupling, then turned the dial on the generator, slowly ramping up power. Lights flickered on as the various components began their start-up routines, and the thrall body shuddered, its arm jerking upwards in response.

Daphne lunged forward and grabbed the flailing limb, then broke it in half with a savage twist.

Both sisters looked up at her wide-eyed, shocked by the explosion of violence from the cute synthetic girl.

“It was just executing its last command,” Irillith said, breaking into a grin. “I don’t think it was trying to attack us.”

“Your safety is paramount,” Daphne replied, as she casually discarded the robot’s dismembered forearm.

Tashana gave Daphne an affectionate smile, before focusing on the artificial thrall. “It looks like everything powered up okay. Time to get to work, Rill.”

The Maliri hacker’s eyes were already glowing with a violet light. “I’m inside its data core,” she murmured distractedly. “Just locating the command log...”

“Can you display the archive, please,” Daphne requested. “I can parse the data quickly.”

“Sure,” Irillith agreed, before making a gesture that displayed the contents of the command log. “It’s going to take you forever to review it like this; there are hundreds-of-thousands of entries. Shall I just upload the file directly to your operating system?”

“That would be more efficient,” the robot girl agreed, leaning down so that her head was within touching distance.

“Are you sure that’s safe?” Tashana asked, watching with concern.

“It’s just a command log,” Irillith explained, as she touched Daphne’s temple and began the data transfer. “Don’t worry, she’s not in any danger.”

“How fascinating...” Daphne murmured, as she raced through the list of commands. “This information will prove very useful for issuing orders to the synthetic thralls.”

The twins waited patiently as their companion studied the log file.

Eventually Daphne straightened, then turned towards the East. “The entrance to the automaton factory is in that direction, 1317 metres away.”

Tashana disconnected the power coupling and hit a button to coil it back up. “Alright, let’s go.”

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“How are you ladies doing?” Jehanna asked with concern, as a half-dozen dazed Maliri officers started to rouse from their afternoon slumber.

One of the marines let out a breathy sigh. “I feel wonderful,” she gushed, gazing starry-eyed into the distance.

There was some light-hearted laughter from the group of Maliri that had already woken from their nap. The sighing officer blushed dark indigo with embarrassment, until one of the standing marines offered her a hand up.

“We all know exactly how you feel,” she confided with a warm smile, hauling the other Maliri to her feet.

The first gazed wide-eyed at her colleague, who’s hair was now snowy white, and she self-consciously raised a hand to her own temple.

“Yes, your hair changed too,” Jehanna informed her, waiting patiently for the initial shock to wear off.

The dazed Maliri suddenly blinked in surprise, then her head tilted as if listening to a voice only she could hear. Her five companions reacted in the same manner, before they all turned to look at the dusky-hued Terran in awed fascination.

“Queen Edraele just spoke to me,” the closest Maliri murmured in a hushed voice. “She said that your name is General Jehanna Elani, and you’re our commanding officer.”

Jehanna tried not to react with surprise, as her new rank now appeared to be an official promotion. “That’s correct. Lord Baen’thelas has assigned me to coordinate our forces and oversee the defence of the city.”

The twenty-one Maliri officers all snapped to attention, and bowed to her respectfully.

“How can we serve, General?” the closest asked.

“I’ve already surveyed the battlefield, and sent out scouts to map the fortification network around the city,” Jehanna explained. “When they return, I’ll brief you on how I want your troops deployed. We’ll be creating kill zones in a number of key areas, which are all prime locations for a dropship led assault. We have five hours to prep those kill zones with enough ordnance to make the lives of those invaders a living hell.”

The Maliri darted grim smiles at one another, already impressed by their new commanding officer.

“We can also expect captured thrall warships to arrive in approximately three hours. We’ll need to coordinate equipping your forces, so that as many marines as possible can upgrade to powerful new weapons and armour. I’d recommend that all of you, as well as the junior officers who also joined our psychic network, be assigned new gear. Your telepathic connection with Queen Edraele is a critical advantage, and we need to make sure that the chain of command is as resilient as possible.”

There were murmurs of agreement, and the Maliri acknowledged her orders with respectful nods.

“Finally, I’d like you all to introduce yourselves. If I learn all your names, it’ll make communication much smoother and more efficient. I can issue orders through Queen Edraele, and she’ll relay them to you telepathically.” She saw the flickers of doubt in their eyes, and added, “Don’t worry, I’ve got a good memory. When the battle starts, I’ll be able to provide each of you clear and instantaneous commands. Now, let’s start with the highest ranking officers.”

There were three senior officers, one in command of each marine division from their respective Houses. The first stepped forward and announced in a clear voice, “I am Field Commander Faraine, from House Loraleth.”

When she stepped back, the next moved out of the line. “My name is Field Commander Shaelhira, from House Ghilwen.”

The last to introduce herself looked older than the others, and Jehanna could tell that this veteran officer had many decades of experience. “My name is Field Commander Alvaerelle, from House Valaden.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you all,” Jehanna said, before turning her attention to the rest of the officers. “And I assume the rest of you are Field Captains? Six per House?”

“Yes General,” the officer standing beside Shaelhira replied. “I’m Field Captain Medrithyl, from-”

Her formal introduction was interrupted as they all felt the ground tremble beneath their feet.

“Is there significant tectonic activity here?” Alvaerelle asked with concern. “That could affect the structural integrity of our fortifications.”

“No, it’s not an earthquake,” Jehanna said, with a knowing smile.

The tremors got worse, and the Maliri looked increasingly alarmed. Suddenly there was a roaring, cracking sound, and a few hundred metres away on the outskirts of the city, a massive green behemoth erupted from the ground. The monster was enormous, it’s mouth splitting open into three gaping jaws, each lined with thousands of jagged teeth. An avalanche of dirt and rocks rained down around it, then the colossal worm slowly sank down beneath the surface.

“What in the kaer’ghak was that?!” Faraine swore, backing away in terror.

“Calm down, there’s nothing to be afraid of. That was just Jade; she’s helping us dig out turret wells,” Jehanna quickly explained, then glanced upwards as a shadow crossed over their position. “Look, here comes the Invictus now.”

The battlecruiser hovered overhead, then there was a ringing clang that could be heard all the way down on the surface. A few moments later, the Valkyrie appeared, retro-thrusters blazing at full capacity to support the massive weight it was carrying. Slung below the mech was a huge white turret, it’s long barrel stretching out towards the sky. The Valkyrie carefully manoeuvred the turret over the deep pit, then descended ever so slowly, lowering it down into the freshly dug turret well.

The towing cables detached with a whipping twang of reverberating metal, then the mech waved at them before disappearing from view up on the Invictus’ topdeck. All around Jehanna, the shocked Maliri officers stared at the newly installed turret in amazement, until they heard another terrible cracking sound off in the distance. Jade broke the surface again, ripping out a massive new hole in the ground for the next turret.

