Three Square Meals Ch. 162

\*John, I need to speak with you. It’s time to wake up.\*

Alyssa’s soft voice swirled through his mind like a gentle breeze, stirring him from a deep slumber. With a groan of protest, John stretched his arms, being careful not to disturb the two girls who were using him as a comfy pillow. With practiced familiarity and the expert use of telekinesis, he untangled himself from Ailita and Jehanna, then guided them back into each other’s arms. A quick glance at the chronometer on the wall revealed that it was 4 AM, and John blinked in surprise as he sat up.

\*Why the early start?\* he asked, looking around the hexagonal bed for Alyssa. \*I thought we were planning the next ambush for 6 AM?\*

The blonde was kneeling behind him, and when they locked eyes, he saw the tense look of concern in her cerulean orbs.

“Calara’s up on the Bridge; she had trouble sleeping,” Alyssa whispered quietly. “She’s worried about how close the Galkiran invasion force is getting to the Venkalyn homeworld, and stressing about trying to divert them before it’s too late.”

John glanced down at Jehanna. “Is this to do with that conversation from last night? About knocking the Galkirans out of hyper-warp, and attacking them every chance we get?”

Alyssa gave him a solemn nod. “Calara’s getting desperate.”

“Well, we are running dangerously short of time,” he agreed, his expression equally as grim. “Everyone is pretty well rested, and our ships are all fully repaired; I don’t have a problem with putting some real pressure on the Galkirans if Calara feels it’s necessary.”

“I thought the same, but I wanted to get your permission first before disturbing everyone,” Alyssa explained, leaning over to give him a tender kiss.

As she pulled back, they shared a smile, then Alyssa’s gaze swept over the sleeping Lionesses. Her telepathic call reached out to each of the girls and they began to stir as they woke up.

“Ugh... just five more minutes!” Dana protested, pulling the duvet over her head.

John reached over and slipped his hand under the covers, then tickled her dainty feet. “Rise and shine, sleepyhead.”

It didn’t take long to turn her protests into raucous laughter, and the redhead perked up considerably when John pulled her in for a kiss.

“Now that’s the way to wake a girl up,” Dana said with a contented sigh.

“Tickle you out of the covers, then give you a big sloppy kiss,” Alyssa said, nodding thoughtfully. “Okay, I’ll remember that next time.”

“Don’t you dare,” Dana growled, narrowing her eyes at the blonde. “It’s only fun when he does it.”

John rose to his feet and offered a hand to Sakura. “My kisses are not sloppy,” he protested with a playful frown.

The Asian girl gave him a shy smile and leaned in for a quick smooch.

“Don’t worry, it’s the enthusiasm that counts,” Rachel teased him.

Dana giggled and nodded in agreement, her bright blue eyes sparkling with mischief.

Tashana stood with feline grace, then sidled up to John and gave him a sensuous kiss. “I think your technique is divine, Baen’thelas. You always take my breath away.”

Irillith didn’t waste any time in following her sister’s lead. “Delicious kisses from our delicious fiancé,” she purred in agreement.

He smiled fondly at the azure-skinned beauties, then cleared his throat as he addressed the rising group of Lionesses. “Time for a shower, ladies. Oh... and the twins will be serving breakfast this morning.”

“Goddammit!” the Karron orphan cursed vehemently. “Good one, Rach!”

“Don’t blame me,” the brunette smirked. “You were teasing him too.”

Dana let out a despondent sigh, then trailed dejectedly after John and the twins as they walked hand-in-hand towards the bathroom.

He glanced back over his shoulder and grinned. “Hey, cheer up. You can help me make the appetisers.”

“Yay!” she whooped, bounding after him into the shower.

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Valeria stared morosely at the Sector Map, watching with disinterest as the black armada continued its relentless march through Maliri territory. There had been no sign of the rival Progenitor since her master had split his Galkiran forces, the ten fleets of thrall warships under her command not having lost a single vessel to enemy interdiction. While this attack group had proceeded completely unopposed, that was certainly not the case with the second group, which had suffered numerous crippling ambushes.

The Galkiran Matriarch fidgeted nervously as she sensed a new wave of shock, fear, then anger sweep through her thrall network. There was no mistaking the telltale signs that the other group was under attack yet again. She knew that if Lord Gahl’kalgor was there on the Bridge, he would have ordered an immediate wormhole jump to intervene at that ambush, and seize the opportunity to obliterate the enemy Progenitor. However, he was not there with her. He was currently shacked up with that conniving bitch, Ashryn, and ignoring his most devoted and loyal servant.

Clenching her fists until the gauntlets creaked in protest, Valeria fought down the urgent desire to vaporise the brazen Galkiran battleship captain. She could sense Ashryn’s foul presence in the psychic network, the thrall glowing brighter than ever before, with a smug new radiance that set the matriarch’s teeth on edge. It was all Ashryn’s fault that this rift had formed between herself and Gahl’kalgor. The furious Gladiatora wanted to rip the thrall’s lungs out through her anus for daring to defy her will, and preventing her from alerting Gahl’kalgor about the enemy Progenitor’s attacks.

\*I’m returning to my ship. Meet me in the hangar.\*

Valeria jumped in fright as the brusque telepathic command shattered her moody introspection. She darted a guilty look at the holographic map, knowing full well that Gahl’kalgor would not be amused by her malicious compliance to his orders. This was the closest she had ever come to downright disobedience, and Valeria shivered with fear as she wondered how he was going to react to the lack of any meaningful progress.

Rising from the Command Throne, she barked, “Drop out of hyper-warp and open the hangar door. Lord Gahl’kalgor is returning home.”

The startled crewwomen hurried to follow her orders, and Valeria marched purposefully out of the Bridge. Despite her bold facade, the matriarch felt a pit of anxiety gnawing in her stomach, her crimson skin turning a pale pink. Gahl’kalgor had delivered vicious beatings for far lesser slights, many of which were entirely imaginary on his behalf. She could only imagine what kind of dreadful punishments were in store for her this time, and Valeria worried that she might have accidentally pushed him too far.

Hurrying down to the hangar, the anxious matriarch actually arrived there before Gahl’kalgor. Through the open hull door, she could see the enormous black battleship hanging silently in space, the thrall vessel parked alongside her master’s colossal dreadnought. It was difficult to spot his approaching shuttle against the ominous backdrop of the imposing warship, but it eventually glided into view and swept imperiously through the hangar doors to land in the centre of his private docking bay. The airlock door split apart, the fanged maw separating to regurgitate its imperious passenger. Valeria held her breath as Gahl’kalgor stepped out of the Ascendancy-class shuttle, and braced herself to face his fury.

Instead he greeted her with a broad grin, his handsome face lighting up with genuine pleasure. “Valeria! It is good to see you. I missed your company.”

She gaped at him in shock as he strode towards her, totally unprepared for this jovial mood. All her fears and anxiety evaporated in an instant, as Valeria realised that while she’d been worrying herself sick, he’d clearly been having the time of his life with Ashryn. A dizzying surge of jealousy left her speechless, then she glowered at Gahl’kalgor as he swaggered past.

“How goes the pursuit?” he asked, oblivious to her mercurial shift in mood.

“Fine,” she muttered, falling into step beside him.

Gahl’kalgor smirked in amusement. “So you chased the coward back to his throneworld?”

Valeria hesitated before replying, “Not exactly.”

“You destroyed him and his puny ship already?” he asked, frowning in disappointment.

“No, he lives,” Valeria admitted sourly.

Gahl’kalgor raised an eyebrow at her sullen tone, his patience running out. “What has happened in my absence? Speak plainly.”

“Baen’thelas has repeatedly ambushed the other attack group,” she muttered, her face a bitter mask. “They’ve lost at least three entire fleets.”

“What?!” he blurted out, turning to stare at her incredulously. “Why didn’t you intervene?! You’re telling me that you just sat here and did nothing?!”

Valeria felt a thrill of excitement when Gahl’kalgor’s mood turned, his infuriating self-satisfied smile disappearing as she goaded him into a familiar snarl of rage.

“It wasn’t ***my*** fault,” she declared impudently, glaring back at him with open defiance.

He lunged forward and grabbed her by the throat, effortlessly hauling her into the air with one arm. “Who’s fault was it then?!” he bellowed in her face. “Are you daring to imply that I’m to blame?!”

“It was Ashryn!” she croaked, her defiance shattered as she desperately clutched onto the steely tendons of his forearm.

Gahl’kalgor pulled back and looked at her askance. “She’s been with me the entire time. How could this possibly be her fault?”

“I tried to warn you!” Valeria gasped. “Ashryn said you were sleeping! I ordered her to wake you up, but she refused! I couldn’t jump to the battle and leave you behind!”

He slowly lowered his wild-eyed matriarch to the ground. “Why would she do that?”

When he released her, Valeria massaged her throat, then said spitefully, “Ashryn told me you needed your rest... as if you were a helpless infant! She’s just a stupid thrall with ideas far above her station. How dare she speak for you like that!”

She panted for breath, and eagerly awaited his furious command to burn the life out of her rival. The matriarch then watched in appalled disbelief as Gahl’kalgor’s expression softened, reflecting a tenderness that he’d never once shown towards her over the previous thousand years.

“She really does care about me,” he murmured, an affectionate smile spreading across his face.

Valeria gaped at him, then blurted out, “***I*** care, my Lord!”

“Of course,” he said dismissively, not paying her any more attention as he set off again.

Crushed by his disinterest, Valeria trailed along behind him, desperately fighting back bitter tears of rejection.

“Come along, Valeria, pick up your feet,” Gahl’kalgor called back to her cheerfully, as he marched along the corridor towards the Bridge. “It’s time we dealt with this troublesome pest.”

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The Valkyrie raced towards the Invictus, a ferocious hail of tachyon bolts and glowing purple beams crossing in an intricate lattice in its wake. As John watched the holographic Tactical map, the deadly storm inched closer towards the mech, the thrall gunners gradually picking up a bead on their target. He was starting to get worried for Sakura’s safety when the Valkyrie suddenly cartwheeled to starboard, the deft manoeuvre accelerated by a dazzling flare from its retro-thrusters. The mech moved so fast that John momentarily lost track of it, until he spotted the nimble white machine flying parallel to its old course, but several hundred metres away from its original position.

By the time the Galkiran gunnery crews had readjusted their aim, Sakura was pulling out of range, the Valkyrie moving much faster than their swiftest warships. A glance across the map showed that Jade had also swept out of range of the enemy guns, the two strike craft keeping the enemy distracted as their slower carrier safely withdrew from combat.

“They’re breaking off pursuit again,” John said, watching as the invading forces peeled away and returned to their original positions.

“I was expecting that,” Calara replied, sounding a lot more positive than last time. “Let’s see if we can give them a bit of encouragement. Hold position here, Alyssa, we need to regenerate our shields.”

“You got it,” the blonde agreed, easing back on the throttle and letting the Invictus coast to a halt.

Dana winced as she checked the shield status display. “Shit... that was a close one. Our shields are down to just 7%!”

“We took a hammering from those battleships,” John muttered, grimacing as he recalled the Invictus charging headlong into a blistering hail of fire.

Leaning back in her chair, Calara rolled her shoulders to ease out the tension, then focused on the map again. “That’s the downside of ambushing them while they’re fully shielded. It takes a couple of passes to strip them of their shields, and then we have to take out the engines. Even after we disable them, they’re still able to keep shooting at us until we move out of range.”

“Even though it was a tough battle, we still knocked out the entire fleet,” John noted, his gaze flicking from ship to marooned ship, each one floundering now that its engines were destroyed. “Nice shooting, ladies.”

The Nymphs acting as Calara’s gunnery teams grinned in his direction, thrilled by his praise.

“Actually... I think I might be able to make the next fight a bit easier,” Irillith cautiously announced. “I’m more familiar with their cyber defences now, and getting much quicker at hacking through their firewalls. It shouldn’t be too hard to start infiltrating multiple warships at the same time using automated scripts.”

“Are you feeling up to tackling a battleship squadron?” Calara asked, her mood brightening considerably.

“I know that would be much more useful, but they’ve got considerably better security defences. Do you mind if I start with the cruisers?”

“Whatever you feel most comfortable with,” the brunette quickly replied. “Any ship you can disable will be one less firing at us. In that case, we might be wise to stay on the outskirts of their formation while you help with knocking out their cruisers, then we can work our way inwards towards the capital ships. At that kind of range, the battleships won’t be anywhere near as effective, especially if they’re trying to avoid hitting the other thrall ships.”

“I wouldn’t necessarily count on that,” John warned her. “If they think they’ve got a good chance of taking us out, I doubt they’ll worry about collateral damage.”

“I won’t get complacent. I’ll keep us out of trouble,” Alyssa said, smiling brightly at him.

“Thanks, honey,” he replied, finding it impossible not to smile back at his upbeat XO.

The lead squadrons of destroyers and cruisers had returned to the rest of the Galkiran forces, where each of the fleets was returning to their previous formations.

John walked over to Calara’s station and glanced down at his olive-skinned Tactical Officer. “What do you think they’ll do now?”

