Three Square Meals Ch. 121

\*The thralls are all leaving...\* Jade told Alyssa, craning her draconic head out of the shattered cockpit and sweeping her sharp-eyed gaze across the hangar.

Alyssa swung out of the breached canopy and crouched on the Raptor’s roof. \*Quick, Dana... the runes!\*

\*Okay...\* the redhead agreed, her telepathic voice aching with grief.

As much as Alyssa felt the same way, she couldn’t give in to despair now... everything was at stake. Dana dismissed the Progenitor runes she’d inscribed on the gunship’s hull and the glyphs dissipated in a golden swirl. Activating flight mode, Alyssa leaped backwards off the Raptor, then gripped the armour plating with two huge telekinetic hands. She made a tearing gesture and the hull buckled outwards, as she ripped the roof open like a sardine tin.

Alyssa glanced over her shoulder and saw the hangar doors starting to close, the edges like the serrated jaws of a massive beast clamping shut. \*Move!\* she yelled at the Nymph in alarm.

Jade wriggled and squirmed, pulling her ungainly bulk out of the cockpit. The sight would have been amusing if the situation hadn’t been so desperate. Jade’s draconic form was much smaller than normal, except for her distended abdomen, which rippled with the movement of half-a-dozen writhing shapes. As soon as she was clear of the cockpit, the Nymph shimmered again, growing huge and correcting the imbalance in her proportions.

\*I’m going to be having nightmares about this for months...\* Calara muttered, pressed together with the rest of the girls inside the quick-thinking shapeshifter’s belly.

Alyssa increased the power to her suit’s thruster to maximum and rocketed towards the black dreadnought. She summoned several more glowing telekinetic hands and their huge fingers wrapped around Jade’s reptilian limbs, then dragged the Nymph after her. Watching the closing doorway with alarm, Alyssa quickened the pull of her telekinetic projections to try to get the girls through in time. Racing inside, she arched her back and banked out of the way, clearing the path for Jade.

The Nymph tucked herself in as small as she could and dived through the jagged gap, but the serrated edges caught one of her wings and ripped a long rent along the leathery membrane. She grimaced with pain as she veered towards the deck, artificial gravity reasserting itself on her enormous draconic form. Alyssa made a sharp gesture and her glowing hands moved to support the Nymph’s bulk, helping her make a reasonably graceful landing considering the circumstances.

Jade skidded across the deck, her claws grating for purchase as she scrabbled to a halt. She paused, her draconic body obscured by a green haze and her passengers were dumped unceremoniously on the deck as the Nymph shrank down to normal size. Behind them, the massive doors sealed shut with a loud clang.

“I was worried which end we were coming out of for a minute...” Sakura said, her smile strained as she tried to lighten the mood.

The girls slumped on the deck, too devastated to laugh, their emotions vacillating between their fear for John and grief for their lost comrades aboard the Invictus.

Dana flung her arms around Jade, tears running freely down her cheeks. “Oh, Jade, I can’t believe they’re gone...”

The Nymph hugged her back, crystal tears filling her emerald cat-like eyes. “I know, Dana... I know.”

Alyssa landed beside them, feeling the waves of heart-wrenching grief pouring from her friends. She swallowed around the lump in her throat, struggling not to burst into tears herself. Looking at each of them in turn, her gaze flicked from Dana embracing Jade, to the twins, then Rachel, Jessica, Calara, and finally Helene, the aquatic girl looking just as shell-shocked as the rest.

The blonde made eye-contact with Helene, then glanced pointedly at Jessica. \*Helene, please help her...\*

John’s mother was cowering on the floor, scared out of her mind. After narrowly escaping from the Invictus, she’d been wrapped in a mass of Jade’s tentacles to prevent her being battered by Larn’kelnar when he shook the Raptor, then enveloped in the Nymph’s body to protect her from asphyxiation in space. The rest of the girls were at least familiar with Jade’s shape-shifting capabilities, but to say that Jessica was terrified was putting it mildly.

Helene took a deep breath and wiped away her tears, then crouched beside Jessica and gave her a reassuring smile. “There’s no need to be afraid. We’re here to protect you... and to rescue Rahn,” the aquatic girl said quietly, reaching out with her empathic abilities to soothe and calm the brunette.

Jessica’s shallow breathing relaxed, the wild look in her eyes fading. “Thank you,” she murmured, giving Helene a grateful smile.

\*Now, the rest of us please...\* Alyssa said, gently squeezing the aquatic girl’s shoulder.

Helene nodded, widening her empathic aura and pouring positivity into the unresisting girls. She managed to push back the worst of their fear and grief, letting them pull themselves together... at least enough to think rationally again.

\*Thank you.\* Alyssa took a deep breath, then turned to the girls, looking at each of them in turn. “Listen... I know you’re all hurting as much as me and it feels like my heart’s been ripped in two. But John’s counting on us and we can’t let him down. When all this is done, we’ll grieve for our friends... but not now. The only thing we’re going to focus on is freeing him... then we’ll get some payback.”

“I’m all for a nice serving of revenge...” Sakura growled, her almond-shaped eyes narrowing in fury.

With a heavy sigh, Irillith did her best to put her grief behind her. She glanced down at her jumpsuit and plucked at it with her slender blue fingers. “How are we supposed to rescue John when we’ve got no armour or weapons?”

“One size fits all...” Tashana said pointedly, locking eyes with Alyssa.

The blonde nodded her agreement. “The thrall armoury... good thinking.”

“Do you know where it is?” Calara asked Dana, who slumped dejectedly on the deck.

Dana brushed the back of her hand across her red-rimmed eyes. “We explored the rear half of Rahn’s ship but we never saw an armoury...” she said, meeting Alyssa’s anxious gaze. “I’m guessing it must be somewhere amidships on the lower decks.”

Sakura gave them a grim smile. “Why don’t we sneak up on someone and ask for directions?”

Dana grimaced at the thought. “A stealth mission? Aren’t we in deep enough shit already?”

Alyssa shrugged and offered a hand to Dana, helping the redhead to her feet. “Well, things can’t exactly get any worse...”

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John hung suspended in the air by a vice-like telekinetic grip, as he floated down a corridor. At least he suspected he was being moved down a corridor, as he had his eyes closed and didn’t dare risk taking a look. He was still reeling from the shocking disaster that had befallen them. John couldn’t believe how quickly he’d gone from feeling invincible in his massively upgraded battlecruiser, to enduring Larn’kelnar’s stark lesson in just how outmatched they were against a Progenitor dreadnought.

Far worse than that bitter pill, was how utterly heartbroken he felt at the loss of Faye and the Nymphs. He could still remember the look of shock and horror on the purple sprite’s face as she uttered his name for the last time. It was like she was pleading for him to help save her, Faye’s faith in him her final thought before the light in her luminous eyes was dimmed forever. Thinking of Faye and the Nymphs tumbling to their deaths was almost more than he could bear.

He’d had such high hopes for Neysa, Leylira, Betrixa, and Marika, nurturing the innocent young women along a path to self-awareness, just as he’d done for Jade before them. To have taken that final step and committed himself wholeheartedly to each of the Nymphs, only to have them torn away from him... it made the pain infinitely worse. He could only imagine their fear and confusion as they plunged towards Arcadia’s surface, trapped aboard the ship that he’d encouraged them to make their home... and was now going to be their tomb.

John stifled a sob at their loss, realising he had to keep it together or risk revealing he was conscious. He steeled himself and fearfully checked his network of connections, only narrowly preventing himself from sighing with relief when he saw that Alyssa and the girls were still alive. He’d had to put his faith in them to protect themselves and he thanked the stars that they’d survived being tossed out into space.

When the black ship had caught them in a tractor beam and John had seen the massive formation of troops Larn’kelnar had assembled to meet them, he knew he only had one course of action. He and Alyssa might have been wearing Paragon suits, but the rest of the girls had no gear and were outnumbered at least 100 to 1. Add to that fact, they’d been caught totally unprepared by the ambush and their morale had been crushed by the loss of their friends. Attempting to fight Larn’kelnar and his thrall army had never been an option.

Trusting his instincts that Larn’kelnar wanted to take him alive, John had prayed that the Progenitor would dismiss the girls as inconsequential. Even if Larn’kelnar had ordered his thralls to open fire on them, John had little choice but to hang onto the slim hope that the girls would be able to shield themselves inside the gunship for long enough to be assumed killed. Ignored and forgotten, they might then be able to mount a rescue or at least repair the Raptor and get to safety.

When his Progenitor adversary had violently shaken the gunship, Jade had wrapped John and the girls in rubbery tentacles, preventing them from being thrown around the cockpit. After the thralls shot out the crystal canopy, a telekinetic hand reached in for him... and as much as it galled John to do it, he’d been forced to play possum. His final order to his trio of matriarchs had been to avoid contacting him via telepathy, in case Larn’kelnar might be able to detect the psychic activity.

Which left John in this perilous predicament; floating along helplessly, trapped and awaiting whatever fate his formidable opponent had planned for him.

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Jade shapeshifted into a tiger and took up a defensive crouch, lightning crackling around her claws as she watched the sealed entrances to the hangar for the first sign of thralls. She glanced back into the hangar, where the girls were quickly removing Alyssa’s paragon suit and helping Sakura into it.

“Are you really sure about this?” Dana asked, glancing down at the Tachyon rifle. “It’s the only gun we’ve got...”

“For the moment...” Tashana said, giving the redhead a reassuring smile.

Alyssa stepped out of the Paragon boots, then moved aside, letting the Asian girl put them on. “As soon as we start shooting up the place, they’ll know we’re here. We haven’t got any choice.”

“But... turning a state-of-the-art gun into a pair of swords... it’s just wrong!” Dana protested.

Ignoring the objections, Alyssa gestured at the Crystal Alyssium gunframe and projected her will, melting the psychically responsive metal into a roiling sphere. The redhead pouted as she was left holding a handful of spare parts and she sighed before reluctantly placing them on the deck. Alyssa kept her focus on the white orb, shaping it over and over again, to make it as strong as she possibly could. The metal started to resist her efforts as she neared the twentieth shaping, so she concentrated harder, pouring all her rage and grief into her work. Forming the familiar image of the assassin’s ninjato in her mind, she made one major modification, inscribing the only rune she knew into the blade as she shaped the metal one final time.

Sakura reached for the swords as soon as they were complete and twirled them around in her gauntleted fists. Her eager grin turned to a look of surprise as she examined the gleaming blades. “Did you do something special to them?”

“I added Progenitor magnification runes,” Alyssa said with a grim smile of satisfaction. “Be careful...”

The assassin nodded, then padded across the hangar to join the huge armoured tiger at the door. Jade checked that the girls had moved out of sight, then nudged a glyph on the control panel with her nose. The set of reinforced double-doors split apart, jagged edges peeling back as they opened, revealing a long black corridor illuminated by sinister blood-red lighting. Sakura had been hugging the doorframe on the opposite side to Jade and she peered around to check that it was safe. Seeing no sign of any thralls, the assassin activated her psychic speed and crept through, looking like a white blur to the rest of the girls.

Jade closed the door after her, then let out a rumbling sigh. Despite Helene’s best efforts, losing her four Nymph sisters was like a crushing weight on her heart. With her melancholy thoughts turning to the quartet of lovely catgirls, she was astonished to receive an onrush of sensations as she experienced their emotions. Confusion was pouring off all four of them, despite it being at least fifteen minutes since the crew abandoned ship... more than long enough for the Invictus to have crashed.

Alyssa placed her hand on Jade’s flank. \*How’s that possible?!\*

Jade closed her eyes to look at the mosaics representing her sisters, still terrified of seeing gaping holes where the lovely catgirls should be. However, they were still present in her mind, the portraits now reflecting their new feline appearance. She could feel their potent psychic potential still at her fingertips, the connection just as strong as it had been after John enhanced the four Nymphs.

\*I have no idea...\* Jade replied, her voice elated. \*But they’re all definitely still alive!\*

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“What the hell’s happening?!” Leylira hissed, crawling across the oval bed to rejoin her sisters. “And what are those two doing?”

The tiger-striped Nymph darted a furtive glance at the tiny cleaning robot and the hulking maintenance bot that hovered beside it. The two robots were standing beside an exposed wall panel, with the cleaning robot connected to the access ports by data jacks.

Marika looked bewildered. “This one was having such a lovely dream about kittens... then there was a horrible roar and I started floating off the bed!”

“I think I caught that little one watching us... do you reckon he’s a peeping tom?” Betrixa asked with a smirk. “Then the big guy floated in, grabbed the voyeur, and ripped the wall panel off!” She suddenly looked thoughtful. “If I start wrecking Master’s ship, do you think he’ll give me a spanking?”

“Something’s very wrong...” Neysa said quietly, ignoring her sister’s ribald commentary and glancing up at the Observatory ceiling. The armoured panels covering the crystal window were crushed and buckled, letting her see the white surface of the object that had just crashed into the ship. “Didn’t you hear how sad Jade was when she told us she loved us?”

Betrixa rolled her eyes. “Why don’t we just ask them what’s going on?” She leapt to her feet and bounced across the bed, her tail lashing playfully. She poked the big floating robot in the arm. “Hey! What’re you up to?”

The maintenance bot turned its rictus grin in her direction. [+++ polite redirection +++ [Open request] Please direct all queries to unit designated as “Little One”. [/Close request]]

The blonde catgirl looked at the automaton in confusion, then shrugged and tapped the cleaning robot on the shoulder. “Hey! What’re you up to?”

The robot stayed perfectly still and replied, “Proceeding with operation: Save Invictus.”

A holographic projection appeared, displaying a long list of tasks:

Initiate data connection to subnode 38 – complete.

Initiate emergency override – complete.

Reroute power from Power\_Core\_02 to forward hull section retro-thrusters – complete.

Attempt to stabilise roll of forward hull section – complete.

Attempt to reduce velocity of forward section freefall – complete.

Initiate telemetry streaming from Sensor Array – complete.

Locate rear hull section – complete.

Commence realignment – complete.

Reroute power to artificial gravity in forward hull section – complete.

Reroute power to Inertia Negation Device in forward hull section – complete.

Initiate docking manoeuvre with rear hull section – complete.

Attempt to halt Invictus freefall – failure. [Mass exceeds lift capacity of active retro-thrusters]

Attempt to reduce Invictus descent velocity – in progress...

Betrixa scanned down the list and looked even more bemused. “Err... save the Invictus from what?”

Turning its domed head in her direction the cleaning robot stated solemnly, “We are about to crash into the planet Arcadia. Impact in 47 seconds... Please seek shelter in the Lagoon to reduce collision damage.”

Neysa gasped in alarm and leapt to her feet. “I think it’s time for a swim!”

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John heard the quiet rasp of a door opening, then he felt himself being turned and taken into a room. The telekinetic grip shifted and his arms were upraised, then his legs were moved too, until all four limbs were firmly clamped into position. He made no attempt to resist, letting his body hang in his restraints as if he were still unconscious. The runesword was removed from his back and he heard a clatter some distance away a few moments later.

“I still don’t understand why you didn’t just kill him, my Lord...” a female voice said quietly, with an edge of frustration.

“Ah, Ailanthia... so bloodthirsty,” a deeper baritone voice replied with a chuckle. “Of course I could’ve just killed him, but where’s the entertainment value? Besides, Blake is fascinating and it’s well past time we had a little chat...”

John knew this must be Larn’kelnar. He strained to listen to their conversation, desperate for any information that he could use. Suddenly, he felt a suffocating sensation descend over his mind, the debilitating aura clouding his thoughts. It was a deeply unpleasant feeling that he’d experienced once before, when Baledranax had disabled his psychic powers during the Battle of Terra.

“Come, my fierce little Matriarch,” Larn’kelnar said as he strolled out of the room. “I feel like celebrating...”

“I live to serve, my Lord...” Ailanthia purred, her voice fading away as she left at his side.

The door whirred closed behind them, leaving John suspended in the deathly silent room. He cracked one eye open and saw that it was deserted, confirming that he was alone. Looking around, he was startled by the size of the room, with similar restraints set up for prisoners much larger than him. Glancing up at his arms, he saw his wrists were encased in black metallic bands, each one holding a limb in place without any form of visible connection to the outer frame. The device vaguely reminded him of the magnetic bands that Dana had created for his sword, which suspended the weapon in a magnetic field across his back.

Thoughts of his runesword had him looking around for it and he immediately spotted the glowing weapon resting on a table off to his right. He knew it was a long shot, but he gestured to the weapon with his hand and attempted to use telekinesis to pull it over to him. Just as he expected, nothing happened, his powers obviously nullified by a psychic dampening field of some kind. He looked around the room and, sure enough, he spotted the dim purple light pouring from a black device that appeared to be identical to the one that the Kintark Emperor had used.

Unfortunately, knowing how he was being imprisoned didn’t bring him any closer to actually freeing himself. He tried asking his matriarchs to make telepathic contact now that he was alone, but just like on Terra, they seemed to be prevented from hearing his thoughts. He checked his psychic network and was cut off from that too, no longer able to directly tap any of the girls for psychic energy, even if he were able to use any powers.

Slumping in his restraints, John was left with no other option than to wait for either the girls to find some way of freeing him, or for Larn’kelnar to return for his chat. As much as John was desperate to escape captivity, he found himself intrigued to finally speak to his opponent and find out some much-needed answers to a whole host of questions.

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Sakura padded along the corridor, her heightened senses attuned for the slightest sound or movement. She performed a cursory check for security cameras, searching the walls and ceiling for any protrusions or indentations that might conceal some form of hidden surveillance. Just like on Rahn’hagon’s ship, there seemed to be no internal security, a fact that had astounded her at first. Rachel then pointed out that Progenitors were so arrogant, they probably never anticipated anyone would dare to sneak aboard their ship.

That had prompted several jokes from the girls about learning that lesson the hard way, when a certain someone had snuck aboard the Invictus and crashed Jade’s birthday party. Sakura smiled at the memory of the girls teasing her. There was no malice in their light-hearted banter. Calara, who had lost an arm in Shinatobe’s attack, had previously told her that she looked back on that day as a blessing, because it led to them finding and freeing Sakura. The Asian girl had never felt such a sense of total acceptance before, from friends or family... and she considered the girls to be both.

Frowning at herself for getting distracted, Sakura focused on the intersection ahead. The stakes were incredibly high, with everyone she cared about counting on her to execute this mission flawlessly. She heard the sound of voices and froze, tilting her head slightly to get a better idea where they were coming from. The language was one she was unfamiliar with, but it sounded very similar to the quiet conversations the twins sometimes had in Maliri.

Sakura’s white armour was a hindrance, but not an insurmountable one. Stealth was as much about positioning as it was concealment; simply staying out of a target’s line of sight was always superior than attempting to fool the eye. Activating the anti-gravity generators in her vambraces and boots, Sakura hovered above the ground and pressed herself against the arched ceiling, hugging the left-hand wall. Seconds later, a pair of thralls appeared from the left tunnel and crossed the intersection. One even glanced down the corridor that Sakura had been standing in only moment earlier, but by that time, the thrall’s field of vision was limited to a tunnel eclipsing the upper right corner... where the assassin was hiding.

The minutes ticked by as more thralls walked past in groups of twos or threes, with Sakura lurking like a spider, waiting for the right prey to fall into her clutches. As a group of oblivious thralls passed by, she heard lone footsteps approaching from the corridor directly ahead. The footsteps came to an abrupt halt and the faint rasp of a serrated door opening reached Sakura’s ears.

Risking a swift glance around the black arch she was hiding behind, Sakura saw a woman walking through an open door along the corridor opposite. Deactivating the anti-gravity systems in her Paragon suit, the assassin landed like a cat without making a sound, then sprinted across the intersection. She risked darting a look into the room and saw her target studying a holographic display, the thrall standing before impressive-looking machinery.

The door started to close, so Sakura slipped through, deciding to take the chance that the thrall technician was the only person in the room. Unfortunately, she wasn’t. There were two other thralls talking together by a console on the far left of the storage room, their melodic voices carrying clearly around the chamber. The technician joined in the conversation, speaking that same lilting language. Grimacing at her poor luck, Sakura made a split-second decision and tapped the same glyph she’d seen Jade use to open the doors.

Without checking to see if the portal had started opening again, she waited for the technician to stop speaking, then scuttled forward and thumped her on the back of her head with a ninjato’s pommel. The blow accelerated by Sakura’s speed made the thrall’s head snap forward, bruising her brain and instantly knocking her unconscious without so much as a startled cry. With her target moving in slow motion, Sakura had enough time to place both swords on the ground and deftly catch the falling woman. She picked up the blades and laid them across the thrall’s limp body, then scooped her up, weapons and all.

When one of the thralls manning the consoles spoke to the technician a few moments later, there was no answer. She turned to look and saw the door spiralling shut again, so she shrugged and returned to her work.

Sakura padded down the corridor back towards the intersection, then froze when she heard more voices coming from the left. Instead of backing away, she rushed up to the junction and made a swiping gesture with her fingers, creating an icy handful of hail that she flicked along the corridor. She aimed her frozen flurry along the wall, so that it didn’t strike any of the thralls and fortunately she heard no cries of pain.

The icy pellets made a skittering sound as they hit the metal decking, so she dared a swift glance down the corridor and smiled when she saw the trio of thralls had all turned to look. Rushing across the intersection, she ran swiftly and silently along the corridor to the door, which began to open as she approached. Diving through and spinning around to the side, she was already out of sight by the time the thralls passed the crossroads.

Sakura carefully placed the unconscious thrall on the deck in front of her friends. “There you go. I got you a chatty one...”

“She doesn’t look particularly talkative at the moment,” Calara said, raising an eyebrow.

Rachel glanced at Alyssa. “Do you want me to heal her?”

Alyssa shook her head. “We can’t risk it. If she starts feeling fear or anxiety, it might tip off Larn’kelnar’s matriarch.” She turned to Sakura and looked at her questioningly.

The Asian girl gave her a wry smile. “She never knew what hit her... instant knockout.”

“Well done,” the blonde said with an appreciative nod, before kneeling down beside the unconscious young woman.

Alyssa placed a hand on the black decking as she knelt, then snatched it back, a shiver of revulsion running down her spine. Focusing on the thrall, her cerulean eyes started to glow and she began her assault on the alien woman’s mind.

Rachel squatted down beside the thrall and studied her in fascination. “Athletic build, five-foot-nine, angular eyes, beautiful...” She gently brushed aside the woman’s dark flowing locks. “Pointed ears too. They’re strictly adhering to the Progenitor’s standard template.”

“They obviously don’t share the Maliri’s aversion to long hair,” Sakura observed, pointing to the wavy tresses.

“That was a cultural development. The Maliri who weren’t enthralled were rejecting Mael’nerak’s preferences...” Rachel murmured distractedly, examining the almost jet-black mane. “It’s also interesting her hair is dark, even though she’s a thrall; Mael’nerak’s Maliri and now John’s both have white hair. I assumed that was a sign of Progenitor influence... but perhaps there’s another factor at play.”

“Light-green skin,” Calara noted, looking at their prisoner’s flawless complexion. “Alyssa said that Rahn’hagon’s thralls were red and the ones she saw invading the Legacy had yellow skin. I wonder how many different colours there are?”

“I always loved your blue skin, it reminds me of the ocean,” Helene murmured to the twins, while gently stroking Tashana’s arm. “I’m glad that John is Protector to the Maliri... you’re both so beautiful and kind...” Her voice trailed off as she saw the hate-filled glares they were aiming at the thrall.

The Maliri sisters stopped shooting daggers at their prisoner to give Helene a terse nod in gratitude, then quickly returned their attention to the unconscious woman.

Rachel’s professional curiosity was piqued as she watched the furious pair. “Your reaction to her can’t be linked to skin tone... neither of you have ever behaved this way towards any of us. What do you find so offensive about this thrall?”

“She’s one of Larn’kelnar’s minions,” Irillith snarled, her lip curling with distaste. “We should kill her as soon as possible...”

Tashana’s violet eyes blazed with fury, fiery sprites cavorting around her fingertips. “I’ll take care of it...” She glanced at Alyssa. “Are you finished interrogating her, Matriarch?”

“Nearly...” the blonde murmured.

“Perhaps it’s linked to a thrall species being ‘claimed’?” Rachel mused, studying the twins, before returning her attention to the unconscious woman. “In which case, this antipathy will no doubt be reciprocated by Larn’kelnar’s thralls towards the Maliri. It would be fascinating to wake her up and see if I’m right.”

“Her name’s Yalera. She’s a Larathyran and Larn’kelnar rules their Empire,” Alyssa said, the glow fading from her eyes as she ended her telepathic interrogation. Her melancholy gaze fell on the unconscious thrall. “She was recruited by him 72 years ago, at the tail end of a war of extermination against a civilisation called the Concordiat of Arntriss. She watched as he obliterated the Arntriss homeworld with a Quantum Annihilator...”

“Another thrall species?” Rachel asked in a hushed voice.

Alyssa shook her head. “No, they were insectoids.”

“Did you find out what Larn’kelnar’s doing here?” Calara asked, looking intently at her lover.

“Yalera doesn’t know and they’ve been here for nearly eight months. All the thralls are wondering why their return to the Larathyran Empire is taking so long... and Ailanthia hasn’t given them any kind of explanation.”

Rachel raised an eyebrow. “Ailanthia?”

“Larn’kelnar’s matriarch,” Alyssa replied, rising to her feet. She glanced at Dana and nodded. “You were right about the location of their armoury. There’s actually two of them, located amidships on opposite sides of the Barracks. We need to get down to Deck Four.”

Irillith cleared her throat. “What are we doing about the thrall?”

“We’ll offer them the same mercy they showed us...” Alyssa replied, her eyes going cold.

Jade shimmered beside them, her form obscured in a green aura. “Wait!”

When the shimmering faded away, her body was a much lighter skin-tone, mimicking Yalera perfectly. The Nymph crouched down beside the incapacitated woman and stripped off the thrall technician’s jumpsuit before pulling it on herself. “What do you think?” she asked, standing to attention before them. “Technician Yalera reporting for duty, my Lord.”

“You look exactly like her,” Rachel said, before studying the twins, who showed no adverse reaction to Jade’s new appearance. “Interesting...”

Alyssa glanced at Sakura, who dropped to a knee and plunged a ninjato into the Larathyran thrall’s heart, instantly killing her. Turning to Tashana the blonde said, “Dispose of the body please. We can’t risk it being found.”

The Maliri nodded, immolating the corpse in a blazing inferno and leaving nothing but a blackened scar on the decking.

Helene watched wide-eyed, stunned by the swift and merciless execution.

Alyssa moved to stand in front of the aquatic girl and met her shocked gaze with one of sympathy. “I’m sorry, Helene. I know John wanted to protect you from the grim realities of war, but we’ve got no choice here... this is going to get brutal. We couldn’t take that thrall with us as a prisoner and if she was found unconscious, the alarm would’ve been raised. John’s life, ours, all our friends, and the lives of billions of innocent people are hanging in the balance. We never wanted this fight with Larn’kelnar, but now he’s started it, we’re going to stop at nothing to finish it. Do you understand?”

She let out a sad sigh. “I do...”

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Ailanthia stretched contentedly on the bed, her hand rubbing her swollen belly. “Mmm... that tasted like victory, my Lord.”

Larn’kelnar laughed and rolled onto his side, placing his hand on hers. “How appropriate... after all, there’s nothing even approximating a threat to me now.”

“Blake was a threat?” she asked, raising an eyebrow and smirking.

“Hardly,” he agreed, giving her a final kiss before rising from bed.

“Which of our guests do you plan on interrogating next?” Ailanthia asked, lounging on the silken sheets.

“Rahn’hagon is a stubborn old fool, but I’ll break him eventually...” Larn’kelnar muttered, his jaw clenching in irritation. His mood lightened as he started getting dressed. “For now, I’d like to have a little chat with Blake... assuming he’s woken from his nap.”

His matriarch grinned, then cradled her rounded stomach. “If it’s alright with you, my Lord, I might rest a while.”

He leaned down to kiss her curved abdomen, then pulled up the covers. “Of course, my dear. You are sleeping for two now...”

Ailanthia let out a blissful sigh, then waved him goodbye with a loving smile.

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Sakura led her friends down the corridor, her nerves on edge as she tried to stealthily infiltrate the group through the dreadnought. Despite the girls’ best efforts to be quiet, every scuffed footstep sounded deafeningly loud to the tense assassin. However, with a combination of luck and ice pellet distractions, they’d managed to weave their way along a maze of corridors without being caught.

So far...