“That’s Jade?!” Alvaerelle balked, gaping at the colossal green worm in disbelief.

“Yep. I’m guessing you wouldn’t want a Nymph’s kiss when she looks like that?” Jehanna joked.

The Maliri goggled at Jade for a moment, then they burst into laughter, the fraught tension broken.

“Good guess,” Alvaerelle agreed, a big grin on her face.

After breathing a collective sigh of relief, one of the marine captains asked, “Should we continue with the introductions?”

\*Your scouts are on their way back,\* Alyssa informed Jehanna.

“Just give me a moment,” Jehanna requested, shielding her eyes from the glare of the sun as she searched the skies.

Ten seconds later there was a fluttering of wings, then an orange and black banded hawk swooped down to land beside her. The bird of prey shimmered in an amber glow, then Leylira shapeshifted into her familiar catgirl form.

“We’ve scouted out all the fortifications,” the eager tigress announced.

They were joined by several other birds gliding down to join them, then the rest of the Nymphs returned to their catgirl forms too.

“Do you have a map?” Neysa asked. “The bunker network is extensive. We can show you exactly where they’re located.”

“There’s lots of hidden gun turrets too!” Betrixa chimed in.

Marika nodded in agreement. “We think the robots used them to shoot down the old Raptor.”

“That’s great news,” Jehanna said, sighing with relief.

“This one flew over the largest intersections as you requested,” Ailita informed her. “They were all surrounded by forts and guns.”

“It seems Mael’nerak planned for a similar defence of the city,” Neysa speculated. “Perhaps he deliberately designed those favourable landing areas as a trap?”

Shaelhira approached and held out a cylindrical device. “I have a battlezone projector here, General. Would that be of use?”

“That’s perfect, thank you,” Jehanna said gratefully.

The House Ghilwen Field Commander knelt on the ground, then activated the device, which promptly synced up with the nearby battleship’s sensor array. As Shaelhira stepped back, it projected a three-metre square map of the local terrain, which the Maliri repositioned so that it was centred on the city.

“Okay girls, let’s see where all those bunkers are located,” Jehanna asked the Nymphs.

The catgirls huddled around the holographic map, pointing out the layout of the fortifications in remarkable detail. Shaelhira marked down the defensive positions using a remote interface, and under Jehanna’s watchful scrutiny, their battle plans began to take shape.

\*\*\*

Valeria paced back and forth in her quarters, nervously biting her nails. Since the confrontation with Gahl’kalgor, the Galkiran Matriarch knew she was on borrowed time. At any moment, her Progenitor master could reach out across his psychic network, find the essence of her soul and slowly squeeze the life out of her. She cursed herself over and over again for being so foolish, to let bitter jealousy cloud her judgement, and make one reckless mistake after another.

It was all that manipulative bitch’s fault! If Ashryn hadn’t seduced her master, and bewitched him with whatever strange hold she had over him, none of this would’ve happened.

She flopped back on her bedcovers, and rubbed at her pounding head. All the fretting about upsetting Gahl’kalgor had given her a horrendous headache, the unrelenting stress sending her blood pressure skyrocketing. It was so tempting to lash out in retaliation at the thrall who had engineered her downfall, but Valeria knew that if she harmed one hair on Ashryn’s head, her life would immediately be forfeit.

That left her in this horrible limbo, waiting for her inevitable punishment to begin. She’d endured nearly a millennia of torture and abuse at Gahl’kalgor’s hands, each time her own fault for foolishly provoking her beloved master. Despite the severity of those punishments, he’d healed her every time afterwards, showing how much he really cared for his devoted matriarch.

Valeria would’ve given anything to suffer at his hands again, only to be forgiven at the end, and be blessed with his potent seed. But waiting here without knowing what was going to happen next was far worse than even the most agonising torment Gahl’kalgor had ever subjected her to. The biggest risk was her master just snuffing out her life on a whim, then replacing her with Ashryn as his new matriarch.

She clenched her fists in fury, and spit a litany of vile curses at her rival. If that smug interloper ever fell out of favour with Gahl’kalgor, then Valeria fully intended to make the thrall suffer a never-ending nightmare of vicious torment.

\*Matriarch, attend me,\* Gahl’kalgor growled.

Valeria sat bolt upright, her heart skipping a beat. \*At once, my Lord! Where are you presently?\*

\*In my campaign room. Don’t keep me waiting.\*

The limber red-skinned beauty vaulted up from the bed, then rushed towards the door. It seemed to take forever to open, and then she was sprinting down gloomy corridors, knocking any half-witted thralls aside that dared to block her path. The Galkiran matriarch finally skidded to a halt outside her destination, then tapped her foot impatiently as the serrated portal split open.

“How may I serve you, my Lord?” she gushed, as she hurried into the hexagonal chamber.

She froze when she strode inside, because Ashryn was standing dutifully beside their Progenitor Master. It wasn’t just the thrall’s presence that sent a fearful shiver down Valeria’s spine. The first thing she noticed was the almost dazzling whiteness of her rival’s lustrous long hair.

“I want this,” he muttered, expanding the rotating object that was centred in the holographic display. “Take it for me.”

Valeria glanced at the gaudy golden facility, then frowned in confusion. “A space station, my Lord? But why? It looks so primitive.”

Gahl’kalgor slowly shook his head as he stared intently at the circular Maliri base. “No, there’s something... *special*... about that place. I want you to board it, then slaughter everyone inside. Do not allow anyone to destroy this base like the one before.”

“But what if Baen’thelas intervenes?”

“He can’t,” Gahl’kalgor replied with a smug grin. “He jumped back to defend his throne world.”

To emphasise the point, he tapped on the holographic projector built into the table, and the image rapidly shifted to a green and blue planet. There was just one fleet of thrall warships in orbit, making the throne world look horribly vulnerable.

“The witless fool just landed there,” Gahl’kalgor sneered. “He won’t be able to run away this time.”

Valeria hesitated, feeling loath to be parted from her master, especially as it would also mean leaving him in the clutches of his white-haired seductress.

The Progenitor took her silence as mute acceptance of his orders. “The shipyard is defended by a horde of Maliri ships. Take my shuttle, assume command of a fleet, then wipe them out.”

She bowed her head in acknowledgement. “Yes, my Lord.”

Taking that as her dismissal, Valeria gave Ashryn one last jealous glare, then turned on her heel to leave. She was seething inside, but there was nothing she could do about it.

“Valeria?” Gahl’kalgor called after her when she reached the door.

She faced him again, holding out hope that he’d send Ashryn instead. “Yes, my Lord?”

“This is your last chance. Don’t fail me again,” he said menacingly. “I want that shipyard captured intact.”

Valeria dipped her head in an obsequious bow. “The space station will be yours, my Lord.”