“Testing how well I know our adversary, Admiral?” she replied, her brown eyes sparkling.

“Just curious,” he admitted. “Maybe I should’ve asked: what would you do in their position?”

She leaned back in her chair and gazed away into the distance, mulling over the threat the Invictus posed. “They’ve nearly strained their shields to the limit after keeping them activated for so long. If it was me, I’d wait here and let the shield projectors recover while keeping an eye on the Invictus. Better that than be subjected to another cloaked ambush when my fleets were the most vulnerable.”

“Makes sense,” John agreed, before glancing back at the Galkirans. “It’ll be interesting to see if they take advantage of us needing to recharge our shields.”

As he studied the holographic map, he saw the Raptor was making playful loops around the Invictus, the gunship waggling its wingtips as it rocketed past Sakura in her Valkyrie.

\*Jade, I think taunting the Galkirans is probably bad form,\* he said with a wry smile. \*You don’t have to rub it in that you’re enjoying yourself.\*

\*But I am having lots of fun, Master!\* she gushed. \*It’s so exciting zooming around the Galkiran ships!\*

He shook his head in amusement, then returned his attention to the invading thrall forces. Judging by the sensor readings, they still had their shields activated, but the fleets were remaining stationary, as if torn with indecision about how to proceed.

“They’re just sitting there,” he noted, watching in fascination. “I wonder what they’re planning to do next.”

Tashana grinned as she walked over to stand beside him. “I think we broke them.”

Dana snorted with laughter. “I bet they don’t know whether to shit or go blind!”

“We’re stalking them and thinning the herd,” Leylira declared, her feline eyes gleaming with the thrill of the chase. “They thought they were the hunters, but now they know... they’re the prey.”

“We’ve been subjecting their crews to significant stress for a prolonged period of time,” Rachel cautioned him. “If they are starting to crack under the strain, their behaviour could become extremely erratic.”

John grimaced as he stared at the thrall vessels, feeling a pang of guilt. The Galkiran invasion force was a deadly threat, but he knew that those women were helpless pawns under the absolute control of their Progenitor master. He wished there was some way to avoid further traumatising the thrall crews, who he considered to be innocent victims in this needless war.

\*We haven’t got much in the way of options, handsome,\* Alyssa said quietly. \*The only alternative is to start blowing up their ships and stopping them permanently. At least this way, we’ve got a shot at helping the survivors... we can’t do much if they’re dead.\*

\*I know,\* he said with grim resignation. \*It just feels wrong hounding them like this.\*

“Master! They’re running away!” Betrixa called out in warning.

John glanced back at the Galkiran force and saw that the vanguard fleets were now jumping into hyper-warp, continuing their advance into Maliri territory. The rest of the attack group followed after them, speeding away from the ambush site, and abandoning the scores of vessels that had been left immobilised.

“They’re still heading towards the homeworlds. They aren’t fleeing yet,” he corrected the cheetah catgirl.

“Yeah, they are,” she replied, baring her pointed fangs as she gave him a feral grin. “It doesn’t matter which way they run, they know we’ll keep chasing them!”

“Shields at 73%,” Dana informed him. “We’ll need a few more minutes to fully recharge.”

Alyssa spun the pilot’s chair around to face John. “Do you want to wait here, or keep up the pressure? If we stay on their heels, Dana can knock the rear fleet out of hyper-warp as soon as our shields are back up to 100%.”

Turning away from the map, he met Calara’s curious gaze. She gave him a look of sympathy, then slowly nodded her head.

“Let’s go,” he said with a heavy sigh. “There’s no point dragging this out any longer than necessary.”

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Valeria stood dutifully at Gahl’kalgor’s side, where he sat in his command throne.

“Captain Lyshalla, I’m promoting you to Fleet Commander,” the Progenitor ordered, as he faced the row of holographic images that depicted his Galkiran senior officers. “You will assume command of all ten fleets in this attack group.”

She sat up straighter, her angular green eyes shining with pride. “You will not regret bestowing this honour upon me, Lord Gahl’kalgor.”

“Continue the search for his throneworld, and destroy this Baen’thelas by whatever means necessary,” he said curtly.

The thrall’s beautiful scarlet face lit up with fervent devotion. “We will not fail you. We shall crush anyone that dares to oppose your divine will!”

He acknowledged the newly promoted officer with a nod, then ended the holographic call. “Prepare to activate the Wormhole Generator. I will supply the co-ordinates.”

The Chief Engineer waited patiently by her console. “The Wormhole Generator is fully charged, my Lord. Standing by.”

Gahl’kalgor glanced at his matriarch and raised an eyebrow. “They’re definitely under attack?”

She answered with a curt nod. “This ambush is different to the others. Baen’thelas previously waited until our fleets dropped out of hyper-warp and were forced to deactivate their shields. The last ambush was only ten minutes ago, but he just attacked again.”

“He grows impatient...” Gahl’kalgor mused, before a wicked smile appeared on his face. “Or increasingly desperate.”

Turning his attention back to the holographic map, the Progenitor tapped several runes on the control panel built into the armrest of his command throne. The focus of the map suddenly shifted, the stars flashing past in a blur until it re-centred on the second group of Galkiran fleets. He couldn’t see that peculiar white ship, as the actual battle was taking place hundreds of light years out of range of his dreadnought’s sensors. However, he could see the his own forces as they reacted to the attack, the warships reeling from the enemy onslaught.

Choosing an arrival point that was a suitable distance from the raging battle, Gahl’kalgor uploaded those coordinates to his Chief Engineer. “Take us there now.”

“Yes, my Lord,” the Galkiran replied, carefully inputting the target location into the ancient device. “Initiating wormhole.”

Valeria gripped onto the raised backrest of the Command Throne, then steeled herself as the swirling disc enveloped the mighty dreadnought. She fought down the sudden wave of nausea, as she reeled from being sent hurtling across the galaxy.

Gahl’kalgor seemed unaffected by the stomach-churning jump and he rose from his seat, his attention fixated on the holographic map as it was updated with all the objects in sensor range. The Galkiran fleets were shown exactly as previously depicted, the thrall ships positioned where they’d reacted to the latest ambush and dropped out of hyper-warp. There was a tight grouping of ships at the rear of that scattered trail that were the targets of the attack, and all the other fleets were hurrying back to converge on the battlefield.

“Should I move to engage, my Lord?” the helmswoman asked eagerly.

“Not yet,” he muttered, his eyes narrowing as he surveyed the chaotic battlefield. “We need to find the perfect spot to cast our nets...”

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“Ignore the highlighted cruisers,” Irillith stated, her eyes blazing with a bright violet radiance.

Calara glanced at the six thrall warships that the Maliri hacker had chosen, then began designating her own set of targets. “Alyssa, tell Jade and Sakura to finish off the destroyers. We’ll take care of the remaining cruisers. Targets assigned, ladies.”

“Done,” the blonde replied, as she yanked the flightstick to the right and shoved it forwards.

The Invictus banked to starboard, then plunged down in a steep dive, desperately attempting to shake off the targeting beams that followed its rapid descent. The Nymphs opened fire with their Tachyon Lance batteries as the Invictus began its plunge, the dazzling sapphire beams scything into the surrounding Galkiran forces. They slashed through thrall shields and burned black armour plating, until a chain of explosions marked the immobilisation of those doomed cruisers. The enemy forces desperately tried to retaliate, sending answering salvos of purple beams and tachyon bolts at their tormentor, which always seemed to be just one tantalising step ahead of them.

The six battleships at the rear of the fleet spat out their defiance at the Invictus, the massive barrels of their Quantum Flux Cannons ablaze with purple lightning. The cannons recoiled as they blasted charged slugs at their target, the huge projectiles streaking across space towards the diving battlecruiser. Those shells were powerful enough to punch straight through the Invictus’ hull, but their formidable firepower was meaningless when each one sailed harmlessly past its huge engines.

The evasive manoeuvres proved to be remarkably effective, but the Invictus’ haphazard flight brought it right into the crosshairs of six Galkiran cruisers that had just joined the frantic melee. The sleek black warships lined up perfect shots on the Invictus as it barrelled towards them, the two sides converging so that the thralls wouldn’t be able to miss at point blank range. Suddenly all six vessels went dark, as system after internal system began to shut down, leaving them adrift as their quarry sailed past unopposed.

“Very nice,” John said, nodding to Irillith with admiration. “How long until they can regain control of their ships?”

She gave him a sly smile. “When I let them. They’re mine now.”

“That’s the last of the cruisers,” Calara noted, her calculating gaze sweeping over the Tactical map. “Alyssa, engage the battleships. We’ll hit them now while their Quantum Flux Cannons are recharging.”

“Moving to an attack vector,” the blonde replied, pulling back on the flightstick and reversing the steep dive.

“Damn... that was brutal,” Tashana murmured, watching the unfolding battle in admiration. “You’re making it look easy.”

“Shield status?” Calara requested, not taking her intense gaze off the holographic map.

“We’re still in good shape,” Dana replied. “86% at the moment.”

The Latina’s eyes flicked in John’s direction. “The two nearest fleets are closing in on us. After we cripple these battleships, do you want to stay and inflict more damage?”

“How risky is that?”

Her brow furrowed as she made some swift calculations. “If we can neutralise the battleships quickly enough, we can disengage before they’re ready to fire their Quantum Flux Cannons again. We should be able to make a serious dent in the next fleet’s cruisers before we’ll need to completely withdraw and regenerate our shields.”

He nodded his assent. “Let’s do it. We’re running out of time and if we can’t scare them into a retreat, we’ve got a lot of ships to take out.” Turning towards the map, he glanced at the two nearest Galkiran fleets, which were closing from both the starboard and port flanks. “Which one are you planning on hitting next?”

“That fleet, on the port flank,” she replied, pointing towards the warships charging in their direction. “It’s closest to the battleships, so if we rush to engage them, it’ll take the other fleet longer to reach us.”

“Makes sense,” he said, studying them speculatively.

Calara cracked her knuckles before gripping the weapon controls. “Focus fire on the middle pair of battleships,” she said to her Nymph gunnery team. “Alyssa, can you ask Sakura and Jade to target them as well?”

“Done.”

The Valkyrie and the Raptor had fallen into formation beside the Invictus, but as soon as they received Alyssa’s telepathic orders, both sprang into action. John could imagine Jade throwing the gunship’s throttle forward as its engines blazed an incandescent orange, the nimble strike craft roaring ahead of its allies. The Valkyrie wasn’t as fast as the Raptor, but it’s upgraded Progenitor engines were still grossly overpowered for the relatively tiny mech. It also barrelled ahead of the Invictus, weaving hypnotically as the trio approached the furthest reach of the capital ships’ firing arcs.

Calara narrowed her eyes in concentration, her finger clamping down on the trigger as she unleashed the Invictus’ Nova Lances. The searing blast slammed into the second battleship on the left, that vast column of energy throbbing with power as it almost single-handedly obliterated the target’s shields in one devastating stroke. When the massive beam winked out, the Galkiran capital ship seemed to be stunned for a moment, as if the crew had never faced such formidable firepower before.

Both sides then opened fire at the same time, exchanging blistering salvos with their Tachyon Lance batteries. The Galkirans had significantly more guns to go with their massive advantage in tonnage, and the forest of beams that blazed out towards the Invictus outnumbered the returning shots by a ten-to-one ratio. John winced against the blinding glare, and despite Alyssa’s skilful evasive manoeuvres, a worrying number of those purple beams thumped into his ship’s shields.

“Shields at 72%,” Dana said in a low voice, as if unwilling to break the tense silence on the Combat Bridge.

Frowning in confusion, John stared at the enormous thrall battleships. “Careful, girls... I think that one on the right held fire for some reason.”

“Are you sure?” Calara asked sharply, her eyes flicking to the starboard side of the capital ship formation.

“I think so...” he replied, with a pensive frown. “It was hard to tell for certain with so much incoming fire. The others definitely let us have it with everything they’ve got.”

Tashana nodded decisively. “Yeah, he’s right. I didn’t realise until John pointed it out, but all those beams came from directly ahead or to the left. The last one looks like it’s manoeuvring for a better shot...”

Calara’s eyes flared with a radiant inner light and she stared off into the distance at something only she could see.

“Oh fuck!” she cried out, her voice brittle with panic. “He’s here!”

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“Open fire!” Gahl’kalgor barked, grinning with anticipation as his dreadnought unloaded on the oblivious battlecruiser at almost point blank range.

The Quantum Devastator mounted on the prow seethed with energy, dancing arcs of purple lightning cavorting up the barrel. The incandescent blast from the massive weapon eclipsed the feeble lightshow from the Nova Lance, the horrifying power of that beam atomising everything in its path. As the Invictus was erased from sight, the rest of the gunnery teams lashed out at the unsuspecting strike craft accompanying it.

The Valkyrie and Raptor were savaged by a terrifying fusillade, their position on the holographic map blotted out by an unrelenting storm of tachyon beams and tachyon bolts. It was a glorious display of gratuitous overkill, and Gahl’kalgor laughed in triumph as his gunners continued to pour more firepower at their targets.