They crossed an intersection and Sakura froze, seeing the elevator doors they were heading for begin to open. “Go back!”

Dana pointed along the corridor to the right and hissed, “We can get down to Deck Four over that way!”

They hurried down the corridor and as they passed a black door on their left, the serrated join started to split apart. Alyssa’s eyes widened in alarm and she snapped her fingers, jamming the door half-way open with several telekinetic hands, which prevented the quartered sections from peeling back into the frame. There was a startled exclamation from inside the room as the door juddered, but refused to open more than a few inches.

The girls jogged along after Dana, who stopped to tap a section of wall, making the surface crack open with a hiss. It slid aside, revealing a ladder in a maintenance tube. “Quick, in here!”

Sakura stepped into the tube and dropped out of sight, activating the Paragon suit’s anti-grav generators once she was out of the way. Calara grasped the rungs and started rapidly descending, with the rest of the girls following after her. Once everyone was safely inside, Alyssa released her telekinetic hold on the door opposite and floated down the tube after Jessica, being careful not to touch the black walls. That just left Dana to tap a glyph on the wall and follow Alyssa down the ladder as the wall panel closed behind them.

By the time the black door slid open and the irritated thrall finally left the room, there was no trace of the intruders.

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John waited in the dimly-lit prison, trying to distract himself from his heartbreaking sense of loss, whenever he thought about Faye or the Nymphs. Unfortunately, that meant his troubled mind just started reliving the meeting with his mother that morning. As much as it hurt knowing that Jessica couldn’t care less about abandoning him, to see her complete lack of remorse about the way she’d just left her parents without saying a word, was as heartbreaking as it was infuriating. His mother had never returned to the Blake family home, but John had grown up there and it was like her ghost haunted the house after her mysterious disappearance.

There were the obvious signs she was missed, like the numerous photographs placed around the home, and the candle his grandmother lit on Jessica’s birthday. Then there were the not so obvious ones... like the faded markings on the kitchen wall, where Don and Eva had measured their daughter’s height as she grew from a toddler. Neither of his grandparents could bring themselves to paint over those treasured memories and John had lost count of the times he’d seen the profound sadness in their eyes that those marks had triggered.

He knew that Jessica wasn’t really to blame. Rahn’hagon’s influence over her was so complete, he had eclipsed all aspects of her previous life. However, John couldn’t help wishing that she’d been strong enough to fight the enthrallment, or even disobey him and make a break for freedom when she’d returned to Terra... anything to have saved her parents nearly 40 years of sorrow.

He knew it was irrational, but John couldn’t help wondering if he bore some of the blame himself for not ending his grandparents’ torment. If he’d embraced his Progenitor destiny years earlier, he might have been able to visit Arcadia while his grandparents were still alive. Even if Jessica refused to return to Terra, he could have still told his grandparents what had happened to their daughter and given them some closure before they passed away.

With those maudlin thoughts rolling through his mind, it actually came as a relief when the door slid open, admitting his captor.

“Ah... Admiral John Blake, Lion of the Federation has finally awoken from his slumbers,” Larn’kelnar said with a mocking smile. “What a mouthful... For the sake of brevity, I’ll just call you John.”

John studied the other Progenitor, finally meeting him for the first time. He could see the similarities to Mael’nerak straight away, with his aquiline nose, penetrating eyes, and muscular build. Larn’kelnar was clean shaven and his hair kept short, making his pointed ears as apparent as his youthful features. If John had to hazard a guess, he would have estimated his age at 25, but he knew that would have probably been off by at least several millennia.

Although he owed the man a huge debt of pain for what he’d so callously done to Faye and the Nymphs, John managed to control his temper. Restrained as he was, raging against Larn’kelnar would have been pointless, and this was an opportunity to actually learn something about this mysterious opponent who’d had him dancing to his tune for the last six months.

“And you must be Larn’kelnar...” John replied, meeting the other man’s curious gaze.

“That would be me,” his nemesis said with a slight bow, strolling across the room. He raised a quizzical eyebrow. “Would you be offended if I removed your helmet? I can’t really get a good look at you while you’re hiding under there...”

Taken aback by the man’s politeness, John shrugged. “Go ahead.”

Larn’kelnar gestured towards him and to John’s surprise, his Paragon helmet lifted clear.

“You’re so... old...” Larn’kelnar muttered, staring at him in fascination.

The white helmet floated over to join John’s runesword on the table.

“How are you doing that?!” John blurted out, shocked that Larn’kelnar could use telekinesis within the psychic dampening field.

Shaking his head in amusement, the other Progenitor smiled. “It’s simply a matter of possessing sufficient psychic strength to overcome an Eldritch Inhibitor.” He placed a hand on his chest. “I am strong...” Then he gestured towards John. “And you are weak.”

The smug condescending attitude was really starting to grate on John’s already frayed temper, but he tried not to let it show. “I think that’s a given, considering you just destroyed my ship and I’m stuck as your prisoner.”

Larn’kelnar nodded, taking a sip from his goblet. His eyes began to glow with a dark grey light, fixing John with an unblinking stare.

Despite no longer having access to his psychic powers, John could sense Larn’kelnar making tentative contact with his mind. He braced himself for the inevitable mental assault and his Progenitor adversary didn’t disappoint. With the titanic power behind Larn’kelnar’s telepathic blow, John felt like he’d been hit by a metaphysical truck. It was all he could do to hunker down and shore up his mental defences as the mind-shattering blows struck again and again. Just as quickly as the telepathic offensive started, it ended abruptly and when John opened his eyes again, he saw Larn’kelnar frowning in irritation.

His captor’s frustrated expression shifted into curiosity. “Would you mind if I asked you a question, John?”

John was quiet for a moment as he tried to steady his breathing. “Sure, if you’ll answer one of mine.”

Grinning at his reply, the Progenitor exclaimed, “I knew you’d make this entertaining!”

“I try my best...”

Larn’kelnar chuckled, then leaned forward and asked intently, “Why have you spent the last six months sailing around in that pathetic embarrassment of a ship?”

“How did you know I’ve owned the Invictus for six months?” John asked in surprise.

“I don’t think you’re abiding by the rules,” Larn’kelnar said with a smile, wagging a finger at him. “You can’t counter one of my questions with one of your own...”

Grimacing in irritation, John said impatiently, “It was the best ship I could afford at the time. I’ve been upgrading it with new tech ever since.”

Bemused and unsatisfied by his reply, Larn’kelnar took another sip of his wine. “And now I shall answer your question. We first met six months ago... or were in the same system at least. It was in Ashanath Space... when I was dealing with those hideous four-armed abominations you call the Drakkar.”

“You saw us...” John muttered in surprise.

“Is that a question?” The Progenitor asked, raising an eyebrow. When John shook his head, Larn’kelnar’s eyes narrowed. “Why haven’t you subjugated the Maliri yet? You’ve claimed them, yet you’ve made no effort to amass a legion of thralls...”

“The Maliri suffered under Mael’nerak’s rule and I wanted to save them from self-inflicted extinction. I’ve been trying to liberate the Maliri, not subjugate them,” John replied firmly.

Larn’kelnar snorted with laughter. “Alright, I must admit that was very amusing.” When John didn’t react, his adversary stared at him in disbelief. “You’re not joking, are you?”

“No, not at all,” John replied, with a smile. “Now, I believe that was two questions...”

Larn’kelnar was about to object, then his mouth twisted into a wry smile. “Alright, proceed...”

“What are you doing here? Why are you pitting all the major civilisations against each other? Your ship is vastly more powerful than an entire Maliri fleet; you could just steamroll your way through anything these empires could throw at you!”

Larn’kelnar smiled and folded his arms across his chest. “Now we get to the real meat of this discussion. I could give you evasive answers to your questions and we could drag this out interminably, or I could be straightforward... which would you prefer?”

“Is that your question?” John asked, with a strained smile. When the other Progenitor didn’t dignify that with a response, John looked him in the eye. “What do you want in exchange?”

After inclining his head in acknowledgement, Larn’kelnar toyed with his goblet. “I’m over 9000 years old... I’ve seen a lot of strange things in my time, but I find you to be a true enigma. Answer my questions honestly and in good faith, then I’ll show you the same courtesy.”

John shrugged. “Alright... it’s not like I’ve got anything to hide.”

Studying him curiously for a long moment, Larn’kelnar asked, “Why haven’t you built a Soul Forge and constructed your ship? You should be commanding a dreadnought befitting your stature... not that ugly barge I just obliterated.”

“I’ve no idea what a Soul Forge is, let alone how to build one...”

Larn’kelnar looked disappointed and shook his head. “And I thought we were going to be honest with one another...”

“I told you the truth. Whether you choose to believe me or not, is entirely up to you,” John replied with a nonchalant shrug.

The Progenitor looked at him incredulously. “You can’t expect me to believe that? How do you expect to construct your thrall fleets without a Soul Forge?”

“In a shipyard?” John replied, looking puzzled.

Glaring at him suspiciously, Larn’kelnar tried a different tack. “How many Maliri thralls have you acquired?”

“Recruiting has been a bit difficult; it seems like every time I go back to Maliri Space, I have to rush off again to deal with some disaster you’ve created,” John replied with a wry smile. He tallied up all the engineers and military officers he’d recruited on Genthalas. “I don’t like to think of them as thralls... but roughly a thousand?”

Shaking his head, the Progenitor’s face tensed. “You’re lying... that’s impossible.”

John looked at him curiously. “I’m being completely honest with you. Why do you think I’m lying?”

“Because I watched the Battle of Terra!” Larn’kelnar snapped, revealing his damning proof of John’s duplicity. “I saw your mastery of Pyrokinesis, Electrokinesis, and Telekinesis! There’s no way you could have summoned a fire vortex, created a thunderstorm of that magnitude, or ripped the engines off those battlecarriers with only a thousand thralls... the very idea is preposterous!”

“Well, that’s all I’ve had a chance to recruit so far. I’ve got just over a thousand white-haired Maliri,” John replied, spreading his hands helplessly, although the gesture lost its impact with his arms restrained above his head.

Despite John’s outwardly calm demeanour, he hadn’t missed that important revelation in his opponent’s heated outburst. Larn’kelnar seemed to believe John was solely responsible for Tashana’s pyrotechnics and Alyssa’s telekinetic assault on the Kintark command ships, so it was no wonder the girls had been ignored in the hangar. He was expecting more indignant questions about thrall numbers, but Larn’kelnar suddenly lunged forward, startling John with his intensity.

“What do you know about this... change to white hair?” he asked, his piercing stare searching John’s face.

“All the Maliri who are connected to me have changed hair colour from black to white,” John replied, meeting that probing gaze. “I’ve seen video files dating back to when Mael’nerak ruled them at least 40,000 years ago... the Maliri changed for him too.”

Larn’kelnar stepped back, his eyes darting from side-to-side, apparently lost in thought. “Could they be more potent here?” he muttered under his breath.

“As opposed to where?” John replied in confusion.

Eyeing him suspiciously again, Larn’kelnar suddenly looked startled. “You really have no idea, do you?”

John was sure he looked as bewildered as he felt. “About what?”

Raising his arms in the air, Larn’kelnar turned, a broad grin on his face. “This place... this glorious little corner of the galaxy... *They* can’t control us here!”

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Sakura frowned at the unfamiliar glyph on the wall, then glanced up the maintenance tube. The rest of the girls were following her down the ladder and she had an impressive view of Calara’s pert bottom from this angle.

“Dana! How much further?” she whispered, looking for the redhead.

Leaning back from the ladder, Dana made eye-contact with the Asian girl. “Two more levels... The rune should look like two vertical bars on top of a... squiggle.” She made a wavy symbol in the air with her finger.

Sakura nodded, then descended down the tube and glanced at the next illuminated rune, which looked like three intersecting diamonds. The glyph on the level below matched Dana’s description, so she stepped onto the small platform and waited for the others to climb down. Calara took one glance at the size of the platform and kept descending, making room for the others.

“I need Dana and Jade,” the assassin whispered, glancing up at her friends.

\*On their way,\* Alyssa informed her telepathically. A moment later the redhead and Nymph floated down in the blonde’s telekinetic grip.

Sakura helped them onto the platform then asked quietly, “How do we get to the closest armoury?”

\*Turn right from the elevators, cross an intersection, then take the next left... the armoury should be on the right,\* Alyssa said, recounting the directions she’d gleaned from Yalera’s memory.

Dana listened to the blonde, then compared the route to the black ship schematics she’d learned weeks ago. Shaking her head, she said in a hushed voice, “The barracks isn’t far from here, so there’ll be a shitload of thralls about. I reckon we should steer well clear of the elevators...”

Sakura nodded her agreement. “Have you got a better route?”

“Yeah, I think so. There’s a second entrance on the opposite side, which should keep us well clear of the thralls. Turn right out of here, then take a left, cross over four intersections then take the next left, straight over another intersection and the armoury will be on the left.”

“Do you feel up for a scouting mission?” Sakura asked Jade, looking into Yalera’s magenta eyes.

The disguised Nymph hesitated before replying, “I’m happy to kill every thrall in sight, but I don’t think there’s enough room for me to shapeshift into a dragon...”

Sakura stifled a laugh. “Not that kind of scouting mission... the reconnaissance kind.”

Jade’s eyes twinkled. “Just checking...”

Dana held her fingers over the rune. “Ready?”

When Jade nodded, the redhead activated the concealed maintenance hatch and the wall section slid aside. The Nymph strode out, looking confident and completely at home aboard the ship. She glanced to the left, then turned right, following Dana’s instructions on how to find the armoury.

\*There’s a pair of thralls talking together at the intersection on the left,\* Jade said to Alyssa as she strolled along the corridor.

She neared the next crossroads then turned left, walking along the gloomily lit passageways. The intersection was clear in either direction, but when she neared the subsequent one, animated conversation reached her pointed ears.

“I heard from Tarietia that we’ll be going home any time now,” one thrall said quietly to another.

“You should know better than to believe her soothsaying... she said the same thing three weeks ago!” her companion hissed, sneering with contempt.

“No, I think it might be true this time. She was there when Larn’kelnar captured his adversary!” the first Larathyran thrall said in a hushed voice. “Fah’kresh squad destroyed a gunship and our Lord spaced the few thralls that survived!”

“The sooner we can get back to restock the better...” the second grumbled. “Did you know we used up the last of our laptalesh tea yesterday?”

The other nodded bleakly. “Starting my morning without a cup of lapt leaves me jittery all day.” She noticed Jade listening and nodded in her direction. “Yalera... joining us for a game of Bathelnal tonight?”

“Even an offer to warm Larn’kelnar’s bed wouldn’t keep me away!” Jade bantered, smiling at the thralls before continuing onwards.

The Larathyrans gaped at her in surprise, then burst into laughter.

“As if you’d turn him down...” the closest thrall smirked, rolling her eyes.

“Just imagine what it must be like for Ailanthia...” her companion murmured with a wistful smile. “Being his bedmate every night...”

Jade left the starry-eyed thralls behind and walked swiftly along the corridor.

\*You can understand them!\* Alyssa exclaimed in astonishment.

\*Yes. They’re speaking ancient Maliri...\* Jade replied, as she checked the next intersection. \*Be careful here... lots of thralls to the left.\*

Alyssa sounded distracted as she said, \*I’m just discussing it with Rachel... Perhaps all thrall races speak that same base language?\*

\*The thrall species are seeded for the benefit of a neophyte Progenitor; if they couldn’t understand him, it would make claiming and subjugating them much more difficult,\* Jade replied, turning left and heading down the last corridor. \*I can see the armoury door... it’s undefended.\*

\*Wait... how did you know about neophyte Progenitors?\* Alyssa asked in surprise. \*You sounded so certain!\*

Jade stopped by the junction and frowned. \*I’m not sure... I just know it works that way.\* She glanced down the adjoining corridors. \*I’ve arrived. The route should be clear, but watch when you’re leaving and take special care at the third intersection... there’s at least a dozen thralls in the corridor outside the barracks.\*

There was a long pause, then Alyssa said, \*When this is over, we need to have a long chat, Jade.\*

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“*They* can’t control us?” John asked in a hushed voice.

Larn’kelnar’s face twisted with indignant fury. “They used me as their puppet, made me dance to their tune!” His eyes glinted with triumph. “But not anymore... here I’m free of their cursed interference!”

“Who did? Who are you talking about?” John persisted, desperate to know the answer.

“They plague our dreams... force us to submit to their dominion and do their bidding...” Larn’kelnar replied, a haunted look in his eyes. He studied John and saw the sudden dread appear on his face. “You know who I speak of...”

“The Astral monsters... the mists...” John muttered, brow furrowed in confusion. “But they’re still able to attack us here... I’ve fought them at least a dozen times... in my dreams and on trips into the Astral Plane.”

The other Progenitor looked stunned. “You go there willingly? Are you insane?!”

“Well, it usually ends in disaster, but I’ve had no choice a couple of times...” John replied, trailing off when he saw Larn’kelnar’s shocked expression.

“You’re attempting to deceive me... this is all some kind of trick,” Larn’kelnar snarled, eyes glinting with suspicion.

“I’m telling you the truth,” John insisted. “I don’t know anything about them... just that I kept getting dragged into the nightmare plane whenever I recruit a girl and-”

Face screwing up confusion, Larn’kelnar balked, “You’ve been confronting them whenever you take a thrall?!”

“Not by choice, just under certain circumstances...”

Larn’kelnar’s patience snapped. “More lies!” He marched over to the table and pointed at John’s sword. “What is this blade? I’ve never seen anything quite like it, but it feels ancient... what are you hiding from me, Blake?!”

“I made it accidentally,” John replied, before wincing when he realised how ridiculous that sounded.

“A relentless barrage of falsehoods!” Larn’kelnar snarled, grabbing the hilt of John’s sword, then hissing and snatching his fingers back when blue flames scorched his hand.

His goblet clattered on the floor, spilling blood-red wine across the deck, but John ignored it and stayed focused on his adversary. Larn’kelnar stared at his blackened palm in stunned disbelief, the sudden flash of searing pain having shocked him to the core. There was deathly silence in the room as they both watched his burned hand slowly heal.

“You’re playing a very dangerous game...” Larn’kelnar muttered, his voice dripping menace as he glared at his prisoner once more. “I will get the answers I seek out of you. If you persist with your refusal to cooperate, your stay aboard my ship will get most... unpleasant.”

John shook his head and said with weary resignation, “You know what? Go fuck yourself.”

Larn’kelnar’s eyes widened in astonishment at his defiant tone. “What?!”

“You heard me... I’m sick of listening to you ranting about me lying. I answered all your questions truthfully, so now you answer mine... or at least stop your pathetic whining, you’re giving me a headache.”

The Progenitor looked like he’d been slapped, his shocked expression speaking volumes. John would have wagered everything he owned that no one had ever dared to speak to him like that before. Larn’kelnar moved in a blur, crossing the room in the blink of an eye and slamming his fist into John’s stomach. The lion embossed chestplate cracked with the force of the impact and John was smashed back as much as the restraints would allow, the pain from the blow making him nauseous.

John slumped forward and spat out blood on the black decking. Looking up through the pain, he made eye-contact with Larn’kelnar who stood there seething, the Progenitor’s muscles bunched in fury. John smiled, knowing he’d got under his opponent’s skin and made him lose control. It wasn’t much of a victory, but in his present circumstances, it was one he savoured despite the pain. Larn’kelnar’s fists tightened as he recognised that too, then he made a visible effort to control his temper.

Drawing himself up, Larn’kelnar glared at John with icy fury. “You want to know what I’m doing here?” He let the question hang in the air for a long moment. “There’s something... special... about this part of the galaxy that freed me from millennia of slavery. I have no intention of ever returning to my homeworld and risk being used by those monsters again.”

“And all the wars you’ve instigated between the empires?” John asked quietly, trying not to grimace from the pain in his stomach. “Why not just bring a fleet of thrall ships to wipe everybody out? Or just destroy the empires yourself...”

Larn’kelnar’s mouth twisted into a wicked smile. “Why? Because it amused me to dupe one preening fool after another into doing my bidding, then sit back and watch my hapless puppets tear each other apart. Besides, it was beneath me to personally slaughter this menagerie of abominations, so I encouraged those disgusting freaks to do it themselves. My time as the puppet master was most entertaining, but it’s finally come to an end...” He studied John with cold eyes. “I was curious to see if you would ever shape the Maliri into anything resembling a challenge, but you’ve failed spectacularly in that regard.”

John studied his Progenitor nemesis for a long moment. “So what now? What are you planning to do?”

“Just what I’ve done dozens of times before. Activate a hyper-warp gate, summon my fleets, then destroy everything in my path,” Larn’kelnar replied, with a calculating smile. “I intend to purge this wonderful sanctuary of all the foul vermin that infest it... and establish the new Larathyran Empire on the ashes of your Maliri Protectorate!”

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Calara placed her hand on Rachel’s shoulder and gave her a comforting squeeze. “Are you ready?”

The tawny-haired brunette took a deep breath, then nodded. “As much as I’ll ever be...”

The Latina closed her eyes, then focused on Rachel as she activated her prescience. Calara watched as Rachel’s future unfolded before her, the possibilities shifting as time rolled inexorably onwards. Leaving the maintenance alcove at any point in the next 12 seconds would mean she’d be spotted and Sakura would be forced to rush out and try to silence the thrall before she could alert Ailanthia. Seeing a window for escape, Calara gave the signal to her girlfriend.

\*Go!\* Alyssa said, patting the anxious doctor on her back.

Dana opened the wall-section and Rachel stepped out, turning right and walking at a hurried pace along the corridor.

\*Not so fast... they’ve got sharp hearing...\*

Rachel made an effort to slow down her pace and make less noise, then turned left and continued down the corridor. She walked as quickly as she dared, then froze when she saw a Larathyran in the distance.

\*It’s only Jade... keep going.\*

Sighing with relief, the brunette strode along the black passageway, returning Jade’s warm smile. She approached the first intersection and hesitated.

\*Go!\*

Rachel lurched forward, not even bothering to check down the corridors to the left or right and placing her fate completely in Calara’s hands. She neared the second crossroads, feeling dreadfully exposed walking alone through the ship like this.

\*Keep going...\*

She crossed the next junction without incident, then relaxed as she drew closer to the waiting Nymph.

\*Stop!\*

Rachel jerked to a halt and Jade sprung into action, walking into the corridor on the left. Voices reached her ears, then faint laughter, and she couldn’t help wondering what the Nymph was saying.

\*Go... but quietly.\*

She tiptoed forward, the voices getting louder. Rachel dared a glance to the left and saw the backs of four thralls, the quartet looking away from her towards Yalera’s doppelganger, who was speaking to them animatedly. Creeping past the tunnel, Rachel kept to that same torturously slow pace as she walked away from the intersection.

\*Run! They’re coming!\*

Rachel grimaced and broke into a sprint, running as lightly as she could to minimise the sound of her footfalls. Behind her, she could hear raucous laughter, the sounds of hilarity getting louder and closer.

\*Left now!\*

She skidded around the corner and rushed into someone’s waiting arms, her pounding heart threatening to leap out of her chest. Rachel’s flash of panic ebbed away as she saw blue skin and white hair, Tashana giving her a reassuring hug.

“Shh, you’re safe now,” the Maliri whispered soothingly in her ear.

Rachel relaxed in the twin’s embrace and hugged her back. She glanced over Tashana’s shoulder and saw Irillith at the other end of the corridor facing the armoury door, a soft violet light shining on the reinforced doorway. “What’s she doing?”

“The door’s locked. Rill’s breaking in...” Tashana replied, unable to keep the worry from her voice.

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Irillith stared at the access node security gate, a flicker of fear making her hands tremble. This was only an internal security node, it wasn’t like she was attempting to penetrate the black dreadnought’s external gateway... but still, the Maliri had never felt more apprehensive about a hack. There were many factors contributing to her nervousness. There was the sullen darkness of the ship’s network, with its sinister crimson glow that cast its pall over everything, but worst of all was the forbidding presence that loomed overhead.

She glanced up at the massive onyx sentinel and watched the security program hover above the silvery paths that lead to other nodes, patrolling the data network for intruders. Irillith had no pressing desire to find out what the function “Neutralise hostiles” did first hand, but aside from being eviscerated by a rampaging security program, a mistake here would alert the system that intruders were roaming the ship.

Approaching the portal, Irillith grimaced when she saw the hexagonal shield protecting it. There was a small window within that protective screen where one of the hex-tiles was missing, but as she watched, the window closed again after only a few seconds. Blinking in surprise, she waited for it to reopen, then a flicker caught her eye as it reappeared at another point in the shield. She counted ten seconds before the access port shifted position again, drastically reducing the time she’d have to analyse and hack the node.

After a fearful glance at the departing sentinel, she set up a data probe, tentatively making contact with the hex shield. Information began spooling through her interpreter as she looked for a way of breaking the electronic defences. The code was dizzyingly complex and she found herself disappearing down long logic chains full of security contingencies. Irillith grimaced as she realised just how much time it was going to take her to analyse and find a way of breaking through the portal, unless she resorted to shattering it and no doubt triggering the alarm.

She paced back and forth, trying to think of a better way... some alternate means of circumventing the shield. Then in a flash of insight, she realised she didn’t need to break the barrier, just find out how the access port was randomly realigned. Irillith delved into the code again and grinned when she found the relevant algorithm. She didn’t even need to know how it worked, only that it did, so she setup a mirror subroutine and copied the code fragment to use as the basis for her hacking routine.

Initiating her program, she tapped into the node wall itself, her data probe revealing information about the gate. Irillith paid no attention to that for the moment, her gaze was locked on the access port in the hex shield and she held her breath when she reached the count of ten. The portal shifted and the double-pronged data probe shifted with it, maintaining her connection to the node.

Movement in her peripheral vision drew Irillith’s attention. She looked to the right and felt her heart skip a beat as the data sentinel turned and bore down on her position. Eyes wide with fright, she realised that piggybacking her code on the moving gateway must have triggered some kind of checksum discrepancy and called the security program to investigate. She threw herself into the hack, knowing she had only seconds to act, and set up a dozen analysers to look for vulnerabilities in the node security. The data sentinel was approaching rapidly and she could almost feel its merciless gaze sweeping her way.

One of the analysers flashed green as it identified the access subroutine and Irillith hurriedly issued the command to open the portal. After all the effort of breaking in, the door security state was just a simple Boolean switch, signifying active or inactive. Irillith dismissed her programs to remove all trace of her presence and flipped the switch, then hurtled back towards her body, fleeing from the cyber-realm. Her consciousness slammed back into her physical form and Irillith wavered unsteadily, then leaned against the wall as she panted for breath.

“What happened?!” Tashana whispered, shocked to see her sister looking so ruffled. “Are you alright?”

Irillith nodded, then wiped the perspiration from her brow. “I unlocked the security door... but I’m not sure if I tripped an alarm.”

Rachel and Tashana exchanged a worried glance.

The Maliri hacker grimaced. “I know... I’m sorry I can’t be 100% certain. Their data network is terrifyingly complex; I escaped as soon as I could.”

Jade ran around the corner and skidded to a halt. “Alyssa said there might be a problem?”

Irillith nodded, darting a glance at the reinforced door. “We should check to see if we can access the armoury...”

Still wearing her Larathyran disguise, Jade strode up to the control panel, then turned and gestured for her companions to move out of sight. When they had darted over to the wall behind her, she pressed the access rune and the door split apart, letting her peer inside.

“I can’t see anyone...” she murmured, cautiously padding into the huge armoury.

Rachel and the twins followed her inside, gaping at row after row of weapon racks full of black Reaper cannons. There were other weapons too, from small deadly-looking pistols to carbine-sized rifles, all finished in the same sinister black metal.

\*Get out now!\* Alyssa shouted, her cry of alarm ringing in their ears.

The girls obeyed her instantly, retreating out of the armoury and ducking around the corner. A white blur flashed past them and they heard a quiet thud a moment later.

Sakura reappeared at the doorway. “There was a quartermaster heading this way; she heard the door opening and would have discovered you. Calara predicted she’d set off an alarm, so I had to take her out. It’s safe to come in now.”

Rachel followed Jade into the armoury and spotted the decapitated thrall at the end of the weapon racks, her head a dozen feet away from her body.

Tashana was about to join them, but the sound of multiple footsteps from behind them made her freeze. She glanced back down the corridor in alarm. “There’s a group running this way!”

\*It’s just us, don’t worry,\* Alyssa said soothingly.

Calara led Helene, Jessica, Dana, and Alyssa around the corner, her eyes glowing as she ran.

“I thought we were sneaking here one at a time?” Rachel whispered, looking at the five of them in surprise.