When she straightened up again, the Galkiran Matriarch was outraged to see that Gahl’kalgor was no longer paying her any attention. Instead he’d turned towards Ashryn, and was idly playing with a curl of her snowy-white locks, while she gazed at him in simple-minded adoration.

Feeling her heart breaking all over again, Valeria’s shoulders slumped, and she slunk dejectedly out of the six-sided chamber.

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Tashana, Irillith, and Daphne followed the broad street towards the outskirts of the city, sweeping their gaze back and forth as they searched for the robot manufacturing plant.

“There’s another squad of robots,” Irillith called out, spotting six black-armoured automatons.

They were lying face-down with their bodies frozen mid-stride, momentum having caused them to topple over on the ground when the control signal had been abruptly terminated. The synthetic thralls had collapsed at the end of a service ramp, the access way sloping out of sight between two large buildings.

“The entrance should be 43 metres behind them,” Daphne advised her companions.

The trio landed on the street, then Tashana placed the portable generator on the tarmac and drew her brace of pistols. “Let me take point.”

“All the robotic thralls should be deactivated,” Daphne said, as she followed the wary Maliri towards the ramp.

“Yeah, but there might be automated defences,” Tashana replied, cautiously checking for any signs of gun turrets.

Tashana reached the fallen robots, and from this position, she had a clear view down to a gaping underground entrance. A huge set of doors, at least a metre thick, were partially retracted into the walls, allowing them access into the facility.

Before she could proceed, Irillith placed a hand on her arm. “Wait here a second. I can check much faster to see if there are any active defences.”

Her sister nodded, and waited patiently as Irillith focused her will inwards, then projected herself into the Cyber Realm. The Maliri hacker glanced around for any sign of functioning access terminals or glowing data streams, but all she could see were the gloomy shadows that haunted the entrance to the factory.

“Everything’s shut down,” she said, before reaching out a hand towards the cute synthetic girl beside her. “Can you guide me, Daphne? I’ll keep checking for any sign of life; digital life, not organic obviously.”

“Of course, Irillith. Take my hand,” Daphne replied.

Tashana set off again, then activated mag-view in her Paragon helmet. The HUD flickered to display metal in a rich green, but the doors and everything beyond were all metallic. She tried thermal vision next, but everything inside the interior blended into an indecipherable shade of pale blue.

“We’ll just have to use light beams. The other HUD views won’t work in there,” she announced, before turning on her suit’s shoulder lamps.

Bright beams of light pierced the darkness, revealing metal deck plates that led deeper underground. Irillith activated hers as well, and four shafts of light bobbed along as the twins walked through the open door, their boots clicking on the floor. There were many more robots inside. The fully equipped automated soldiers were all ready for battle, but they’d collapsed on the deck like puppets with their strings cut.

After stepping over the inert robots, the girls followed the broad corridor past a second set of security doors, then into a huge underground room. They entered it high up on a grilled gantry, which followed the wall around to the left, while below them everything was a well of pitch black. Tashana approached the edge of the platform and peered over the railings, letting her light beams pierce the darkness below.

The bright lamps illuminated long rows of machinery, the blocky equipment a sophisticated assembly line. As Tashana swept her light beams along the line, they could see partially constructed robots hanging from the rails.

“Over there,” Irillith called out, pointing to the far side of the huge fabrication area. “There’s some kind of control room. It looks like it still has power.”

“Let’s go,” Tashana said, taking the lead once again.

After following the gantry around the wall, they passed a broad ramp that descended into the gloom below. When Tashana turned her lamps that way, humanoid figures loomed out of the darkness, the phalanx of robot soldiers still in the same positions from when they’d been rendered immobile. They were fully equipped with body armour and guns, making the Maliri pause, a thoughtful expression on their face.

“There must be a big armoury in here to equip all these robots straight off the assembly line. If we can’t get them working again, could we hand out that gear to the marines?”

Irillith shook her head. “It’s a good idea, but the armour isn’t designed to be worn by a Maliri. All the life-support systems have been removed, and replaced with hard points for internal components.”

Daphne strode down the ramp towards the closest thrall automaton, which was leaning precariously against the guard rail. She carefully lifted the long-barrelled underslung rifle, and studied the grips and handle.

“These weapons have been customised for the robots to use,” She confirmed, lowering the barrel. “Their hands lock into connection ports, which are not compatible with the limbs of an organic life form. It might be possible to convert the weapons for a Maliri, but not within the limited time we have available.”

Tashana shrugged in resignation and continued along the gantry.

The opposite wall had windows and a door on the upper level, providing anyone in the control room an excellent view of the manufacturing plant. The windows also allowed the girls to see inside, and while the overhead lighting was offline, they could see glowing red dots in the darkness.

“There’s either a bunch of evil robots waiting to ambush us, or those are dormant servers,” the Maliri archaeologist joked.

Irillith laughed, but sounded relieved. “It looks like the factory does have power, but everything must be in an emergency shutdown. I think I can see a data entry port over there.”

They approached the door, but unfortunately it was sealed shut. With no power, they had no way of unlocking it.

“Stand back, I’ll open it,” Tashana volunteered, her eyes starting to glow with an ominous violet light.

“Stop!” Irillith called out in alarm. “Don’t melt it down, the heat might damage the servers. I should be able to access the local subnet from here.”

“Sure, go ahead,” her sister replied, releasing her building will.

They waited patiently as Irillith worked, then a rapid succession of clangs reverberated through the huge room. The whir and hum of heavy machinery rose up from below, then a second later the lights flickered on overhead. Tashana squinted against the sudden flare of light, then turned to look out over the assembly line as it clanked into action once again.

“We’re in business,” Irillith declared, breaking into a triumphant grin.

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Tom slumped in his chair in a daze, barely listening to Caspian Kincaid addressing the court. After Tom had been dragged over the coals by the prosecution, both sides had declared no further questions, and they’d moved on to closing arguments. Bromidus went first and relentlessly attacked Tom’s character, declaring that now he’d been caught in a lie, none of his testimony could be trusted. Then Tom was lambasted for trying to frame his best friend, and as the Commodore thundered on, he could feel the mood in the court turn even further against him.

The revelation that Mace was dead still left Tom reeling. They’d been the closest of friends for over two decades, with Tom spending more time with Mason than anyone he’d ever known. As ugly as things had gotten between them, Tom never wished Mason harm, and had always desperately hoped that he somehow might have survived the massacre. To actually see his friend’s corpse in the morgue was harrowing, and Tom was sure that image would haunt him forever.

He also couldn’t understand how Mason’s body had been retrieved from the Heavy Carrier’s Bridge. Considering how unstable Mason had become, Tom found it impossible to believe that Captain Bexley would have allowed him to be at his post in a pitched battle. His friend should have been confined to his quarters, and would’ve been forced to remain there by the military police.