Retaking his seat, he turned to grin at Valeria. “So much for this ‘Righter of Wrongs’,” he said with a contemptuous snort.

The Galkiran matriarch felt her heart skip a beat as Gahl’kalgor smiled at her, her mood soaring to elation as the rift between them seemed to evaporate. “He never stood a chance against your tactical genius, my Lord.”

His smile broadened and he patted her hand, where it lingered on the armrest of his throne. Valeria almost swooned, the heady rush of her master’s approval leaving her breathless.

“Ah... Lord Gahl’kalgor?” the Chief Tactical officer stammered, her voice hollow with shocked disbelief.

“Yes? What is it?” he replied cheerfully, turning his attention back towards the thrall crewwoman.

She pointed a trembling finger at the Tactical Map. “We missed...”

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For a brief millisecond Alyssa froze in shock, her cerulean eyes widening in horror as she witnessed the calamitous destruction of the Invictus in Calara’s clairvoyant prophesy. The Latina reacted almost instantaneously, and as she barked telepathic commands, Alyssa obeyed them without question. One hand slammed the throttle back as far as it would go, while the other jerked the flightstick to the right, the abrupt change in forces enough to rip a lesser ship apart.

Fortunately, the Invictus was made of sterner stuff, and the white battlecruiser lurched into a roll just as the space it had previously occupied was obliterated from sight. The blast missed the hull by a matter of feet, but was still close enough to vaporise the Tachyon Lance turrets along the left side of the Invictus’ underbelly.

“Holy fuck!” Dana gasped, gripping her console in fear. “It nuked our shields in one shot!”

John stared aghast at the map, as the menacing silhouette of a Progenitor dreadnought suddenly appeared in front of them. He couldn’t see the actual hull of the monstrous vessel, but muzzle flares from hundreds of guns limned the outline of the ancient behemoth in a sinister purple glow.

“Jade! Sakura!” he blurted out, his heart lurching as he saw the dreadnought continue to blaze away at the last places he’d seen the two strikecraft.

“Warned them in time,” Alyssa muttered, her eyes tightly narrowed in concentration.

“Over there! It’s the Raptor!” Tashana pointed out, rushing over to stand beside John. “And there’s the Valkyrie!”

John searched frantically for the two girls, feeling a huge surge of relief that they’d both survived that initial ambush. When he locked eyes on the gunship, his relief was short lived. Jade had lost her shields in the opening volley, her lightning fast reflexes the only thing that saved her from complete annihilation. The Raptor’s spotless white hull was now pockmarked by ugly scorch marks, and the tip of the left wing had been completely seared away.

The Valkyrie was in an even worse state, with one entire leg completely missing, the limb severed mid-thigh by a Tachyon Lance. Sakura had lost the retro-thrusters built into that leg, compromising the mech’s agility, but the main engine was mounted on the rear of the torso so it still had the advantage of speed. She banked around, jinking and dodging the streams of tachyon bolts that tried to cut her down, but with the Valkyrie’s shields knocked out, the mech was taking hits.

“Tell them to get the hell out of there!” John ordered, his heart in his mouth as he watched their desperate evasive manoeuvres.

Alyssa didn’t have time to reply, as she was too busy concentrating on avoiding a barrage of Galkiran tachyon beams. Now that the dreadnought was no longer blocking the last battleship’s line of sight to the Invictus, the thrall capital ship opened fire with every gun it could bring to bear. Alyssa had been forced to decelerate to make the decisive roll that saved them from destruction, but the loss of speed now left the white battlecruiser more vulnerable to the enemy battleship. Tachyon Lances scored solid hits, the crackling columns of energy gouging deep furrows through the armour plating on the topdeck.

“They’re about to fire their Quantum Flux Cannons!” Tashana yelled in warning, watching fearfully as the dreadnought’s biggest turrets pivoted to track the Invictus.

“I know, I know!” Alyssa snapped back, as she flung the flightstick from side to side and ramped up the thrust from the engines.

John watched helplessly as his ships scattered, the trio racing away in different directions to evade their deadly pursuers. He wished there was something he could do to help, but these ship battles were never his area of expertise, leaving him feeling like a useless observer. All he wanted to do was charge that dreadnought, smash his way in, and hack that Progenitor to pieces, but the Invictus wasn’t strong enough to prise open the hull, so now they were forced to run and hide...

“Activate the Stealth Generator!” he yelled, jolting Dana out of her shocked daze.

“Shit... yeah!” she gasped, reaching for the rune on her console.

“No!” Calara snapped, holding her hand up in urgent warning. “Wait!”

The redhead turned to look at her in confusion. “What? Why?!”

The Invictus was sweeping around in a jagged turn, Alyssa’s attempt to withdraw hampered by having to repeatedly dodge salvos from the dreadnought’s rear-mounted Tachyon Lances. The massive Progenitor warship was also bristling with batteries of Tachyon Cannons, and now that the Invictus had been stripped of its shields, a storm of energy bolts hammered the armour. The seconds ticked by, and the Invictus started to look like it had come down with a horrific case of pox, its white hull now a scorched hellscape.

“The Flux Cannons!” Tashana reminded them, her eyes wide as she watched the huge barrels tracking their erratic path.

“Now!” Calara yelled, waving frantically at Dana.

She punched the rune and the cloaking device activated, shrouding the Invictus in its signal dampening field. Alyssa immediately shoved the flightstick forward and tilted it to the left, pushing the battlecruiser into a smooth rolling dive that took them in almost the opposite direction they’d been facing a few seconds earlier. Her timing was perfect, as the dreadnought’s spine-mounted Quantum Flux Cannons opened fire a moment later, launching a volley of charged slugs where their old flight path would have taken them.

John held his breath as the initial salvo blazed past harmlessly to their rear. The subsequent rounds sprayed out in a wide arc, but were still nowhere close to the retreating battlecruiser. He could almost sense the frustration of the Galkiran gunners, who must have been desperately hoping to score a lucky hit on their vanishing quarry. What they couldn’t possibly know, was that Calara’s clairvoyance was a breathtakingly effective tool at eliminating bad luck from the battle... providing she was actively using it at the time.

A final glance at the holographic map showed that the Raptor and the Valkyrie had accelerated away from the dreadnought, and were now safely out of range. The strike craft peeled around in broad arcs, heading towards a rendezvous point with the Invictus, which was located far from the wreck strewn battlefield. John removed his Paragon helmet, then slumped down in his Command Chair, feeling drained in the aftermath of the battle.

The rest of the crew were just as subdued, the gravity of that one-sided fight sitting heavily with all of them. They had all nearly been killed... multiple times... and it was only Calara’s psychic abilities that had saved them from destruction.

“Holy shit...” Dana murmured, a mix of emotions in her trembling voice.

John heard a bit of awe, fear, and shock in her subdued exclamation. He rubbed his face and was about to ask her what was wrong, when she pre-empted him by tapping a rune on her console. The Tactical Map flickered out of view, and was replaced by a holographic depiction of the Invictus, the damage status clearly shown on the battlecruiser’s profile.

There was a brutal scar that ran almost the entire length of the ship, where the periphery of the blast from the Quantum Devastator had scorched the hull. The Tachyon Lances and Tachyon Cannons along the port side of the Invictus’ underbelly had been atomised, leaving ugly pits where the turrets used to be. As the three-dimensional image slowly rotated, they could then see the damage to the topdeck, which looked like it had been ravaged by a furious beast.

Claw-like furrows had been gouged out of the hull by Tachyon Lances, each vivid scar dozens of metres in length. Surrounding those raw wounds were hundreds of impact craters, marking where tachyon bolts had seared the armour plating. The extensive battle damage made it look like they’d endured a gruelling month-long campaign, rather than surviving being exposed to a Progenitor dreadnought’s main guns for only thirty seconds.

“Activating the Stealth Generator was a great idea, but we couldn’t use it straight away,” Calara quietly explained, looking at John apologetically. “I saw what would’ve happened. If we’d cloaked when you said, they would have switched to shooting at Jade. She wouldn’t have survived.”

He nodded wearily, and gave her an understanding smile. “You did the right thing.”

Dana removed her own Paragon helmet, set it on the engineering console, and squinted speculatively at the status display. “It’s actually not that bad; it just looks a shitload worse than it really is. We’ll have to build some replacement turrets, make some new guns, and obviously patch up all the armour, but they didn’t hit anything critical.”

“You hear that, handsome?” Alyssa asked, turning her chair to face him with an encouraging smile. “It’ll buff out.”

He looked at her, and despite the optimistic expression on her beautiful face, he could see that it didn’t reach her eyes. There was an underlying tension there, as she knew exactly what was troubling him.

“Let’s pick up Jade and Sakura, then we need to decide what we’re going to do next,” he said, his grim tone reminding everyone of the bleak choices they were now forced to make.

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Gahl’kalgor watched the holo-screen in fury, as the battlecruiser faded from view, melting into the surrounding darkness. His Galkiran gunners blazed away, firing wildly into space in the vain hope of scoring a lucky hit, but it was as if that white ship had become as insubstantial as an ethereal spirit.

“Find me his thrice-damned throneworld,” he snarled, gripping the armrests with enough force to shatter steel.

Valeria knew that the only way of ending these maddening games of hit and run, was to drive Baen’thelas back to the heart of his empire. Once they’d destroyed the source of his power, there’d be no more hiding from her master’s wrath. They had done it many times before, with Gahl’kalgor personally delivering the killing blow that ended up with those decapitated rivals being added to his trophy room.

“Yes, my Lord,” she said obediently.

Recalling her prior conversation with Narzera, Valeria felt a flicker of guilt for deliberately ignoring the scout captain’s persistent attempts to contact her. If Narzera’s team of hackers had managed to crack the hidden signal they’d discovered in the Maliri Comms Beacon, the location of Baen’thelas’ throneworld might already be in their grasp. She glanced warily at Gahl’kalgor, who bristled with anger at this infuriating opponent slipping out of his clutches yet again.

Neglecting to inform Gahl’kalgor about Narzera’s discovery might enrage him further, and Valeria was loathe to shatter the renewed connection between them. She could still picture the joyful look on his face as he grinned at her, perfectly recalling every exquisite aspect of his chiselled features. After all the heartache of being ignored in favour of Ashryn, it was like a beaming ray of sunshine had shone down from the heavens and filled her heart with glorious warmth.

As much as it pained her to risk his wrath, Valeria resigned herself to the fact that she would have to inform him eventually. At least if he were to choke her to death in an all-consuming rage, she’d shared a precious moment with him, where it felt like she truly was the centre of his world.

“My Lord... I-“ she stammered anxiously.

“Find me his throneworld!” Gahl’kalgor growled, cutting her off mid-sentence as he rose from the command throne. “I’ll be in my shuttle with Ashryn. Inform me immediately if anything changes.”

Valeria’s mouth snapped shut with an audible click of her teeth, then she watched in seething silence as he strode out of the bridge.

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“I’m sorry, John,” Calara said, her face downcast as she slumped wearily in the seat beside him at the conference table. “I got complacent; I should have been expecting another attack by the dreadnought.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” he replied, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze. “The Progenitor could have intervened in the last couple of ambushes, but he let us tear apart his forces. We were all caught by surprise when he did finally turn up.”

“Why did he wait until now to attack?” Sakura asked, her brow furrowed in confusion. “Did we do something different that prompted him to take action?”

“This was the first time that we’ve launched back-to-back ambushes,” Calara cautiously suggested. “Perhaps he was willing to ignore the original rate of losses, but when we ramped up the attrition of his fleets, we forced his hand.”

“Well, we know that bastard’s here now,” Dana scowled. “He won’t be jumping anywhere for the next twelve hours.”

“Hold on,” Rachel said cautiously. “We don’t know that for certain.”

The redhead looked at her askance. “Yeah, we do. That’s the recharge time for the Wormhole Generator... minus a few minutes for the battle if you want to be pedantic.”

“But we didn’t see the wormhole when he arrived,” Rachel persisted. “That means he could have jumped here hours ago and his dreadnought is now fully recharged and ready to jump again.”

“That’s a good point,” Calara said, giving John a worried glance. “We have no way of knowing what the Progenitor was doing prior to his ambush.”

John considered it for a long moment, then shook his head. “This guy doesn’t strike me as the lurk in the shadows type. Whenever we’ve attacked his forces, he retaliated immediately. I think it’s safe to assume that the dreadnought jumped here mid-battle, but we missed the wormhole because we were all pre-occupied with the fight.”

“I agree... that does make sense,” the Latina said thoughtfully. “But it still doesn’t explain why the Progenitor didn’t intervene in the last few battles.”

He gave her a helpless shrug. “Progenitors are psychotically deranged. I’ve said before that I don’t think it’s possible to accurately predict their motives.”

They all sat in subdued silence, thinking about the daunting task of facing an inscrutable foe.

“The others are nearly here,” Alyssa quietly informed them.

A few seconds later, Jehanna, Ailita, and Helene entered the Briefing Room.

Jehanna was in the lead and she frowned with disapproval as she took her seat. “Why didn’t you wake me? I thought the battle was supposed to be at 6AM?”