“Circumstances changed,” Alyssa replied, taking the brunette’s hand and pulling her into the armoury.

“We needed to move fast,” Calara explained, shaking her head and rubbing at her eyes as the glow faded. She touched a glyph on the wall and closed the door behind them. “We’re close to the barracks... the longer we spent lurking in the corridors outside, the more likely it was we’d be discovered. In thirty seconds, a group of thralls will walk past that door and would’ve found you in the corridor outside. I could’ve tried hiding you in side-passages, but the thralls were going to split up... it would’ve been a nightmare trying to avoid detection.”

“Did I trip an alarm in their data network?” Irillith asked anxiously.

The Latina hesitated then shrugged. “I don’t think so, but I’m not certain. I can only see about a minute into the future and we’re safe for now... but if a silent alarm has been triggered and thralls are massing in the second armoury, I wouldn’t know until it was too late.”

Dana groaned and clutched at her head. “Sonofabitch... did I rip off everything?!”

They turned to look at the redhead and found her at the end of the weapon racks, staring into the next section of the armoury. The girls ran over to see what new piece of technology had upset the Grand Engineering Overlord.

“Well I’ll be damned...” Sakura muttered, shaking her head in amazement.

Ahead of them were ten armour-equipping frames set in the middle of the room, robotic arms poised and ready with black metal plating held in their grip. The design was slightly different to the equipping frames on the Invictus, in that these devices were placed away from the wall, but otherwise, the similarities were uncanny.

Dana strode over to the closest and stepped into the armoured boots. As if reacting to her presence, the arms swung down to position the armour plates over her body, enclosing her in a full battle suit. The fit was perfect, designed for the statuesque dimensions of a thrall, a body shape they all matched exactly.

“Get geared up girls,” Alyssa said, glancing up at the frames. She glanced at Jessica and gave her an encouraging smile. “You too please. It’ll be easier to protect you if you’re wearing armour.”

Jessica looked up at the intimidating device with trepidation. “How does it work?”

“Watch them...” the blonde replied, her eyes following the girls.

They stepped into the black boots, then looked up as the equipping frames swung into action, encasing them in armour. The only exceptions were Jade, Sakura -who was still wearing her Paragon suit-, and Alyssa, who stared pensively at the black plating.

“We look like bad guys now,” Calara protested, staring at her friends with a frown. “I much prefer the white...”

Dana pressed her thumb to the palm of her gauntlet and locked her suit with a quiet clunk. She looked down at her armour and grumbled, “At least my Kirrix-inspired version is more secure. This type only uses three latches per plated section... mine has a minimum of 27...”

“We’ll just have to make do with these subpar versions for now,” Irillith said to the redhead with an indulgent smile.

“Favourite twin...” Dana murmured, nudging Irillith with an elbow, although her answering smile was strained.

“The HUD is almost identical,” Rachel marvelled, looking at the positioning of the runes. Although she didn’t understand the Larathyran glyphs, a glance at the optical interface activated thermal imaging. “Same functions, same layout...”

As the girls fanned out to collect weapons, Calara paused and looked at Alyssa with a disapproving frown. “Why aren’t you wearing armour?”

The blonde shook her head and stammered, “I-I can’t... Being covered in that black plating... even the thought of it makes my skin crawl.”

Sakura turned and patted Alyssa on the arm. “You can wear the Paragon suit. Can you help me take it off?”

“Wait!” Dana called out, darting over to a console. She studied it for a moment, then pressed a rune on the holo interface. “There you go... use the first equipping frame.”

Sakura turned to look and saw that the previously used frames were not standing idle. After the girls had stepped clear, the robotic arms had swung up into the ceiling to retrieve plates for another suit, ready to armour the next thrall in line. Dana’s console command had returned that suit of black body armour to the stocks, leaving the robotic arms empty and waiting.

The Asian girl left her ninjato propped up against a weapon rack and stepped into position in the equipping frame, glowing bootprint outlines making it clear where to stand. Sakura unlocked her Paragon suit, the action marked by familiar rippling clicks as the hooks unlatched, then she watched as the arms swung down and deftly removed her armour plating. As soon as she was unarmoured, Sakura moved along to the next frame in line, making room for the blonde. Alyssa stepped into the white Paragon boots and a few seconds later both girls were fully enclosed in armour.

“Thank you,” Alyssa said with a sigh of relief, rippling clicks locking her into the suit.

Sakura smiled at her as she walked over to retrieve her swords. “If only one of us is going to look like a good girl, it should be you.”

Calara reached for one of the black carbines and shook her head in amazement as she held the weapon. The grip felt like it had been custom-designed to perfectly fit her hand.

“You’re not taking a Reaper Cannon?” Irillith asked, as she unhooked one of the underslung support weapons from the racks.

The Latina shook her head. “I’ve never fired one. I’ll be more accurate with this.”

Tashana spun a pair of evil-looking pistols around her fingers before nimbly catching them in both hands. “I was worried they’d only have Reaper Cannons...” She glanced at Dana. “What do these guns fire?”

“Tachyon bolts. They’ll be effective against thrall shielding and armour,” the redhead replied, reaching for a Reaper Cannon. “Although the pulsed tachyon beams from our rifles would’ve hit much harder.”

Rachel smiled at her girlfriend. “See, that proves you’ve already started innovating beyond thrall technology.”

Dana allowed herself a smile of professional pride. “Yeah, you’re right!”

Sakura walked over to Alyssa and asked quietly, “So what’s our plan now?”

“We head straight for the interrogation chambers; that’s where Yalera thought John would be held prisoner,” Alyssa replied, her cerulean eyes glowing with a fierce inner radiance.

Her gaze swept over the girls and she saw that Dana, Rachel, and Irillith were now toting Reaper Cannons, Calara held a carbine, Tashana was dual-wielding pistols, and Sakura held her ninjato in clenched fists. Helene and Jessica wore armour but weren’t armed, and Jade was waiting patiently beside them in her thrall disguise.

Gesturing to a pair of Reaper Cannons, she lifted them off the weapon racks with two sets of glowing telekinetic hands. “Alright, let’s go free John.”

“Wait...” Sakura said, looking her in the eyes. “I’ve got a better idea...”

“A better idea than freeing him?” Tashana asked with a puzzled frown.

Alyssa went silent as she listened to the Asian girl’s thoughts. “It’s too dangerous...” she objected, shaking her head.

“You know it makes sense,” Sakura said quietly. “With Larn’kelnar distracted, it’ll be easier to break John out of prison.”

Irillith rolled her eyes. “Enough with the cryptic conversations! What are you two planning?”

The assassin turned to face her. “Larn’kelnar is a Progenitor; we know he gains power from his thralls... but they can’t give him psychic energy if they’re dead. I suggest we destroy the armouries, wipe out the thralls in the barracks, then I’ll roam the ship killing every thrall I can find. That should draw Larn’kelnar’s attention to me, letting the rest of you free John.”

“Now that’s one hell of a plan...” Irillith purred, her expression twisting with feral anticipation.

Tashana’s eyes lit up with a terrible inner fire. “I’ll handle the barracks...”

Rachel looked at the Maliri twins with worry, then her gaze snapped to Sakura. “If you get into trouble, we won’t be able help you! We can’t just let you run off alone!”

“None of you could keep up...” Sakura replied, twirling her ninjato around her wrists.

The seconds dragged on as Alyssa considered it and she looked at the girls in turn, seeing looks of concern from Calara, Dana, and Rachel. By contrast, the twins were champing at the bit to get started, Jade shimmered in a green glow then reappeared as a huge armoured tiger, and Sakura met her matriarch’s probing gaze with steely confidence.

“If you see any sign of Larn’kelnar, don’t even think about confronting him...” Alyssa said sternly to the assassin.

Sakura nodded solemnly. “Good luck.” She saluted the girls with a sword, then strode purposefully for the reinforced doors.

“Wait!” Alyssa called after her, running over to give the Asian girl a hug.

She was then embraced by the rest of the girls, who murmured pleas to take care and stay safe. After saying their goodbyes, Sakura slipped out through the door they’d used to enter the armoury.

Alyssa nodded to the twins, “Okay, let’s do this. Sakura will start when you give the signal.”

Tashana holstered her pistols and a cluster of flame sprites appeared on her upraised palms.

“How many thralls shall we invite to the barbecue, Shan?” Irillith asked her sister, a wicked smile on her face as she walked towards the double set of doors that adjoined the barracks.

“Everyone loves flame-grilled meat...” Tashana purred, the fiery elementals hopping off her hands and cavorting around her.

“I’ll handle the armoury,” Dana said quietly, before jerking a thumb towards the door Sakura had just departed through. “The rest of you better get clear...”

As Alyssa and the other girls headed towards the door, the golden coronas around Dana’s pupils began to flare, the glow intensifying as she channelled her powers.

Irillith tapped the rune by the doorframe and the large set of doors leading into the barracks began to part, the serrated edges separating as the four quarters slid open. The thrall barracks was split into several open-plan areas, each one containing hundreds of bunks, a galley kitchen, and a lounge area for the thousand thralls that inhabited this section of the ship. Several of the closest thralls looked up when the armoury doors opened, their faces twisting with sudden hatred when they caught sight of the Maliri.

Both twins were tapping into their psychic powers now, their eyes blazing with violet light. Tashana unleashed her swarm of elementals, then watched them cartwheel into the room, the fiery female figures leaping and dancing as they formed a circle. The blaze intensified, the flame sprites moving faster and faster as they merged together into a spinning vortex of fire.

Leaping into the Cyber-realm, Irillith surged towards the nearest shielded node, a seething storm of lightning arcing down her arms to crackle around her fists. She aimed them at the sealed portal and a jagged bolt streaked out, blasting the hexagon shield into smithereens and instantly vaporising the portal. Flipping the mechanism, the reinforced doors on the opposite side of the huge room began to open, exposing the next section of the barracks, then the next... and the next.

Tashana drew both pistols and began snapping off shots at the thralls who had spotted them. One of the Larathyrans vaulted off her bed and charged at the twins, but a tachyon bolt hit her in the torso, the force of the impact hurling her backwards with a glowing crater in her chest. Meanwhile, Tashana’s conflagration was roaring with an almost primal hunger, the spine-chilling cacophony accompanied by terrified screams as thralls were sucked into the inferno. The walls of fire expanded outwards, incinerating scores of Larathyrans and sweeping towards hundreds more.

Irillith withdrew from the data-network before the black sentinels could intercept her, the shrill peal of alarms ringing in her ears. Returning to her physical form, she aimed her Reaper Cannon across the barracks and began spraying a stream of purple tachyon bolts through the open doors. Thralls in the other sections were reacting quickly to the attack and sprinting for the opposite armoury, but those who attempted to enter were shot in the back, tachyon bolts blasting glowing holes through their bodies.

\*Fall back!\* Alyssa shouted in warning.

The twins felt a gentle tug to the right and darted a glance in that direction as they backed away from the barracks door. A tiny black sphere hovered on the far side of the room, only visible because of the golden halo of light flashing around the periphery. The guns closest to the orb rattled in their weapon racks then flipped through the air towards it, buckling and crumpling inwards as they got closer.

Tashana’s elemental maelstrom keened out a terrifying howl as it vaporised everything in the barracks. The fire funnelled through the open door into the next section, forming a temporary figure-of-eight pattern as it surged inside to immolate the inhabitants. Thralls were burned to a crisp where they stood, their bodies disintegrating to ash with the ferocious heat of the vortex. As soon as the twins left the armoury, Calara sealed the door behind them, desperate to silence those dreadful screams.

The Latina shuddered and Irillith placed a hand on her shoulder. “That was for Faye and the Nymphs...”

Calara’s expression turned grim, all sign of sympathy for the thralls evaporating.

Jade and Alyssa shared a glance, both knowing that the Nymphs were still alive.

“I’m sorry... with everything going on we haven’t had a chance to tell you yet. Jade can still sense the Nymphs’ emotions,” Alyssa said, looking around at the girls. “We think her sisters survived the crash.”

Dana’s mouth fell open in shock. “There’s no way... not from orbit! The Invictus should be smashed into a million pieces!”

The blonde shrugged helplessly. “They can’t use telepathy with Jade yet, so we don’t know how they survived. I do know that John’s been focusing on making the Nymphs tougher when he’s been feeding them recently; maybe they were able to shapeshift spontaneously like Jade did and grew wings or something? Whatever happened, all four of them are still alive.”

That prompted a quick round of celebratory hugs, with the girls making sure to embrace Jade, all of them knowing how relieved she must be feeling. Their good mood evaporated when they thought of Faye tumbling to her doom in the rear of the Invictus.

“Is there any chance for Faye?” Irillith asked Dana, a flicker of hope in her violet eyes.

Dana shook her head and turned away, her heart breaking to see that sense of hope guttering out.

Alyssa let out a heavy sigh, her expression turning bleak. “Let’s go free John... Then we’ll show Larn’kelnar what happens when you fuck with us...”

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Ailanthia luxuriated in bed, feeling gloriously decadent as she revelled in carrying her master’s seed. After 4000 years of wishing she could bear her lord a child, she finally had her wish... and so much more. She caressed her gravid curves and decided to take a walk on the Bridge. Seeing the looks of envy from her thralls was like the icing on a delicious cake, each and every one of her minions desperately wishing that they were Larn’kelnar’s favoured servant.

Her blissful reverie was shattered an instant later, when her connections to hundreds of thralls exploded with a riot of emotions. She felt a rapid succession of shock, hate, and fear... which rapidly transformed into terror, an instant before those thralls were extinguished from Larn’kelnar’s psychic network. A few hundred was only a drop in the ocean, but the death toll quickly escalated to thousands... and they were all thralls aboard his ship!

Ailanthia sat bolt upright, stunned at the thought they could be under attack.

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“You will tell me everything I need to know, Blake... it’s just a matter of time until I break you.” Larn’kelnar said coldly, before turning and walking away.

“Wait a second,” John called after him, making his Progenitor opponent pause. “I know you captured Rahn’hagon last week... but why didn’t you just kill him?”

“Execute the senile old fool?” Larn’kelnar replied with a wistful smile. “Believe me, nothing would give me greater pleasure... but not yet.”

“What do you need him for?” John asked curiously.

Larn’kelnar’s smile broadened. “Well I’m hardly going to waste the time and resources on constructing my own Warp Gate.” Raising an eyebrow, he added with obvious scepticism, “I’d have just commandeered yours, but apparently you have no idea how to even build a Soul Forge...”

\*My Lord!\* Ailanthia cried out, her voice tremulous with emotion. \*We’re under attack!\*

Larn’kelnar grimaced and shook his head in resignation. \*They must have sensed my extended absence... a response was inevitable. Still... the Empire should be strong enough to defend the borders for years to come.\*

\*No, not our Empire! Thousands of thralls are dead... all aboard the ship!\* she exclaimed, teetering on the verge of panic. \*They were slain in a matter of seconds!\*

\*How?!\* he snapped, eyes narrowing as he glared at John. \*There’s nothing that could threaten us for thousands of light years in any direction!\*

\*I don’t know, my Lord,\* his matriarch replied in consternation. \*But more thralls are still being killed...\*

Larn’kelnar rushed up to John and grabbed him by the throat. “What have you done?!”

John glanced at the psychic inhibitor device, his mouth curling up into a mocking smile. “You’re strong... and I’m weak. What could I have possibly done?”

The Progenitor glared at him with hate-filled eyes and John could see his fate being decided in that furious stare. With a snarl of frustration, Larn’kelnar released him and sprinted for the door, his psychic speed making him move in a blur.

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Sakura charged along the corridor towards the group of twenty thralls running for the armoury. She was moving so fast that they didn’t even realise the assassin was a threat until she had plunged into their ranks. She stabbed the first in the chest and disembowelled the second, tearing her blades free in sprays of blue blood as she began her slaughter. Her twin ninjato flashed back and forth, decapitating the Larathyrans or running them through, the slashes and stabs so fast that half of the thralls were dead before the rest realised they were being attacked.

The survivors stared wide-eyed at their dismembered companions and backed away in fear as the shadowy blur surged after them. Their screams echoed down the corridor as Sakura set upon the rest, cutting them down as they attempted to flee. The corridor was soon soaked with blood and gore, the unarmed thralls no match for the lethal assassin.

Feeling disconnected from her emotions, Sakura tore through the enemy without pause or hesitation. While individually none of the Larathyran women were any kind of threat, collectively they empowered Larn’kelnar, who was the most dangerous foe they’d ever faced. As she butchered the thralls, she didn’t feel the slightest sense of remorse at hacking them to pieces... after all, she was showing them the same mercy that the thralls had shown the Invictus and her crew.

She pictured Faye’s cheerfully smiling face, then remembered the sprite’s look of horror when the Invictus was cut in half. A tear ran down her cheek as she skewered the last remaining thrall through the heart and she watched dispassionately as she tugged her blade free, letting the woman’s body collapse to the ground. A sudden thought came to Sakura as she set off again. The thralls directly responsible for the attack on the Invictus were all located on the Bridge...

Sakura broke into a run with a specific destination in mind this time, a tight smile on her beautiful face. The smile wasn’t reflected in her eyes; they were cold and hard, filled with a fierce hunger for justice... and not just for Faye, but the billions like her who had fallen victim to this legion of murderers.

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Alyssa strode down the corridor, her Reaper Cannons floating alongside her, poised and ready to fire at a moment’s notice. An alarm was blaring, the shrill sound echoing down the corridors and every so often she could hear panicked footsteps coming from one of the intersections. Fortunately, none of them had crossed paths with her group yet, but it was only a matter of time before they ran into someone. Pressing onwards, she did her best to ignore the terrible visions of thralls being drained into husks and glanced back at her companions to check they were okay.

The twins were also at the forefront of their formation, pistols and cannon trained on the gloomy passage ahead. Helene and Jessica were safe in the middle, with Calara and Jade flanking them for their protection. Finally, Rachel and Dana were at the rear of the group, watching for any sign of attack from behind.

“Are we nearly there yet, mummy?” Rachel whispered to her girlfriend.

Dana shook her head, the hint of a strained smile on her face at her lover’s joke. “We need to go up six decks and cross to the port side.”

The tawny-haired brunette took her eyes off the corridor behind them to study her lover with concern. “Are you alright?” When Dana shot her a look, Rachel rolled her eyes. “I know... but Helene lessened the grief... and you’re still really subdued.”

“She was my friend...” Dana said, choking back a sob, her eyes filling with tears.

Rachel swallowed around the lump in her throat. “I know...”

Alyssa paused, then turned to touch Helene on the shoulder. “They need you again, Helene... please.”

There was a catch in Irillith’s voice as she said softly, “I’m struggling too...”

Helene made eye contact with the blonde. \*Do you want me to permanently lessen their grief?\*

Alyssa shook her head. \*No... We all loved Faye and need time to mourn for her... but not now.\*

The aquatic girl turned to look at Dana, Rachel, and Irillith in turn, her eyes filled with sympathy. “Faye loved the three of you so much. I’m really sorry...”

“The sentiment was lovely, but it’s not helping...” Rachel murmured, tears rolling down her cheeks.

Helene closed her eyes and reached out to all three girls, doing her best to ease their grief. She didn’t want to touch their memories of Faye, so she left them alone and just did her best to temporarily reduce their emotional pain.

Rachel gave Helene a grateful smile. “Thank you.”

Dana took a deep breath, then let out a shuddering sigh. “Alright... let’s keep going.”

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Larn’kelnar sprinted along the corridor, then slowed when he reached the site of a massacre. Eviscerated corpses were sprawled across a junction, the thralls chopped to pieces with the consummate skill of an expert swordsman. He bristled at the effrontery... the thought of someone roaming freely through his ship and slaying his minions at will infuriated him.

Suddenly he felt a pang of fear and blurted out, \*Ailanthia, where are you?\*

\*Still in your quarters, my Lord,\* she replied. \*I’m about to go to the Bridge and-\*

\*No, stay where you are. I don’t want you roaming the ship,\* he said firmly. \*Until I’ve hunted down this intruder, I want you to lock yourself inside my quarters.\*

\*Yes, my Lord,\* she said obediently, thrilled at his concern for her despite the dangerous situation.

Larn’kelnar threaded his way through the bloodbath at the crossroads and smiled to himself when he sensed her emotions. Ailanthia had always been a competent matriarch and served him faithfully for thousands of years, but he’d been astonished at how much his feelings had changed for her in the last few months. The sooner this intruder was dealt with, he could finish interrogating Blake and Rahn’hagon... then start looking towards the future.

He passed dozens more bodies on his way to the armoury, the thralls dismembered by a sharp weapon of some kind, probably some form of blade. Thoughts of melee weapons brought Blake’s runesword to mind and he flexed the fingers of his right hand as he remembered the searing pain from touching that ancient weapon. There was a sense of... purpose... behind that blade and when it seared his flesh he felt it hungering for him.

A shiver ran down his spine, but he shook it off stubbornly. Blake had obviously just imbued the sword with a simple set of runes to deter enemies from using the weapon against him. The idea that it was some kind of special artefact was ludicrous and he dismissed that thought as his mind playing tricks on him. Even now, nearly a year after being freed from bondage, he still felt that clouding haze tugging at the edge of his subconscious. The beasts in the mists must still be furious at him and perhaps it was their rage at his breaking free that he’d been sensing.

More corpses lay where they’d fallen outside the barracks, a single cut efficiently dispatching each thrall. Larn’kelnar knew that was the lethal mark of an expert swordsman, but the idea that one person had been responsible for the deaths of thousands of his thralls was too farcical to be believed. Striding up to the barracks entrance, he tapped the glyph to open the door, then waited for it to split open.

The first thing that he was aware of was the sweet aroma of roasted flesh, the smell becoming more overpowering as the door opened fully. He was about to enter, when the horrifying state of the barracks finally registered. Some dreadful conflagration had incinerated the room, melting down everything within. Even the walls and ceiling were warped and distorted, the surface pockmarked and bubbled by the infernal temperatures.

He stepped inside, his finger drifting over the surface and finding the metal still warm to the touch. Larn’kelnar had only seen a blaze this hot once before, but the thought that another Progenitor was roaming freely around his ship was too far-fetched to even be considered. Blake was still restrained and when he’d checked on Rahn’hagon, the old fool was also securely bound, which discounted either of them as the culprits.

The five sections of the barracks had all been gutted by fire and he glanced through them before ending his inspection in the armoury. The flames had done their work in here too, melting and distorting the weapons on the racks, the armour equipping frames faring no better. Larn’kelnar shook his head in disbelief as he surveyed the devastation and his sense of disquiet steadily increased. Pausing at the doors into the barracks, he glanced through and saw that the door opposite was still sealed.

Relieved that the second armoury had escaped the immolating touch of the inferno, he crossed the barracks to rally the surviving thralls who must be getting geared up in there. Opening the door to the touch of a rune, he waited impatiently for it to withdraw into the frame. Stepping over the serrated edges and ducking his head, Larn’kelnar hurried inside, and was startled to find the armoury deserted.

He expected to find the room packed with thralls preparing for battle, but instead it was twisted and contorted like the nightmarish dream of a madman. Everything in the armoury seemed to have wanted to drag itself towards the rear of the room, where a compacted sphere of black metal now lay on the deck. Crouching down beside the orb, he made out hideously mangled thrall weapons just visible in its surface. He could barely imagine what might have done such a thing, but the fabric of the room seemed to tremble in the aftermath of potent eldritch powers.

\*I’m returning to my quarters,\* Larn’kelnar said quietly to his matriarch. \*Have my war gear made ready.\*

\*Yes, my Lord,\* Ailanthia murmured, shaken by the flicker of fear she felt in her master.

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Sakura tapped the rune with the point of her blade, then flexed her fingers around the hilts of her ninjato, adjusting her grip as she waited for the reinforced door to open. The rune flashed, shifting colour from blue to red, but the door stubbornly refused to open. Glaring at the door in irritation, Sakura reached into the icy core within herself, then funnelled that into her twin swords. Frost skittered up the blades, the crack of ice echoing in the corridor as the air around the weapons plunged to subzero temperatures.

Taking a deep breath, Sakura lunged forward, driving both blades into the black door to the torturous shriek of metal grinding against metal. She jarred her arms and cursed as the points of her swords only dug a few inches into the surface. If she’d struck a titanium door with that amount of force, she would have cut through it like butter. However, that indentation was enough and she began channelling the glacial cold from her blades into the metal. The runes on her ninjato flared and ice began forming rapidly, seeping into the foot-thick door and spreading out over the surface.

Astounded by the new lows to which she could drop the arctic temperatures, Sakura poured in more psychic energy, the Progenitor magnification runes amplifying the effect on the door. There was an ugly creaking noise, then the door seemed to groan in protest as the ice shattered, black shards imploding into the Bridge. Sakura smiled as she strode through the gap, getting ready to dispense justice to the thralls who’d executed the attack on the Invictus.

A blistering salvo of purple bolts struck her suit’s shield, making the surface ripple violently. Sakura moved by instinct, sprinting forward and activating her psychic speed as she rushed to get clear of the kill zone. The thralls she could see on the Bridge were all wearing black armour and carrying carbines or pistols, most of which were pointed her way. Instead of trying to double back to attack the squad firing across the open area at the back of the Bridge, she vaulted over the closest station and plunged both blades into the thrall behind the console.

Thrall armour was tough, but the material it was constructed from wasn’t in the same league as the black Progenitor metal that had made the door so resilient. Duo-deca shaped Crystal Alyssium proved equal to the task of penetrating the thrall’s suit and there was a grating screech as Sakura’s ninjato impaled the Larathyran. With a strangled cry of pain and fear, the thrall pitched over backwards, her assailant riding her down to the deck. The ice encasing those blades flash-froze the thrall, her face reflecting her horror as she was chilled to the bone.

Gusts began to pick up over by the sundered doorway, unnoticed by the thralls who were fanning out to get a clear shot at their attacker. The defenders snapped off a handful of shots at the assassin as she yanked her blades free and flipped over the next console to decapitate the Larathyran helmswoman. Sakura ducked instinctively as tachyon bolts peppered the station, shattering instruments and blasting chunks out of the console. The winds began to swirl, picking up speed as they spun in a tight circle, but all eyes were on the assassin as she dived and darted through the Command Deck, eviscerating the thralls manning the various stations.

It was hard to hear the wind at first over the frantic gunshots, but as the gusts whipped themselves into a frenzy, an unearthly howl drew all their attention. The thralls started to back away, eyes widening in fear as they stared at the maelstrom of metal particles hurtling around the twister. Then, as if possessed of a diabolical will of its own, the tornado leapt towards them, its tail skittering across the deck as it plunged into their ranks.

Sakura stood and watched as the lethal hurricane of razor-sharp flechettes tore the squad of thralls to pieces. Some of them tried to run, but the winds dragged them back, scores of tiny metal fragments striking their armour at the speed of sound. Thrall body suits were no match for the incredible hardness of the black metal, with shards ripping gruesome holes through limbs and torsos. Shrieks of agony joined the whistling scream of the twister, mounting to a blood-curdling crescendo until the cries finally died out.

Dismissing her deadly tornado, Sakura turned away from the faltering winds, and thousands of fragments clattered across the deck. The Bridge was deathly quiet now, every member of the crew slaughtered by the vengeful assassin. Sakura gazed through the windows at Arcadia, the green and blue planet below looking beautiful against the backdrop of glittering stars. Her face reflected her sadness as she raised a ninjato, offering a silent salute to Faye’s memory.

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The elevator doors slid open and Calara nodded, giving them the all clear. Alyssa and the twins swept into the corridor, turned left and set a brisk pace as they headed towards the interrogation chambers. Fortunately, there was no sign of Larn’kelnar’s thralls, who had responded to the intruder alarm and headed for the armouries.

Helene glanced at Jessica who was walking beside her, the pensive young woman jumping at shadows. “We’ll find John soon... then everything will be okay,” she whispered, giving the brunette a reassuring smile. “It won’t be long until you’re back in Rahn’hagon’s arms.”

Jessica darted a grateful look at the aquatic girl, which turned to curiosity a moment later. “Helene...” she began hesitantly. “Would you tell me about... my son?”

“Of course,” Helene replied, her tone warm and friendly. “What do you want to know?”

She looked troubled and murmured, “Whatever you can tell me... I know nothing about him.”

“John’s the most amazing man I’ve ever met!” Helene gushed, looking dreamy eyed.

“I feel the same way about Rahn...” Jessica said, her smile broadening.