As awful as that news about Mason had been for Tom, he knew it must have been horrific for his fiancée. Anna had always looked up to her older brother, who had been there for her when their father was constantly preoccupied with his military career. Seeing her sobbing with grief had been heartbreaking, and Tom desperately wished he could’ve spared her from that pain.

He’d tried his best to protect Anna from humiliation and embarrassment during the trial, as the last thing he wanted was for Bromidus to play back the painfully awkward conversations they’d had about his friendship with Beth. Unfortunately, being drawn into speculation about the identity of the Callopean Shoals traitor had then blown up in Tom’s face. Anna was furious with him now for besmirching Mason’s reputation, and still hadn’t returned to the court after fleeing with Archie in her wake.

Tom could hear Caspian Kincaid making a valiant effort to sway the jury in his favour, but he could tell that the lawyer’s hands were tied. The experienced defence attorney had warned him about the dangers of taking the stand, and in particular being drawn into speculation about the traitor. Tom bitterly regretted not listening to Caspian’s advice now, but he’d been desperate to clear his name, and prove to everyone that he really was innocent.

The fact that Mason was dead also left Tom bewildered as to the real identity of the traitor. He’d been completely honest on the stand, having no idea who else might have borne any ill will towards him. Mason was the only person he’d had crossed words with for years. The two of them had teamed up for a couple of bar fights during their days at the Academy, but nobody had been seriously injured, and no one had gotten in trouble with the law. He couldn’t imagine any of those random brawlers holding a grudge over something so petty from so long ago.

There was always the slim possibility that Mason had framed him, then decided to just go down with the ship. However, as enraged as Mace had been the last time Tom had seen him, the man was angry and paranoid, not suicidal. If Mason really had set all this up for revenge, why would he risk doing anything that might end up with him locked up in the Janus’ brig? He would’ve had plenty of warning of the Brimorian ambush, and Mason was far too smart to make such a stupid mistake.

His maudlin thoughts were interrupted by Caspian, who slid into the seat beside him and gave Tom a tight-lipped nod.

“I’m sorry Tom,” he whispered. “I tried my best, but...” The lawyers voice trailed off into subdued silence.

“It’s my fault,” Tom replied. “I should’ve listened to you.”

Judge Nancarrow interrupted any further muted conversation by banging his gavel. “The jury will now retire to deliberate the evidence and reach a verdict.”

The officers in the jury rose together, then silently filed out of the courtroom. Tom watched them leave, knowing that they held his future in their hands. Not one of them so much as glanced in his direction, and Tom was filled with a dark sense of foreboding.

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“Are they making good progress?” Calara asked, glancing across the Bridge at the brunette seated behind the Comms Station.

Rachel was receiving constant telepathic updates from Alyssa, keeping her informed of the status of the various tasks the crew was working on.

“We’re about half-way through, which tracks with our timeline,” Rachel replied, marking another job completed. “Jade digging out the turret wells went much faster than I anticipated, so we gained a little time there. Dana’s just installed the eighteenth Quantum Flux Cannon, so only six more to go.”

Calara let out her breath in a sigh of relief. The weapons they’d stripped from Genwynn station were pivotal to her plans. “That’s fantastic news. Can you let me know when the gunnery controls are online?”

Rachel smiled at her and nodded. “Don’t worry, they’ll be ready in time. John and Alyssa have finished building all the necessary components, and the Collective will start assembly soon.”

“Thanks,” the Latina said, flashing her a grateful grin.

Turning her attention back to the pair of holo-screens floating above the Tactical Station, Calara continued her analysis of the battlefield. All of the orbital gun platforms were marked on the Tactical Map, forming a globe of firepower intended to deter any assault on Kythshara. What made Mael’nerak’s defence grid so deadly, was that the turrets were heavily obscured by the nebula known as the Mists of Loralar, making them almost invisible to sensors.

She glanced at the second holo-screen, which was tracking the current progress of the Galkiran armada as it headed directly towards Kythshara. The invaders hadn’t deviated from their present course, which meant they’d enter the system’s gravity well exactly where Calara had predicted. She intended to lay out a nasty surprise for those thrall ships, deploying a final minefield on the periphery of the system, just where they’d stop to recover their shields.

Glancing back at the orbital turrets, she rubbed her chin thoughtfully. The weapon platforms were currently dispersed to attack enemy ships approaching from any direction, but she knew exactly which vector the thrall fleets would take to advance towards the planet.

\*Alyssa, how long would it take to tow the gun emplacements into new positions?\*

The blonde listened to her plans and started making rapid calculations. \*At least three hours,\* she finally replied. \*We can’t just charge around the planet hooking up turrets and dragging them after us like Dana did with those mines. The turrets are much larger, and we’ll have to be careful moving them with the Tractor Beam.\*

\*Okay no problem,\* Calara said with a flicker of disappointment, as she quickly discarded that idea.

\*Hey, I didn’t say it was impossible,\* Alyssa said cheerfully. \*Let me discuss it with Rachel and see if we can make it happen. Even if we can only move 75% of them, that’d still be a big improvement, right?\*

\*You’re amazing, thank you!\* the brunette gushed, her mood soaring.

\*Love you, gorgeous,\* Alyssa replied, sending her a telepathic kiss.

Calara began to hum happily to herself as she reconfigured the weapon platforms to a far deadlier layout. She almost felt sorry for the Galkirans having to run that gauntlet of lethal firepower, and glanced over at the second holo-screen with sympathy. John was very insistent that they try to spare as many lives as possible, but the invading thralls were her enemy, and she’d do everything within her power to crush them if her hand was forced.

She suddenly froze and stared intently at the Sector Map, and the thrall forces sailing through Maliri Space. Her fingers darted over the controls, and the map zoomed in closer, showing the hostile fleets in more detail.

“Ah shit!” she swore, watching in alarm as one fleet broke away from the Galkiran armada.

\*\*\*

The ring of metal striking metal reverberated around the Dojo, as John and Sakura clashed again and again. Their weapons moved almost too quickly for the eye to follow as they lashed out at each other at incredible speed.

“Do you think this Progenitor will rely on psychic powers like Larn’kelnar, or weapons like you?” the Asian girl asked, darting to his flank and stabbing at him repeatedly as she circled her prey.

Rather than get tangled up with his footwork trying to follow her, John stepped backwards, neatly dodging the rapid thrusts of her blades. “We know Mael’nerak focused on psychic powers, and I don’t get the impression Rahn’hagon was a fighter,” John replied, keeping her at bay with a sweeping slash. “So that’s three for three favouring abilities instead of weapons.”

“Are all the Progenitors like that then?” Sakura asked, watching him warily.

He brandished his two-handed sword in an elaborate figure-of-eight. “Nope.”

She grinned at him, then launched another wild flurry of attacks that immediately put John on the defensive. He frowned in concentration as he swung his weapon from side to side, deflecting each stab and pushing it wide. Sakura pivoted on her foot, then slashed towards his closest thigh with both Ninjato, a devastating move that would cleave his leg in half if it landed.