“We weren’t planning a boarding action, so it was highly unlikely we’d need you for any fighting,” John explained to the disgruntled reporter. “I thought about waking you up anyway to watch the battle, but you looked so comfy with Ailita, I didn’t have the heart to disturb you.”

“Alright, you’re forgiven,” she replied, but her smile faded as she looked around the Briefing Room at all the sombre faces. “I heard what happened. Are you all okay?”

“We’re all fine,” Alyssa said quietly. “But we have some hard decisions to make.”

John turned to look at Dana across the conference table. “How long will it take to repair everything?”

Their Chief Engineer grabbed the holo-remote and tapped away at the controls. A few seconds later, she brought up holographic depictions of the Invictus, Valkyrie, and the Raptor, showing their current damage status.

“Alright... starting with the easy fix,” she said, pointing to the gunship. “There’s a bit of wing damage and maybe a fifth of the armour plates need to be replaced. I’m guessing that’s like a five minute patch job, right?”

Alyssa glanced at John. “I’d fix it myself, but I can’t reshape that many times yet.”

“That’s no problem. Leave it to me,” he said, before shifting his attention to the mech. “What about the Valkyrie?”

“Well... we’ll need to completely rebuild the missing leg,” she replied, doing some mental calculations. “The retro-thruster was the only component that we’ll need the Soulforge for, but the rest can be built out of regular Crystal Alyssium. Maybe an hour to make all the parts, assemble the leg, then attach it to the Valk?”

“I can build all the internal components,” Alyssa offered. “Then all you’d need to do is make the thruster and some thirty-shaped armour plates. With the maintenance bots helping, it’ll only take us a couple of minutes to bolt everything into place.”

“The Collective will be happy to offer you any assistance we can,” Daphne volunteered.

“Thanks for helping out, Daphne. It won’t take me long to shape the armour,” John said gratefully.

“I’m sorry I wrecked the Valkyrie,” Sakura said, darting him a guilty look after staring at the battered machine. “I tried my best to dodge, but there was so much incoming fire.”

John beckoned her over, then enveloped the remorseful girl into a hug. “You only had a split-second to react, honey. It’s a miracle you managed to even save the mech.” Pulling her down onto his lap, he squeezed her tight. “But all that really matters is that you survived. I thought we’d lost you for a second back there.”

Sakura hugged him back fiercely. “No way you’re getting rid of me that easy. Not with my guardian angel looking over my shoulder.”

She reached behind her to grab Calara’s hand, their fingers interlocking and thumbs rubbing together in a simple gesture of affection.

“I heard you saved me too,” Jade said, turning her big emerald eyes towards the Latina.

“It was nothi-!” Calara was cut off midway through her gracious reply as the Nymph gave her an exuberant hug.

John smiled at them fondly. “I’d hug you myself, but Jade’s doing a great job. You saved all of us, Calara. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she said, returning his smile over a verdant shoulder.

He waited for a few moments as everyone echoed his gratitude, and Jade returned to her seat.

“Ready for the Invictus?” Dana asked, waiting before proceeding.

“Yeah, go ahead. How bad is it?”

“That blast destroyed four Tachyon Lances and eleven Tachyon Cannons, plus all their turrets,” she began, pointing towards the underbelly where they’d narrowly avoided being obliterated by the Quantum Devastator.

“They gave us a real close shave,” John said grimly.

Dana nodded, then shifted the view to the Invictus’ upper levels. “Then we lost another two Tachyon Cannon turrets, a retro-thruster, and a shield projector when they unloaded on the topdeck. I also want to get out there and check the Quantum Flux Cannons. They’re so big, there’s no way they could’ve avoided everything they threw at us; I need to make sure that nothing punched through the armour.”

“Speaking of which...” he said, raising an eyebrow.

She gave him a helpless shrug. “The armour’s thrashed. You’re going to need to melt it down and just replace the lot.”

Tashana pointed to the right side of the Invictus’ underbelly. “That section seems okay.”

 “Yeah, I meant all the damaged bits,” Dana clarified. “Basically the entire topdeck, plus all the plating on the bottom that got singed by the Quantum Devastator.”

“Well, I can rebuild all the guns and turrets we lost,” Alyssa began, studying the holographic image. “If John strips and reshapes the armour, then me and Dana, plus the Collective can put it all back together. What do you think?”

“Sounds like a plan,” John agreed. “Shaping all those plates will be the most time consuming bit.”

Dana tapped a finger on her chin as she worked out how long it would take. “I reckon we should be able to get it all done in about two hours.”

Helene brightened after hearing that summary, then looked around at all the pensive faces. “That’s good news isn’t it? When I saw all that battle damage, I thought it would take a lot longer to fix.”

“You’re right, it could have been a lot worse,” John conceded. “Losing two hours is a setback but not a total disaster.”

“So why is everyone looking so unhappy?” she asked in confusion.

John and Calara exchanged a glance, then he replied, “We need to decide if we’re going to stay here and keep trying to wear down this invasion group, or if we use the wormhole generator to jump to Genwynn Station.”

The room went silent, with no one willing to be the first to offer their opinion.

Helene looked increasingly perplexed and blurted out, “But if we leave, there won’t be anyone left to protect Kehlarissa’s homeworld!”

“I know,” John said bleakly. He glanced at Calara and continued, “If we stay and keep attacking this group, will we be able to immobilise them all before we reach Venkarys?”

She ran her fingers through her hair and hesitated, reluctant to answer.

“I want your professional assessment, Captain Fernandez,” John said, his tone becoming firm. “We need to know exactly what are options are.”

Calara took a deep breath, then shook her head. “I don’t believe it’s possible, Admiral. Now that we know the dreadnought is here, we’ll have to be much more careful. We were able to inflict significant numbers of casualties at the beginning, but that was when we were ambushing them with mines. We withdrew from combat as soon as the dreadnought came into range, and it took much longer to reach us, because it was trying to protect three times the number of thrall fleets. Now the response time would be dramatically faster.”

“How risky would it be to continue fighting while in range of the dreadnought?”

She gestured towards the battered image of the Invictus. “If it lands a solid hit with the Quantum Devastator, we’ll be finished. Even if it just scores a glancing hit on the hull, we’ll be in big trouble. Then there are all the Quantum Flux Cannons and Tachyon Lances to worry about. We do have a significant advantage in mobility, but they’ve got more firepower, bigger shields, and a tougher hull. If we try to square off with the dreadnought, it’ll be a suicide mission... and that’s not even taking into account all the thrall fleets trying to kill us too.”

John took that in for a long moment, then turned to Irillith. “Can you show me the Venkalyn Homeworld?”

The Maliri princess nodded, and waved her fingers towards the console before Dana could hand her the remote. With a violet light glowing in her eyes, she found the requested data and displayed it through the holo-projector. Venkarys was a pristine Gaia-class planet, its surface covered in lush green forests and beautiful aquamarine seas. At one time it had hosted a far greater population, with dozens of highly populated cities spread out around the world. With the sharp decline in births, most of those metropolis had been abandoned to nature, with many of the Maliri retreating to the capital.

“How many people live on Venkarys?” he asked quietly.

“I don’t have access to accurate census records, but I’d estimate around 27 million,” Irillith replied, her expression equally as grim.

“27 million,” he murmured, his face paling. “Women... and children.”

\*Kehlarissa has ordered a massive evacuation and relocation program,\* Edraele informed him. \*Many civilians in the capital have been transported to nearby systems, or have scattered to previously abandoned urban areas. She has also been preparing underground evacuation complexes to hide and protect her people from orbital bombardment.\*

The mention of that terrible possibility brought back horrifying memories from his past. John shuddered as he remembered the brutal massacre by the Terran Federation on Galon Prime, and witnessing the bloody aftermath of the orbital bombardment that had crushed their rebellion.

“What about Genwynn Station?” Alyssa prompted Irillith, sensing that John was distracted by disturbing memories.

At Irillith’s command, an image of the Maliri trading station appeared before them. The space station was huge, having been extended many times over the past millennia, with vast habitation complexes added on to house the male population.

“I don’t have accurate population numbers for Genwynn either,” Irillith ruefully informed them. “But there could be upwards of 30 million Maliri males living there.”

“A quarter of your entire male population?” Rachel prompted her.

The House Valaden princess nodded in confirmation.

“Wait a minute...” Dana muttered, a sceptical frown on her face. “30 million? Are you sure? I know Genwynn is big, but they must be packing them in like sardines in there!”

Irillith hesitated and glanced back at the space station. “You’re right... that does seem somewhat implausible.”

Tashana suddenly burst out laughing. When everyone looked her way, shocked at her inappropriate outburst, she flushed with embarrassment.

“Sorry... I couldn’t help it,” she said with an apologetic frown.

“What made you laugh, honey?” John asked, waving away her apology.

“The males have been lying to the Matriarchs for centuries, and nobody suspected a thing. They aren’t all living on the border stations... they can’t be. Even with our dwindling population, just imagine how much food you’d need to supply for that many people.” She shook her head in admiration. “No, they must have settled on isolated planets near the periphery.”

Irillith stared at her wide-eyed. “You can’t be serious! What about the fleets patrolling the borders? They’re exclusively manned by female crews loyal to their matriarchs; if they spotted Maliri ships transporting people to unpopulated planets, they would have intervened, or at least informed their matriarch.”

“Right... if they spotted them,” Tashana said with a wry smirk of admiration.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Irillith asked, frowning at her sister.

“Well, we know that each of the trading stations is equipped with a Progenitor grade cloaking device... that the males have known about for centuries,” the former smuggler said with a raised eyebrow. “If the Ashanath were able to reverse engineer a Progenitor Power Core, how hard would it be for the Maliri males to do something similar?”

Irillith’s mouth fell open in shocked disbelief.

“Yes... I think we’ve greatly underestimated the ingenuity of our menfolk,” Tashana said with an admiring grin.

“But they didn’t say anything to us!” Dana protested. “Even after they agreed to move from the border stations.”

“Their society has survived on secrets and lies to protect themselves for centuries,” the Maliri archaeologist explained. “Is it really that hard to believe that they’d be wary of John, a self-proclaimed Progenitor?”

“I can’t believe Ceraden lied to us,” Calara said, looking hurt.

“To be fair, we never asked him about that outright,” John said, feeling defensive of his friend.

“A lie by omission then,” she said with a disapproving frown.

Rachel looked thoughtful for a moment, then shook her head. “It’s entirely possible that he doesn’t know.”

“He must do,” John said, looking sceptical. “Ceraden isn’t some underpaid clerk. He has a significant amount of wealth, status, and prestige.”

“True, but do you remember how shocked Ceraden was when Elder Natharion revealed how much he really knew about the Progenitors,” Rachel reminded them. “It seems pretty obvious to me that the senior males in their society aren’t sharing all their knowledge with the general population, especially with someone like Ceraden, who clearly doesn’t see eye-to-eye with the elders.”

“But wouldn’t Ceraden notice if people he knew started disappearing?” Jehanna asked, listening with great interest.

“Not if significant numbers of the new arrivals were immediately transferred off the station to a planet,” Rachel suggested with a wry smile. “How much attention would Ceraden pay to shuttle transfers? Very little, I’d imagine, especially if those transfers were conducted in secret, to cloaked vessels.”

“This is all fascinating,” Irillith said with a grimace. “But what are we going to do about the thrall invasion force heading towards Genwynn Station? Even if there aren’t quite so many males there as I originally thought, the station is still packed with huge numbers of people. Do you remember how many men we saw living in the habitation modules at Geniya?”

“You’re right, and if we do nothing to help them, they’ll be slaughtered by the Galkirans,” John said with a heavy sigh.

He looked back at the holographic depiction of the House Venkalyn homeworld and was torn with indecision. Both the planet and the border station desperately needed their assistance, but whichever one they chose, the other would be left defenceless. If he abandoned either of them to the merciless hands of the Galkiran invaders, John was under no illusion what their bleak fate would be.

As he argued internally with himself and tried to make the right decision, the interminable silence dragged on into minutes. The girls darted apprehensive glances at one another, waiting for John to give his final verdict.

Rachel cleared her throat to get his attention. “John, this it too big a decision to make alone. Should we all vote as a group to decide how to proceed?”

John hesitated, then opened his mouth to reply, but before he could utter a word, he was cut off by the girl sitting to his right.

“No, there isn’t going to be a vote,” Alyssa declared, slowly rising from her chair.

He looked at her in astonishment. “Excuse me?”

“We all know what we need to do,” she replied, her voice turning cold and hard. “If we leave Genwynn station unprotected, the Galkiran fleets will tear it to pieces. The population on Venkarys is nowhere near as vulnerable.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, bewildered by her surprising conclusion. “Genwynn used to be a defensive starbase, so it must have the same weapon batteries as Geniya. Edraele also dispatched Amlaril’s fleet to help defend the station, so they might be massively outnumbered, but they aren’t completely helpless. There’s nothing protecting Venkarys from the Galkirans.”