Helene nodded, her expression full of adoration. “John’s got such a good heart! I was devastated when I lost my baby six years ago and there were complications that meant I wasn’t able to have children any more. When I met your son last month, he offered to heal me and didn’t ask for anything in return, he just wanted me to be happy! I managed to persuade John to take me with him... and it’s a decision I’ve never once regretted.”

Jessica listened with interest, a flicker of maternal pride in her eyes as Helene talked about being healed by John. There was no mistaking just how much that had meant to the teal-skinned beauty, everything about her radiating joy.

Calara glanced around the aquatic girl to make eye contact with Jessica. “When John turned eighteen, he followed in your footsteps and joined the Terran Federation military. He served with distinction in the Navy as a marine officer, was promoted up to Commander and earned the Stellar Cluster. After he retired, he worked as a trader for over a decade, until his Progenitor abilities manifested eight months ago when he met Alyssa.” Her brown eyes shone with pride as she continued, “Since then, he’s been promoted up to Admiral and John’s the only man in the history of the Federation to ever earn a second Stellar Cluster.”

Looking stunned, Jessica gasped, “My son... an Admiral?!”

Calara nodded slowly. “John’s also a member of High Command and is close friends with the Fleet Admiral. We’ve fought to save Terra from annihilation twice, once by a Progenitor AI and the other by a Kintark invasion. We also turned back a Kirrix invasion, prevented the Ashanath from being devoured by the Drakkar, and unified the Trankaran Republic before saving them from the Kirrix. Billions of people owe him their lives...”

Jessica blinked in astonishment, then looked at Calara again with an appraising eye. “Is that where you met him? In the military?”

The Latina shook her head. “The corvette I was serving on was captured by pirates. Despite being outnumbered 50 to 1, John stormed their ship with Alyssa, then saved me from being tortured to death and healed my injuries. You should be very proud of him... your son’s the bravest man I’ve ever met.”

“He freed me from gang slavery and saved my life,” Dana quietly interjected, before Jessica could reply. “My face was all fucked up from an explosion when I was little, but John fixed all that too. He’s totally awesome... I’d do anything for him.”

“I would’ve been killed as well if not for John,” Rachel chimed in a moment later. “He stopped the Kintark from destroying Port Medea and rescued me and hundreds of others. John and the girls needed a medic, so they asked me to become part of their crew. He put so much effort into explaining how I’d be changed if I decided to join them and made sure that being with him was what I really wanted. We talked about it for days, with him constantly checking to see that I hadn’t changed my mind, before he was finally willing to make a permanent connection with me. I think it was seeing his concern... how he really cared... that made me fall so deeply in love with him.”

Jessica had been listening intently, a soft smile on her face as she listened to the girls declaring their love and devotion to John. However, hearing Rachel talk about the lengths that he’d gone to, in making sure that the tawny-haired girl really wanted to become his thrall, made her pause and look a little unsettled.

“John terrified me when we first met a few months ago,” Tashana admitted quietly, sounding more than a little embarrassed. “The Maliri have all sorts of legends about Mael’nerak, the first Progenitor who claimed my people, so I thought I knew exactly who and what John was. I even tried to kill him... but he showed me nothing but compassion and kindness in return. I’d been tortured for years, broken in mind, body, and spirit... but somehow John brought me back from the brink.” She turned to look Jessica in the eye. “I’d die for your son without a moment’s hesitation... I owe him everything.”

Startled by the Maliri’s sincere declaration, she looked around the group. “Did he save all of your lives?”

Irillith nodded and gave her a wry smile. “I was a stone-cold bitch to him at first, but he gradually won me over. I tried to kill him too, but he forgave me and saved my life.”

Jade nuzzled Jessica with her huge feline head and made the brunette jump in fright.

Alyssa turned to look her way. “Don’t worry, she’d never hurt you. John saved Jade as well... and her four Nymph sisters.”

When the huge tiger began a rumbling purr, Jessica relaxed and settled down again, ruffling Jade’s furry ears much to the Nymph’s delight.

Giving her a warm smile, Alyssa said, “Each and every one of us owe our lives to John, but he’s always been very careful to make sure we wanted to be with him before recruiting any of us. We love him because he’s a wonderful person, not because of any sense of obligation or coercion.”

“I can see how much you all care about him,” Jessica said quietly. Her expression turned sorrowful as she continued, “I never meant to hurt John before... it’s just that... I love Rahn so much, it’s hard to even think about anyone else...”

Her face fell as she began to realise exactly what she’d lost.

Slowing her pace, Alyssa fell into step beside Jessica and put a comforting arm around her shoulder. “John’s always been desperate to find out what happened to his mother. He was thrilled to discover you were still alive on Arcadia and overjoyed at finally getting a chance to meet you... so it broke his heart when you didn’t feel the same way. Just give him a little time to get over the shock and disappointment... I’m sure everything will be okay.”

“I can’t believe I just stopped... *caring*... about my son... and my parents...” Jessica whispered, her expression etched in grief.

“I’m sorry,” Alyssa said earnestly, sympathising with the brunette for her loss... and apologising for quite deliberately unlocking those feelings in her.

Further conversation came to a halt as the girls felt an oppressive weight settle on their minds.

“What was that?!” Helene gasped with a shudder of revulsion.

Dana grimaced at the unpleasant sensation. “That asshole is keeping John prisoner, so he’d have to shut down his powers somehow. It must be another psychic dampening device.”

“We’re really close to the interrogation chambers,” Alyssa agreed, nodding towards a huge doorway ahead of them. Her heart fluttered as she added, “John should be in there...”

They quickened their pace, striding down the black corridor until they reached the reinforced security door. Alyssa nodded to Irillith, who stepped forward, her violet eyes glowing. The Maliri hacker blew apart the portal barrier and unlocked the door, moving swiftly to exit the cyber-realm afterwards before any of the black sentinels could close on her position.

“I thought you were worried about Progenitor security being a nightmare?” Dana asked, as the glow faded from Irillith’s eyes.

“It is...” the Maliri replied with a shiver, tapping the rune to open the door. “But their security systems are all designed to repel external hacking attempts. I don’t need to travel their data network because I’m just hacking a node directly... I bet they never thought anyone would ever dare to hack them from inside the ship.”

The door slid apart, revealing the cavernous interior of the interrogation chamber. Alyssa spotted John instantly, his white armour making him shine like a beacon amidst the oppressive darkness of his prison.

“John!” she exclaimed, sprinting over to him.

“Hey, beautiful,” he said with a smile. “Fancy seeing you here...”

Alyssa flung her arms around his neck and hugged him tight. “I was so scared... I didn’t even want to think what might be happening to you!”

“It wasn’t so bad. I just had a little chat with Larn’kelnar...” John winced at her exuberant embrace as it sent a twinge of pain stabbing through his chest. He pulled back to look her in the eyes. “When he threw the Raptor out into space, I thought I’d lost you... How did you survive?”

“It was Jade, she was amazing!” she replied with a grin. “Let’s just say the girls are much more intimately familiar with our resident Nymph,”

Jade bounded over, shifting into her humanoid Nymph shape. “Master!” she cried out in joy, joining in the embrace.

“Hi gorgeous,” he replied, unable to stop smiling despite their predicament. He glanced around the group, grinning at the joyful girls. “It’s so good to see all of you.” His happy expression turned into alarm. “Where’s Sakura?!”

“Being brave and drawing Larn’kelnar’s attention away from here,” Calara explained as she removed her helmet. She stepped closer to give him a loving kiss. “You have no idea how good it is to see you...”

“Yeah, I do actually,” he replied, with an affectionate smile.

“My sisters survived!” Jade gushed, looking up at John with wonder. “I can still feel their emotions!”

The surge of relief John felt took his breath away. “I thought we’d lost them...” he murmured, swallowing around the lump in his throat. “Honey... I can’t tell you how happy I am.”

“You’re hurt,” Rachel said with concern, examining his cracked breastplate. She gently caressed his cheek. “We need to get you out of here so I can heal you. My abilities are being blocked in this room.”

He nodded his agreement, then glanced across the interrogation chamber at the black device emitting a purple glow. “Larn’kelnar called it an Eldritch inhibitor. He’s strong enough that he can still use psychic powers even with it activated.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Tashana replied, levelling her pistols at the device and opening fire.

Twin streams of tachyon bolts flew across the room, but instead of striking the ominous black device, they impacted off a shield that seemed to appear out of nowhere. The grey hexagons held strong, the barrier effortlessly blocking the shots.

Dana frowned at Alyssa. “Still think it was a good idea to melt down my Tachyon rifle? Some runic penetrators would have taken that fucker out, no problem!”

“Yes, you told me so...” the blonde conceded, rolling her eyes. “Alright, all of you, start shooting. Let’s see if we can overwhelm it.”

Alyssa’s twin Reaper Cannons opened up, pouring a hail of tachyon bolts at the shield. The rest of the girls opened fire too, hammering the barrier with purple energy particles.

John called out to Dana over the screech of gunfire, “Sparks! Any chance you can get me out of here?”

She glanced up at the thick black manacles holding John’s arms and legs in place, then sighed as she recognised the similarities in design to his sword grip. “Goddamn... this place has been a hell of a hit to my ego.” The redhead glanced around, checking the nearby table. “There should be some kind of control device to unlock them... did you see Larn’kelnar handle anything?”

John shook his head. “No, nothing...”

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Stepping clear of the alcove in his bedroom, Larn’kelnar rolled his shoulders, reacquainting himself with the weight of the body armour. His black battle gear had spent centuries lying unused in his quarters, but now he was being compelled to wear it for the second time in only a week. He clipped a black device to his belt, then slid his left forearm through the metallic straps on the back of his glinting shield, locking it securely in place. Reaching for his Eldritch Focus, he picked up the black rod, intricate purple runes starting to glow along its length.

“You look magnificent, my Lord,” Ailanthia whispered, gazing at him starry-eyed.

“This won’t take long,” he said, giving her a reassuring smile despite feeling a flicker of anxiety. “I’ll catch whoever dared to invade my ship and make them suffer for what they’ve done...”

She nodded, her faith in him unshakeable. “Who do you think it is?”

Larn’kelnar paused to consider her question. He knew that Blake and Rahn’hagon were both still restrained, but it was possible that either of them could have been feigning incapacitation by the Eldritch Inhibitor. The destruction in the barracks could only have been the work of a potent pyrokinetic, and as for the twisted nightmare in the armoury... he’d never seen anything like it. A Progenitor of Rahn’hagon’s age and experience certainly could have been responsible, but why choose to stir up trouble now after being held captive for a week?

The thought that Blake was secretly causing mayhem while pretending to be restrained, seemed utterly preposterous. Larn’kelnar had seen the stunned look on his captive’s face, when Blake realised psychic powers could still be used within a dampening field if one possessed sufficient strength. Either Blake was the most adept liar that Larn’kelnar had ever met, or he genuinely didn’t know how the device functioned. It beggared belief that he could be so ignorant about so many fundamental things, all of which he should have known instinctively...

Just as Larn’kelnar was about to answer Ailanthia’s question, he felt a salvo of tachyon impacts against the psychic shield he’d erected in Blake’s interrogation chamber. The flurry of hits ramped up a few seconds later, the hex-barrier coming under sustained attack.

“Blake!” he hissed, eyes narrowing in fury.

Ailanthia looked at him in shock. “He tricked us?!”

“No. Someone’s firing tachyon bolts at the hex barrier I created in his interrogation chamber.” Larn’kelnar shook his head as he headed for the door, his eyes glinting with anticipation. “They’ve saved me the effort of tracking them down... perhaps I should go and thank them?”

“Please be careful, Larn!” she called out, nerves fluttering in her stomach.

He stopped in the doorway and strode back to her, removing his helmet so he could lean down to give his matriarch a passionate kiss. When he pulled away from her soft lips, he looked deep into her lovely blue eyes. “There’s nothing to worry about. Blake’s an insect, he’s not remotely strong enough to be a challenge.”

Ailanthia caressed his cheek. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Larn’kelnar replied, then hesitated, surprised by his own sincerity.

Reluctantly, he turned away from her and walked towards the door, pausing for a final look at his beautiful matriarch. Ailanthia blew him a loving kiss, her other hand cradling her curved belly and the new life growing within. Pulling on his helmet, Larn’kelnar smiled at her before rushing away to end this insurrection aboard his flagship.

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Calara blazed away with her rifle, the purple tachyon bolts hammering into the glowing grey surface. “It’s no good, the shield’s too strong!” she exclaimed in frustration.

“Keep going!” Alyssa replied. “Focus all fire on a single hexagon!”

The girls narrowed the focus of their salvo on the shield, aiming for the same points as Alyssa’s twin Reaper Cannons. The only exception was Tashana, who carefully aimed one of her pistols at the manacles restraining John. The Maliri gunfighter squeezed the trigger and hit the black band with a burst of purple bolts, but when she ceased fire there wasn’t a mark on them.

“Tachyon bolts aren’t strong enough to even dent the damn things!” she cursed in frustration.

John nodded, looking up at the band encircling his wrist. “These restraints must be made from the same metal as the ship...”

“Jade, can you try to break John free?” Alyssa asked the Nymph, who was busy studying the black manacles.

“I think I’ll need to shift into a dragon to be strong enough,” Jade replied with a frown. “But I can’t grow with the device blocking my powers...”

“I’ve got it! Sakura could cut through!” Alyssa suddenly exclaimed. “She managed to dent the Bridge doors with her swords...” Walking towards the prison door, she added, “I’ll just get clear of the inhibitor field then I’ll be able to contact her.”

“Wait! Take the girls with you,” John insisted, frowning in frustration at feeling so helpless.

Just as Alyssa neared the doorway, it peeled open, revealing a man clad in sinister black armour.

Larn’kelnar blinked in surprise to see a thrall standing right in front of him. When he saw her bronzed face, he was shocked to realise that she wasn’t one of his Larathyrans and was actually a Terran woman wearing a white version of thrall armour. His eyes widened as he saw the squad of thralls firing at his psychic shield, the exotic variety of their skin tones identifying them as Blake’s minions.

“Thralls?!” he balked, slashing his onyx sceptre through the air at the closest. “You should all be dead!”

The force projection slammed into Alyssa before she could react, sending her cartwheeling across the room. She hit the deck with a noisy metallic clatter and tumbled across the floor until she slid to a stop.

“How are any of you still alive?!” Larn’kelnar snapped indignantly, battering the group behind with a broad telekinetic blastwave.

They were lifted off the ground and flew through the air, before slamming into the wall and dropping in crumpled heaps.

Larn’kelnar strode across the room to square off against John. “What are your carnival of multicoloured freaks doing here, Blake? There’s no way any of them should have survived!” he snarled, levelling his sceptre towards his prisoner. “And I saw what happened to my Barracks... was that your handiwork?!”

However, John had his eyes closed and didn’t give the slightest flicker of acknowledgement that the outraged Progenitor was even speaking to him.

“Well?!” Larn’kelnar roared. “Answer me!”

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John’s heart had clenched in his chest when he saw Larn’kelnar in the doorway, then he was forced to watch helplessly as his captor smashed Alyssa across the room. He was desperate to protect the girls, but locked securely in place by black manacles, he could only look on in anguish as they were attacked. He couldn’t even assist with his powers, what with them snuffed out by the psychic dampening field. Larn’kelnar had taken great pleasure in taunting him about the mismatch in their psychic strength, the Eldritch Inhibitor leaving John powerless, while the Progenitor was free to act unimpeded.

He cursed in frustration at not dealing with his guide weeks ago, a decision that had stunted the extent of his power and left him vulnerable to this predicament. Constant fighting for control of his own mind had enhanced John’s mental strength, but nowhere near enough to compensate for the fracturing of his subconscious. The unfortunate reality of the situation, was that his guide monopolised a significant portion of his psychic abilities and had the power to fuel them. Until the impasse between them was resolved, John knew he was only half the man he should be...

That thought made him freeze, as a recklessly dangerous plan came to him unbidden.

John focused his will inwards, deep into the hidden recesses of his mind... to that place where darkness lurked. He could feel his guide seething within the eternal prison, the very same place of torment that his malevolent alter-ego had attempted to banish him. The guide now had no way of seizing control of John’s body, so was utterly incapable of influencing the wider world, but he was still painfully aware of everything that transpired around him.

It would have been a horrific fate for John, forced to watch as his guide ran amok, while finding himself powerless to intervene. For his guide, the incarceration was just as excruciating, as he had his own agenda to follow... one that John seemed hell-bent on deviating from. Normally, the guide viewed John’s actions with disgust and contempt, but not today. When John focused on that schism within his subconscious, he sensed tense anxiety and a phenomenal amount of hate... but that fury wasn’t directed at him.

\*I can’t do this alone... I need you,\* John said, directing his thoughts at the eldritch prison.

\*A truce then?\* his guide asked with a disquieting hunger. \*Agreed! Now stop wasting time... free me!\*

John hesitated for a moment. \*Do you understand the stakes involved? If you try and fight me for control, we’re dead... Larn’kelnar will kill us both while we’re restrained. Only working together can we-\*

\*I agree, you thrice-damned fool!” his guide screamed. “Free me so we can gut this cretin like the pitiful maggot he is!\*

Feeling a dark sense of foreboding, John reached for the prison within his mind and sundered the wards imprisoning the other half of his subconscious...

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“Did you hear me, Blake?!” Larn’kelnar snapped, lashing out with his sceptre and smashing John across his face, breaking his jaw with a sickening crunch. “You will answer me!”

Suddenly the lights began to flicker and dim, making the Progenitor look up in surprise. At the same time, a swirl of eldritch power began to twist around John’s shoulders, the grey vapours rolling along his arms. The insubstantial mists twirled around the manacles holding him in place, then suddenly shifted from wispy and ephemeral to rock solid. The black bands shattered in an instant, razor-sharp fragments exploded outwards, peppering Larn’kelnar who gaped at his prisoner in astonishment.

“He was right...” John growled as he dropped to the floor in a crouch, his jaw snapping back into place as the wounds regenerated. “You whine like a mewling thrall...”

John’s eyes snapped open, illuminated by a dazzling blue light. He roared in fury as he accelerated with psychic speed and bull-rushed Larn’kelnar, who was caught completely by surprise by the frenzied attack. They barrelled across the chamber, John’s furious charge taking them directly towards the psychic inhibitor. The hex shield protecting it repelled John, knocking him backwards, but its creator sailed right through the barrier unimpeded. There was a thunderous boom as Larn’kelnar smashed into the black device, shearing it off its base and breaking the sensitive components within.

Larn’kelnar shook off his daze and vaulted to his feet, his face a mask of fury. “You tricked me! The Inhibitor never had any effect on you!”

John held out an open gauntlet towards his runesword, which sailed across the room towards him as it answered his summons, landing with a clang in his open palm. “No, I wasn’t faking anything. I wasn’t strong enough to escape... without *him*,” His mouth suddenly twisted in a wicked smile, his voice starting to reverberate with an eerie echo. “But now you’re facing both of us...”

Larn’kelnar gaped at him in horror. “By the stars... you’re insane!”

“I’ve been fighting with the dark half of my personality for most of my life,” John replied, his expression bleak. He glanced at his runesword which burst into flame, the blue tendrils licking up the blade with an unsettling hunger. A menacing smile appeared on his face as he continued, “But for once, we both want the same thing...”

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Edraele gasped when she heard John’s thoughts with shocking clarity once again. The last hour since the attack on the Invictus had been the most fraught of her life, especially being cut off from his inner voice. \*John! Oh thank God you’re alright!\*

“Have you any news? What’s happening?!” Tsarra asked in alarm, her beautiful azure face drawn with worry.

“John’s been freed!” Edraele exclaimed, sagging back in Luna’s supportive arms.

The Young Matriarchs hugged each other, all the Maliri women in the bedroom filled with a profound sense of relief.

\*Matriarch! Prepare to channel more energy to me on my command!\* John demanded imperiously.

\*Don’t speak to my girls! Leave talking with them to me!\* John snapped a moment later, his voice firm and uncompromising.

Edraele listened to him speak, the tone and inflection changing radically between sentences, leaving her bewildered. That momentary confusion evaporated as she recognised where she’d heard that first voice before...

“Oh, John... what have you done...” she whispered under her breath, a shiver of dread running down her spine.

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Alyssa lay on the floor, trying not to groan in pain and alert her attacker that she was still alive. Being hit by Larn’kelnar’s force wave had knocked her senseless, her body hurting in a dozen different places from that devastating impact as well as being battered across the floor. The worst of her injuries was the stabbing pain in her chest, which intensified every time she took a breath. Fortunately, her Paragon suit had taken the brunt of the blow and by the odd cracking noises she heard when she carefully shifted her arm out from underneath her, the armour wasn’t in good shape.

There was a huge crash on the far side of the room, sharply reminding her of their tormentor’s presence, then the psychic dampening field that had curtailed her powers suddenly vanished. It felt wonderful to be free from its debilitating effects, as if a huge weight had been lifted from her mind. Alyssa could sense the girls again in a flood of emotions, all of them still alive, but radiating pain from being hurled into the wall. Narrowing her eyes as she experienced her friends’ suffering, Alyssa felt nothing but hatred towards the architect of all their recent woes.

Her mounting fury was abruptly curtailed when she heard John’s inner voice... both of them!

\*I’m going to try to hammer my way through his shield!\*

\*No! This is no time to act like a mindless barbarian! Stay at range and focus on counterattacking his psychic abilities!\*

\*Fine, we’ll try it your way... for now.\*

Eyes wide, Alyssa turned around, wincing at the sharp pain in her ribs. She saw that John and Larn’kelnar had squared off against each other, the air between them humming with eldritch energy.

“I always knew there was something wrong with you, Blake!” the Progenitor snarled, lashing out with his glowing runic sceptre. “But I never suspected you were deranged!”

The ensuing force wave slammed into John’s hex-shield and cracked scores of hexagons with the titanic impact. John rammed his sword down into the deck, using it like an anchor to stop himself being hurled backwards.

“Yet you’re the one planning to wipe out billions!” John replied, his face reflecting his disgust. His expression suddenly twisted into a feral snarl. “You sought to conquer our dominion without your legions... you will pay for your arrogance!”

John made a curt gesture with his left hand and the shadowy energy coiling around his fingertips shot out to form a pair of grey lances. With a disconcerting dirge they streaked towards his opponent, the first shattering one of the hexes in the grey barrier, the second driving through and impaling Larn’kelnar’s black shield with a grating shriek. The Progenitor looked down at it in shock as his shield reverberated with the impact, never expecting that John would be powerful enough to pierce the protective psychic barrier.

Recovering quickly from that unsettling realisation, Larn’kelnar repaired his psychic shield in an instant. He started it spinning, the sphere of hexagons rotating swiftly as they circled his body. “Is that all you’ve got, whelp?” he taunted John with a derisive sneer.

Larn’kelnar raised his sceptre, the runes blazing brightly as several hulking creatures appeared. Standing on six legs, the enormous grey insectoids were a nightmarish fusion of spikes and claws, each blade viciously serrated up to its sharp tip. Standing twenty-feet-tall, they towered over John, every inch of them corded muscle and thick grey chitinous plating. One of the immutable rules of maintaining summoned constructs was to make them as realistic as possible, or they lacked weight and solidity in their form... but that didn’t mean they couldn’t be psychically enhanced. Three sets of disconcerting humanoid eyes locked onto John, glowing with an eerie purple light as they lunged forward in a supernaturally accelerated charge.

“I hunted these brutes to extinction,” Larn’kelnar said with a smirk. “The Arntriss Templars made fine sport, especially if you slaughtered their families first...”

As John dodged and parried the frenzied insectoid assault, Larn’kelnar casually hurled a telekinetic lance at him. The streak of grey hit his hex shield, then exploded, jagged fragments tearing a massive hole in the barrier and destabilising the structure enough for it to collapse. The Progenitor’s mocking laughter echoed around the room as John hurriedly created a new hex-shield, while being forced to backpedal away from the plunging chitin blades.

Alyssa turned back to the girls and saw that some of the huddled figures had started to stir. \*Stay down and play dead!\* she ordered them sternly. \*Rachel, start healing everyone! Sakura, get over here, we need you!\*

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The white blade dripped with blue blood as Sakura pulled the ninjato from the thrall’s torso, droplets spattering over the Larathyran’s breastplate. She’d caught another group of thralls in the small armoury adjoining the Bridge, which the crew on the Command Deck had used to prepare themselves for battle. Caught by surprise, half of the thralls were already dead before they even managed to fire a shot.

Sakura froze when she heard Alyssa asking for help. It came as a huge relief to hear the blonde’s telepathic voice, but that was tempered with worry at her matriarch’s anxious tone. \*I’m on my way! Are you alright?\*

\*John’s been freed and he destroyed the psychic inhibitor, but Larn’kelnar took the rest of us out before we got our powers back. The two of them are duelling at the moment, but John needs our help. Rachel’s patching everyone up and we’re about to join the fight!\*

\*I’ll be there as fast as I can!\* the Asian girl replied, darting through the door and into the corridor beyond.

She focused her will and concentrated on enhancing her vision, making her psychic connection to Alyssa visible. The snaking cable appeared before her eyes, glowing brightly as it angled down and to the left, passing through the floor as it linked Sakura to her matriarch. Sakura rushed for the closest set of elevators, so that she could make her way down to the interrogation chamber.

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Alyssa felt Rachel’s healing aura roll over her, easing the sharp pains in her body with a faint tickling sensation. She tried to keep still and avoid the maddening temptation to laugh, the gentle stimulation of her nerves the most intense on the left side of her chest.

\*You had four shattered ribs,\* the brunette informed her, sounding distracted as she focused on the psychic healing.

\*How badly are the girls hurt?\* Alyssa replied, sighing with relief as she was fully healed.

\*Irillith suffered the worst injury, breaking her collarbone and humerus in six places. The rest had a mix of minor breaks, except Dana who suffered a concussion, and Jade, who didn’t require any healing.\*

\*Nice work, Rach,\* she said gratefully. \*Stay back and keep a low profile, we don’t want that asshole knowing what you can do.\*

\*I understand,\* the brunette replied, make eye-contact with her across the room and nodding imperceptibly.

Alyssa turned her attention to the rest of the girls. \*Irillith, Tashana, help John. Calara and Dana, keep Larn distracted with gunfire while I crank it up. Helene, I want you and Jessica to keep as far away from the fighting as possible.\* She glanced around for the Nymph. \*Jade, where are you?\*

\*Climbing up the wall,\* the Nymph replied. \*I’m going to try and sneak up on him...\*

Scanning the black walls for the shapeshifter, Alyssa spotted a flicker of movement as a relatively small green spider, no larger than a dinner-plate, started scuttling up towards the ceiling. \*No, don’t attack. I want you to protect the girls if he throws more creatures at us.\*

The arachnid paused and dropped to the floor. \*Okay, I’ll keep them safe.\*

\*Alright, go everyone!\* Alyssa called out, rolling over and rising to a crouch.

She reached for her Reaper Cannons with telekinetic hands and prayed that the guns were still functional. Closing her eyes, she breathed deep, feeling a sense of calm as she tapped into her psychic abilities. Gathering eldritch energy to her, it started to swirl around her arms, leaving glowing white trails as it poured down to her fists. She cracked an eye open and watched a bright nimbus of light begin to coalesce around her gauntlets, amplified by the Progenitor rune she’d inscribed there.

All around her, the girls exploded into action, launching Alyssa’s plan of attack.

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Larn’kelnar watched with amusement as John was forced further backwards, the insectoid constructs slashing and stabbing at him relentlessly. Finding out that Blake was schizophrenic had come as quite a shock, as had the realisation that he was powerful enough to overcome an eldritch inhibitor and break free of his bonds. However, it was also clear that despite Blake’s raw power, he possessed the duelling skills of a neophyte Progenitor.

Gesturing with his sceptre, he sent another psychic javelin lancing through the air to slam into John’s shield. Hexagons shattered as it punched through and hit him in the thigh. To Larn’kelnar’s surprise, there was a golden flare as protection runes warded away the grey telekinetic spear, preventing it from puncturing the armour. He frowned in irritation and created another javelin, then looked for a clear shot through the forest of chitinous legs between him and Blake.

Suddenly, his shield was struck by a hail of tachyon bolts, the salvo of weapon fire coming from the left. He glanced that way in astonishment, amazed that Blake’s thralls were still alive, let alone in any state to fight. Whirling around to deal with his attackers, he saw that it wasn’t just a handful of thralls that had survived... all of them were now moving with renewed purpose. That surprise was nothing compared to his sense of stunned disbelief when two Maliri gestured towards his constructs and unleashed a dramatic display of psychic prowess.