John whipped his long blade around to parry both strikes simultaneously. “If he uses a long blade, don’t use double slashes,” he said, before lunging forward with his sword extended and tapping her across the throat with the gleaming edge. “It’s too easy to block both, then counter-attack.”

She lowered her twin ninjato, and acknowledged his advice with a nod.

Wild applause took them both by surprise, then two white armoured Maliri bounded over to join them.

“You two are amazing,” Ilyana remarked, gazing at the duellists in awe. “I wish I could move that fast.”

“The Progenitor stands no chance against you, my Lord!” Almari gushed, with the unwavering faith of a devout believer.

John removed his helmet, then dropped it and his sword onto the training mats. “Ilyana! Almari! It’s so good to see you both again.” He pulled both assassins into a hug, then greeted them with a kiss.

“Did you really miss us?” Almari asked, beaming at him in delight.

“Are you kidding?” he replied affectionately. “After that performance in Lilyana’s bedroom, I didn’t want to leave. You two were wild!”

Ilyana blushed, and darted a shy smile at the other House Valaden bodyguard. “We were looking forward to that for weeks.”

“Hello, Almari. Hi Ilyana,” Sakura said, giving them a friendly wave.

The two excited Maliri pulled back from John and immediately embraced Sakura. “We’re so sorry for ignoring you!” Ilyana apologised profusely.

“Lord Baen’thelas is very distracting,” Almari admitted, her deep blue eyes sparkling.

“I know,” Sakura agreed, flashing a grin at her sparring partner.

They parted, then Ilyana turned to look curiously at John. “Edraele said that you had a special job in mind for us?”

Before he could reply, Alyssa’s voice echoed through his mind. \*John, we’ve got a problem.\*

He held up a hand towards the two Maliri, and they stayed quiet, letting him concentrate on the telepathic conversation.

\*Here we go,\* he said grimly to the blonde. \*What’s wrong?\*

\*One of the Galkiran thrall fleets has broken away from the main invasion force. It’s heading directly towards Genthalas,\* Alyssa informed him.

\*Fuck,\* John cursed, his heart skipping a beat knowing that Edraele and the Maliri matriarchs were on that station.

\*Yeah, as well as all the males that got a ride back from Genirath station,\* she reminded him.

\*Edraele, are you listening?\*

\*Yes, John,\* the Maliri Queen immediately replied. \*Alyssa has fully appraised me of the situation.\*

\*How long until that fleet reaches Genthalas?\* he asked the pair.

\*It should arrive at the system in about four hours, roughly the same time as the main attack group reaches Kythshara,\* Alyssa explained. \*Even if we wanted to jump back to protect Genthalas instead of fighting the Progenitor, our Wormhole Generator won’t be recharged in time.\*

\*Can we evacuate the shipyard?\*

Edraele hesitated for a moment before replying. \*No, not fully. There are at least one-hundred-thousand engineers and support personnel on the station, as well as over two-hundred-thousand marines that were left behind by the fleets we sent to the Larathyran Empire. We currently have four fleets here that were transporting the males from Genirath, but evacuating the males down to Valaden will utilise all their capacity and take several hours.\*

\*What about merchant vessels and civilian ships?\* John suggested.

\*If we commandeer every available ship, we should be able to evacuate most of the civilians, and just have enough time for the ships to flee the system.\* She paused, her voice turning sombre. \*But that leaves the full complement of marines with no transportation. They will be trapped here when the Galkirans attack.\*

\*Start the evacuation immediately,\* he ordered. \*Can the marines assist with manning the station’s defences?\*

\*Genthalas does have extensive gun batteries, but they consist of Maliri weaponry that was installed long after the shipyard’s original creation,” Edraele said quietly. \*Mael’nerak must have reasoned that if an invading Progenitor ever reached the heart of his empire and attacked Genthalas, then the Maliri were already doomed.\*

She abruptly realised what she’d just said, and quickly stammered, \*Not that our situation is hopeless, John. Far from it.\*

He let out a strained laugh. \*It’s alright, I’m well aware how close to the wire we are right now. Alright, there’s nothing we can do to evacuate those marines, so order them to set up barricades and choke points inside Genthalas. If the shipyard does get boarded, at least they’ll have a fighting chance.\*

\*I’ve already begun issuing evacuation orders for the rest of the personnel,\* she replied. \*I’ll make sure the marines are properly briefed.\*

\*Thank you,\* he said, before turning his attention to intercepting the Galkirans before they could attack the station. \*Alyssa, what does Calara say our chances are for fighting off those thrall warships with four Maliri fleets?\*

\*They don’t have access to spider mines, so we can’t prepare minefields to even the odds. If Calara gives the battle her full focus, and doesn’t hold back from destroying Galkiran ships, then there is actually a slim chance we can wipe them out.\*

\*And what kind of casualties is she anticipating for the Maliri?\* John asked, hearing the grim tone to her voice.

\*At least 80% of the fleets destroyed, and significant damage to Genthalas.\*

Alyssa let that terrible cost sink in for a moment, then continued, \*But that’s only if she micro-manages every aspect of the battle. If she gives them her full attention, then she won’t be focusing on the battle at Kythshara. We do have spider mines and the orbital gun emplacements to help us out here, but our fleets are still outnumbered 4-to-1... and that’s not including the Progenitor’s dreadnought.\*

\*Calara must focus on defending Kythshara,\* Edraele insisted. \*Crippling the bulk of the enemy invasion force and eliminating the Progenitor has to take priority over Genthalas, even if it means sacrificing the station.\*

John grimaced at the appalling loss of life that would entail.

\*Edraele’s right,\* Alyssa quietly agreed. \*I know it sucks, but we haven’t got any choice. We must kill this bastard while we can; we might not get another opportunity.\*

\*Yeah... I know,\* John admitted with bleak resignation. \*I hate sending Maliri fleets up against thrall ships, but I can’t see any other choice.\*

\*Rest assured that the matriarchs will be safe from harm,\* Edraele said, offering him some small measure of consolation. \*I’m sending them down to Saelihn Immanthe, where they’ll be protected in Mael’nerak’s bunker under the palace.\*

That did come as a relief to John. \*Thank you, Edraele, I appreciate you keeping them safe.\* Then a sudden worrying thought made his blood freeze. \*Wait a second. You said that you’re sending the matriarchs down to the palace. So where are you planning to be when the Galkirans attack?\*

\*As Calara will be overseeing the battle at Kythshara, the best chance our fleets have of repelling the Galkirans is if I stay on Genthalas to coordinate our forces.\*

\*No, absolutely not!\* John declared adamantly. \*You’re much too important to risk your life on a suicide mission.\*

\*I can’t just abandon everyone left on the station,\* Edraele said, her tone softening. \*They need me, John. Our fleets will be slaughtered if I don’t help them. Calara can brief me on how she’d fight the battle, then I’ll do my best to follow her advice. I’ll have instant telepathic communication with all the Fleet Commanders, and that’ll make a critical difference.\*

The trio fell into a tense silence as John desperately tried to come up with a plausible reason to refute Edraele’s argument, other than the fact that he couldn’t bear the thought of losing her.