“True, but if the Galkirans defeat Genwynn, they’ll be able to demolish the station and murder everyone aboard. The situation on Venkarys is very different,” she stated, her tone emotionless and analytical. “This Progenitor doesn’t have a Quantum Annihilator with him to detonate planets. So even if his fleets bombarded every city on the planet into rubble, we’d only be looking at a death toll in the low millions. That means his invasion force would have to personally hunt down the population on Venkarys to exterminate them all, which would take them weeks, if not months... which would actually be to our advantage.”

John was stunned by her ruthlessly blunt appraisal of the situation, but Alyssa continued on undeterred.

“By that time, Maliri crews will have retrieved all of Larn’kelnar’s fleets, and we’d be able to crush the Galkiran invasion with sheer weight of numbers. If it means sacrificing twenty million to potentially save the lives of billions, it’s a trade we must make for the greater good.”

Now all of them were staring at Alyssa in shock.

“Don’t forget that the males are outnumbered twenty-to-one due to the Maliri gender imbalance. That means they are twenty times more valuable to the Maliri civilisation than their females. It doesn’t matter if there’s only a million males on Genwynn station; we still have to protect them, even if it means sacrificing twenty million females on Venkarys to save their lives.”

Alyssa looked around at the group, making brief eye contact with each of the girls, until they all dropped their gaze. Her stern expression softened slightly when she finally reached John.

“You’d never be able to abandon women and children,” she said gently. “So I’m making that decision for you.”

Turning on her heel, she strode out the door, with everyone else in the room watching her departure in mute horror.

Sakura turned to John, a look of desperation in her eyes. “You have to stop her! We can’t just sacrifice an entire world full of people!”

“She’s right...” Rachel said, her face a mask of regret. “About everything.”

“But we always find a way to save everyone!” Dana protested, looking shocked. “There must be some way to protect Genwynn and Venkarys!”

Calara shook her head, her expression bleak. “We don’t have the numbers or the firepower to take on a dreadnought and nine thrall fleets. If we try to stop them from reaching Venkarys, there’s no guarantee we could destroy all the thrall warships in time, and we still can’t go toe-to-toe with a dreadnought. You saw what happened this morning; there’s a high likelihood we’ll be destroyed in the battle, and then we won’t be able to save anybody. At least we have a fighting chance of protecting Genwynn station.”

Tashana reluctantly nodded in agreement. “If we throw our lives away on a suicide mission, then everyone’s doomed. The Maliri, the Terrans, the Trankarans, the Ashanath... the Progenitor will wipe them all out.”

“Our only chance of defeating this Progenitor is to lure him into a trap where we have the advantage,” Calara said bleakly. “That’s why the plan has always been to lure him to Kythshara; it’s the only way we can even the odds against his dreadnought.”

John let out a heavy sigh, then rose from his chair, and walked towards the door.

“Are you going to stop her?” Sakura asked, looking at him with desperate hope in her eyes.

He paused by the door, but didn’t look back. “Give me a few minutes alone with Alyssa.”

Nobody commented on his firm order, and John left the Briefing Room to walk onto the Bridge. His executive officer was seated in her usual spot on the Command Podium, her hands dancing over the console as she prepared coordinates for the Wormhole Generator.

“Don’t try to stop me, John,” she warned him, a stubborn set to her jaw.

“You know I can if I wanted to?” he asked quietly, as he walked up the ramp towards her.

Alyssa hesitated, then acknowledged he was right with a short nod.

He climbed up the illuminated steps to the Command Podium, then sat heavily in his chair. “There really isn’t anything we can do to save Venkarys, is there?” he asked, his voice bleak.

Before she could reply, Edraele’s telepathic voice filled his mind. \*No, John. You did everything you could to eliminate the Galkiran forces, but the Progenitor’s arrival has made that impossible. You only have one course of action left available now; you must try to save Genwynn station from destruction.\*

John leaned forward to his command console and began to deliberately tap in commands.

“Don’t, John...” Alyssa said quietly.

He ignored her and completed his search, then the holographic Sector Map was replaced with a zoomed in view of Venkarys.

“You’re just making it harder on yourself,” she continued, reaching over to stroke his hand in sympathy.

John stared at the Maliri cities, the gleaming gold of their elegant architecture visible from orbit. He knew that down on the surface, millions of women and children were going about their lives, oblivious to the horrors approaching from space.

“I can’t do it,” he finally admitted. “I can’t just abandon them.”

\*We know,\* Edraele said softly. \*So we’re going to shoulder that burden for you.\*

Before he could react, Alyssa gestured towards her console, using telekinesis to activate the Wormhole Generator.

John’s protest died on his lips as he realised there was no stopping the inevitable now, and he watched helplessly as the wormhole began to form in front of the Invictus’ bow. The black vortex swirled towards them, enveloping the front of the battlecruiser, then his stomach lurched as he was propelled through the rift in space to a location hundreds of light years away.

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Alone in his bedroom, a blue-skinned male slept soundly in his bed, bathed in the muted light of dawn that shined through the sweeping crystal window. A jarring alarm shattered the serene silence, jolting the Maliri awake. He threw back the covers, then climbed purposefully from his bed, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

“Shael, begin morning routine,” he commanded, as he stretched his muscles in preparation.

The opaque filter on the windows faded away, giving him a spectacular view of space. A thousand twinkling stars greeted him with their cheerful glow, shining brightly against a breathtaking vista of nebulae that were formed in every shape and colour imaginable. The Maliri admired the view for a long moment, then he dropped to the floor and began his first set of pushups.

While he worked his muscles, a synthetic female voice began to list his schedule. “At 8AM you have a meeting with Kailmer to discuss the logistics of evacuating the station. At 9AM you have a staff conference to assess changes in xeno relations. At 10AM you have a-”

 “Shael, cancel the 9AM meeting and reschedule,” he said between reps.

“Do you wish me to send out notifications, or will you inform your staff personally?” the VI assistant intoned.

“Inform them of the new time,” he requested. “And initiate a meeting with Elder Aldorellan if he’s available. It’s a high priority, so demand that he clears some space in his schedule.”

“Dispatching notifications...” the automated voice politely informed him. “Do you wish to continue listing your schedule?”

“Not yet.”

There was a long pause while the Maliri continued his workout, the only sound his deep breathing.

A melodic chime from the comms interface reverberated around the bedroom. “You have an incoming call from Elder Aldorellan.”

“Accept,” the man said, tucking his legs under him and smoothly rising to his full height.

The azure face of a very angry senior Maliri appeared. “Do you have any idea what time it is? What’s the meaning behind making these demands at this ungodly hour?! Where’s your respect for your elders? I need my rest!”

“Cease your whining, you grumpy old Nae’jyre,” he replied, crudely insulting the venerable Maliri with a grin. “I know you’re always up at the crack of dawn.”

Elder Aldorellan dropped his angry facade and chuckled in amusement. “Alright, I admit it; I was just enjoying a nice cup of hot Bialaer tea. What’s this about, Darthas?”

“You know full well, and I’m not discussing it over station comms,” he replied, reaching for a towel to wipe down his bare torso.

“Alright. I’ll make sure I’m available,” Aldorellan agreed.

Darthas gave him a respectful nod, but before he could say another word, an urgent note chimed from the comms interface.

“One moment, Aldorellan,” he requested politely.

The old Maliri frowned as he glanced at his own comms interface. “A high priority message from Traffic Control?”

“You too?” Darthas asked in surprise.

Aldorellan nodded, then his eyes widened as he studied the incoming missive. “Looks like we’ll be having that meeting a little earlier than expected...”

Darthas opened up the message, then quickly scanned through the contents. Genwynn Traffic Control had alerted him that they had granted landing permission to the Invictus, and Lord Baen’thelas was requesting an urgent audience with all the elder males aboard the Trading Station.

“I’ll see you in Docking Bay 37, Elder Darthas,” Aldorellan smirked, before closing the call.

He grimaced, still unused to being addressed with his new title. The honorific was meant as a gesture of respect for their senior leaders, but Darthas still felt like a man in his prime. He’d always associated the elders as being geriatric old men, more like Aldorellan who was now pushing his two-sixties. With a sigh of resignation, he remembered that he was only two decades away from his own two-hundredth birthday, and it wouldn’t be long until age finally started catching up with him.

After quickly showering and dressing, Darthas pulled on his gleaming golden armour. Unlike his peers, he refused to adorn the suit in an ostentatious display of gemstones. The only concession he made to his rank, was the trio of exquisite sapphires that were set together on the left side of his breastplate. He brushed a finger across the precious jewels, each one worth a small fortune, but he would have traded all three in a heartbeat for the girls they represented. Shaking off his maudlin mood, he donned his helmet, then left his suite.

Genwynn Station was always busy, but at this time of the morning there was considerably less foot traffic along its golden halls that usual. Darthas left the secure zone that was intended solely for Maliri inhabitants, and entered the public area of the trading station. Despite the early hour, there were always greedy merchants ready to set up for a days’ trading, trying to steal an advantage over their competitors.

He glanced at a pair of Yelneg who were bickering in their shrill voices with a Skerawk, the business partners arguing over the pre-arranged price of his cargo. The brightly plumed avian countered that the situation had changed, and with heightened tensions between the Brimorians and all their neighbours, his hold full of Tophnil eels was worth at least double his original quote. One of the Yelneg furiously waved around a holo-pad, shoving it in the Skerawk’s beaked face, and demanding he stick to the original quote for the prized delicacy.

“Maliri!” one of the Yelneg squeaked, rotating around on its stumpy legs and moving to block his path. “I demand an adjudication! You must enforce our legally binding contract!”

“There’s nothing binding about the price!” the Skerawk squawked indignantly.

“We paid you in advance!” the other Yelneg yelled, his fungus cap vibrating to match his temper.

The other drummed his legs on the deck. “It’s all in the contract!”

“I read the contract,” the Skerawk chirped smugly. “You forgot about the clause that includes unexpected market fluctuations.”

“That was just meant to reimburse you for any differences in purchasing price!” the contract-wielding Yelneg shrieked. “Not so you could gouge us for more profit!”

Shaking his head in disbelief, Elder Darthas looked down at the belligerent fungi. “Why haven’t you heeded our warnings about how dangerous it is to be here on this station right now? Are you unaware that the Maliri are at war and facing an invasion?”

“How can anyone be a threat to you?” one of the Yelneg scoffed. “Everyone knows the Maliri have eclipsed all other species in technology.”

“And we’ve sunk our entire fortune into this venture!” his partner shrilled. “But this pirate won’t give us what’s rightfully ours!”

“My cargo will be rightfully yours when you pay me the rest of my transportation fees,” the Skerawk said, his beak clicking for emphasis. “It’s all in the contract.”

“You lousy swindler!” the Yelneg with the holo-pad screeched, before lowering his domed head and charging at the avian.

The Skerawk flapped his wings twice in rapid succession, and swept gracefully into the air, placing a clawed foot on the Yelneg’s head to launch himself further out of reach.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Darthas quietly slipped away, hurrying past the squabbling merchants with a sigh of relief. As he strode briskly through the Mercantile Zone, he was surprised to see that the Yelneg and Skerawk were far from being alone on the station, and dozens more merchants were setting up trading stands for the day. It always amazed him how much value other species placed in material wealth, but trying to trade in what could soon be a warzone seemed to be indulging their greed to the point of madness.

When he reached Docking Bay 37, he entered through the reinforced doors, then his attention was immediately drawn to the Terran battlecruiser that dominated the hangar. The vessel had a glistening white hull, which gleamed as brightly as a golden-hulled Maliri vessel would in the illumination from the overhead lights. That made the ugly blackened scar that ran down the Invictus’ hull even more pronounced, and he stared at the scorched ship in fearful fascination, wondering what could have caused such a terrible blast.

Movement caught his eye, and Darthas realised that his two fellow elders had arrived before him, and were now holding a conversation with the ship’s crew. They beckoned him over, and as he approached, he immediately recognised Lord Baen’thelas from the holo-conference in Geniya. The Progenitor had cut an imposing figure over a holo connection, but meeting him in person was even more daunting.

“Elder Darthas,” John said, nodding to him respectfully. “Thank you for agreeing to meet with me on such short notice. We’re very short on time, so would you mind if we skip any lengthy introductions and pleasantries? I’ve been informed that you’re the leader of the Institute of External Affairs?”

“Yes, that is correct, Lord Baen’thelas,” Darthas replied. “And foregoing the tedious diplomatic dance would be a welcome relief.”

John nodded in agreement. “I couldn’t agree more, and please just call me John. This is Alyssa, she’s my primary matriarch.”

The stunning blonde beside him gestured towards the airlock. “Would you gentlemen care to join us in our ship? We can relax in comfort there, without any risk of any electronic eavesdropping.”

The three Maliri elders immediately accepted his invitation, then followed the couple inside. Darthas remembered the statuesque blonde from the meeting, but she was even more breathtakingly beautiful in the flesh. He was torn between being captivated by John’s magnetic presence, and the irresistible allure of the shapely Terran teenager.

After an explanation on how the grav-tubes worked, they all entered together, and Darthas did his best to avoid staring at the blonde. Alyssa glanced his way as they rose through the decks, briefly locking eyes with him as he sneaked a peek at her through his opaque helmet, and gave him a coy smile. Despite his face being completely obscured by the helmet, there was no mistaking the knowing look, and he blushed furiously, feeling like a youngster being caught with his hand in the proverbial cookie jar.