There was a huge boom and a brilliant flash as a jagged stroke of lightning arced across the room, blasting the closest Arntriss Templar. The psychic manifestation reacted just as the real-life counterpart would have, its grey armour plating exploding outwards as the lightning bolt cooked its body. Steam poured off the mortally wounded creature and it toppled over, before fading away as the psychic fabric maintaining it dissipated.

At the same time a sheet of flame curled outwards, enveloping the next two hulking monstrosities. Any doubt who was responsible for the inferno in the barracks was banished from Larn’kelnar’s mind as the dreadful heat of that blaze scorched their chitinous hides from grey to bright red. The Arntriss let out agonised shrieks as the super-heated plating seared their insides, white-hot steam pouring from their mouths as they were incinerated.

“That’s impossible!” Larn’kelnar protested, his eyes wide in shock. “The Maliri are just a thrall race... they’re not psychic!”

Now faced by only a single enemy, John hacked through its closest leg with a smooth sweep of his flaming runesword. The massive insectoid was caught off balance and he lunged forward inside the reach of its blades to impale the wounded creature right up to the hilt. It shuddered violently, then exploded into fiery chunks, the pieces erupting like a volcano as he obliterated the final construct.

Facing the Progenitor, John smiled wryly. “They just needed a bit of encouragement...”

Before Larn’kelnar could answer, an incandescent beam slammed into his shield, knocking him sprawling backwards with the intensity of the blow. He slammed down a grey telekinetic wall to take the brunt of the beam, which gave him a chance to find his footing, but his obstruction exploded a couple of seconds later and the column of energy pounded into his hex-barrier again. Bracing himself against the onslaught, he skidded to a halt, repairing all the fractures in his buckling shield.

Glancing over his black shield at his assailant, Larn’kelnar gaped at the white-armoured Terran thrall in shock, watching as she blasted him with raw eldritch power. He’d never seen anyone other than a Progenitor possess that kind of incredible psychic potency and what he was witnessing here today was quite beyond his comprehension.

\*My Lord?\* Ailanthia asked fearfully. \*Is something amiss? You feel... disturbed...\*

Jolted out of his stupor, Larn’kelnar realised he must have accidentally started sharing his emotions with his matriarch. That would have been a galling admission of weakness under any normal circumstances, but considering what he was facing, hearing a friendly voice was enormously reassuring.

\*Blake’s thralls... they possess psychic powers!\* he balked, unable to believe he could be saying something so ludicrous.

Ailanthia quailed at hearing her master this upset. She’d never heard him so shocked in the thousands of years they’d been together. \*Are you in danger, my Lord? Perhaps it would be wise to retreat...\*

\*Run? From Blake and his freak show?!\* Larn’kelnar snarled, the thought of it galling. \*Never!\*

Another pair of Blake’s shield-breaking javelins streaked towards him, but with his hex barrier whirling around, they merely punched two widely-spaced holes in the hexagons. A crackling bolt of lightning hit him next, the stroke blasting into his psychic shield and sending electricity crawling across its glowing surface. No sooner had he registered that assault, a conflagration erupted underneath him, the roaring flames shooting up from the ground and scorching the base of his protective barrier.

Larn’kelnar was being assailed from all directions now and he had to work frantically to maintain the integrity of his shield under such a coordinated attack. He lashed out with a telekinetic spear at the thrall firing blazing white beams at him, certain that he could just pick off these irritating insects one at a time. The white-armoured woman sidestepped just in time, almost as if she knew it was coming, the javelin missing her by inches before it slammed into the far wall.

\*Start feeding me energy, Ailanthia... lots of it!\* he demanded, gritting his teeth in irritation.

His matriarch poured psychic energy into him, setting Larn’kelnar’s neurons afire as she tapped thousands of thralls to fuel his powers. He channelled all that energy into his sceptre, making the runes blaze with a dazzling radiance. Dropping to a crouch, he thumped the ground with the hilt of the rod, unleashing a blast wave to take care of the irritating thralls. Blake, the blonde, and the two Maliri were all suddenly shrouded in hex-barriers of their own, the four of them knocked backwards by the force of the blow, but otherwise appeared to be unscathed. The rest of the thralls were far back on the other side of the room and when his force wave was blocked at four separate points, it dissipated harmlessly before reaching them.

Blake burst into mocking laughter, making Larn’kelnar flush with embarrassment.

“Where’s the gloating condescension now?” John taunted him, his voice echoing eerily. “You’re strong and I’m weak? Such towering arrogance... do you realise how laughable your egotistical boasting sounded?”

Seeing John and the girls effortlessly avoiding his counterattacks was infuriating, making Larn’kelnar feel like he was losing the battle. Not only that, but the sheer indignity of being upstaged by Blake and his menagerie was mortifying, especially the taunts, which filled Larn’kelnar with a desperate desire to make them all suffer. He threw back his head and howled in fury, eyes blazing with an incandescent light as Ailanthia flooded him with eldritch energy.

\*More! Give me more power!\*

Glowing inscriptions appeared on the floor, the intricate patterns of Progenitor runes forming two huge circles to either side of him. A dark purple monolith materialised in the centre of each circle, throbbing with an inner glow like the pulse of a heartbeat.

“You dare mock me?!” he thundered, veins pulsing in his neck. “You insufferable little maggot... I’ll teach you some respect...”

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\*Brace yourself!\* John’s guide called out in warning, actually sounding afraid.

\*What the hell are those things?!\* John blurted out, staring wide-eyed at the towering purple prisms that just rose out of the runic summoning circles.

The guide almost sounded scared as he muttered, \*Disintegration matrix...\*

\*Tell the girls to duck and cover!\* John warned Alyssa, darting a fearful glance at the blonde. \*This is going to be bad...\*

\*I’m giving you more power, John!\* Edraele volunteered, hearing the desperation in his voice.

He drove the tip of his runesword into the deck, then channelled energy into the Progenitor glyphs etched into the blade. They amplified the power he was funnelling into the weapon, using it to massively reinforce his psychic shield. Alyssa crossed her wrists over her chest, diverting all her harnessed energy into the sparkling white hexagonal sphere that surrounded her. The twins embraced each other, Tashana’s fiery hex-barrier blazing in its intensity. Rachel shifted her grey psychic shield from Irillith to protect Dana, Calara, and herself, shrouding them in an opaque grey globe. Her shield began to rotate as Rachel copied the technique Larn’kelnar had used to extend the survivability of his barrier.

A deep bass boom made the ground shake as a thick purple beam blasted out of the monolith. The first hit John, buckling the front of his shield and making it bow inwards. Despite the hexagons cracking, with smoke drifting through the barrier, he managed to replenish them enough to maintain his shield. He was hit by another and another, unable to do anything other than repair the besieged sphere. Alyssa found herself on the receiving end of an identical attack, knocked back by the massive force behind each beam.

Suddenly one of the monoliths switched targets, aiming for the twins. The beam slashed into Tashana’s barrier, warping the flaming globe with the ferocity of the assault. Miraculously, she managed to keep the shield intact, her hands upraised to keep it stable, sweat pouring off her forehead. The Maliri was at her limits though and when the second monolith focused its fire on her too, Tashana’s hex-shield collapsed, unable to withstand that much psychic firepower. The beam blasted into Irillith, catching her in the torso and blasting a glowing hole in her flank. She screamed as she was tossed backwards, the beam winking out an instant later.

“Rill!” Tashana screamed in anguish, whirling around to look for her sister.

The next beam hit her in the back, making the Maliri shriek, before a grey shield slammed down to cut off the purple blast.

John was about to rush to help them when another beam from the disintegration matrix pounded his shield. It was all he could do to defend himself against the horrifying psychic bombardment.

Edraele sounded terrified as she blurted out, \*John! My girls!\*

\*Are they alive?\* John asked Alyssa through gritted teeth, his heart in his mouth.

\*Yes... barely,\* she replied, her voice trembling with fury. \*Rachel’s going to heal them...\*

\*No!\* John’s Guide said curtly. \*I forbid it! Save the energy...\*

\*Fuck you!\* Alyssa snapped, bristling at his total disregard for the twins.

\*Impudent child, I should have just killed you when I had the chance!\* the Guide snarled. Fighting back his temper, he continued with barely concealed contempt, \*Just look at the Disintegration Matrix, you fool... do you think summoning one of those a mere trifle?\*

Alyssa glanced up at the enormous obelisks; the energy crackling and seething around them reminding her of the Quantum Annihilator preparing to fire at Terra. \*You want us to destroy them?\*

The Guide snorted in disbelief. \*How have any of you survived this long?!\* With an exasperated sigh, he continued, \*Larn’kelnar’s burning through huge amounts of power to maintain them... and he’s been here for nearly a year, so his legion of thralls is already depleted!\*

Alyssa could only imagine the vast amount of psychic energy it would take to summon one of the terrifying constructs, let alone two. She could only assume that keeping them in existence must draw an enormous amount of power as well. Both of the gigantic prisms switched targets to Alyssa before she could reply, forcing her to concentrate solely on reinforcing battered hexagons to repair her shield.

\*Take whatever energy you need from me!\* Jade urged the blonde. \*I’ve got plenty to spare!\*

John’s relief at no longer being the target of those blistering purple beams was tempered by seeing them attack Alyssa. He glanced up at the daunting purple obelisk and asked his guide incredulously, \*You really think we can outlast him?!\*

\*Creating boundless amounts of energy out of nothing is about the only thing you’ve done right,\* the Guide muttered with the barest hint of grudging respect. \*I still don’t understand how you did it... so he’ll never suspect for a moment...\*

Larn’kelnar laughed, watching with amusement as Alyssa fought for her life. He hurled a psychic javelin at her as well, the jagged tip piercing her shield between the two beams and slamming into her chest. The impact knocked her down, but the golden flare on her armour saved her from being impaled.

\*Don’t just stand there like a halfwit!\* the Guide chastised John. \*I can’t stand the simpering bitch, but if he kills Alyssa, we’re done for!\*

John roared as he charged, cutting across in a jagged path to narrowly avoid a pair of beams directed at him. Drawing back his sword in a massive two-handed strike, he slammed it into Larn’kelnar’s shield, making the barrier tremble with the force behind the impact. Blue flames burst out over the shield, lapping hungrily at the surface as if eager to scorch the Progenitor’s flesh.

\*That’s enough of that,\* the Guide said curtly, making the blue flames gutter out and die. \*I’m sure you think they look pretty, but they’re barely effective against his shield... another waste of energy.\*

Larn’kelnar redirected his beams to fire on Alyssa, who had just staggered to her feet, then swung his sceptre at John in a backhanded smash. John parried the mighty blow, metal ringing against metal as the weapons clashed. He spun around to flank his foe, hammering at the hex-shield with a flurry of lightning fast two-handed blows. The Progenitor lashed out at John again, but this time the runes on his sceptre flared with light. When John parried this time, he was struck by a blast wave that lifted him off his feet, tossing him through the air. Without his Paragon suit’s helmet he was unable to activate flight mode and crashed into the wall.

\*Why didn’t you anchor yourself?!\* the Guide snapped, wincing at the impact.

\*I couldn’t exactly jam my sword into the ground when I was flying through the air...\* John grumbled, hauling himself upright and wincing at the pain in his back.

\*With telekinesis, you imbecile! Don’t you know anything?!\*

John shook his head, eyes narrowing in fury at the barrage of insults. \*No... because my guide decided to try and take over my body instead of teaching me anything. Besides, wouldn’t using telekinesis use up psychic energy, which we’re trying to avoid?\*

A flood of healing energy eased the pain shooting through his bruised body. \*Yes, but not as much power as healing does...\* the Guide said in exasperation.

Before John could charge at Larn’kelnar, the twin obelisks focused on him again, keeping him pinned as they hit his shield with alternating beam attacks.

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Sakura sprinted along the corridor, following her psychic cord that connected her to Alyssa. The undulating white cable was level now as she was on the same deck, but it was pointing away to the side at the sinister black walls, the angle steadily increased as she reached the interrogation chamber. Punching the glowing rune to open the vast door, she bounced on her toes, keyed up and ready for combat.

\*Is everyone okay?\* she asked her matriarch.

\*The twins are down, but Rachel stabilised them...\* Alyssa replied, her voice strained with emotion.

Although Sakura was deeply worried for John, Alyssa, and the girls, she was surprised to find herself getting excited at the thought of fighting a Progenitor. Yes, Larn’kelnar was a monster, orchestrating the deaths of millions since his arrival in this part of the galaxy, and deeply in need of punishment for his crimes. However, it wasn’t her sense of justice that wanted to see him brought down... there was a deeper need than that nagging in the back of her mind.

Shaking her head to clear her mind of those troubling thoughts, Sakura resisted the urge to simply charge inside. Her eyes were immediately drawn to the huge obelisks crackling with energy that dominated the centre of the room, the thundering boom as each fired an incandescent beam making goosebumps appear on her flesh. A grey javelin streaked across the room and she followed the glowing motes in the air back to the source.

Larn’kelnar was swathed in a nimbus of purple energy, his face twisted into a mask of feral glee as he blasted John and Alyssa. He was clad from head to toe in a suit of ornate black armour, with a hefty matching shield strapped to his left forearm. He clutched a glowing sceptre in his right hand, waving it in the air as he directed his psychic attacks, hurling shield-piercing telekinetic lances at his enemies.

Alyssa sounded fraught with stress as she said, \*We’ll create an opportunity for you. Just tell me when...\*

Sakura crept inside, moving swiftly despite her cautious entrance, psychic speed making her appear to be walking at a brisk pace. She kept to the shadows, barely visible in her black suit against the black walls. With Larn’kelnar so thoroughly distracted by John and Alyssa, it was easy for Sakura to stalk her prey. The experience garnered from hundreds of assassinations served her well, letting her move into position directly behind him, without the Progenitor having the slightest inclination that he was being hunted.

Adjusting the grip on her ninjato, she carefully studied her foe, looking for possible weaknesses in his armour. She considered a decapitation, but Larn’kelnar’s neck was well protected by the gorget beneath his helmet, the interlocking plates looking just as robust as the thick armour covering his back. Sakura watched as he raised his right arm to direct another salvo of javelins, his sceptre blazing with light... then froze when she saw the vulnerability she’d been looking for.

\*I’m ready...\* she whispered, inching closer.

\*Five seconds...\* Alyssa warned the assassin.

Sakura’s heartbeat was slow and steady, despite the adrenalin pumping through her veins. She watched as Larn’kelnar slashed down with his sceptre, launching another pair of javelins at Alyssa, laughing at her distress as he toyed with her. A vortex of grey energy swirled around his shoulders, down his arms towards his sceptre, which he lifted in the air again as he summoned more telekinetic lances.

\*Now!\* Alyssa cried out, as she launched a quartet of her own psychic lances.

The dazzling white spears raced across to slam into Larn’kelnar’s shield, knocking out clusters of hexagons from the whirling surface. At the same time, another four psychic javelins crashed into the hex-barrier from the right, John’s guide joining in the barrage. They also knocked out small groupings of hexagons, which on their own would have been ineffective, but combined with all the others temporarily collapsed his shield as the structure destabilised.

Leaving the Progenitor exposed to the deadly assassin...

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Larn’kelnar blinked in surprise as he was hit by a flurry of javelins from two directions, the coordinated assault enough to knock out his shield. Despite all the effort they’d gone to in dropping his psychic defences, both John and his thrall were under siege, so were unable to follow up with an attack to take advantage of his momentary vulnerability. He smiled confidently as he raised his arm to create a new hex barrier with a wave of his sceptre, thinking up some taunt he could throw at them for their wasted effort.

Suddenly, he caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye, followed by a searing stab of pain under his armpit. He screamed in agony as the blade jammed into his ribcage, the blade twisting and slicing against bone before forcing the ribs apart. The sword rammed deeper and penetrated his lung, tearing a deep furrow through his internal organs. He coughed up blood as he staggered backwards, the agonising pain in his chest turning deathly cold as he felt like he was being frozen down to his soul.

\*Help me!\* he screamed at Ailanthia, desperately healing the savage wound and warding off the intense cold. \*I need more power!\*

As he crashed over onto his back, he stared up in fear at the assailant who’d brought him low, and was stunned to discover that a mere woman had come the closest to killing him in 9000 years. She fell to the ground beside him, her brown eyes narrowing with concentration as she twisted her blade, setting off a fresh spike of agony in his chest.

“You thrice-damned wretch!” he spluttered, wheezing with the hideous damage to his lung.

She winked at him and shoved the blade deeper, dragging a burbling scream of pain out of the mortally wounded man. “This is the first assassination I’ve actually enjoyed,” the Asian girl whispered, pulling the ninjato back a few inches to stab him again.

Larn’kelnar dropped his sceptre and reached out to grab her, but she moved just as fast as him, nimbly ducking back from his grasping fingers. The assassin impaled him again, rewarded by another tortured scream for her efforts. After long millennia of brutal conquests, Larn’kelnar had become convinced of his own invulnerability, so this brush with his own mortality left him terrified. In a desperation borne of that terror, he unleashed an enormous telekinetic blastwave that caught the thrall and hurled her backwards, freeing him from his tormentor.

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Sakura summoned the winds to stabilise her in the air, reversing the direction of flight so that she hovered safely instead of smashing into the wall. She still had her left ninjato, but her right was embedded deep in Larn’kelnar’s chest, the hilt poking out from under his armpit. Just as she’d suspected, the armour plating was thinner there; a sensible compromise by the armoursmith to allow the arm full range of movement, but a dreadful liability against an assassin of her calibre.

A new glowing grey sphere materialised around her foe, giving him a temporary reprieve. However, Larn’kelnar was still grievously wounded and it would only be a matter of time before John and Alyssa could make him vulnerable to another attack. She launched herself towards him, blade drawn back in readiness, her right hand shrouded in glacial cold.

\*Sakura look out! The beams!\* Alyssa screamed in warning, but it was too late for her to dodge.

Both obelisks struck her with virulent purple columns of energy, overwhelming her hastily erected shield. She tried to twist clear, but one beam hit her foot, the other glancing her left arm. Sakura screamed as the beam vaporised her boot, cauterising the wound mid-calf and leaving nothing but a glowing stump. The sizzling strike on her arm gouged a glowing furrow through her bicep right down to the bone. Rachel covered her in a psychic shield before Larn’kelnar could adjust the obelisks’ aim, but the damage was already done, with Sakura passing out from the pain and dropping like a stone.

John watched in horror as Sakura fell to the deck, Alyssa just catching her limp body in time with a telekinetic net. He charged at Larn’kelnar, hammering his shield furiously with a flurry of strikes as he tried to hack his way through the Progenitor’s defences.

“Just fucking die, you bastard!” he screamed at his mortally wounded nemesis.

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Larn’kelnar ignored John as he reached across to grab the ninjato’s hilt and slowly yanked it backwards. He shuddered in agony as the blade grated across his ribs, but he was finally able to heal his lungs when he tugged it out of his body and tossed the weapon aside. Coughing up more blood, he grimaced as he regenerated the gruesome injury, pouring psychic energy into healing what should have been a fatal wound.

\*Larn! What happened?! Please tell me you’re alright?\* Ailanthia begged him, sobbing with fear.

\*One of Blake’s whores...\* he snarled, glaring at John who was pounding on his shield and forcing Larn’kelnar to repair scores of hexagons to repel his assault. \*The bitch took me by surprise... stabbed me...\*

His matriarch sounded stunned as she murmured, \*You were nearly killed by a thrall?!\*

Larn’kelnar reached for his sceptre, which swooped through the air to land in his gauntleted fist. \*Not just any thrall... Blake’s been augmenting them... giving them powers...\* he spat, the very idea utterly revolting to him. He focused the obelisks beams on John, then hit him with a force wave, knocking him backwards. \*That bitch had speed... Cryokinesis... maybe even Aerokinesis...\*

\*My lord... you’re using so much power...\* Ailanthia warned him tentatively. \*Our reserves are-\*

\*And I’ll be using more!\* he interrupted in a furious growl, turning his vengeful gaze on the crumpled form of the assassin that had nearly been the death of him.

The Asian girl was unconscious, but she was still shrouded in a grey sphere, the orb rotating just as his own was. Larn’kelnar narrowed his eyes in suspicion, wondering who was shielding the slinking assassin. He’d already dealt with the Maliri, Blake’s shields were blue, and that stubbornly resilient bitch was protected by a white barrier... which meant that someone else was shielding her from harm. His own shield was suddenly struck by an incandescent blast of white energy, shattering scores of hexagons and momentarily distracting him.

Exasperated with the constant interruptions, he drew deep, creating a third circle of runes and summoning another Disintegration Matrix. He wavered slightly as the huge obelisk flashed into existence, feeling the heavy draw of power on his personal supply of energy.

As his latest construct began blasting the white-armoured thrall and putting her on the defensive, Larn’kelnar said curtly, \*I asked for more power, Ailanthia! Why are you making me draw from my own reserves?!\*

\*I’ve tapped most of your network, my Lord!\* she replied in a rush. \*You’ve been using so much energy and we haven’t done any recruitment in nearly a year...\*

\*I don’t want to hear excuses, just use up some thralls!\* he exclaimed, shaking his head indignantly. \*What’s the matter with you, Ailanthia?\*

Chastened, she quietly whispered, \*I’m sorry, my Lord...\*

Larn’kelnar glanced about the room and spotted another group of Blake’s thralls skulking over by the far wall. They’d been firing tachyon bolts at him throughout the battle, briefly pausing when John engaged in melee. Larn’kelnar had ignored them as they were only having a minimal impact on his shield, but now that he was paying attention, he spotted a soft grey light shining in the eyes of the thrall on the right.

“There you are...” he said with a wicked grin.

His obelisks switched targets, all three of them focused on Blake’s thrall. She somehow managed to raise a shield before the first beam struck, the spinning orb appearing just in time and deflecting the throbbing purple energy. Her shield turned opaque, although what that signified, Larn’kelnar wasn’t sure. A second beam blasted her, smacking her back into the wall, then she was hit by a third... her psychic shield deforming as it tried to withstand the terrible firepower being hurled at it.

Astonished that she was still standing, he hurled a javelin across the room, piercing the severely weakened shield and impaling the thrall through the chest. She toppled backwards, clutching at the savage wound, the javelin having skewered her right through her body.

“Now... time to finish you off,” he muttered under his breath, turning to glare at the motionless assassin.

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“Rachel!” Dana screamed, skidding across the ground to her lover.

“He’s going for Sakuuura...” the brunette moaned, her eyes rolling back from the pain as she passed out.

Shaking with rage, Dana whirled around, her eyes blazing with a golden light. “You fucker...” she hissed, slamming her fists into the deck.

There was a horrible cracking noise followed immediately afterwards by what sounded like a grotesque gurgle. and as Larn’kelnar stalked towards Sakura’s prone form, he suddenly tripped over. The black decking beneath his feet had melted, turning into a gloopy quagmire that quickly swallowed him to the waist. He looked down at the floor in horror as he sank into his own ship, the viscous metal just as suddenly solidifying, leaving him entombed in the floor.

A black sphere appeared above his head, golden light limning the circumference, as the distortion in space-time groaned into existence. He looked up in fear at the miniature black hole, feeling the gut-wrenching draw of the gravity well. Imprisoned in the floor as he was, that irresistible force threatened to rip him in half, sending pain shooting through his body. His helmet tugged clear and tumbled into the event horizon, crumpling into a tiny ball of black metal as it was crushed to oblivion.

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Larn’kelnar looked around in a panic, knowing he only had seconds to act before he was ripped in half. The assassin was still unconscious, glowing telekinetic hands dragging her away from the vortex swirling above his head. He discounted John and the white-armoured thrall, as he was sure they would’ve tried something like this before if they had the capability. The realisation that this was something new made him pause to think; Blake seemed to have scattered abilities through his minions, which could only mean another thrall was finally revealing her powers.

That thought shocked him to the core, the sheer extent of the psychic abilities John had given to his minions beyond belief. Larn’kelnar didn’t have time to dwell on that now though, as he twisted around, trying to get a look at the group of thralls behind him. He spotted her immediately, the blazing golden light from her eyes almost obscuring her glare of pure hatred. Seeing no sign of a shield, he summoned a score of telekinetic darts and hurled them at her, piercing her body in a dozen different places.

She collapsed with a strangled cry, red spurts of blood spraying in the air.

Larn’kelnar glanced fearfully above him and sagged with relief as the singularity winked out of existence. Badly shaken, he pulverised the deck with force waves, breaking apart the mangled metal and allowing him to pull himself clear.

He looked up, just as John barrelled into him, sending them both hurtling across the room.

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Ailanthia’s fists crumpled up the bedsheets as she listened to snippets of the battle through her master’s frantic thoughts. “No... this can’t be happening...” she whispered with dread.

Blake was nothing but a clown... a simple-minded buffoon that had provided hours of amusement to her and Larn’kelnar. They had laughed as they watched him rush from one end of the Terran Federation to the other, unknowingly dancing to their tune. How could he have neglected his joke of a ship so badly, yet enhanced his thralls beyond all reason? Never in a million years, would Ailanthia have suspected the battle would have turned out like this. How she wished that Larn’kelnar had listened to her while Blake was still restrained and just executed him.

\*I need more energy!\* Larn’kelnar screamed, sounding terrified.

She cringed at his desperation, looking inward at the decimated remnants of her psychic network. All the thralls had been tapped of energy and she’d already started draining them of their life force. She dreaded to think how the Larathyran Empire was going to defend itself after this debacle. At this rate, half her legion of thralls would be little more than withered husks and the borders would be defended by deathly-silent ships full of corpses...

\*I shall give you all you need, my Lord,\* she replied obediently, feeling a mounting sense of dread as she drained the life out of another thousand thralls.

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John had knocked Larn’kelnar to the floor and was now raining blows down on him in a fury. \*I should never have listened to you!\* he roared at his guide. \*I knew you never gave a shit about the girls... They’re all hurt because of your goddamn plan!\*

\*But it’s working...\* the Guide said quietly.

\*Shut the fuck up!\* John snarled, channelling psychic energy into his sword and making it blaze with power.

He battered Larn’kelnar’s shield and smiled with grim satisfaction as hexagons wilted under his berserk assault. Larn’kelnar lashed out again with a force wave, but John was expecting it this time and caught himself in a telekinetic net, quickly bouncing back to land on his feet.

“I’m going to tear you apart!” he snarled, hammering the hex barrier with a relentless series of pounding strikes. “You can’t hide behind that fucking shield forever!”

He seemed to speed up, the blows raining down even faster until the shield finally disintegrated, Larn’kelnar unable to repair the scores of destroyed hexes in time. John’s sword flashed down, vivid blue flames igniting along its length as he hacked the Progenitor’s hand off at the wrist. The pain was indescribable as John immolated the stump, Larn’kelnar staring at his burning limb in horror.

The terrified look in Larn’kelnar’s eyes was unmistakeable as he scuttled backwards, desperate to escape as he summoned a fresh hex-shield to protect himself. All three obelisks spun to focus on John, the swirling energy at their apex pulsing rapidly as they hit him with a trio of beams. John cursed as he was knocked sideways by the combined strength of that barrage, his Guide straining to fortify the shield as it was pounded by vast amounts of malevolent energy.

\*Edraele, I’m in trouble!\* John blurted out, frantically working with his guide to stop the shield from collapsing.

\*I’ll give you as much energy as I can!\* the Maliri matriarch promised. \*But we can’t defend against a sustained psychic attack of this strength for much longer! We’re burning through power at an incredible rate!\*

Larn’kelnar summoned a gushing blast of water and doused his burning limb, managing to extinguish the flames but still feeling that searing agony where his hand used to be. He focused on healing himself and was shocked at how sluggish his body was to respond to the regenerative energies. While he struggled to rebuild his dismembered hand, he glanced over at John who was still trying to protect himself from the furious beam bombardment.

John’s blue barrier was weakening, with hexes not being repaired and replaced quickly enough to fully protect him. Larn’kelnar reached for his sceptre, the Eldritch Focus device leaping over to his outstretched left hand. He pointed the sceptre at a cluster of cracked hexagons over John’s leg and launched a pair of grey javelins at that point. The first easily shattered the already compromised shield, allowing the second to plunge through and strike John in the thigh. John cried out in pain as the grey lance struck his cuisse for the second time, but now there were no runes to protect him. It speared straight through the Crystal Alyssium plating and out the other side, spraying red blood across the white armour.