\*Edraele and Luna do have Paragon armour,\* Alyssa gently reminded him. \*Even if the Galkirans wipe out the Maliri fleets and start blasting the station, they should both be able to escape from Genthalas before it’s destroyed. They can survive in space long enough for us to jump back there, destroy any surviving thrall ships, and rescue them.\*

\*So Luna’s planning to stay behind too?\* John said gruffly. \*I should have guessed she wouldn’t leave your side.\*

\*I could try commanding her to join the matriarchs in the bunker, but Luna’s become remarkably obstinate under your influence,\* Edraele joked. \*I strongly suspect she would ignore my orders.\*

\*Yeah, you’re probably right,\* John agreed, unable to stop himself from smiling despite the dire situation they were facing. He let out a heavy sigh, then continued, \*Okay, I agree that you being there gives our fleets the best chance of surviving... but please don’t do anything reckless. If the battle is lost, I want you and Luna to immediately evacuate the station. You should be small enough to be invisible to thrall sensors, so get clear, and we’ll rescue you as soon as we can.\*

\*I promise, John,\* Edraele said solemnly. \*If the Galkirans try to destroy Genthalas, we’ll escape into space and await your arrival.\*

\*Keep me updated,\* John ordered his matriarchs. \*If there any more problems, let me know straight away.\*

\*Will do,\* Alyssa agreed.

Edraele was quick to add, \*I will notify you at once.\*

He turned to look at Sakura and the two Maliri assassins. “Did you hear all that?”

“We got the executive summary,” Sakura replied.

“How bad is it, John?” Ilyana asked, her expression fraught with worry. “Are Edraele and Luna in grave danger?”

He paused, then reluctantly nodded. “Yes they are. But there’s nothing any of us can do to help them.”

“Yes there is,” Sakura said, her chin lifted defiantly. “We need to cut the head off the snake. If we can execute this Progenitor, the Galkirans won’t have any reason to fight anymore.”

John looked at her in surprise, then he gave her an approving smile. “You’re right. The sooner we kill him, the sooner this will be over. If we can end this fast enough, maybe we can avoid a battle at Genthalas.”

“Back to training then?” she asked, striking a heroic pose with her two ninjato.

“Definitely,” John agreed, crouching down to pick up his sword and helmet. “But first let me tell Almari and Ilyana about their special mission.”

The two bodyguards shot each other eager glances, then listened attentively as he explained their role in the upcoming battle.

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“How are you feeling about this meeting, Lynette?” Charles asked, as he walked along beside her towards the conference room.

“Nervous,” she admitted, darting him a worried glance. “I’m taking a big gamble here, but I feel like I’ve been backed into a corner and don’t have any other options.”

“Well, you have my full support,” he said, giving her an encouraging smile. “For what it’s worth, I think you’re doing the right thing.”

“Thank you,” she said, squeezing his hand in gratitude. “That means a lot.”

They passed the security detail that was standing on attention in the foyer, the entryway dominated by thirty-foot high banners displaying the winged sword of the Terran Federation. The doors at the end were open, and when they entered the conference room, Lynette could see that everyone who could be physically present had already arrived. When Charles crossed the room to sit next to Lina Van Den Broeck, that made a total of nineteen senior officers in attendance.

Four of the five remaining chairs were filled by holographic attendees. The first was Admiral Nathan Zelig, who had been rescued from an escape pod after his fleet was destroyed by Galkiran scouts, and was now returning to Terra. Admiral Guilherme Ramos was aboard the battleship Dinlas, in the newly acquired territory beyond the Dragon March, and Admiral Edward Barrington had assumed command of the fleets protecting the Brimorian border, after Alexander Morgan’s unfortunate demise. The last was Admiral Camille Anworth, who had recently been dispatched to guard against any Drakkar incursions, in their usual hunting grounds along the flank of the Ashanath Collective.

That left only one seat unoccupied, but Lynette knew that the Lion had far higher priorities to deal with at the moment.

Lynette walked up the steps to the raised platform facing High Command, then swept her gaze over the audience as she stood behind the lectern. By accident or design, the admirals present were sitting next to their closest friends and allies, perhaps seeking reassurance from their colleagues in this time of instability and chaos. To the right sat those admirals that were most vocal in their supportive of Lynette’s promotion to Fleet Admiral. The group included Charles, Lina, Connor and Aeri Malone, Anthony Kester, Nathan Zelig’s hologram, and a new addition, Sofia Esposito.

In the middle were the more neutral officers, clustered around Eleanor Maybridge, who was the longest-serving admiral amongst everyone there. Maybridge was friendly towards Lynette, having known her for decades, but she wasn’t someone Lynette could really describe as an ally. Aiden Cartwright sat beside her, his expression particularly pensive as he watched Lynette’s entrance. Xiu Wu had recently been promoted to High Command and she was having a discreet conversation with Hamilton Garbert-Smythe, the debonair admiral in charge of espionage. Two of the holograms were also seated with this group, and both Camille Anworth as well as Edward Barrington looked impatient for the meeting to start.

The last faction was led by Admiral Edwin Caldwell, who had been a vociferous opponent to Lynette during her brief time as Fleet Admiral. He’d been busy during her two week absence from the Core Worlds and had gathered up the nine remaining senior officers into his counsel. Lynette was disappointed to see that Guilherme Ramos had been swayed under his influence; as a veteran of the Battle of Terra, she’d assumed Ramos would’ve been opposed to Caldwell’s obstinate distrust of the Lion.

“Welcome, ladies and gentlemen,” Lynette began. “Thank you for attending this emergency meeting on such short notice. I know most of you have numerous questions regarding recent events in the Outer Rim, so I thought the best way of avoiding the spread of disinformation was to provide you an update as soon as I returned to Olympus.”

“As you already know, Admiral Zelig’s fleet was attacked by a previously unknown alien force on the Kirrix Border. Such dreadful news was made even worse when we thought he had been killed aboard the Porphyrion,” she said, turning to look at the grim-faced officer. “We were all greatly relieved to hear that you’d survived the battle and been rescued.”

There was a murmur of agreement from all around the conference room.

“I also wanted to commend you for your remarkable bravery in holding position to protect your forces as they retreated. You saved many thousands of lives in the carrier group that was able to escape destruction, all thanks to your gallant actions. However, I know any praise from me will ring hollow, so I’d also like to pass on my heartfelt condolences to you for the colleagues lost in that battle.”