John led them out of the grav-tubes into a corridor, and after a short walk, they entered what was unmistakeably a lounge.

“Feel free to remove your armour,” John said, as he approached the women waiting for him by the sofas. Gesturing towards the identical Maliri twins, he added, “As you can see, we’re all well past any need to keep up that pretence.”

Darthas gaped wide-eyed at the pair, instantly recognising them from the meeting. He’d found it difficult to avoid staring at Alyssa, but the twins were almost transcendently beautiful, somehow managing to eclipse the Terran teenager. Instead of the usual dark hair cut in the short style favoured by most Maliri females, their white tresses flowed like a glorious wave over their shoulders and down their backs. He could only imagine what it would be like to run his fingers through those silky locks.

“Elder Darthas?” John prompted him. “Would you like anything to drink?”

Blinking in shock, the Maliri realised he’d been caught staring moon-eyed at the twins. His colleagues had already removed their armour, and were now seated on the sofas, waiting patiently for him to join them.

“You’ll have to forgive him,” Elder Aldorellan said with a wicked grin. “Darthas isn’t quite as decrepit as Lordual and me. I fear his senses have been addled by your charming young hostesses.”

Darthas fumbled at the clasp to his helmet, mortified at his own behaviour. “Please forgive me, Lord Baen’thelas. I can’t apologise enough for...”

“Shh, it’s alright,” Alyssa said softly, moving over to him and placing her hand on top of his twitching hand. “Let me help. You’re all fingers and thumbs.”

With surprising strength she carefully moved his gauntlet aside, then released the seal that locked his helmet to the suit. She reached up to remove the armoured helm, revealing his face and the dark indigo bloom of embarrassment that coloured his cheeks.

“We belong to John, but we don’t mind you looking,” she whispered, giving him an indulgent smile. Glancing back over her shoulder at the twins, Alyssa added, “Would you girls mind giving him a hand? You’re better at removing Maliri armour than I am.”

Irillith and Tashana divested him of his armour plates in remarkably short time, then Alyssa clasped his hand and led him over to the sofa.

As drawn as Darthas was to John’s captivating presence, he couldn’t bring himself to look the man in the eyes. “I humbly apologise for any offence I might have caused, Lord Baen’thelas. I have no excuse for my deplorable lack of propriety.”

“Don’t worry about it. No one is offended,” John said, looking at him with sympathy. “You’re reacting instinctively to my presence, and the changes I’ve made to Irillith and Tashana.”

“Your friends requested coffee. I made you one as well, I hope that’s alright?” a striking brunette asked, giving him a kind smile.

“Ah yes, thank you,” he said gratefully, startled to realise he hadn’t even noticed the other women in the room, he’d been so distracted by the twins.

“I guess you missed the introductions earlier,” John said, slipping his arm around the brunette when she sat beside him. “This is Calara. The redhead over there is called Dana, the brunette next to her is Rachel, and the girls directly opposite you are Sakura and Jehanna. I won’t go into their specific roles on the ship, but they make up my command crew and combat teams.”

“It’s an honour to meet you all,” Darthas said, as they each greeted him with a friendly wave. He straightened his back, then looked purposefully at John. “So, how can we assist you?”

John looked at each of the three elders. “How much do you know about the Galkiran invasion?”

The Maliri exchanged glances, then Lordual spoke up, “Nothing more than the information you disclosed during the meeting on Geniya.”

Darthas nodded in agreement. “We know that another Progenitor has invaded Maliri territory and that you’ve requested we evacuate the border stations as a precautionary measure. We’ve been making as many preparations as possible so that we can quickly evacuate Genwynn when our fleets arrive.”

John exchanged a pensive glance with Alyssa, then turned his attention back to the Maliri elders. “The Galkirans are heading directly for this station. They’ll be here in approximately eight hours.”

Lordual inhaled sharply, and Aldorellan wavered, his azure face turning a pale shade of blue.

“They’re coming here? Today?” Darthas blurted out, gaping at John in horrified disbelief.

“I’m sorry we couldn’t give you more warning,” John replied, his face shadowing with profound regret. “We’ve been trying to delay the Galkirans as much as possible, but they ended up splitting their forces. We’ve been whittling them down, but there’s a limit to how much we can do with just the Invictus.”

“How many?” Darthas asked, feeling as badly shaken as Aldorellan looked.

“Maybe ten fleets so far?” John said with a shrug. “I haven’t been keeping count.”

“We’ve crippled 54 battleships, 351 cruisers, and 409 destroyers,” Calara stated, without unwavering certainty.

“You’ve destroyed *eight* *hundred* warships... alone?” Darthas whispered in awe.

“No, we haven’t destroyed any of them. We crippled their engines to maroon them in space,” John clarified, his expression grim. “The thralls manning those ships are fanatically loyal to the Progenitor leading them... but they’re really just his innocent victims. If we can kill that bastard, they won’t be a threat anymore.”

The Maliri elders exchanged more shocked glances.

“We inflicted most of the damage to them in the first couple of days,” Calara explained. “Then they split their forces and we’ve been ambushing the group heading towards the Core Worlds.”

“How many warships are heading towards Genwynn now?” Darthas asked with trepidation.

“Another ten fleets,” John said in a bleak monotone.

Aldorellan inhaled sharply, then clutched at his chest, a stricken look on his face.

“Shit!” John exclaimed, his eyes snapping to the second brunette. “Rachel, he’s having a heart attack!”

“Aldorellan!” Darthas blurted out in panic, reaching for his gasping friend.

“Don’t worry,” Rachel said, her voice calm and reassuring as she darted to the old Maliri’s side. She placed her hand on his chest and added, “The pain will be gone in just a few seconds.”

Darthas clasped the elder’s hand, then watched in astonishment as a grey mist emerged from the Terran girl and enveloped his writhing friend. Within moments, the spasms abated and Aldorellan relaxed, the tension leaving his body.

“Is he...?” Darthas asked, turning fearfully to the brunette.

“Fully healed? Yes he is,” she replied, glancing at him with a teasing smile. Turning to frown at Aldorellan, she gently admonished him, “You need to take better care of yourself. All that sugar in those sweet teas aren’t good for your arteries. Now, would you like me to wind the clock back a bit? Give you another forty years or so?”

The old man looked up at her in wonder, then silently nodded his assent.

“Just relax, you’ll feel as good as new,” she murmured, the comforting glow brightening in intensity.

“What are you doing to him?” Darthas asked, unable to believe his friend had already undergone a complete recovery.

“Just giving him a check-up, and fixing any other health issues he might have,” Rachel replied, her grey-eyed gaze flicking in his direction. “Would you like the two-for-one deal? If so, just keep holding onto Aldorellan’s hand.”

Darthas was too shocked to reply, but he couldn’t release his friend’s hand if he wanted to, because Aldorellan suddenly clenched hold in a steely grip, with a strength he didn’t know the old man possessed. The healing mists flowed across their clasped hands, then swept across his body, the soothing wave making him gasp with relief.

“Three-for-one special?” Rachel murmured, holding out her other hand in invitation to Lordual.

He looked at John for confirmation, who gave him an encouraging nod. The Maliri elder then gratefully accepted her slender hand with his own calloused fingers. Rachel worked quickly and efficiently, and it didn’t take long for her to nod with satisfaction as her healing mists began to recede. She released her patients and retook her seat, then casually reached for the cup of coffee that she’d been drinking before being interrupted.

Aldorellan sat bolt upright on the sofa, his face reflecting his shock. “The twinge in my back... that pain in my arm... they’re all gone!”

Darthas stared at his hands in astonishment. The aches around his joints after all the heavy lifting had vanished as if by magic. “The same with my hands!”

Lordual got up from his seat, then did an impromptu jig, a huge grin spreading across his face. “I haven’t felt this good in a century!”

“You’re welcome,” Rachel said, smiling in amusement at his antics.

The trio all thanked her profusely, each of them awed by her priceless gift.

Clearing his throat, John said, “I’m sorry we scared you that badly. I appreciate you’re all feeling a bit overwhelmed at the moment, but we’re running out of time, and we still have some important things to discuss.”

“Of course,” Lordual said, blushing with embarrassment as he returned to his seat.

“What can we do to help?” Darthas asked, leaning forward and listening attentively.

John paused for a moment, trying to organise his thoughts. “Alright, let me just put all our cards on the table. I’m feeling too drained to mess around.”

“Please do,” Aldorellan said, gesturing towards John to proceed. “We’ll endeavour to be as forthcoming with you in return.”

Darthas frowned and studied the Progenitor more closely. He felt closer to him now, closer to all of them in fact, and could tell that despite their friendly manner, they were all deeply troubled.

“What’s wrong? he blurted out, looking at John, then each of the girls with concern. “I didn’t notice it before, but you all seem upset by something very serious.”

John deflated and looked away, unwilling to meet his questioning gaze.

“We were trying to stop the other invasion group from reaching Venkarys,” Calara quietly admitted, her voice full of regret. “Then the Progenitor ambushed us and damaged the Invictus. So we were forced to make a horrible choice: either keep fighting a losing battle to save Venkarys, or give up, and jump here to protect Genwynn station instead.”

Darthas was astonished to see what seemed like a flicker of profound guilt cross Lord Baen’thelas’ handsome face.

Lordual and Aldorellan exchanged shocked looks, as the weight of that decision sank in.

“Genwynn station is not defenceless,” Aldorellan declared. “We have hidden defences that could be used in a dire emergency. I asked Kivessin on Geniya to share that information with you.”

“Yeah, he told us all about that,” Dana said with a conflicted frown. “Even if you trashed the habitation modules to release the defence platform, it still wouldn’t be enough firepower.”

“You’re facing ten fleets,” Calara gently reminded him. “You might be able to hold off two, maybe three on your own, but you’re too heavily outnumbered.”

“Is there no chance of survival?” Darthas asked, his initial alarm fading into grim stoicism.

“There is now that we’re here,” Dana replied. “But we’ve got a shitload to do.”

John let out a heavy sigh, then squared his shoulders and faced them again. “If we’re going to have any chance of protecting you, we need to know exactly what the situation is here at Genwynn.”

“You have our full cooperation,” Lordual said with conviction.

“Alright. Let’s start with precisely how many people you’ve got on the station?” John asked, looking at each of them in turn.

“Just over 850,000 men and boys,” Darthas replied.

John glanced at Tashana, who returned it with a pointed look of her own.

“That’s... less... than we were expecting,” the House Valaden princess said with a wry smile.

“Ah,” the elder Maliri answered noncommittally.

“Which is a good thing,” Calara interjected before things got awkward. “It gives us more options.”

“Edraele dispatched one of her fleets to Genwynn, but it’s not going to arrive for another two hours,” John explained. “We’ve got two choices. We can either use her fleet to try to defend the station, or we can load as many of your people aboard her ships as possible and evacuate the habitation zones.”

“Fuck yeah!” Dana exclaimed, perking up immediately. “Then we can jettison all the useless addons, and cut this bad boy loose!”

“How much of a difference would Amlaril’s fleet make in the battle?” John asked Calara.

“Not as much as a Progenitor grade starbase,” she replied with an eager grin. “I agree with Dana. We should use the Maliri fleet to evacuate the station.”

Irillith reluctantly shook her head. “Even if you packed her ships full of civilians, there’s no way you could fully evacuate everyone aboard Genwynn. We’d need the Brimorian transports for that.”

“They’re probably still evacuating Genirath station,” Tashana said, ruefully shaking her head.

“They actually finished yesterday morning,” Alyssa informed them. “The transports are currently on their way back towards the homeworlds.”

“My point is that we can’t fully evacuate the station,” Irillith clarified.

Calara looked thoughtful for a moment, then said, “We might not need to. Our highest priority is to just safely evacuate all the civilians from the habitation zones, so we can jettison the additional modules and activate Genwynn’s defensive capabilities.”

“That’s more feasible, but then we’d still be defending a starbase crammed full of civilians,” Irillith said, frowning sceptically.

“If we commandeer any civilian vessels in the system, we can move even more people from Genwynn before the battle,” Sakura suggested. “I spotted a number of merchant vessels docked in the hangars as we approached the station.”

John glanced at the elders. “Can we leave you to handle impounding those ships and prepping them to evacuate civilians?”

Darthas nodded in agreement. “I’ll handle that personally. Do you wish to reimburse them if we jettison their cargo?”

“Whatever it takes,” John said with a shrug. “I was a trader once. I would have helped out, no matter what the personal cost.”

The Maliri chuckled as he recalled the fierce squabble between the Yelneg and the Skerawk. “I’m not sure our clientele share your altruistic sentiments, but we’ll take the necessary steps to ensure their cooperation.”

“You’ll need to move quickly,” Calara warned him. “The Galkiran fleets are very fast, and they’ll be swarming the system when they get here. The last thing we need is a convoy of slow-moving freighters packed with refugees begging for protection.”

“I’ll contact station security as soon as we finish this meeting,” Darthas promised her.