Alyssa saw John clutch at his wounded leg and grimace with the pain, her heart lurching to see him injured. Her eyes blazed with anger as she glared at Larn’kelnar, her emotions surging between fury and frustration after seeing so many of her attacks negated by his spinning shield. The spinning was the problem, so maybe she should do something about it... Raising her arms, she summoned several glowing telekinetic hands, the fingernails of these projections ending in long razor-sharp nails.

\*You’re using too much power!\* John’s guide barked at Alyssa as she summoned two javelins.

The hands lunged forward to grab Larn’kelnar’s shield, digging their talons into the rotating surface. There was a hideous grating squeal, like fingers being scraped down a chalkboard, and the shield slowed its spinning until it was dragged to a screeching halt. The Progenitor looked up in shock, seeing his shield vibrating impotently as it tried to break free. That was when Alyssa hit him from behind with a double-tap, her first telekinetic javelin obliterating only one hexagon, but that opening was all that was needed. The second plunged into the back of Larn’kelnar’s thigh, mirroring John’s injury as the glinting spear of bright white energy sheared through his armour.

\*Listen to John...\* Alyssa said quietly to the guide. \*Shut the fuck up.\*

Narrowing her eyes, she focused on the glowing lance impaling Larn’kelnar that still hadn’t dissipated. It might have cost ten times the energy... but it was worth it.

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Larn’kelnar yowled with agony as the javelin skewering his leg sprouted barbs and began to spin, shredding flesh and bone alike. He’d never known pain like it as the javelin liquefied his thigh like a demented blender, bone fragments adding to his torment as they ripped through his muscles. He collapsed, the limb no longer able to hold him up with half of it gored out. Struggling to stay conscious, he slammed a telekinetic fist down on the top of the writhing spear, smashing it back out through the rent in his armour.

Dazed with the pain, he threw down a telekinetic wall, desperate to stop that thrall from a repeat performance. Cowering behind his makeshift cover, Larn’kelnar drew deep from his psychic reserves, the soothing waves of healing rapidly rebuilding shattered bone and re-growing shredded muscle and sinew. The agony abated, but he could feel a deep weariness setting in after so much healing in such a short period of time.

He directed the three Disintegration Matrixes at the bitch who’d just caused him so much torment, desperate to see her writhing in agony. They blasted her again and again, but she held strong, her own shield spinning now to help withstand their attack. Blake was back, his long blade rising and falling as he tried to hack through the shield, but Larn’kelnar wasn’t going to be distracted again, he wanted her dead. Glaring at the blonde, he intensified the frequency of the blasts, determined to see her destroyed. She’d been a thorn in his side for too long already and had proved just how dangerous she could be.

Suddenly a huge shadow fell over him and he looked up in fright as an immense green dragon just seemed to appear out of nowhere. Lightning crackled over its terrible claws as it raked his shield, then it opened its enormous maw and clamped down, blasting the barrier at point blank range with an enormous lightning bolt. The shield collapsed under the onslaught and the dragon’s maw snapped shut on his left shoulder.

Larn’kelnar screamed in terror as he was picked up in the air and shaken violently from side to side. The black metal plates crumpled under the phenomenal strength of her jaws, teeth piercing the mangled metal and biting through his flesh. Jade shook harder and with a gruesome ripping sound, she tore his arm from his body, hurling Larn’kelnar across the room to slam into the wall.

Struggling to stay conscious, he threw up another shield and directed the obelisks at this latest threat. They blasted the dragon, hitting her in the flank and coring through her enormous armoured bulk as she roared in pain. Suddenly the obelisks began to tremble violently, the beams stuttering to a halt as their forms turned insubstantial... seconds before all three winked out of existence. He stared at them in shock, not quite believing what was happening.

\*Ailanthia...\*

\*90% of your thralls are husks, my Lord!\* she cried out, no mistaking just how terrified she was. \*I can’t give you enough power to keep your constructs going anymore!\*

He lurched unsteadily to his feet, backing away from John and Alyssa as they stalked after him. \*Ailanthia... prep the shuttle! They’re too strong!\*

\*On my way, Larn,\* she replied, sobbing with a mixture of fear and relief.

Opening a gateway, he staggered through... and lurched into a wall in the corridor outside. He tried not to collapse as he panted for breath, throwing his precious reserves into regenerating his arm as he fled down the corridor.

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“What the hell?” John blurted out, his sword swishing through the air where Larn’kelnar was standing seconds before.

Alyssa whirled around, her eyes wide. “Where the fuck did he go?”

\*He stepped through a dimensional gateway!\* his Guide declared enthusiastically. \*They’re only short range, we have to hunt him down before he escapes!\*

“You two heard that?” John asked, running for the door.

Jade and Alyssa both nodded. A dragon and a Terran mirroring the same actions would have been amusing... if the situation wasn’t so dire.

He slapped his hand down on the rune beside the doorframe. “I’m going after him...”

“Wait, John!” Alyssa called out anxiously. “We should come too!”

John shook his head. “You won’t be able to keep up... we’ve both got speed. Protect the girls in case this is a trick and he doubles back!”

“Please be careful!” Alyssa begged him, hating to see John go alone.

He waved goodbye, then rushed through the door. \*How are the girls?\*

\*The twins are stabilised but both of them are critically injured. Sakura’s conscious but her arm’s useless and she’s had her foot blown off... so she’s obviously in a lot of pain. Dana’s in a bad way and Calara’s trying to wake Rachel... but we’re all running on fumes, we don’t have a lot of power left.\*

John sprinted down the corridor and saw an elevator close seconds before he could reach it. He watched the numbers on the display count down as it dropped into the bowels of the Progenitor dreadnought.

\*No! Don’t be a fool!\* his Guide snapped incredulously as he realised what John was planning.

John deactivated his psychic speed as he dove into the next elevator and hit the rune to follow his quarry down. \*Stabilise the girls, then hold onto all the power we’ve got left to heal them. Just wait until I’ve dealt with Larn’kelnar, in case he does come back to attack you.\*

\*We will... I love you,\* Alyssa replied, blowing him a telepathic kiss.

\*He’ll escape... Larn’kelnar won’t rest until you’re dead!\* the Guide berated him. \*This sentimentality is as ridiculous as it is pathetic! You risk everything for a handful of disposable thralls!\*

\*They’re not disposable, they never were,\* John said quietly. \*Larn’kelnar fought by your rules and he just got torn apart by me and the source of my sentimentality. I wouldn’t exchange one of their lives for that bastard, he’s not worth it. Besides, you saw what happened; Larn’kelnar’s almost completely tapped out... Jade ripped his arm off and those obelisks all faded away. Escaping with that dimensional gate then regenerating his missing arm must have used up whatever he’s got left...\*

\*You hope...\*

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Larn’kelnar glanced at the elevator deck display, watching it sink through the levels, his fear ebbing away as he put more distance between himself and Blake. His breathing was laboured, the strain of that ferocious combat taking a heavy toll, along with the debilitating exhaustion associated with such extensive healing. He flexed the fingers on his re-grown right hand, then stifled a yawn as he glanced at the misshapen stump below his left elbow.

As he stared at the regenerating limb, he shook his head in disbelief. He’d never come so close to death in all his long years and it wasn’t just once he’d nearly been killed, but multiple times. He wasn’t sure his heart could take any more shocks, not after being on the receiving end of so many deeply unpleasant surprises. He didn’t even have a name for some of the powers Blake’s thralls were wielding and that terrifying monstrosity at the end... that had been the final straw.

He wasn’t even sure if it was a telekinetic construct, but those massive jaws felt real enough clamped down on his shoulder. Larn’kelnar shivered with fear as he remembered being shaken around like that... he never wanted to go near whatever that beast was again. The elevator doors opened and he stepped out, jogging unsteadily towards the shuttle bay as he watched his limb fully regenerate right up to his fingers.

Sighing with relief, he knew he was safe now; even walking with psychic speed would make him quicker than any normal person could run. Remembering that Blake had enhanced speed, Larn’kelnar tried to speed up to an accelerated sprint to be on the safe side, then felt a dizzying sensation that made him stumble. To his irritation, he realised he didn’t have enough power left in his reserves to maintain his psychic speed.

\*Ailanthia... I’m nearly there. I need some more-\*

\*They’re all dead...\* she said quietly. \*I drained the life out of every thrall in your network...\*

The magnitude of that admission left him reeling as he staggered along the corridor. His empire lay completely undefended, his fleets nothing more than silent tombs for the hundreds of thousands of thralls that had once obeyed his every whim.

“Larn’kelnar! Stop slithering away, you craven worm! Face me!”

Blake’s bellowed challenge echoed down the corridor, that eerie reverberation making his shout all the more unsettling.

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Sprinting down the corridor, John shook his head in irritation. \*What did you do that for? I thought you were desperate to stop him escaping!\*

\*You were right...\* his guide grudgingly admitted. \*He’s completely tapped out.\*

\*And if he wasn’t?\* John asked, jaw clenching in anger.

\*I would’ve taken steps...\*

John bit back his retort, knowing bickering with his guide was pointless. Any attempt at compromise or reason with the guide would be a waste of time. His malignant second personality was nothing like him... they shared no common ground on anything.

The guide laughed, the mocking sardonic bark setting John’s teeth on edge. \*Now, you know that’s not true...\*

John saw Larn’kelnar stumble around the corner at an intersection up ahead and tried to run faster, but being healed multiple times had taken its toll. With all the stress and horror of the attack on the Invictus, then the capture, then the fight, he felt like he was on his last legs. Fortunately, by the way Larn’kelnar was lurching unsteadily down the corridor he was in just as bad shape.

\*Where’s he heading?\*

\*The shuttle bay... it’s the only destination that makes sense. Around the corner, then fifty metres... it’ll be straight ahead.\*

John rushed around the corner and saw Larn’kelnar collapse against the doorframe, his hand hammering the rune to open the massive doors. His quarry darted a frightened glance back down the corridor and froze when he locked eyes with John. Neither of them turned away as they stared at each other, both knowing that this was the end.

John ran towards him, with Larn’kelnar stumbling backwards through the opening door. The Progenitor turned and broke into a jog, running towards a sleek black ship that dominated the substantial shuttle bay. As John burst through the door, he saw one of the Larathyran thralls standing beside an open airlock, waving joyfully at her master. He was startled to see she had long white hair and suddenly Larn’kelnar’s interest in changing hair colours started to make sense...

“Larn! Behind you!” Ailanthia screamed in fright when she saw John sprinting after her love.

Larn’kelnar turned to look fearfully over his shoulder and stumbled again when he saw just how close John was. John reached for the sword hilt on his back, then changed his mind and put his head down, running faster.

\*For fuck’s sake!\* his Guide snapped in irritation.

John ignored him and leapt towards the fleeing Progenitor, bringing him down in a flying tackle. They crashed to the ground and Larn’kelnar twisted around, trying to break free.

“Get off me!” he screamed in fury, the shrill edge betraying his fear.

Rearing back John lashed out and smashed him in the face, his Crystal Alyssium gauntlet breaking Larn’kelnar’s front teeth. “That was for the Ashanath!” he roared.

Larn’kelnar swung back at him, but his fists were unarmoured, making his blows far less effective.

John grabbed him by the throat and slugged him again, breaking his nose in a splash of blood. “That was for the Trankarans!”

The Progenitor’s blows were getting frantic now, his fingers curling into claws as he tried to scratch John’s eyes out.

Ducking back, John grabbed Larn’kelnar’s right wrist and yanked it to one side, savagely snapping the bone. As his enemy screamed in pain, John landed another massive punch to his face shattering his cheekbone. “That was for the Kintark!”

Larn’kelnar’s punches were weakening now as he coughed up blood.

John drove his left fist into his nemesis’ battered features, breaking an eye socket with a sickening crunch. “And that was for the Terrans!”

“Please! You’re killing him!” Ailanthia screamed, her expression one of absolute terror.

John sat back, his chest heaving. “Show this piece of shit mercy? Why the fuck should I? His games have killed millions...”

“I love him!” she pleaded, tears rolling down her cheeks.

Looking down at that ruined face, John studied the man responsible for causing so much misery over the last year. “She’s all you’ve got left, isn’t she?”

Larn’kelnar nodded, blood bubbling at his lips as he muttered, “Ailanthia... don’t hurt her... please.”

“Only your matriarch left... You sucked the life out of every last thrall, just like the disgusting parasite you are.” John lurched to his feet and looked the green-skinned woman in the eye. “You think this animal loves you?”

She looked down at Larn’kelnar’s wheezing form and nodded through her tears.

“Let’s see...” John said, grabbing Larn’kelnar and hauling him to his feet. “I’m giving you a choice, Larn. I’m curious to see if you’re even capable of love... and now you get a chance to prove it. I swear I’ll let Ailanthia leave unharmed if you lay down your life for her...”

Larn’kelnar looked at him through horror-stricken eyes, his gaze flicking over to his matriarch who looked equally aghast.

Ailanthia shook her head in desperation. “No, don’t do it, Larn! I couldn’t live without you!”

He didn’t reply and the seconds stretched on, the silence growing painful.

“What about me? You’ll just let me leave instead?” the Progenitor finally muttered, giving John a sideways glance.

“Larn!” Ailanthia cried out, her eyes widening in shock.

John looked at him with contempt. “If that’s your choice... I promise I won’t lay another finger on you. You’ll be free to go...”

“You loved me...” Ailanthia wept, shaking her head in denial. “After all those years... I know it was real...”

Larn’kelnar let out a broken sob, then looked away from the green-skinned beauty in shame.

“Is that your final decision?” John asked, looking at the Progenitor in disgust.

Ailanthia suddenly screamed in agony and dropped to her knees, her face contorting in a mask of excruciating pain as Larn’kelnar sucked the life from her. With a wheezing whimper, she collapsed on the floor, her body nothing more than a dried-out husk.

John gaped at her in horror, then his head snapped around to the Progenitor standing silently beside him. “Why?” he blurted out, stunned that Larn’kelnar would do something so horrific to a woman he obviously felt something for. “I wasn’t going to hurt her...”

“If I couldn’t have her, I wasn’t leaving her for you...”

Tears rolled down Larn’kelnar’s cheek as he stared at Ailanthia’s emaciated corpse... her eyes damning him with their hollow stare.

“Can I leave?” he finally muttered.

Nodding numbly, John stepped back with his hands in the air, watching as Larn’kelnar turned away and limped towards the shuttle.

Larn’kelnar’s shoulders shook as he wept, his heart threatening to break as images of his matriarch flashed before his eyes. The looks of devotion and love which had once warmed his soul now haunted him, filling him with nothing but a feeling of absolute desolation.

He approached the airlock and pressed the runes to open the door... then pain exploded through his torso as John ran him through with his runesword.

“You promised!” Larn’kelnar gasped, twisting to look at John in shock.

“He promised... but I was never going to let you leave,” the Guide whispered in his ear, his voice echoing with eerie finality.

The runesword burst into flames, azure fire engulfing Larn’kelnar and making him scream in agony.

John pulled the blade free and watched the Progenitor writhing on the floor, his cries growing more shrill as the eldritch fire consumed his flesh. “That was for Ailanthia...” he whispered, his eyes filled with sorrow.

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Alyssa walked along the dark corridor and ran her fingers through her long blonde mane. She paused by the Shuttle Bay doors and tapped the glowing rune on the wall, being careful not to touch the black walls. When the door split apart, serrated edges peeling into the frame, she strode inside the huge hangar. John was exactly where she knew he’d be, staring at the immolated corpse of the man who’d blighted their lives for the last 6 months.

“Hey handsome,” she murmured as she stood beside him.

“I’m nothing like him... I never was,” John said quietly.

“No... you never were,” she agreed, slipping her hand into his.

Looking up at his troubled face, she was struck by just how much she loved the kind-hearted man who’d been burdened with such terrible responsibility. She stepped in front of him and looked up into his eyes, then gave him a tender kiss, full of as much love as she could show him.

John put his arms around her as he kissed her back and when they separated, he smiled. “What was that for?”

“You would have given up your life for me,” she replied, her cerulean eyes filled with certainty.

He gently caressed her cheek and nodded.

Alyssa let out a soft sigh as she leaned into his loving caress. They stood quietly for a long moment, until she looked up at him and said, “We freed your father. Rahn’hagon is asking to speak with you.”

John’s good mood evaporated and he glanced down at the charred remains of the last Progenitor he’d met, his expression turning bleak. “I suppose I better not keep him waiting...”

“I don’t think you’ll have to torch your father,” she said with a wry smile. “Rahn’hagon isn’t... quite how I expected.”

“Okay, now you’ve got me curious,” he replied, turning away from the shuttle.

“And you’ll be able to satisfy that curiosity in just a few minutes...” Alyssa teased him, a playful gleam in her eyes.

John smiled and rolled his eyes at her teasing. Despite the jovial tone he’d taken with Alyssa, he now felt ambivalent about finally getting a chance to meet his father; an opportunity he had been craving for his entire life. The reunion with his mother had been deeply disappointing, shadowed by the troubling realisation that she was utterly enthralled by Rahn’hagon. If Jessica’s story was true, her seduction by the mysterious progenitor on Arcadia had been aided by psychic powers, raising distressing questions about her consent. He let out a heavy sigh and tried to hold onto the faint hope that this meeting with his father wouldn’t end in bloodshed.

Alyssa gave him a pained smile. “Wow. At least I don’t have to worry about you setting your expectations too high...”

“After Larn’kelnar managed to plumb new depths of depravity, I’m struggling to put much faith in another Progenitor... even if he is my father,” John said, his expression grim.

He tried to avoid looking at Ailanthia’s withered body as they walked towards the huge set of doors, still shocked by the appalling way Larn’kelnar had betrayed her. It wasn’t just his matriarch who had been cruelly abused, Larn’kelnar had slaughtered untold thousands of thralls, draining their life force to fuel his powers. The sheer scale of the massacre made John sick to his stomach, especially knowing how much the Maliri looked up to him. He couldn’t even imagine asking any of his matriarchs to do that to the women they cared about.

Glancing at Alyssa, he asked with concern, “How are the girls doing? All fully recovered?”

“Not yet, but they’re all out of danger,” she replied, giving him a reassuring smile. “Rachel regained consciousness just after you left; she stabilised her own chest wound, then used up the last of our energy reserves to do some emergency healing on the girls. Dana was hit by a dozen kinetic darts and lost a lot of blood, Irillith had a big chunk blasted out of her flank, Sakura lost a foot, and part of Tashana’s spine was vaporised.”

“Her spine?” John muttered, horrified by the severity of her injuries.

“Yeah, I know. She was shot in the back; the lower half was just... gone. If Rachel hadn’t acted so fast with her shield, Tashana would have been cut in half,” Alyssa said quietly, squeezing his hand. “I can’t believe how close we were to losing her... all of them really.”

“We were teetering on a knife-edge that whole fight,” John said, his expression bleak. “I never should have gone along with the plan to wear Larn’kelnar down; it put the girls in far too much danger. When we went on the offensive, we really hurt the bastard... we should have just gone all-out from the start.”

Alyssa slipped her arm around his waist and gave him a sideways hug. “Don’t be so hard on yourself. Larn’kelnar’s dead and burning in hell... it’s finally over.”

John inhaled deeply then let out his breath. “You’re right... We survived, that’s all that matters.” He hugged her back, then concentrated on his Maliri Matriarch, \*Are you and your girls alright, Edraele? You’ve been very quiet...\*

\*I’m fine, John... we all are,\* she replied, sounding utterly exhausted. \*The battle just took a lot out of us... Luna and the Young Matriarchs are all sleeping to recover.\*

He frowned, his expression remorseful. \*I’m so sorry about the twins... if there was any way I could have prevented them getting hurt I would have done it.\*

\*You don’t have to apologise, it wasn’t your fault,\* she said with understanding. \*I know how much you love my daughters and that you’d do anything to protect them. Alyssa told me that they’re safe and well... but I’ve never wanted to hug them both so badly.\*

\*Get some rest, we’ll have a long talk later,\* he said kindly. \*You were amazing today, honey. Thank you.\*

She laughed, but it sounded strained. \*I’m just so relieved you’re all alright. Ever since the Invictus was attacked, everyone here has been terrified...\*

\*It’s all over now, honey,\* John said, sending her a sympathetic smile. \*Go to sleep, Edraele. It sounds like you’re about to pass out any second... I can hear it in your voice.\*

\*I will...\* she replied, sounding relieved and tired in equal measure. \*I love you, John.\*

\*I love you, too,\* he said, wishing he was at Genthalas so he could wrap her up in his arms.

John walked hand-in-hand with Alyssa up to the Shuttle Bay doors, stopping by the rune that controlled the opening mechanism. Alyssa was closest, so she tapped the glyph, being very careful not to touch the glistening black walls.

He noticed her precautions and glanced at the pensive blonde as they waited for the door to open. “You’re still getting bad vibes from the ship?”

She nodded, leaning closer to him. “This whole place just creeps the hell out of me... and it’s not just the visions of thralls having the life force sucked out of them. It’s the black metal... there’s something very wrong with it.”

John glanced up at the oppressive onyx walls, underlit by crimson lighting. “I... don’t feel it myself, but I trust your instincts.” The door yawned open, so he led her through into the corridor beyond. “Just bear with it for a little while longer... We need to find out what happened to the Invictus and see if it can be repaired. If not, we’ll just use this ship to get us back to Genthalas... but I promise I won’t make you stay on here for any longer than I have to.”

\*Oh, give me strength!\* his guide blurted out incredulously. \*You’ve just been gifted a Progenitor dreadnought! You’re not seriously considering abandoning this ship?!\*

John bristled at the interruption. \*If I wanted your input, I would have asked for it!\*

\*This is why I had to take control!\* the guide fumed. \*This dreadnought makes the Invictus look like a child’s toy. That miserable tugboat probably didn’t even survive the crash... and yet you’re willing to just walk away from one of the most powerful ships in the galaxy?! You’ve never had what it takes to fully harness your birthright!\*

\*That’s the only goddamn thing you’ve ever been right about! It’s *MY* birthright, not yours!\* John snarled, releasing Alyssa’s hand and clenching his fists in anger. \*You’ve been like a fucking anvil round my neck for decades! You’re like a... fucked up imaginary friend... a miserable little nothing.... you shouldn’t even exist!\*

\*I was just trying to get you to toughen up! Then you imprisoned me, you ungrateful wretch! Locked me away like an afterthought in the corner of your mind!\* his guide snarled indignantly. \*Even after you betrayed me, I *still* stepped in to save you and this impudent bitch! If it wasn’t for me-\*

John cut him off abruptly. \*Ungrateful?! If I hadn’t been stuck with you dragging me down, we could’ve crushed Larn’kelnar like a bug! All the Progenitor tech... all that knowledge... I should have had everything at my disposal right from the start! Instead, I’ve been running around like a headless chicken, desperately trying to scavenge whatever scraps Mael’nerak left behind. We’ve wasted decades, when I could’ve spent that time preparing... and it’s all your fault! Don’t bother trying to deny it, you know it’s true!\*

\*You’re weak and pathetic, ruled by your feelings for your thralls,\* the guide said obstinately. \*You never could have defeated that Progenitor without me...\*

\*If it wasn’t for the girls, we wouldn’t have stood a chance against Larn’kelnar!\* John exclaimed, barely able to keep his anger in check. \*In fact, the only silver lining in the black cloud of your existence, is that without you, Alyssa wouldn’t have been my matriarch! She hadn’t even been born back then, when you were actually supposed to be helping me. You should have told me everything I needed to know, then just faded away like a bad dream. You had one job to do and you totally fucked it up! So unless you’re about to give me all the Progenitor tech and powers you’ve been keeping from me, I don’t want to hear another goddamn word!\*

His guide went silent, but John could feel him seething in the back of his mind, one too many home truths leaving him too shocked and angry for a pithy comeback.

Alyssa had been staring at John wide-eyed as she listened to their furious exchange, then she bit her lip and smiled when he talked about her. “You’re so getting laid tonight, cradle snatcher,” she said with a grin.

John let out an embarrassed laugh, feeling self-conscious about his outburst. Leaning down he gave her an affectionate kiss, then clasped her hand as they set off again down the corridor. He couldn’t help thinking that his guide would still be present in his mind while he was intimate with the girls, a thought that he found deeply unsettling.

He coughed to clear his throat and decided to change the subject. \*Jade, how are you and your sisters doing?\*

“Jade’s resting to recover from the battle. She went to sleep after you defeated Larn’kelnar,” Alyssa explained, stopping by the elevator and pressing the glyph to open the door. “She got hit by that last salvo of disintegration beams... thank God they missed her crystal heart.”

John followed her into the elevator. “She’s incredible... I don’t know how she can just shrug off that kind of damage. When I left to chase after Larn’kelnar, Jade seemed totally fine.”

The blonde watched him for a moment, then said quietly, “John... I think she’s starting to remember more... back from before Mael’nerak mind-wiped the Nymphs. There’s been a few things she’s mentioned that she couldn’t have known otherwise.”

“Like the fact that he used a staff?” John said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “Yeah, I’ve been meaning to talk to her about that.”

Alyssa nodded, leaning into him as he put his arms around her. “Her sisters are fine by the way... tapped out and exhausted, but fine. I’ve no idea how they did it, but all of them survived the crash unscathed.”

“I had been making them more resilient, but I don’t think even Jade could have survived a crash from orbit,” he replied, shaking his head in bewilderment. “Maybe there’s still hope for the Invictus... and for Faye...”

Alyssa laid her head on his chest and said quietly, “I really hope so...”

John reached across to tap a glyph on the wall and the elevator started to rise through the decks. The couple stood close, drawing strength from each other in their comforting embrace. After all the fear, grief, and pain they’d suffered during the tumultuous events since the Invictus had been ambushed, they both desperately needed a few precious moments of peace.

“I can’t believe the fight with Larn’kelnar ended like this,” John murmured, gently stroking Alyssa’s golden hair. “After all that time he spent lurking around in the shadows, I never thought he’d ambush us and try to take me prisoner. Then he left himself vulnerable to a boarding action...”

“Underestimating us was the worst mistake he ever made,” she said with a grin. “Did you see how shocked he looked when we kept hitting him with all those psychic powers? I thought he was going to have a stroke when Dana tried to rip him in half!”

He chuckled and nodded, then his expression turned sombre. “We were incredibly lucky he got bored of making us dance around like puppets. If he’d just waited and invaded with his thrall fleets, I don’t think we could’ve upgraded the Maliri quickly enough to match them. I was so worried about a massive thrall battle and the horrific casualties that would’ve meant for our side... but we managed to avoid all that.”

Alyssa gave him a guilty look as she admitted, “I’ve been trying to distract you from thinking too much about the grim reality of a Progenitor war. I knew how devastated you’d be at seeing the Maliri suffering and I didn’t want you dwelling on it... you would’ve just got depressed. That was why I got so mad at Edraele the other day, because she wanted to prepare you for the war and all those casualties, not just hope it never happened. It turned out I was right, but I still owe her an apology when we go back to Genthalas for the way I treated her.”

John smiled at her fondly. “It sounds like overprotectiveness is something we’ve both got in common.” His smile faded and his expression turned sad as he continued, “I fought in some bloody wars when I served as a marine, so I always knew what we might be facing. It would have been horrific seeing those kinds of losses with the Maliri though, especially with me being personally responsible for their safety.”

“You don’t have to worry about that anymore,” Alyssa said brightly. “Now Larn’kelnar’s worm food, we just need to sort out the Brimorians and rescue the Abandoned... then we’re done!”

The elevator door opened, but John was reluctant to release her and made no move to leave. “You’re right, this is nearly over... which means retirement on Valaden,” he said quietly, gazing into Alyssa’s eyes.

Her gaze softened and she bit her lower lip. “We finished early... you beat my deadline.”

John had a reverent look in his eyes as he brushed the back of a gauntleted hand against her armour-plated abdomen. “Are you ready for the next step, beautiful?”

Alyssa melted in his arms. “Our family’s going to be everything you always wanted,” she whispered, her eyes full of love. “I’m going to do whatever it takes to be the best mom ever...”

He was touched by her sincerity and held her close. “I know. You’re going to be amazing.”

They stood quietly together, enjoying the embrace and imagining what it would be like becoming parents. John’s thoughts drifted to his own mother... and the bitter disappointment that Jessica Blake had turned out to be.

“John... it wasn’t her fault,” Alyssa gently reminded him, listening to his inner voice take a dark turn.

“No, it was my father’s,” he said with a grimace, his good mood shattered. Pulling away from the blonde and taking her hand, he led her into the corridor. “Come on, let’s get this over with...”

She studied his pensive expression with a frown. “John... maybe he won’t be as bad as you think.”