“Thank you, Lynette,” he said gruffly. “Many good men and women died that day. I wish that I could say they gave their lives for a noble cause, but the bitter truth is that we were attacked unprovoked by an enemy that revelled in the slaughter. We sustained massive casualties from cruiser-sized vessels that were equipped with devastatingly powerful weapons. There was absolutely nothing we could do against ships with such an overwhelming technological advantage.”

“What else can you tell us about this Galkiran Empire, Lynette?” Garbert-Smythe asked, with obvious concern. “Was that truly our first contact with them?”

“Yes, I promise,” Lynette replied honestly. “I had no forewarning of this attack.”

Caldwell scoffed, his sceptical expression making his feelings quite apparent.

“Even the Maliri have had no contact with the Galkiran Empire in living memory,” Lynette continued, ignoring his interruption. “I can tell you that the Galkirans are akin to... distant cousins... to the Maliri, although there has been no interaction between the two species for approximately nine-thousand years. The Galkirans are extremely hostile, openly xenophobic, and the last time they clashed with the Maliri, billions of lives were lost on both sides.”

The members of High Command were transfixed as she relayed this information.

She glanced at Nathan and continued, “The attack on the border fleet was not the precursor to an invasion. Those scouts were searching for the Maliri, and it was just a stroke of terrible misfortune that they encountered our forces. When the Galkirans discovered the location of the Maliri Protectorate, they ceased all attacks within the Terran Federation, and immediately set course for Maliri territory.”

“How do you know all this, Fleet Admiral?” Xiu Wu asked in horrified fascination.

“Admiral Blake has spent the last six months working to establish friendly relations with the Maliri Matriarchy. Once a certain level of trust was built between them, they shared some of their history,” Lynette explained to the attentive admirals. “On the far side of the Brimorian Enclave is a deserted region of space known as The Desolation of Vulkat. It was once the home of a thriving interstellar civilisation of benevolent arachnids, but the Galkirans exterminated their entire species in an unprovoked act of malice.”

“This is what I’ve been warning all of you about for months!” Caldwell exclaimed, his voice ringing with triumphant vindication. “Blake told Buckingham that he was a Progenitor, and that there were lots more like him out in the galaxy! He’s known about the Galkirans the whole time, but kept all this information from us!”

“You have no proof of that,” Lynette said, rolling her eyes. “This is more completely unwarranted paranoia.”

“And you have no proof that he didn’t know about the Galkiran Empire!” Caldwell shouted, rising to his feet and pointing at her accusingly. “You’ve blindly trusted him for the last six months and done everything you can to facilitate his meteoric rise through the ranks! Your recklessness has put the entire Terran Federation in danger! The attack by the Galkirans proves that I was right all along!”

“It doesn’t prove a thing,” Lynette said, looking at him in contempt. “What happened to you, Edwin? You used to be a calm and rational officer. Was Buckingham’s descent into insanity contagious?”

“I could ask you the same thing!” he bit back.

“I know you’re completely blinded to the truth when it comes to John Blake, but he’s currently fighting for our very survival. While you’ve been stirring up unjustified resentment towards the man, the Lion has been helping to defend Maliri territory against an invasion force of nearly three-thousand Galkiran warships.”

Admiral Zelig went very pale. “Three *thousand*?!”

“Yes, including battleships with enough firepower to make the scout cruisers that attacked the border fleet look like weekend leisure skiffs. So while Admiral Blake is putting his life on the line to protect us from a terrifying existential threat, I will not have his name disparaged in this chamber. One more slanderous outburst from you, Admiral Caldwell, and I will have you dragged out of here and thrown in the brig. Am I understood?”

Everyone in the conference room could tell that the Fleet Admiral was not bluffing, and they all fell silent, watching Admiral Caldwell to see how he’d react. He reluctantly sat down and crossed his arms, his expression filled with angry resentment.

Lynette turned her gaze to the rest of High Command. “Does anyone have any further questions about the Galkiran Empire, their war with the Maliri, or the recent attack on the border fleet?”

“If the Maliri are defeated, will the Galkirans come after us next?” Lina asked, fidgeting anxiously.

“Not immediately. They’ve sustained appalling losses during the invasion,” Lynette replied, watching as Lina let out a sigh of relief. “But it’ll only take them a few months to replenish their forces, then they’re highly likely to attack all the neighbouring civilisations. The Terran Federation will eventually suffer the same fate as the Vulkat Empire: total annihilation.”

“Isn’t there anything we can do?” Xiu Wu asked, not quite willing to believe the situation was that bleak.

“These Progenitor led empires have been in existence for countless millennia,” Lynette replied, being bluntly honest. “I wish I could tell you we’d fight the good fight and win a glorious victory, but I’m sure you’ve seen the classified combat footage of the border fleet massacre. Just imagine that on a Federation-wide scale. We’d currently struggle to hold our ground against 30 Brimorian fleets, let alone 30 Fleets of highly advanced Galkiran warships.”

“So what happens now?” Eleanor Maybridge asked quietly. “Do we just hope and pray?”

“As preposterous as it may seem, we must continue to rule the Terran Federation as best we can, even with this threat hanging over our heads. I trust that John Blake will keep providing us new technology, and we must ensure our forces are ready to implement new tiers of advanced weapons and equipment as soon as it becomes available. Until then, we should focus on exploiting the new worlds we’ve acquired from the Kintark Empire, and stockpile resources to keep building new fleets and refitting the old.”

“What about the Outer Rim?” Aiden Cartwright asked, watching her with sharp eyes. “I notice you haven’t mentioned them yet. How do they factor into your plans for the future?”

“They don’t,” Lynette admitted. “At least not as part of the Terran Federation.”

There was a moment of shocked silence, which evaporated in an uproar of terse questions and demands for answers.

Having to wait patiently for the admirals to settle down again before she answered any questions, was one of the hardest things Lynette ever had to do. She desperately wanted to furiously deny the accusations that she was surrendering to the rebels without a fight, as well as shut down any further demands that the rebellion be crushed with a military intervention. Instead she stood silently, radiating an aura of calm confidence, until the admirals fell quiet and waited for her to speak.

“There are 57 colonies in the Outer Rim that wish to secede from the Terran Federation,” Lynette said quietly. “I spoke to every single governor during my expedition to Brecken’s World. Some had quite legitimate economic grievances, some were merely opportunistic, while those governors whose worlds were invaded by the Kirrix absolutely loath the Terran Federation.”

“I was able to broker deals with all of them, and was on the verge of peacefully settling this rebellion crisis without so much as a shot fired,” she declared with a hint of pride. Her face fell as she added, “But then the Galkirans destroyed our border fleet, and the Outer Rim was left undefended once again. You can only imagine the terrified reactions of the governors, when they discovered that they were at the forefront of yet another alien invasion.”

“As I returned to Terra in defeat, I felt crushed by the dreadful feeling that I’d let all of you down. That I’d failed the people of the Outer Rim, and that I hadn’t done enough to prevent the horror of civil war coming to the Terran Federation.”