“It’s a shame there aren’t any other ships nearby,” Dana said, waggling her eyebrow suggestively. “It’d be super helpful if they were equipped with a cloaking device as well. Then we could stuff them full of civilians and not even have to worry about them safely escaping.”

“Very smooth,” Rachel said, rolling her eyes at the redhead.

The Maliri elders did their best not to visibly react with shocked disbelief to her painfully unsubtle request, but they couldn’t help making fleeting eye contact with one another.

John rubbed a hand across his weary face. “Alright, I get that you still don’t trust the matriarchs as far as you could throw them, but I don’t really care about that. All that matters to me is saving as many Maliri lives as possible. Have you been secretly building cloak-capable ships? We figured that’s how you must be moving most of the males to whatever planet you’ve colonised.”

Elder Aldorellan made a strange strangled noise, that had everyone looking at him in alarm.

Rachel shook her head. “He’s fine, there’s no way he’s having another heart attack. You’re just shocked at how much we figured out, right Aldorellan?”

The elder Maliri buried his face in his hands and studiously avoided answering her question.

“Come on, just be honest with us,” John said, looking across the coffee table at Darthas. “We abandoned the House Venkalyn homeworld to protect Genwynn instead. You owe a huge debt to all those women and children who are sacrificing their lives for you. Making sure that as many people survive as possible at Genwynn will honour their sacrifice.”

“We... can’t,” Darthas gasped, horribly conflicted. “We all swore blood oaths... on the lives of our children.”

“That you’d never speak a word to outsiders about the secrets you’re protecting?” Alyssa gently prompted him.

He took a deep breath, then nodded in confirmation.

“You trust us and want to help... but you don’t want to break your oath?” she asked perceptively.

Darthas nodded again.

Alyssa rose from her seat beside John, then knelt on the floor in front of the Maliri elder. “You don’t have to say a word,” she said, her voice warm and reassuring. Clasping his hands, she looked deep into his eyes. “Just relax and focus on me. When you feel me reach out and touch your mind, just welcome me inside. You won’t be speaking a word, and you won’t be betraying your oath.”

He hesitated for a moment, then gave her a final nod of consent.

After witnessing Rachel’s psychic abilities first hand, it wasn’t quite so shocking when Alyssa’s eyes began to glow with a pure white light. Darthas felt the tentative touch to his subconscious, the telepathic contact little more than a gentle caress. In that brief moment, he felt strangely connected to the blonde girl, and could sense that her intentions towards him were benign. Relaxing with that comforting reassurance, he did as she’d asked and didn’t fight back when she pushed against his subconscious again.

Time seemed to fly by, entranced as he was by the captivating beauty kneeling on the floor before him. He noticed a coy smile appear on her face as he admired her flawless features, and was jolted by the realisation that the telepath could almost certainly hear his every thought. Feeling guilty, he closed his eyes, then waited patiently for her to finish.

Alyssa gently squeezed his hand, notifying him that she had completed her psychic task. He opened his eyes again and was startled by the strange expression on her face. Instead of giving him a teasing look, or even a reproachful one for those admiring glances, her enchanting blue eyes were filled with sympathy.

She rose to her feet, then leaned down to give him a tender kiss on the cheek. “I’m so sorry, Darthas,” she whispered in his ear. “It might not have seemed like it at the end, but I promise you... they all loved you very much.”

He felt his eyes well up with tears, and just managed to choke back a sob. Her gentle compassion stirred up all the agonising grief he’d tried to suppress for the last century.

“Darthas, are you alright?” Aldorellan asked with concern, darting a reproachful look at the psychic matriarch. “What did she do to you?”

Shaking his head in denial, he managed to smile at the blonde. “Thank you.”

She patted his hand, then returned to John’s side. They made brief eye-contact, then John relaxed, some of the tension easing from his tense shoulders.

“We’ll leave overseeing the evacuation in your capable hands,” he said, looking meaningfully at each of the three elders. “But I do have one request to make. We’re able to make cloaked mines, which have been incredibly effective against the Galkiran fleets. If you’re able to supply us with as many torpedo warheads and strike craft sized cloaking devices as possible, we’ll be able to use them to destroy huge numbers of their warships.”

Lordual hesitated, until he received nods of approval from his fellow elders. “We do have the required components,” he cautiously conceded. “At this short notice, the most we’ll be able to supply is perhaps 200 warheads and 50 cloaking devices. Would that be sufficient?”

Dana gave him an enthusiastic thumbs up. “That would awesome, thanks!”

“We’ll be making repairs for the next two hours,” John explained to his three guests. “After we’ve done as much to help out here as we can, we’ll intercept the Galkiran fleets and start harassing them as they approach Genwynn.”

Alyssa touched his hand and raised an eyebrow.

He nodded in agreement, then faced the Maliri again. “As I was saying, we have a few important tasks to complete here before we can depart. Your priority will be to make sure everyone is safely evacuated from the habitation modules, so that when we return, we can separate Genwynn from the extended superstructure and prepare the starbase for battle.”

Elder Aldorellan sat more confidently, firm resolve in his eyes. “We’ve been preparing for this moment for a long time, Lord Baen’thelas. We always knew that someday, the starbases would be used to defend against invaders.”

“Genwynn will give us our best shot at really hammering their invasion force,” John agreed, rising from his seat. “We’re facing a very tough fight, but I know you’ll do everything you can to help us secure victory. Between Genwynn station, the Invictus, and all the minefields we’ll be dragging them through, the Galkirans will rue the day that they decided to invade Maliri territory.”

The three Maliri males stood as well, filled with a renewed sense of purpose.

“We won’t let you down,” Darthas said with conviction. “I’ll make sure the rest of the station is evacuated, if I have to drag every last man out of there myself.”

“Let’s hope they’ll be a bit more cooperative than that,” John said with a smile.

“They will be,” Lordual said. “The vote to return to the homeworlds was nearly unanimous. We trust you... and can see that the matriarchs have had a change of heart under your guidance. Everyone is excited to be reunited again and build a new society together with the females.”

“Everyone?” Dana asked, raising an eyebrow again.

He hesitated, then shrugged in resignation. “Everyone. As you can probably imagine, the younger males are most enthusiastic about being warmly greeted by a huge population of women, who have been yearning for their return.”

“You have been sorely missed,” John said with frank honesty. “Most of the Maliri women I’ve met are longing to start a family, but many of them had given up any hope of ever meeting a male. They’re nice girls and nothing like the self-obsessed nobility you’ve probably encountered out here on the border stations.”

“That’s very reassuring to hear,” Darthas said, looking thoughtful.

“Give them a chance,” Alyssa said with a reassuring smile. “You won’t regret it.”

The three elders nodded politely, then followed John as he guided them out to the docking bay.

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The glorious yellow sun crept over the horizon, turning the dark skies a rich purple, quickly followed by a relentless progression through the full spectrum of warm hues. Elenrayelle was oblivious to the spectacular sunrise that shone down on the capital city, her attention on the hundreds of reports detailing the evacuation from Venkarys. Her weary concentration was broken by an urgent message flashing on the comms interface, and when she saw who it was, she quickly answered the call.

“Good morning, Matriarch,” the planetary governor said, respectfully bowing her head. When she looked up again and faced the screen, she was startled to see another woman at Kehlarissa’s side. “And good morning to you, Queen Edraele.”

“Hello, Elenrayelle,” Kehlarissa replied. She studied her with concern, then added, “You’re looking tired; have you been up all night?”

The governor gave her a weary nod. “I hadn’t planned to,” she replied weakly. “There was just so much that needed to be done...”

“We’re both very proud of your diligence,” Edraele said, her lovely voice filled with genuine warmth. “I know you’re making a tremendous difference to the lives of all the people on Venkarys.”

“I’m trying my best,” Elenrayelle said with a shy smile, unused to hearing such heartfelt praise.

Kehlarissa nibbled anxiously at her lower lip, the normally arrogant Maliri noblewoman looking uncharacteristically unsettled and upset. “Elenrayelle... I’m afraid I have some bad news.”

“Oh? What is it?” the planetary governor asked, feeling a tremor of panic when she heard the fear in her matriarch’s voice.

The leader of House Venkalyn glanced up at Edraele, looking at her with a silent plea.

Placing a reassuring hand on the younger woman’s shoulder, Edraele locked eyes with the most senior authority figure on the Venkalyn homeworld. “Baen’thelas inflicted massive casualties on the Galkiran fleets. They’ve single-handedly destroyed over 800 warships.”

Elenrayelle’s eyes widened in astonishment as she broke into a broad grin. “That’s incredible news, my Queen! I can hardly believe it! Have the Galkirans routed and given up on the invasion?”

Edraele shook her head. “I’m afraid not. In the last battle, Baen’thelas’ ship was damaged and he was forced to withdraw. The enemy Progenitor has join those warships and they continue to advance towards Venkarys.”

The Maliri bureaucrat gasped, and sat rigidly in her chair. “But Lord Baen’thelas will return after he’s repaired his ship?” she asked plaintively.

Looking at her with sympathy, Edraele let out a heavy sigh. “The Galkirans are threatening Genwynn station as well. As there is no way Baen’thelas can eliminate the rest of the thrall forces now that they’re being protected by a dreadnought, he was left with no other choice but to attempt to defend Genwynn.”

“So we’re on our own? There’s no one to defend us?!” Elenrayelle blurted out, bordering on panic.

Edraele responded with a solemn nod. “At their current rate of progress, the Galkirans will reach Venkarys in approximately six hours. You must do everything you can to make sure you’ve dispersed the population as widely around the planet as possible. Cities will be an obvious target, and the most likely to be the focus of their attacks.”

“Six hours...” the governor whispered, trembling with fear.

“I know you’re scared, Elenrayelle, but you need to snap out of it!” Edraele said sharply, the razor-edged lash of her tongue making the administrator jump.

“Please forgive me, my Queen,” she whimpered, bowing her head in contrition.

“There’s nothing to forgive; you’d have to be crazy not to be frightened,” Edraele said, her tone full of warmth and sympathy again. “But your survival, and that of all the Maliri on your homeworld, depends on you being brave and clear-headed in this crisis. Do you understand?”

Taking a shuddering breath, the governor nodded. “I’ll try to be brave.”

“We believe in you,” Edraele said with conviction. “Now, we might lose communication with you anytime now, so it’s imperative that you listen closely. Warn everyone to stay away from the cities. If the Galkirans do initiate a planetary bombardment, all the major urban areas will be their primary targets.”

“I’ve tried, but some stubbornly refuse to listen,” she pleaded with the Maliri Queen. “Most have done what you asked... scattering to the countryside and finding refuge in abandoned areas.”

“That you’ve tried your best is all we can ask of you,” Edraele said, giving her a reassuring smile. “Make sure you find shelter too, Elenrayelle. Help is coming, and when this invasion is over, I promise that you’ll be richly rewarded for your service to our people.”

“Thank you, my Queen,” she said, feeling a flicker of hope wavering in her chest.

Kehlarissa opened her mouth to speak, but the signal abruptly cut out, leaving the governor staring at a blank holo-screen. Elenrayelle’s first instinct was to panic, but she tightly gripped her desk and concentrated on keeping her breathing calm and steady. When she felt in control again, she rose from her seat, then strode out of her office.

She was startled to see that her administrative assistants were all present as well, and judging by their haggard appearance, they’d also been working through the night. Elenrayelle felt an unfamiliar surge of civic pride at seeing their diligence, knowing that they all felt the same stirrings of loyalty and respect for Baen’thelas and his beautiful queen.

“Ladies, may I have your attention please,” she said quietly. “The Galkiran invaders will reach Venkarys very soon. We must send out one final warning to the citizens to abandon the cities... then our duty to the people is done. After that, we must seek shelter ourselves.”

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John stood beside the Soulforge and watched as it channelled his will, pouring a steady stream of liquefied metal into the components he pictured in his mind. A retro-thruster for the Valkyrie was a straightforward item to build, so his mind wandered, dwelling on all the decisions they’d made that led up to this point. He’d trusted Calara implicitly and taken a step back, letting her take the lead with the tactics and strategies she employed to deal with the Galkiran invaders.

He couldn’t help feeling that he might have overburdened the young woman, incredibly gifted as she was, and that maybe if he’d been more actively involved, events might have turned out differently. As he mulled that ugly thought over, he grimaced and rubbed his temple, wishing he could scrub it from his mind. Calara had performed magnificently, scoring an 800 to 0 kill ratio, if you considered incapacitated ships to count as a victory, which he most definitely did.

The truth was that they were facing impossible odds before the invasion even started. Decisions that they’d made months ago had led them to this position, and while some could potentially be considered mistakes, the vast majority had been the best he could achieve at the time. John realised that it was pointless trying to second guess himself. They weren’t able to change the past, only learn from it, and if they managed to survive this disastrous invasion, he’d make sure they’d learn from whatever mistakes they made.

“Are you alright, Master?” Ailita asked, her cool hands caressing his neck from behind.

“Oh, that feels amazing,” he replied, tilting his head forward to give her better access.

“You work too hard,” she whispered sensually in his ear. “Your poor muscles are aching for relief.”