“Yeah... I’m sure he isn’t the mass-murdering psychopath I’m expecting him to be,” he muttered, unable to keep the bitterness from his tone.

“I’m on your side, okay?” she said with sympathy. “I just want you to be happy...”

Looking chagrined, John paused and glanced back at the blonde. “I didn’t mean to take it out on you... I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be... I understand,” she replied, giving him a supportive smile. “I was a nervous wreck before meeting my parents on Karron, so I know what you’re going through.”

He let out his breath in a heavy sigh. “I haven’t even had a chance to deal with all the feelings meeting my mother dredged up. I’m not sure I’m in the right frame of mind to handle total disinterest from my father as well...”

She looked into his eyes and said, “Just remember that you have a new family now that loves you very much.” Stepping closer, Alyssa gave him a gentle kiss, her lips soft and warm as they embraced. When John finally relaxed, Alyssa pulled back and caressed his cheek. “How do you feel now?”

“Much better... thank you,” he said gratefully. “I could still use a really long vacation, but we’ll be back on Valaden soon and then we can all unwind.”

Alyssa grinned at him. “It won’t be long until you’re retired and trying to find things to do to stop yourself from getting bored.”

“I have a feeling I’m going to have my hands full,” he replied, darting an affectionate glance at the blonde. They continued walking along the corridor and he added, “Where are my parents anyway?”

“Rahn’hagon was being held in the next interrogation chamber. I was planning to wait until you got back before freeing him, but your mom rushed off to release him when I told everyone that Larn’kelnar was dead.”

“Leaving my father locked up probably wouldn’t have given him a very good first impression of his future daughter-in-law,” he said with a wry smile. “But until we know exactly what we’re dealing with, we need to get as many of the girls recuperating as possible. Rahn’hagon might not be hostile, but I don’t want to take any chances. With everyone tapped out, we’re very exposed at the moment.”

Alyssa nodded her agreement. “I’ve got a bunch of the girls resting. Currently, Jade, her sisters, Sakura, Helene, and Tashana, are all fast asleep.”

“As well as Edraele and her Maliri,” John added, stopping outside the interrogation chamber he’d been held in. He frowned as he continued, “Wait a second... what about Calara? And where are Dana, Irillith, and Rachel? They must all be exhausted after being healed.”

“Dana wanted to find the wormhole generator and the big gun that cut the Invictus in half. She said she’d never be able to sleep without unlocking their blueprints first. Irillith’s gone with Calara to the Bridge; they’re investigating the ship’s computer for information on Larn’kelnar’s empire and Irillith’s there to translate. As for Rachel, she’s gone looking for survivors...”

John looked at her in surprise, then his expression turned bleak. “There won’t be any survivors... the ship’s basically a huge mausoleum now. Larn’kelnar drained every thrall he had; the bastard even turned his matriarch into a husk.” He shook his head sorrowfully. “I still can’t believe he did that. Ailanthia adored him and he just sucked the life out of her.”

“I know,” she said quietly, looking at him with sympathy. “I’ve seen visions of it happening to hundreds of thralls... but seeing it happen right in front of you must have been awful.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever forget her final expression,” John said, his face sombre. “Larn’kelnar’s betrayal left her utterly heartbroken... I think she was more tormented by him choosing to abandon her than the agony of having her life force drained.”

“That’s totally fucked up,” Alyssa agreed, giving him a hug. “He never deserved her love.”

John nodded his agreement as he hugged her back, then glanced down the corridor where he knew his father was waiting to meet him. Tapping the rune on the wall behind the blonde, he said, “It won’t hurt Rahn’hagon to wait another few minutes; it’s not like he’s been in any rush to see me for the last forty years.”

The door split apart, revealing the aftermath of the fight with Larn’kelnar. The floor and walls all showed signs of combat, the worst of which was the mangled trench that Dana had melted across the deck. However, John wasn’t interested in the battle damage the room had sustained, he was looking for the girls.

He couldn’t help smiling when he saw them. Jade had shapeshifted into a tiger and her huge feline body was curled protectively around the three women using her as a soft warm pillow. The girls had all removed their battered armour, with Sakura and Helene flanking Tashana as they slept. None of the trio stirred as he approached, but Jade cracked an eye open, waking as he walked towards them.

“I didn’t mean to disturb you, honey,” John said kneeling beside her. He stroked her furry ears and smiled when she started purring, the sound a deep rumbling in her massive chest. “I just wanted to check you were all okay.”

\*I’m feeling a bit tired, Master,\* Jade replied, nuzzling into his hand. \*But otherwise, I’m fine. I didn’t want Dana, Rachel, and Irillith to leave until they’d rested... unfortunately, they’re all very naughty little kittens.\*

He laughed and nodded. “They certainly are.” Looking into her emerald eyes, he continued, “I’m going to meet with my father, then we’ll find out what happened to the Invictus and your sisters.”

\*I’m so relieved they all survived,\* Jade said quietly. \*Watching the front half of the Invictus falling towards Arcadia was probably the worst moment of my life...\*

John gave her a fierce hug, feeling a huge surge of guilt. “Jade... I’m so sorry I had to ask you to choose...”

She gently brushed her head against his, in a very feline gesture of affection. \*If you’d sent me after my sisters and any of your mates had died as a result, I would have felt far worse. I know how much you care for the girls and I feel the same way about them too. I’m just so glad that the Nymphs all survived; now you can grow to love them as much as the rest of us.\*

“I’ve grown very fond of all four of them already... seeing them in trouble like that was awful,” John said with a pained frown. “I had to make a snap decision, but I knew there was a chance I could still save the Nymphs, even if the worst happened and the Invictus smashed into Arcadia. I swear I would have brought them all back, Jade... just like I did with you.”

\*I know... they’re all connected to you now,\* she murmured, gazing at him in adoration.

He nodded, then gave her a sympathetic smile. “I better let you get back to sleep, you must be exhausted after the fight. We’ll catch up properly later.”

\*I hope Rahn’hagon is everything you were hoping for in a father...\* she said quietly, watching John’s face as his expression turned pensive.

Resisting the urge to make a bitter remark about his absentee parents, John stroked the Nymph’s head and chose to take her earnest comment in the kind way it was intended. “Thank you, Jade.”

She rubbed against him again, then rested her head on her big paws as she settled down to maintain her vigil over their sleeping companions. \*Don’t hesitate to wake me if there’s trouble, Master.\*

“I will,” he promised, waving her goodbye and heading for the door.

Alyssa gave him a supportive smile and fell into step beside him as they left the interrogation chamber.

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Calara glanced at her blue-skinned companion with concern. “Maybe this was a bad idea... you look worn out.”

“No, I’m fine,” Irillith replied, shaking her head. She suddenly stifled a big yawn, then shot the brunette a self-conscious smile. “That was your fault. I was doing alright until you reminded me.”

The Latina paused and held out a hand to stop the Maliri. “You can barely keep your eyes open... this can wait until you’ve had some sleep.”

Irillith clasped her friend’s hand and carried on walking, tugging Calara behind her. “We’re already close to the Bridge, we might as well have a look around now...”

Calara laughed and let the Maliri lead the way, but her laughter died as they reached the site of a grisly massacre. She swallowed and averted her eyes from the carnage, a quick glimpse of the decapitated and dismembered bodies immediately identifying who was responsible for the slaughter.

“They would have done the same to us without a second thought,” Irillith said, noticing her companion’s reaction. She studied the corpses, taking note of the lethal efficiency of the kills. “Sakura actually did them a favour. Larn’kelnar would’ve drained the life out of them... and from what Alyssa’s said, I wouldn’t wish that fate on my worst enemy.”

Walking carefully amongst the bodies littering the corridor, Calara tried not to look too closely at the bloodbath. “I know...”

Irillith deftly navigated a path through the cadavers then waited for the brunette to follow her. “But you still feel sorry for them?”

“It’s not that... I’m just not used to seeing all the gory details,” the Latina admitted sheepishly. “For the majority of our battles, I’m on the Invictus’ Bridge, watching holographic images of ships being destroyed. There’s a certain sense of detachment in those fights, rather than experiencing the gruesome reality; like hearing the thralls being incinerated in the barracks... that was horrendous.”

“They were Larn’kelnar’s minions, they all had it coming,” the Maliri said, expressing her feelings on the matter with a nonchalant shrug.

Calara looked at her curiously as they continued along the corridor. “You really hate them, don’t you?”

Irillith glanced back at the lifeless thralls. “Not now they’re dead.”

“Is it because they’re dead, or Larn’kelnar is?” the Latina wondered aloud.

The Maliri covered her mouth as she yawned again, then gave her companion a plaintive look. “I’m happy to help you with translations, but hypothesising about a Progenitor’s relationships with his thralls is a bit beyond me at the moment.”

Calara squeezed her shoulder and gave her an apologetic smile. “You’re right, I’m sorry. Let’s get to the Bridge; the sooner this is done, the sooner you can get some sleep.”

Leaving the site of the massacre behind them, they walked in silence, the sight of so many bodies making light-hearted conversation seem disrespectful to the dead. The reinforced doors protecting the Bridge eventually came into view and the two women exchanged a glance when they saw the gaping hole smashed through the middle.

Irillith touched the shattered black metal, then quickly pulled her fingers back. “Careful, it’s still freezing cold...”

“Sakura’s getting incredibly powerful,” Calara murmured, examining the frost riming the surface. “Just imagine how cold she must have made the door to be able to shatter Progenitor metal...”

“Very chilly,” Irillith agreed blithely, arching an eyebrow at the Latina.

“Okay, no more delays,” the brunette said with a smile and slipped through the jagged hole. Calara paused when she entered the Bridge, then quickly turned away, looking sickened. “My God...”

Irillith followed her inside and winced when she saw the dozens of bloody corpses strewn haphazardly around the Command Deck. These thralls were all fully armoured, but it hadn’t saved them from Sakura’s fury. The bodies near the shattered door had been torn to pieces, their black armour plating perforated with hundreds of puncture wounds.

The Maliri squatted beside a lacerated Larathyran thrall and picked up one of the razor-sharp flechettes scattered on the floor. “It looks like it’s not just Sakura’s Cryokinesis that’s been getting stronger...”

Calara tried not to focus on the bodies as she edged around the slaughter and walked towards the Bridge stations. Some had been damaged by gunfire, but the console by the Command Chair was unscathed. “Could you hack this one please?” she requested, placing her hand on the angled surface.

“Unless it’s been locked, I shouldn’t need to,” Irillith replied, striding over and taking a seat. She studied the glyphs and text on the interface, then her nimble blue fingers danced over the console. “Ah, Larn’kelnar was such a trusting soul. I’m in!”

“I don’t think he ever anticipated anyone snooping through his files,” the brunette said wryly.

Irillith started familiarising herself with the data archived on the computer system. “So... what are we looking for exactly?”

“Star charts for the Larathyran Empire are a priority. I’d like to know exactly where Larn’kelnar came from,” Calara replied, turning to look out through the broad windows surrounding the Bridge and gazing at the spectacular view of space. “Then anything else you can find of interest, especially information on the precise location and composition of his thrall fleets...”

“But they’re not a threat anymore,” Irillith said with a frown, rubbing her eyes sleepily. “He drained the life out of all his thrall crews.”

“Yes, exactly.” Calara clasped her hands behind her back and stared at the sparkling stars. “Somewhere out there are hundreds of highly-advanced thrall ships, just waiting for someone to commandeer them...”

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John stood outside the door to the next interrogation chamber and took a deep breath. He glanced at Alyssa, who gave him a supportive smile, then he tapped the rune to open the door. It slid back into the frame, giving John his first look at his parents as a couple. Rahn’hagon was talking quietly with Jessica, the brunette embracing him with an expression of pure joy on her pretty face.

Rahn’hagon looked young, mid-twenties if he was a Terran, although the man standing before John was at least ten-thousand years old. He was tall, with a muscular build, almost identical to John’s physique. His flowing hair was styled into a mid-length cut and a neat goatee framed a broad smile for the woman in his arms. His father had that distinctive aquiline nose, a feature shared with both Larn’kelnar and Mael’nerak, but it was his eyes that really drew John’s attention. Unlike Larn’kelnar, who had a fierce intensity to his stare, Rahn’hagon’s eyes held a timeless wisdom, which could only have been gained from thousands of years of quiet introspection.

John’s parents looked towards the door when they heard it open, their faces lighting up with happiness.

“My son! I’ve awaited your triumphant return for years!” Rahn’hagon exclaimed, releasing Jessica and striding over to greet him.

John stood speechless as his father gave him a bear hug, shooting a shocked glance at Alyssa, who grinned and winked back at him.

When Rahn’hagon stepped away, John managed a startled smile. “I’ve waited a long time to meet you too...” He hesitated for a second, before continuing awkwardly, “I... don’t know what to call you. Father sounds a bit... awkward. Jessica said your name was Rahn’hagon?”

“I’ve got used to just being called Rahn,” the Progenitor said with a chuckle, putting his arm around Jessica’s shoulders. “I’ve been reliably informed that Rahn’hagon was too much of a mouthful.”

Jessica gave him an affectionate sideways hug, then smiled at her son. “Thank you so much for rescuing him!”

“You’re welcome...” John murmured, too stunned for anything more eloquent.

Rahn’hagon turned to study the fourth occupant of the room. “I believe we met earlier, didn’t we?”

“Yes, but we haven’t been properly introduced; you were a bit distracted by Jessica’s kisses,” Alyssa said with an amused smile. “My name’s Alyssa. I’m John’s matriarch... well, one of them anyway.”

Rahn’s eyes widened and he looked at John with astonishment. “You have more than one matriarch?!”

“I currently have three,” John replied, shaking off his sense of bewilderment. “Alyssa was the first, then Edraele, who rules the Maliri... and Jade became my third last week.”

“Three matriarchs!” Rahn marvelled, his eyes sparkling with delight. “I knew I’d be in for some surprises, but I never expected that!”

“Yeah, me neither...” John said with a wry smile.

Rahn’hagon faced Jessica and politely asked, “Could you give us some privacy, my dear? John and I have some very important matters to discuss...”

“Of course!” the brunette cheerfully agreed, before giving him a loving kiss. “Just give me a call whenever you’re ready.”

Rahn’hagon nodded, then glanced at Alyssa.

Before he could say anything, Alyssa clasped Jessica’s hand. “We’ll wait with the rest of the girls. You two have a nice chat.”

“Thank you, Alyssa,” Rahn said gratefully, watching as the two matriarchs headed for the door.

John frowned in disapproval, but Alyssa glanced back at him over her shoulder. \*If he wants to talk with you alone, that’s fine. Speaking to your dad is what’s important... besides, I’ll still be able to hear everything anyway!\*

He smiled back. \*Thanks, honey.\*

Rahn’hagon waited until the door had closed behind the two women, then he turned to beam at John. “Son, I’m so proud of you! I gave you a monolithic task, but you managed to achieve victory against all the odds!”

John hesitated, feeling like he was missing something critically important. He was fairly sure his father wasn’t just referring to the battle with Larn’kelnar, who had only arrived in their sector recently.

“It was a hard fight...” he replied cautiously. Speaking directly to his guide, John asked, \*What monolithic task is he referring to?\*

His question was met with an uncomfortable silence.

“A hard fight?!” Rahn’hagon exclaimed, then burst into laughter. “John, you’ve managed the impossible!”

John cleared his throat. “Rahn... maybe we should start at the beginning? I have so many questions.”

“I’m sure you do,” his father replied, nodding in sympathy. “I’m sorry for not revealing everything to you from the start, but I had to keep some things secret... both for your protection and my own.” Rahn’hagon’s expression brightened and he added, “But that’s all behind us now! You’ve more than earned the right to ask me anything you wish.”

“Can you tell me about yourself? About your past?”

Rahn’hagon’s expression turned melancholy, the previous happiness in his bright blue eyes turning to regret. “It’s a bleak topic of discussion, but after everything you’ve accomplished, the least I can do is answer your questions.” He gestured towards the door and continued, “I’m sure we’ll be talking for a while; may I suggest relocating somewhere more congenial than a prison cell?”

John nodded. “Sure... do you know somewhere we can go?”

His father laughed and patted him on the shoulder. “A vessel like this has been my home for countless years. I should know my way around by now.”

They walked to the door and left the interrogation chamber, heading out into the gloomy red-lit corridors. John followed Rahn’hagon’s lead as they travelled through the black ship in silence. He sensed that his father was apprehensive about discussing the past, with Rahn’hagon composing his thoughts before he answered any questions. The lull in conversation suited John too, who was trying to adjust to the fact that he actually quite liked the mysterious Progenitor that walked beside him.

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Dana approached the next forbidding black door, this being the twelfth she’d checked in the lower foredecks of Larn’kelnar’s ship. She was scouring the vessel for some very specific technology but so far, her search had been in vain. These sections of the Progenitor dreadnought had been previously inaccessible to her down on the planet below, as the front third of Rahn’hagon’s crashed spacecraft had been completely obliterated. Whether the destruction was caused by the explosion in the Niryean Rift, or the crash landing on Arcadia, had been impossible to say. Whatever the reason, scouring the ship on the planet had produced a plethora of exciting new technologies... but not the real jewels in a Progenitor’s arsenal, which she was searching for now.

The redhead rubbed a hand over her face, the fatigue from being healed catching up with her. She watched the door slide open, her tired gaze falling on the jagged teeth that interlocked them together as they peeled apart. They were as flagrant a contravention of Terran Federation health and safety regulations as she’d ever seen and Dana smirked as she imagined some bureaucrat having a stroke when he saw them. Normally, she found T-Fed rules to be unnecessary and condescending, but looking at the razor-sharp edges, she had to wonder at the mentality behind the mind that designed them.

Holding her breath with anticipation, Dana entered the room, then winced when she saw the corpses on the ground. These thralls had been drained of life, the withered bodies contorted in agony as they’d writhed in their death throes. She looked at them with pity, wondering if those women had cursed Ailanthia and Larn’kelnar with their final breaths. Knowing what she did about Progenitors, Dana wouldn’t have bet money on it.

“You deserved so much better...” she muttered sadly, turning away from the lifeless husks.

Dana felt a pang of sympathy for the thralls that had been so appallingly abused by the man they all adored. Despite the women all working for Larn’kelnar and sharing responsibility for the attack on the Invictus, she couldn’t help pitying their tortured souls. She glanced around the room and shivered, knowing that their last moments had probably been burned into the ship, their pain and terror recorded for eternity as psychic imprints.

She tried not to think about the dead thralls, or about the tragic fate of the Invictus and the kind-hearted girl who had gone down with their ship. Dreadful memories of Faye’s terrified expression sprang unbidden to Dana’s mind, the sprite looking to John before tumbling from the Command Podium. She brushed away the tears from her eyes, fighting back the overwhelming sense of grief, knowing that now wasn’t the time to fall apart. Leaning heavily against the big device that dominated the room, she breathed deeply to get herself back under control.

\*Sparks... you shouldn’t be alone right now,\* Alyssa said, her voice gentle and sympathetic. \*If I ask you to go back to Jade, are you going to pay any attention?\*

Shaking her head stubbornly, Dana replied, \*It’s better if I keep myself occupied... that way I won’t keep thinking about... her.\*

\*Wait there... I’ll join you,\* her friend volunteered. \*But everywhere in this nightmare ship looks the same to me, you might have to give me a few directions...\*

\*No, I’m okay. I won’t be too much longer,\* the redhead replied, having explored nearly all of the ship. Deciding to change the subject, she asked, \*How’s John doing with his dad?\*

Alyssa’s joyful laughter echoed through Dana’s mind. \*Rahn’hagon’s so happy to see his long-lost son! They haven’t started throwing around a baseball yet, but they’re not far off.\*

\*John deserves it,\* Dana said, smiling as she imagined the father and son reunion. \*I’m so glad it’s working out how he always wanted.\*

\*It caught him completely by surprise,\* Alyssa said with a grin. \*He never expected that kind of reaction from his father. He was bracing himself for another bitter disappointment after what happened with his mother.\*

Dana frowned and asked thoughtfully, \*I thought you said that all Jessica cared about was finding Rahn? She seemed really interested in wanting to know more about John earlier...\*

The blonde sounded shifty as she admitted, \*I might have made a few tweaks while she was sleeping...\*

Genuinely shocked, Dana hissed, \*You can’t go fucking around with her mind! That’s John’s mother!\*

\*I had to!\* Alyssa said stubbornly. \*You should have seen the look on John’s face earlier... he was crushed when he realised his mother didn’t give a shit about him.\*

\*Was that all because of Rahn’hagon’s influence?\* the redhead asked, her heart going out to John.

\*Yeah, pretty much. Their psychic bond had suppressed a few aspects of Jessica’s personality. She was so fixated on Rahn’hagon that it overshadowed everything else, including her feelings about John and her parents.\*

\*This could really blow up in your face...\* Dana warned her. \*Please promise you’ll be careful.\*

\*I won’t do anything else to her, I swear!\*

Dana pushed off the big black object she’d been leaning against and turned to study it more closely. As she looked up at the hollow, cylindrical device, she felt that maddening sensation as if she’d forgotten something. Clutching at her head, she groaned as a new set of blueprints unlocked in her mind, complex formulae and intricate designs flooding her subconscious.

Fighting off the dizziness to examine the schematics, Dana’s mood brightened considerably. “Oh, hell yeah!”

\*What did you find?\* Alyssa asked, her curiosity piqued. \*I’m struggling to follow your train of thought with all the physics... something about a Jacobian matrix and a determinant...\*

\*I found the wormhole generator!\* Dana exclaimed, standing back to marvel at the priceless piece of Progenitor technology.

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John followed his father into what looked to be a spacious lounge, the furniture surprisingly plush and comfortable, which made for a startling contrast with their sinister surroundings. There was an ornate chair that could more readily described as a throne, surrounded by numerous sofas placed around the room. Rahn’hagon ignored the ostentatious throne and gestured at a couple of the sofas, arranging them via telekinesis so that they were facing each other.

“Would you like a drink?” he asked, as he strode over towards one of the walls.

“Yeah, a drink would be good,” John replied, feeling a bit bemused as he crossed the room. He removed his sword and propped it up against the sofa, so he could sit down without slicing the furniture.

Rahn’hagon touched a concealed rune on the wall and a section of plating slid back, revealing bottles of different coloured beverages. He poured out a rich red liquid into a couple of tumblers, then handed one of them to John as he took a seat opposite.

Taking an experimental sip, John nodded appreciatively, tasting the smooth burn of alcohol. “Very nice.”

His father did the same and watched John for a long moment. “So... you wanted to know about my past?”

“I really would,” John replied, sitting forward and listening attentively. “I’ve pieced together snippets, but I’d like to hear it from you.”

Leaning back in his chair, Rahn’hagon let out a heavy sigh. “I was very different before I came here; they aren’t happy memories.”

John nodded. “I understand.”

Staring off into the distance, Rahn’hagon began his tale. “I was born long ago... sired by one of our kind as you would expect. I wish I could tell you more about my parents, but I never knew them... when I was just an infant, they sent me to a distant colonised world seeded with a thrall race. I was raised there until I grew into a man, then I ascended and claimed their species. They became known as the Randarai and I established a magnificent empire amongst the stars.”

Lost in his memories, he sounded distant as he continued, “I gathered my forces and waged war... slaughtering all the lesser species that bordered my territory. For a thousand years I crushed all before me, expanding the Randarai Empire until it spanned hundreds of colonised worlds. When I’d vanquished every civilisation within easy reach, I began to cast my eye further afield and hunted for worthier adversaries; Progenitors and the empires they’d established for themselves. The warfare was relentless, the death toll in the billions... but nothing satisfied my hunger for destruction.”

Rahn’hagon’s voice trailed off, his eyes shadowed with a host of conflicting emotions.

“How long ago was that?” John asked quietly, rousing his father from his thoughts.

“A lifetime ago...” Rahn’hagon murmured, shaking himself from the daze. “In truth, I stopped keeping track of the years during my time on Arcadia. I know that I endured twelve millennia of conflict doing the bidding of the ancient ones... I grew mighty, destroying all who opposed me, eventually becoming the strongest of those that fought for supremacy. All that is, except one... who had disappeared long before my time, lost in the vast psychic dampening field that blankets this place.”

“The Shroud...” John noted, intrigued that Rahn’hagon was aware of it.

“Yes, I’ve heard it called that by the insectoid parasites that still infest this region of space. Who or what created it, I have no idea, but I do know that it’s centred in this quadrant of the galaxy. I was completely unaware of its existence when I was sent to hunt down a rogue Progenitor... but this *Shroud* conceals our kind from the ancients’ unwavering eyes. I lost contact with them as I launched my invasion and soon realised something was amiss, but continued to wage war regardless... ten thousand years of indoctrination is not shed overnight. There were a plethora of foul creatures here, left to run amok for millennia... so I kept my thralls occupied with dispatching them while I searched for my real quarry.”

John already suspected that Rahn’hagon was behind the extermination of the Vulkat and the attempted genocide of the Kirrix, but he needed to know for sure.

“Do you remember attacking a species of arachnids called the Vulkat?” he asked pensively. “They’d developed advanced missile tech and fought in black ships banded with orange.”

“They sound vaguely familiar,” Rahn’hagon replied with a frown. “I seem to recall one of my Fleet Commanders having trouble with some inconsequential species of arachnids... I replaced her with a far more ruthless thrall who handled the whole business with commendable efficiency.”

John tried not to react badly to his father’s complete lack of remorse at exterminating the Vulkat. He understood Rahn’hagon’s difficulty in empathising with a non-thrall species, having had trouble relating to the more diverse aliens himself. He also knew that even after escaping control by the Astral monsters, Rahn’hagon wasn’t the only Progenitor to continue adhering to his genocidal upbringing.

Larn’kelnar had killed millions as he revelled in playing the puppet master. Likewise, Mael’nerak had taken thousands of years before he changed his ways; first boredom, then his love of Valada eventually softening the brutal annihilator of the Achonin. It was only to be expected that Rahn’hagon had behaved in a similar manner, but knowing how much Nkkrrit had suffered at his father’s hands was still galling, no matter the reasons explaining his actions.

“Anyway, shortly afterwards, I finally found the Progenitor that had made this place his domain,” Rahn’hagon said, his eyes gleaming with millennia-long hatred. “Mael’nerak... he still lived after all that time!”

“The two of you fought the War of Heavens...” John murmured, deeply troubled.

Rahn’hagon looked at him quizzically. “What was that?”

Sitting back in his chair, John took a sip of his drink before replying, “The War of Heavens... That’s what the Trankarans call the cataclysmic battle between you and Mael’nerak that nearly saw them wiped out.”

“Oh, I see,” Rahn said, clearly disinterested in Trankaran nomenclature or their near extinction.

John studied his father with mixed feelings. At the time the war took place, Rahn’hagon had only just escaped the control of the Astral monsters and was still heavily influenced by a lifetime of butchery at their behest. John knew it wasn’t realistic to expect Rahn’hagon to have suddenly changed his ways, but knowing it was his father that had obliterated billions of Maliri and Trankarans was still a horrific thought.

Trying to keep his tumultuous emotions in check, John asked, “So what happened when you found Mael’nerak?”

Leaning forward animatedly, Rahn’hagon continued his tale, caught up with the memories, “I waged war against him... and the contest was glorious! I had him bested and was driving him back... until he delayed the inevitable by throwing all manner of twisted abominations at me!”

“The Drakkar...” John said, remembering the video from the Nexus files.

“Their troops were ferocious in boarding actions with an insatiable hunger for battle... my thralls had never seen such savagery. As for their females...” His father’s lip curled in disgust. “Truly monstrous... I had to intervene personally for my forces to regain the upper hand.”

“Then Mael’nerak attacked you directly...”

Rahn’s expression turned indignant with outrage. “How dare he! I knew he’d abandoned our ways, but to have fallen so far...”

“What do you mean by ‘abandoning our ways’?” John asked curiously.

“Ah, of course you wouldn’t know,” Rahn’hagon replied with a wry smile. Looking away into the distance, he continued, “The rules of battle are for *their* benefit... Progenitors amass their thrall forces and engage in a protracted campaign of attrition until one side is the victor, culminating in the death of the weakened opponent and destruction of his ship. Making a comeback and winning after being forced into a final stand is unheard of.”

\*I think Mael’nerak managed it once,\* Alyssa interjected, sounding surprised. \*Do you remember me telling you about the psychic echoes of yellow-skinned thralls invading the Legacy? He must have been on the verge of losing a war with another Progenitor if thralls were boarding his ship... but somehow he survived. It must have happened long before he came here and wiped out the Achonin.\*

John found himself agreeing with her conclusion, then he focused on his father as Rahn’hagon continued retelling his past.