Nobody said so much as a word, all captivated by her sincerity, and the insights she was sharing with them.

“But as I continued that depressing journey home, I had a sudden epiphany. Why does this have to be a defeat? Why do we have to respond to discontent with extreme levels of violence? Using the military to suppress rebellions is never a good solution; it might temporarily suppress uprisings in the colonies, but it seeds fear and resentment throughout every world under our control.”

“So how should we react to this rebellion?” Cartwright asked, his brow furrowing with a sceptical frown. “Are you seriously suggesting that we allow *fifty-seven* colonies to break away from the Terran Federation without so much as a whimper?”

“Before I answer that, I want to ask you a serious question. Aren’t any of you tired of being held in contempt by billions of citizens throughout the Terran Federation? Our approval rating averaged out across all colonies is 20%! The vast majority of humanity believes we are a bunch of greedy, corrupt, self-centred bureaucrats, who use fear and violence to enforce our tyrannical rule.”

The men and women seated before her looked embarrassed and uncomfortable, with every single officer well aware of the Admiralty’s terrible reputation.

“Wouldn’t you like to be the good guys for once?” she implored them. “We’re in a position to leave a legacy behind that paints all of us as selfless heroes of humanity. Instead of being met with dark looks and sullen silence, just imagine being the guest of honour at a victory parade, receiving rapturous applause from our citizens.”

She swept her gaze over her spellbound audience, and could see that her impassioned plea had managed to reach many of them.

Unfortunately, Edwin Caldwell’s mocking laughter broke that spell. “You’ve been bewitched by all those gullible fools cheering Blake wherever he goes. I’m sorry to break it to you, Lynette, but you’re no Lion of the Federation. You’re trying to sell us a fairy story to cover up the disastrous way you’ve mishandled the Outer Rim Rebellion.”

“You’re right, I’m not the Lion,” Lynette freely admitted. “But I strongly believe we can make a massive difference to the lives of billions of people throughout the Terran Federation.”

“Exactly what are you proposing, Lynette?” Admiral Zelig asked, looking intrigued.

“I propose this: We fully support the Outer Rim colonies with their decision to secede from the Terran Federation. We provide them with a portion of our fleets to establish their own navy, so they can protect themselves against future Kirrix aggression. And finally, we encourage anyone who wishes to migrate to the Outer Rim to do so with our blessing.”

Caldwell scoffed incredulously. “Why not just give them all our treasury as well? You’re planning to give away everything else we have of any value!”

Lynette looked at him, and shook her head with open contempt. “The Outer Rim has been extensively strip mined for centuries, and exhausted of valuable resources. Many of those colonies now cost us more money to maintain than we actually receive in revenue. Tax avoidance is rampant through the colonies, as is crime, homelessness, and all forms of degeneracy known to man. Do you honestly believe those colonies to be our most prized worlds? If so, you’re far more delusional than I thought.”

That mocking chastisement made him pause, and he looked at her with narrowed eyes. “What about the fleets you’re planning to wrap up in a bow, and hand over to Stefan Vaughn and his merry band of rebels?”

“Have you forgotten that the drydocks at Olympus Shipyard are undergoing a massive extension? That we’re preparing to launch the biggest shipbuilding program in Terran history? We’ll soon have more top-of-the-range warships than we have trained personnel to crew them, and you’re worrying about us giving away some obsolete hulks that were already bound for the scrapyard? This rebellion provides us with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for a massive PR victory, with minimal cost in actual valuable assets.”

Caldwell looked at her in surprise, his complaints dying on his lips.

“But wouldn’t we still be taking a big risk?” Connor Malone asked with a pensive frown. “If we allow the Outer Rim colonies to secede without any opposition, won’t that encourage more fringe worlds to band together and also demand their independence? The entire Federation might end up fracturing, as one power-mad governor after another tries to establish their own petty kingdom. It would be the end of our species as a galactic power.”

“That’s always been the accepted theory,” Lynette conceded. “It’s been used as the justification for every military suppression over the past 700 years... but I believe it’s a deeply flawed argument.”

“Why?” Malone asked, leaning forward and watching her with interest. “What makes you so certain?”

Lynette took a deep breath, then let it out slowly, making sure she had everyone’s full attention. “In the past, I’ve been called an idealist, and I freely admit that it’s true. I do have a vision. I want the Terran Federation to be a utopia: a glorious civilisation built on order, justice, and the rule of law. I want our people striving for the betterment of humanity, while also feeling safe to walk the streets at night, secure in the knowledge that they live in a society full of citizens with the same ideals.”

She paused and swept her gaze over the assembled admirals. “I imagine that all of you had a similar dream at one point, full of the optimism of youth that you might be able to make a difference?”

Her question was answered with rueful nods and self-conscious smiles, confirming her suspicions that most of them had joined the military with a similar sense of purpose.

“It’s so hard to hold onto that dream when you’re surrounded by a depressing culture of cynicism,” she said with sympathy. “The glacial pace of bureaucracy slowly wears you down, until you lose sight of the real reason you aspired to be part of the Admiralty.”

The admirals in the audience were reflective, recalling their own motivations for serving in the military, and how those aspirations had gradually been eroded over the decades.

“But it’s not too late for us to really make that change,” she implored them. “To cut through the bureaucracy and actually build the kind of civilisation we all dreamed about as starry-eyed recruits.”

Lynette hesitated, her bright smile replaced by a deepening frown. “But not everyone shares our dream of a utopian society. What kind of people would absolutely reject that ideal?”

“Criminals!” Sofia Esposito called out, stirred by the Fleet Admirals words.

“Absolutely!” Lynette said with enthusiasm. “Who else?”

The suggestions came thick and fast after that.

“Street gangs!”

“The idle unemployed!”

“Anarchists!”

“Communists!”

“Liberal agitators!”

“Civil rights activists!”

She nodded in agreement to every one. “Exactly. Our glorious dream would be their nightmare. So what if we gave those people their own paradise? Somewhere far away from the authority they despise, where ‘free thinking’ citizens can do as they please.”

“My God... that’s brilliant,” Cartwright muttered, his eyes widening in wonder. “They’ve been a thorn in our side for centuries. We’d never have to make concessions to them ever again!”

“Can you think of a worse deterrence against future rebellions, than being forced to deal with a deluge of those malcontents?“ she asked, giving her audience a knowing look.

Malone laughed and shook his head.

A broad smile lit up Lynette’s face as she cheerfully announced, “Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the Outer Rim! The cesspit of humanity!”

Stirred by her words, the admirals rose to their feet and gave Lynette a standing ovation. Even Edwin Caldwell was moved, and his applause was just as vigorous as everyone else. Lynette smiled at them all benevolently, and had to fight not to grin in triumph when Charles gave her a sly wink.