“Shaping all those armoured plates was a real grind,” he admitted, leaning into her skilful touch.

“This one can make you feel much better if you take your shirt off,” the sultry catgirl promised, a hand slipping down to wrap around his torso and stroke his muscular physique.

He chuckled as her hand dipped lower, finding his stiffening length, and coaxing it to full hardness. “Ailita, I think you must be the best personal assistant ever.”

“Really?!” she gushed, pressing her deliciously perky bust into his back as she hugged him from behind.

“I don’t think I’ve ever felt so well looked after,” he admitted, leaning back for a kiss.

\*Hey, what about me?!\* Alyssa protested, but he could tell by her tone she was only joking.

\*You’re less of a personal assistant, and more of a professional teaser,\* he replied, getting his own back for once.

She laughed, the melodic sound echoing through his subconscious. \*I prefer to think of myself as a purveyor of exquisitely beautiful treasures for you to enjoy.\*

\*I can’t really argue with that, can I?\* he asked, glancing at the Soulforge and checking that the retro-thruster was now complete. \*I’m done here. I’ll be heading out in a minute.\*

Alyssa didn’t immediately reply, but when she did, her jovial tone had turned serious. \*Your thoughts went to unpleasant places for a moment back there.\*

\*I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to subject you to that,\* John said with regret. \*I’ve been looking for new ways to blame myself for how things have turned out, and Calara accidentally got caught up in the crossfire.\*

\*If it’s any consolation, she’s spent the last two hours blaming you,\* Alyssa said solemnly.

\*Oh shit! Really?\* he asked in consternation.

\*No of course not, dummy,\* she replied, sending him a telepathic eye roll. \*You know Calara worships the ground you walk on. She’s as bad as you are; blaming herself for all the imaginary mistakes she thinks she made.\*

\*That’s even worse,\* he muttered glumly. \*I better go and see her.\*

\*No, I don’t think that’s wise, not in your current state of mind,\* Alyssa said, her voice full of sympathy. \*You’re both feeling guilty for ‘abandoning’ Venkarys, even though we were left with no other choice. As you both stubbornly refuse to let me take the blame instead, I’ll do my best to take care of Calara.\*

\*What about me?\* he asked, forcing himself to take a jovial tone for her benefit.

\*Nice try, but it doesn’t work when I can hear your inner monologue,\* she said with some amusement. \*Take your pick and I’ll supply you with any number of girls eager to care you into oblivion.\*

\*Don’t forget about the Maliri, Master!\* Jade chimed in, bubbling with excitement.

\*Umm... I don’t swing that way, Jade,\* he said, suppressing a grin.

She harrumphed indignantly. \*Not the men! Amlaril will be arriving in ten minutes!\*

\*I’ve been meaning to thank her for everything she did with the Ashanath,\* John mused.

\*I know!\* the Nymph gushed. \*And we can gather all her senior officers and give them full tummies too!\*

\*I appreciate your enthusiasm, honey... but I’m not really in the mood for anything exotic right now. Not after this morning.\*

\*But this is the best time for it,\* Jade insisted. \*You could use the distraction to stop mentally beating yourself up.\*

“My sister makes a good point, John,” Ailita said softly. “You have had troubling thoughts.”

He removed the control headset and placed it on the soulforge, then turned to wrap his arms around the pink haired catgirl. “You’re just using my name to make me proud of how well you’re progressing, aren’t you?”

“Guilty as charged, John,” the Nymph admitted, taking great care with her speech. “I always appreciate hearing your praise, but I’m more worried about you being upset.”

“That was perfect,” he said, brushing his thumb along her jawline and making Ailita shiver with delight. “Did that take a lot of effort?”

“Yes, but it was well worth it,” she replied, giving him a cheery smile.

He leaned in to give her a tender kiss. “I meant what I said earlier. I know it’s ridiculously self-indulgent to have you be my personal assistant, but I really do appreciate all your hard work looking after me.”

She shook her head decisively. “You’re always very busy, Master. Too busy sometimes to even make sure you get regular meals.”

“Or get daily back rubs,” he said with a grim frown. “I don’t know how I managed without those.”

Ailita giggled, and snuggled into him affectionately. “I’m being serious, Master. This one loves being your personal assistant! I think all my sisters would be insanely jealous of me, if that was actually possible for Nymphs.”

“Are you sure Jehanna doesn’t mind me monopolising your time?”

“Why would she? I know how much you enjoy feeding us together, and with me seducing you at every opportunity, she gets a big round tummy even more frequently,” Ailita confided in him.

John laughed as he realised she was being serious. “You’re right, you do make a gorgeous couple.”

“Would you like to fill us both up this morning?” she purred, rubbing sinuously against him.

He placed a hand on her pale stomach and stroked her affectionally. It was easy to imagine the lovely catgirl growing huge with a litter of baby Nymphs, and he watched Ailita swoon as she revelled in his lusty thoughts.

“Later,” he promised, giving her a parting kiss. “We’ll get together with Jehanna after the battle.”

She let out a contented sigh, and reluctantly released him. “I’ll look forward to it, Master.”

John exchanged a farewell wave with his nubile assistant, then took the loading lift down to the Cargo Bay. He spotted Dana crouched down beside dozens of crates of munitions, the Maliri runes for high explosives clearly displayed in warning.

“The Maliri delivered the warheads,” John stated, stepping off the lift and walking over to join her.

“Mmm hmm,” she replied distractedly, her focus on the large disc-shaped object in front of her.

John squatted down beside her, and studied the glimmering golden glow that was radiating from her eyes. He knew Dana must be delving into the crystalline interior of the Maliri device, squirreling out the secrets of what he presumed must be a cloaking device. He waited patiently for her to finish, and smiled when he saw the broad grin spread across her beautiful face.

“Good news?” he asked, as the glow faded from her eyes.

“Tashana sussed the men out alright. Those sneaky buggers definitely reverse engineered Progenitor tech to make this cloaking device. They did a nice job of it too. It’s not quite as energy efficient as the original, maybe about 85%, but that’s still extremely impressive.”

“Because it’s not built using a soulforge?” John guessed.

“Yeah, exactly,” she replied, gently patting the device. “They figured out a way to mass produce this sweet little gizmo using Maliri tech... and that takes some real skills.”

She sat back on the deck and gazed away into the distance, I thoughtful look on her face.

“What’s on your mind?” John asked, enjoying her company.

“Just... that this tech feels a bit familiar,” she replied, glancing down at the device. “It kinda reminds me of something, but I’m trying to remember what it is.”

“What other cloaking devices have you studied?” John asked, frowning in confusion. “I thought the only other one we’ve found is the original Progenitor version.”

“No, I don’t mean the device itself,” Dana explained. “I’m talking about the technology used to build it.”

“Well you’ve spent a fair bit of time around Maliri technology,” John replied. “There was all those schematics you ripped off from Geniya. Then all the military tech that we either got from Edraele or you found out yourself.”

“That’s it!” she blurted out, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “Everything feels the same!”

“Okay, I’m not on top of my game right now,” John admitted. “Can you explain using small words and simple phrases?”

She laughed and leaned over for a kiss. “All the Maliri tech feels the same way. When someone designs a device, they kind of have their own unique flair to the way they lay out circuits, or bundle cabling, or any one of a million tiny little things. Whoever designed this cloaking device came from the same theoretical school of engineering as the guy who designed their shield modulator, or the air filtration units, or the Nova Lances.”

“That’s nice,” John said patting her arm.

She gave him an indulgent smile. “When I say the guys that designed this stuff came from the same school of engineering, I mean that literally.” Dana frowned, then hastily corrected herself. “Shit... I mean the guy bit, not the school part. Or maybe they did go to the same school... I dunno.”

John looked at her in surprise. “You think the Maliri males designed all the crystalline tech their fleets were using?”

“Yep, exactly,” she replied with certainty. “The males were part of Maliri society back in the day, and I bet they were strongly discouraged from signing up for something dangerous like the military. You know, with the twenty-to-one ratio and all that. So boys will be boys, and if they weren’t allowed to shoot the big guns at bad guys, they could still make them, right?”

Now it was his turn to laugh, and John nodded in agreement. “Yeah, I bet you’re right.”

“And then the women all turned into crazy bitches, so the men all ran for the hills,” she said thoughtfully. “So the Maliri tech stagnated, except out at the border stations, where the guys were still building new stuff.”

“Like this cloaking device.”

“Right,” she agreed, beaming at him. “Plus whatever else they’ve been working on out here.”

“You think there’s more?” he asked, listening with interest.

“Maybe,” she replied, giving him a tentative shrug. “Can you remember exactly what Alyssa said she found in Darthas’ head again? I wasn’t really paying much attention as I figured they’d just be using regular Maliri stuff.”

The door into the Cargo Bay slid open with the whine of hydraulics, and the blonde girl in question sashayed over to join them.

“Speak of the devil,” John said, rising to give her a hug.

“And she shall appear,” Alyssa replied, before playfully bonking Dana on the head.

“Hey!” she protested.

“That was for not paying attention. I knew you seemed a bit distracted,” Alyssa said, wagging a finger at her friend.

“Yeah, yeah,” Dana said, rolling her eyes. “So go over it again. What did you find out exactly?”

John sat on one of the munitions crates and lifted his XO onto his lap.

Alyssa gave him a grateful kiss, then replied, “As you said earlier, Tashana figured out exactly what they were up to. After the males reverse engineered the cloaking devices, they started expanding their territory along the border. They maintain a significant population at the four active trading stations, but they’ve also colonised planets near to each one. Their towns are all concealed by cloaking devices, keeping their location secret from the female crewed fleets.”

“But the Matriarchs stopped bothering with planets this far away from the homeworlds, so nobody pays attention to these outlying systems anyway,” Dana interjected. “Yeah, I remember that part. Skip ahead to the good stuff.”

“The males also build, maintain, and crew their own fleets,” Alyssa explained. “They rely heavily on cloaking devices to maintain a low profile, and it’s been a carefully protected secret until we blundered into the middle of it, because the matriarchs had no idea what they were up to for the previous four centuries.”

“See, I told you they were sneaky buggers,” Dana said with a grin.

“I feel strangely proud of them,” John said, with a wry look of admiration. “It takes a lot of focus and determination to achieve everything they’ve accomplished, especially when it was all done right under the matriarchs’ noses.”

“It helped a lot that they got their hands on cloaking tech,” Dana reminded him. “But I definitely tip my engineering hat in their direction. They know their shit and they’ve exploited the hell out of that tech advantage.”

“What are their settlements actually like?” John asked, glancing down at Alyssa.

“They sound like pretty great places to live actually. There’s not much crime, and everyone gets along with each other,” she replied. “From what I could find out in Darthas’ memories, he’s only been to their planet near Genwynn twice. He’s too high profile to be able to sneak away for long. Everyone there has their regular jobs, but they work together to build big projects, so they get some impressive stuff done.”

“When the Galkiran invasion is over, we’ll have to try to convince the elders to let us visit,” John suggested. “I don’t mind if they keep their colonies independent, but we do need to encourage them to reintegrate if we can.”

Alyssa laughed and shook her head. “Don’t you remember what Lordual said? All the horny young Maliri guys are desperate to go back to the homeworlds and get laid. I think there’s going to be a mass exodus from their colonies... but some of the men might decide to resettle there, probably bringing a bunch of knocked up girls back with them.”

“A man cannot live with the company of bros alone,” Dana said sagely.

“Well I certainly seem to be taking that to extreme lengths,” John joked, pulling them both into a tight hug.

He held it a bit longer than normal, holding both girls close. Dana shared an equally concerned glance with Alyssa, then they snuggled into him.

“I know it doesn’t feel like it, but we did the right thing,” Alyssa said softly.

Dana kissed him on the cheek and nodded in agreement. “We tried our best, but there was just too many of them. I don’t think anyone would blame us for what happened.”

“Yeah, the rational part of me knows that. We were facing 3000-to-1 odds, and still managed to knock out a third of their ships. I just can’t help feeling like I failed everyone on Venkarys,” John said with a sad sigh.

He reluctantly released them, then Alyssa cupped his face in her hand.

“Whatever way this played out, we were always going to lose someone,” she said, looking into his eyes. “If their fleets had all stayed together, we couldn’t have saved Venkarys. If we’d jumped over here earlier to harass these ships, we might have ended up with a reversed scenario, where we had to leave Genwynn behind and protect Venkarys instead. I can’t see any way we’d be able to pull off a miracle and protect everyone, not with just one ship, and facing such ridiculous odds. Throw a Progenitor dreadnought into the mix and we were always going to be screwed.”

“Thanks, girls,” he said gratefully. “You’re right, I can’t keep blaming myself for this. We’ve worn his forces down, but it’s not over yet. We just have to make sure no one else gets caught up in the crossfire.”

“That’s the spirit,” Dana said, giving him an exuberant hug. “Now go and make Amlaril’s day while we finish up here.”

He smiled affectionally at the pair, then waved goodbye, and headed for the airlock.

Jade was waiting for him there, bouncing up and down with barely controlled excitement. “We’re going to have so much fun, Master!”