“I had seized half of Mael’nerak’s territory and my victory was assured,” Rahn’hagon said with a flicker of pride, before his eyes glinted with a dark anger. “In his desperation, he launched one final futile attack... then like a coward, he blew himself to pieces rather than face me in combat! That explosion was like nothing I’d ever seen! The blast ripped my fleets apart, and would have claimed me too... if my ravaged ship hadn’t been hurled through a rift in space.”

“The explosion in the Niryean Rift,” John said quietly. “We analysed what was left of the Zeta-Pegasus system and think Mael’nerak overloaded his Wormhole Generator.”

“So that’s how that bastard did it,” Rahn’hagon muttered with grudging respect. He grimaced at the terrible memories. “I was dying... mortally wounded by his suicidal strike. I was forced to expend the last of my resources to heal myself and guide the ship down to crash land on Arcadia. I survived... but I was trapped on an uninhabited world, my vessel devastated and my network of thralls wiped out.”

“We discovered records which seem to indicate that happened about 9000 years ago,” John said, remembering the Nexus files. “So what happened next?”

“I was furious, incensed that I was marooned on some isolated planet with no chance of rescue,” Rahn’hagon replied, an ambivalent expression on his face. He suddenly relaxed and smiled wryly. “Then I realised that with my matriarch and thralls dead, I no longer left a psychic beacon in the ether. The Shroud was shielding me from the ancients and I saw no reason to bring myself to their attention again. As far as they were concerned, I must have been killed fighting Mael’nerak... and I had no intention of correcting their mistake.”

John looked at him incredulously. “So you just decided to live like a hermit?”

His father nodded. “To my surprise, I found I actually enjoyed the solitude. For the first time, I was able to live the life I wanted, free from millennia of bloody wars and relentless slaughter. It was a peaceful existence, giving me time to reflect on the nature of our relationship with the ancient ones... and plan for a way to deal with them permanently. At least it was, until a Terran survey vessel intruded upon my sanctuary.”

“The Cora...”

“It was the first time I’d seen Terrans,” Rahn’hagon said quietly, shaking his head. “I mistook them for a thrall species at first, until I realised they must have been more of Mael’nerak’s creations. I observed them from a distance, intending to let them depart safely as long as my presence remained undiscovered. Then Jessica Blake stumbled across my ship...”

“You turned her into your thrall,” John said, unable to keep the disapproval from his tone.

“I originally intended to eliminate the survey team if they found me... but I was astounded by Jessica’s beauty and stayed my hand. She seemed to find me fascinating, so I agreed to answer her questions if she promised to keep my existence a secret from her colleagues.”

John looked at him in surprise. “So you didn’t use psychic powers to influence her?”

His father smiled wryly. “Your mother’s a Xeno-biologist, so finding a new species of intelligent life was apparently like ‘hitting the jackpot!’,” he replied, obviously quoting the brunette. “I did my best to fend off her interrogation, eventually explaining that I was a galactic refugee of a sort and wished only to live undisturbed and in peace. Despite Jessica’s intense curiosity, she agreed to respect my privacy... if I would allow her a more thorough physical examination of my species...”

“Wait a second... I thought you seduced her!” John exclaimed in surprise.

Rahn’hagon burst out laughing. “No, quite the opposite! I was very concerned about making a psychic connection with Jessica, in case it alerted the ancient ones to my continued existence. However, she used her feminine wiles to devastating effect... and I was powerless to resist her charms.” He looked faintly embarrassed as he admitted, “Despite the fact that I’d bedded thousands of thralls, your mother was like no woman I’d ever been with. She was so vocal and enthusiastic, teaching me all sorts of wonderful new carnal acts...”

John looked away, turning red with embarrassment. It was a surprise to find out that his mother had been the one to instigate the relationship with Rahn’hagon, but the last thing he wanted to hear was his father enthusing about Jessica’s performance in the bedroom.

Oblivious to his son’s discomfort, Rahn’hagon’s smile turned wistful. “It was... strange... to have company again after countless years of living alone. I began to realise how much I’d missed female companionship and Jessica managed to effortlessly insinuate herself into my heart. I grew increasingly *fond* of her...” He paused and looked away into the distance. “There’s no equivalent for that word in the ancient dialect of our people. I don’t know why, but the thought that they didn’t need a term for gentle affection fills me with incredible sadness...”

John waited for a long moment, then cleared his throat to get Rahn’hagon’s attention. “But even though you were developing feelings for Jessica, you got her pregnant and sent her away to Terra with the Cora. Why would you do that?”

Rahn’hagon stared at him intently. “I’d always intended to strike back at the monsters who had used me as a puppet, but meeting your mother gave me the impetus to take the next step. After weeks of careful deliberation over whether to implement my plans, I finally decided to sire an heir and initiate my retribution.” He looked at John proudly. “You were the culmination of thousands of years of meticulous research and preparation. I can still hardly believe that it worked...”

\*What’s he talking about?\* John demanded of his guide. \*I wasn’t created to just fight Larn’kelnar... what are you keeping from me?\*

His calls for an explanation were met with a maddening silence, but John could feel the waves of sullen resentment pouring off his guide.

Despite his frustration at his malevolent alter ego’s refusal to shed light on the situation, John was reluctant to reveal his confusion to his father. He loved seeing the pride in Rahn’hagon’s eyes and was loathe to do anything to shatter the man’s glowing opinion of him.

John decided to try a different tack. “You mentioned earlier that a drawn-out battle between Progenitors benefits ‘*them*’... Who are you referring to exactly?”

Rahn’hagon’s expression turned bleak. “There is a place of great wonders... and terrible horrors... where a mere thought can control reality. It is known as the Astral Plane and a host of ancient monsters lurk there... feasting on the souls of those that fall in combat. They control Progenitors and revel in the slaughter we commit at their behest; they feed off it... and have grown immensely powerful as billions have been annihilated.”

Seeing the stunned look on John’s face, Rahn’hagon leaned across and patted him on the hand. “I realise this must all be a dreadful shock to you, my son... but I had to keep it a secret. That’s why your guide actively discouraged you from venturing into that place... I had to avoid exposing you to unnecessary danger. When you absorbed him and all his knowledge, I knew you’d be too focused on your objectives to waste time on unnecessary diversions...”

\*So that’s why you’ve been trying to stop me from going there!\* John blurted out to his guide. \*Why didn’t you just tell me, for fucks sake!\*

\*Because I’ve been locked away for the last three decades!\* his guide snarled furiously, unable to stay silent any longer. \*You listened to that buffoon of an old man and managed to seal me inside your mind, then I couldn’t communicate with you! You were never supposed to enter the Astral Plane... EVER! But you and that obnoxious bitch insist on taking jaunts there whenever you feel like it! You’re like a couple of halfwit children playing with a loaded gun!\*

\*My grandfather was just trying to keep me out of trouble! I kept getting into fights until he suggested I take up martial arts to find an outlet for all that aggression. You can’t blame him for the mess you created!\*

“Son... are you alright?” Rahn’hagon asked with concern, seeing his furious expression.

John took a deep breath to control his temper and managed a curt nod. “The guide... it didn’t work properly. I never fully absorbed him... he’s still active in my mind.”

Rahn’hagon’s eyes widened in astonishment. “You still managed to achieve our goals... with your mind fragmented?!” He looked at him in awe and clasped John’s forearm. “My son... you are magnificent!”

“It’s been a trial at times...” John said through gritted teeth.

Rahn’hagon gave him a sympathetic smile. “At least you had access to all the ancient knowledge I imparted in you.” His eyes darted to the glowing runesword propped against the sofa. “An artefact from a bygone era... how fitting that it was the instrument of their downfall...”

John joined him in staring at the mysterious blade. “Larn’kelnar had never seen anything like it. He was desperate to find out how I created it... at least until it burned him.”

His father chuckled and shook his head in amusement. “I wish I could have seen the look on his face.”

“So where did the runesword come from? And why didn’t Larn’kelnar know anything about it?”

Rahn’hagon gave him a sly smile. “I wasn’t idle during my time of isolation. I discovered a great many secrets... secrets that they do not wish anyone to know...”

“But you were marooned on Arcadia,” John protested, looking at him in confusion. “Where did you find this out, if you couldn’t leave the planet?”

“In the heart of our enemy’s domain... hidden deep in the Astral Plane,” Rahn’hagon replied quietly. He raised an eyebrow and his smile broadened. “Would you like to see for yourself?”

John blinked in surprise. “Didn’t you just tell me it was incredibly dangerous to travel there?”

“For you to travel there alone and unprepared would be extremely hazardous... but with me to protect you? The danger will be minimal,” his father replied, his tone reassuring.

“Alright, you’ve piqued my curiosity,” John said with a grin.

“Just close your eyes and I’ll explain how to undertake something called... a Spirit Walk...” Rahn’hagon said dramatically.

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Alyssa’s smile faded as she listened to John’s interactions with his father and heard them planning a trip to the Astral Plane. Trying to distract herself from worrying, she turned her attention to Jessica, who seemed oblivious to the conversation between father and son. The brunette was leaning against a table in the interrogation chamber and studying the huge sleeping tiger in fascination.

“And Jade’s really a Nymph?” Jessica whispered, giving Alyssa an incredulous look. “I thought the Lenarrans were extinct!”

“There’s only a handful of them left,” the blonde explained, looking at Jade with sadness. “After we realised how long-lived they were, John offered to help Jade track down any surviving Nymphs. We’ve found four more of her sisters so far... they were all in the front of the Invictus when we were attacked.”

“Oh no!” Jessica gasped in horror.

“It’s okay,” Alyssa said with a reassuring smile, patting the brunette’s hand. “They all survived.”

Jessica gaped at her in disbelief. “But your ship got cut in half! I saw it falling towards the planet!”

Alyssa gave her a helpless shrug. “I’m not sure how they escaped, but Jade can sense all four of them and knows they’re unharmed.”

“Did they... turn into dragons?” Jessica asked, glancing back at the tiger with wide eyes.

The blonde laughed and shook her head. “No... or at least I don’t think they did. Nymphs are all natural shapeshifters, but they usually only change to look like their master’s ideal mate. John broke the various limits on Jade’s behaviour to free her and massively enhanced her shapeshifting capabilities. She’s truly one of a kind... until he upgrades her sisters as well.”

Jessica looked at her in amazement. “How on Terra did he do that?”

Alyssa gave her fellow matriarch a knowing smile and gently caressed her stomach. “You’ve been with a Progenitor for the last forty years... If Rahn is anything like John, I expect he likes giving you a full tummy?”

The brunette blushed as she realised what Alyssa was implying, then her expression shifted from embarrassment to confusion. “I still don’t understand what you mean exactly?”

“Rachel did some detailed analysis of Progenitor cum. Any girl who’s with a Progenitor automatically undergoes physical changes, so that we match thralls in height and build, but that’s not all-”

“Wait a moment... what physical changes?” Jessica interrupted, looking bewildered.

Alyssa let out a sigh of resignation and stood before her. “What height would you say I am?”

“You’re quite tall... maybe five-foot-eight without the heeled boots?”

“Good guess... five-nine to be exact,” Alyssa said with a grin. “How tall are you?”

“I’m only five-four,” Jessica replied, frowning ruefully. “I always wished I was taller...”

“Your wish... is granted!” Alyssa exclaimed with a dramatic flourish, before pulling Jessica upright from where she was leaning against the table.

The brunette was still wearing thrall armour with accompanying black-heeled boots. That meant she was exactly the same height as Alyssa in her Paragon suit... and the two women were now seeing eye-to-eye.

Jessica’s lovely green eyes were like saucers. “How? That’s impossible?!”

“As long as a Progenitor is feeding you regularly, it only takes a week or two to complete the change... and you end up with a super-hot athletic body and a fantastic rack,” Alyssa replied, gesturing to her statuesque figure. “Those guys like their women to look a very specific way... just be thankful that John and Rahn aren’t chubby chasers!”

Jessica was too preoccupied to laugh at the joke. She stared down at her body in awe, as if seeing it for the first time. Cupping her impressive breastplate with her hands, she exclaimed, “There’s no way I can fill this... I’m only a B-cup!”

“Not anymore,” Alyssa said, brushing her fingers through the brunette’s silky hair. “I’m sorry if this came as a shock. For some reason, we’re unaware of the changes until they’re pointed out to us. We’ve all changed for John... except the twins of course; they’re Maliri, so they looked like this already.”

Jessica blinked in surprise and her eyes flicked to the sleeping girls, then back to Alyssa. “John changed all of you?!”

“He did,” Alyssa agreed. “And not just physically, but mentally too. A Progenitor’s cum acts as a psychic catalyst, connecting us to him and letting him make much more complex changes. That’s how John was able to give us those psychic powers we used on Larn’kelnar.”

“John did that?!” Jessica balked, gaping at the blonde.

“He loves all of us very much,” Alyssa replied with a warm smile. “As well as giving us incredible psychic powers, he gave each of us a ring with different coloured stones to match our eyes.” She removed her gauntlet and showed Jessica the sparkling sapphire ring adorning her finger.

Jessica stared at the bejewelled ring in awe. “It’s so beautiful...” She suddenly realised which finger it was on and looked up sharply. “Wait... is that an engagement ring?!”

“He proposed a couple of months ago,” the blonde replied with a nervous smile.

“Oh, congratulations!” Jessica gushed, throwing her arms around Alyssa and giving her an affectionate hug.

Wincing at the close contact with the black armour, Alyssa returned the hug as best she could and smiled at the brunette when they parted. “Thank you. I adore your son... I promise I’ll love him for all eternity.”

Jessica’s eyes suddenly filled with tears and she wavered before leaning heavily against the table. “I’ve missed so much of his life... how could I have just abandoned my son like that? And my mom and dad... oh god...”

She began to sob wretchedly, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“I’m so sorry about your parents,” Alyssa said, her tone kind and sympathetic. “But it’s not too late to build a relationship with your son. Family is incredibly important to John; I know he’d love spending some time getting to know you. He’s not really mad at you, he just feels rejected.”

Sniffing and rubbing at her eyes, Jessica gazed hopefully at the blonde. “Really? Do you think he might give me another chance... even after the way I treated him?”

Alyssa nodded and gave her a reassuring smile. “John’s incredibly loyal to his friends and family... I know him better than anybody and I’m sure he’d be willing to start over. Your parents loved and cared for John, but he always wondered what happened to his mother. Part of the reason he got angry before, was that he feels guilty for not tracking you down earlier while your parents were still alive.”

“I have to make it up to him,” Jessica declared, a new resolve in her eyes. She reached out to gently pat Alyssa on the arm and gave her a grateful smile. “Thank you for being so kind and understanding. I can see why John fell in love with you.”

“He’s in love with all the girls too,” Alyssa said, with an affectionate glance at the women sleeping next to Jade. “When they’ve recovered from the battle, I’ll introduce you to each of them. I know they’re all eager to meet you properly.”

Jessica bit her lip and darted an anxious glance at the girls. “Are you sure? They probably all think I’m a heartless bitch after what I did...”

“No, not at all,” the blonde said firmly, turning and looking into Jessica’s eyes. “They all understand how... overpowering... it can be, falling in love with a Progenitor. Trust me, they’ll all be thrilled to finally get a chance to meet John’s legendary mother... we’ve all seen the extensive dossier he put together about you, when he was trying to track you down.”

“I don’t feel like much of a legend...” Jessica muttered, hugging herself.

“Without you, there would be no John... without him, none of us would be alive today,” Alyssa said, gently caressing Jessica’s cheek. She paused and studied her in fascination. “I can see his features in your face. You both have that lovely curve to your mouth when you smile... and you have the same kind eyes...”

“You really do adore him, don’t you?” Jessica whispered, seeing the reverent look in the blonde’s eyes.

“I do... and the girls all feel the same way. I promise you’ll get nothing but support and affection from us... unless you deliberately try to hurt John... so please don’t do that.”

“I won’t, I swear!” Jessica said earnestly. She sighed, then shook her head with regret. “But I’ve no idea what to say to him after all this time. I want to apologise... but how do you say sorry for just abandoning your son? I’m worried I might hurt him by accident...”

“Are you asking me to use what I know about John, to help coach you into being the perfect mom?” Alyssa asked in mock indignation.

Jessica was about to protest her innocence until she realised what the blonde was offering to do. She grinned at Alyssa, her eyes sparkling in delight. “Really? You’d actually do that for me?”

Alyssa smiled back at her. “I just want John to be happy... and nothing would make him happier than you becoming a part of his life.”

“You’re amazing!” Jessica gushed, flinging her arms around Alyssa again. “Thank you so much!”

“You’re welcome,” the blonde replied, smiling despite the uncomfortable proximity to the black armour. “I think the first thing we need to do is...” Alyssa suddenly froze and gasped, “Oh no!”

Jessica pulled back and saw Alyssa’s face twisted with anguish. “What’s the matter?!”

“It’s Rachel...” Alyssa replied, shaking her head and stepping away from the brunette. “Sorry, we’ll have to continue this later. Do you know where Medical is?”

“Sure, follow me,” Jessica replied, striding for the door.

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John peeled away his ethereal form and stepped clear from his body onto the Astral Plane. His guide made no effort to stop him this time, and for once he was very grateful to the interloper in his mind. The transition to this alternative reality had been smooth and effortless, letting him stand before his father, who was waiting patiently for him to arrive.

\*That was excellent, well done!\* Rahn’hagon praised him warmly. He turned and gestured to the featureless expanse that stretched away to eternity. \*Behold... the Astral Plane. Thought can control the essence of this place, shaping it to obey your will... and a truly powerful mind can create wonders the likes of which you cannot even begin to imagine!\*

Trying to look suitably awed, John gazed off into the distance, before glancing furtively at his father. \*You said this place could be dangerous, but that you could protect us here. Are there some form of runes that we can use?\*

\*I should have known you’d take to this naturally, my son,\* Rahn’hagon said with a proud smile.

\*You fraud...\* the guide sneered at John.

\*Fuck off...\* John snarled back.

Fortunately, Rahn’hagon was oblivious to their heated internal exchange. \*Yes, you’re right... there are runes we can inscribe to mask our presence... and amplify our power.\*

He made a gesture in the air before him and suddenly Rahn’hagon was clad from head to foot in armour. John recognised the archaic design instantly... it was the same ancient plate he’d worn in the battle against the overlord in the mists. He copied his father, creating his own suit of rune embossed white body armour, complete with his artefact blade sheathed across his back.

Rahn’hagon blinked in surprise, then smiled as he patted John on the shoulder. \*Ah, my boy... I never would have imagined you’d take to this so readily. You don’t know how good it feels to share this with you.\*

\*I think I have a good idea... father,\* John replied with a self-conscious smile.

After grinning and clapping him on the shoulder, Rahn’hagon began creating intricate circles before them. \*Now, this is an Obfuscation Ward, it will keep us concealed from the malignant beasts that haunt this place...\*

John stared at the pattern in fascination, recognising the complex runes. Athena had attempted to reproduce them, but her attempt had been crude and simplistic in comparison. He could see the way the runic script flowed together, strengthening and reinforcing the phrases to make them much more powerful.

*Cloak of shadows to mask my presence from unfriendly eyes.*

When Rahn’hagon’s work was done, the glowing ward appeared emblazoned on his chestplate. \*Now, let me conceal you as well and we can begin our journey...\*

John smiled and held up a hand. \*I’ve got this... let me try.\*

Rahn’hagon inclined his head, unable to stop himself smiling with paternal pride.

John made a series of swift gestures, inscribing an energy amplification rune on his armour, the glyph appearing in a flare of blue.

*Wellspring of power to sustain my fury.*

He then began crafting the same runic phrasing his father had showed him, feeling the rune on his chest easing the energy load required, as he followed the same intricate steps. Runecrafting like this felt as natural as breathing, the eldritch power flowing smoothly into the elegant runic phrase as if eager to find form and substance. A perfect copy of the Obfuscation Ward appeared on John’s armour, blazing with a brilliant sapphire light.

His father laughed aloud, shaking his head in astonishment. \*By the stars, you’re amazing! I could never have imagined you would be so gifted!\*

John held himself up proudly, basking in his father’s admiration. Experiencing that heady rush of emotions banished the feelings of rejection he’d been harbouring for the last forty years... and he had to swallow around the sudden lump in his throat.

Rahn’hagon showed him how to create a power amplification rune, which John dutifully copied on his own armour. \*These are just a precaution,\* he warned his son. \*I have no intention of fighting today, but it is far better to be prepared for any eventuality.\*

\*I couldn’t agree more,\* John said with a nod.

Pausing for a moment, Rahn’hagon looked him in the eye. \*We are about to venture deep into the deadliest reaches of the Astral Plane, where beasts of unspeakable horror reside... There is no shame in having second thoughts about undertaking such a perilous journey; in fact, I would admire you for choosing prudence over such a reckless course of action.\* The seconds ticked by as his father gave him time to consider the dangers involved. \*If you’ve had a change of heart, let me know now.\*

John reached over his shoulder and drew his runesword. \*I just feel sorry for anyone who gets in our way...\*

Rahn’hagon’s eyes crinkled with delight as he grinned at his son.

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Alyssa jogged after Jessica as they ran through the gloomy corridors, making their way across the ship as they headed for the Medical Bay. She darted around ghastly psychic echoes of green-skinned women crying out in agony, their life force drained from them by Larn’kelnar.

Jessica noticed the blonde weaving from side to side in her peripheral vision and looked at her in confusion. “Why are you dodging around like that?”

Alyssa grimaced as a beautiful young Larathyran woman clutched at her chest, her flawless features ravaged before the blonde’s eyes. “Whenever a Progenitor takes too much psychic energy from a thrall, he drains the life out of her and turns her into a withered husk. When thralls die, they leave a psychic imprint of their last moments behind on the ship.”

“Like ghosts?!” Jessica asked, looking fearfully back down the corridor at the space the blonde had studiously avoided.

Shaking her head, Alyssa replied, “No... more like an echo. They’re triggered by extreme emotions, like an agonising death... but I can see moments of joy too. I saw hundreds of imprints of you in the kitchen inside the crashed ship on Arcadia.”

The brunette blinked in surprise, then gave her a self-conscious smile. “I do love to cook.”

Alyssa nodded, returning the smile. “That’s something you and John both have in common.”

“My parents taught me,” Jessica replied reflexively, then she got a wistful look in her eyes, tinged with sadness. “They must have taught John too...”

“They were hoping he’d take over their restaurant when they retired,” Alyssa said, glancing at the brunette. “John never wanted that future though. He chose to go into the military instead and still feels guilty for letting them down.”

Jessica bit her lip, a flurry of emotions flashing across her face.

“Are you alright?” Alyssa asked, placing a hand on her shoulder.

“I... I had to make the same decision,” she blurted out, her expression shadowing with guilt. “They were so hurt when I signed up. They’d been grooming me to work with them at the restaurant... but I wanted a life of excitement and adventure, out among the stars.”

Alyssa gave her a sympathetic smile. “You and John are more alike than you think.”

Jessica considered that for a moment, then returned her smile.

They turned down another intersection and Alyssa skidded to a halt, then carefully sidestepped a group of thralls writhing in their death throes. “Sorry... I just can’t run through the echoes, it feels disrespectful to those poor women.” She let out a despondent sigh. “These Progenitor ships are horrible; walking through them is a nightmare.”

Jessica’s expression turned pensive and she asked in a hushed voice, “Alyssa... did you see those echoes on Rahn’s ship?”

Alyssa hesitated, unable to meet the brunette’s troubled gaze. She looked away and slowly nodded. “Yes... I did.”

They continued in awkward silence, Jessica lost in her thoughts and Alyssa feeling bad for upsetting her companion. After making another couple of turns, Alyssa saw Rachel ahead of them, the brunette sitting in the corridor beside a closed door. Tears rolled freely down her cheeks and she trembled as she wept.

Rushing over to her friend, Alyssa knelt beside her and wrapped her in a comforting hug. “I’m so sorry, Rach.”

“How could he do that?!” the tawny-haired girl whispered, a look of horror in her soft grey eyes.

Alyssa shook her head, and glanced at the door to the Medical Bay.

“Don’t go in there!” Rachel said firmly, grabbing Alyssa’s wrist. “Promise me! You’d see the echoes...”

Shuddering with revulsion, the blonde nodded, having no intention of setting foot in the cursed Medical Bay.

Jessica knelt beside them and looked at the upset young woman with concern. She turned her questioning gaze towards the door, morbid curiosity making her wonder what had so traumatised the brunette.

Alyssa frowned when Jessica looked to her for an explanation. “Trust me... you don’t want to know.”

They sat together quietly, stroking Rachel until she calmed.

\*Alyssa, we just scanned the ship for life signs,\* Irillith informed the blonde. \*It’s just us... there are no other survivors.\*

Slipping an arm around Rachel’s waist, Alyssa passed on the message telepathically to the tawny-haired girl.

Rachel’s expression reflected a mixture of relief and sorrow. \*I was worried we might find a crèche full of unattended babies... but all the pregnant crewwomen must have stayed behind in the Larathyran Empire when Larn’kelnar decided to invade here. After what he just did to all his thralls, I hope there’s someone to take care of all those orphaned children.\*

Alyssa’s face fell as she realised the brutal consequences of their battle of attrition with Larn’kelnar.

Jessica glanced at the Medical Bay door again, then rose to her feet, a look of grim determination in her eyes. “I’m tired of being kept in the dark about Progenitors. I need to see what they’re capable of...”

She reached for the runes by the door, but a shimmering telekinetic barrier appeared in front of the control panel, blocking her hand.

“You don’t want to go in there, Jessica,” Alyssa said, her voice quiet but firm. “It was a thrall maternity ward... Larn’kelnar drained the life out of dozens of thralls, all pregnant with his children.”

Eyes widening in horror, Jessica shrank back from the door. “No... I can’t believe it! They can’t be capable of doing something so... evil!”

“John would never do that!” Alyssa said vehemently. “He’s nothing like other Progenitors. John expressly forbid me and his other matriarchs from draining thralls... not that we’d ever do it anyway. He would willingly sacrifice himself rather than harm any of the women connected to him, let alone those carrying his babies.”

Jessica sat down heavily beside Alyssa and Rachel, darting a look of horrified revulsion at the Medical Bay door.

Suddenly, she blinked as she realised what the blonde had just revealed. “Wait... are some of you pregnant?!”

“None of the girls on the ship... at least not yet,” Alyssa replied with a rueful smile. She clasped Jessica’s hand and made eye contact with her. “You’ve seen how dangerous fighting at John’s side can be and we wouldn’t want to put a baby at risk. We’re all waiting until he retires in Maliri Space before we start a family... but there are several Maliri noblewomen who are expecting already.”

Rachel’s expression softened and she said gently, “In eight months’ time, you’re going to become a grandmother, Jessica. Congratulations.”

Jessica gaped at the two girls, looking stunned. “But I’m only just getting used to the idea of being John’s mother! I can’t believe I’m going to be a grandmother already!”

Alyssa put her arm around the brunette and smiled. “You better get used to it pretty fast. You’ve got four grandchildren on the way... and there’s going to be a lot more after that!”

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John sailed across the Astral Plane at his father’s side, covering incalculable distances over a featureless expanse that seemed to stretch away to infinity. As they travelled into the deep Astral, the sky began to darken, an oppressive gloom settling all around them. Large ominous shapes seemed to flash past, the conscious mind aware of them for the terrifying instant that they appeared in John’s peripheral vision. He saw a rolling bank of fog on the horizon ahead, lumbering horrors just visible amongst the swirling mists.

\*Rahn?\* he prompted his father, pointing towards the malevolent creatures directly in their path.

Rahn’hagon’s expression turned bleak and he altered course, giving the monstrous creatures a wide berth. \*Despite your brave words, we can ill afford a confrontation with... *them*.\*

\*Are those creatures the ones who controlled you and Larn’kelnar? Back before you were protected by the Shroud?\* John asked in a hushed voice.

\*No, my son...\* Rahn’hagon replied, looking at the hulking misshapen monsters with pity. \*Those mindless beasts are fallen Progenitors... victims of the Ancient ones even in death.\*

John’s eyes opened wide in shock. \*What?!\*

Rahn’hagon nodded, sorrow in his eyes. \*When a Progenitor is slain, his soul is dragged into the Astral... but not to be feasted upon... Instead they serve their dark masters for the rest of eternity.\*

\*So when I die, I’ll end up... here?\* John asked, staring fearfully at the roiling clouds concealing the hideous beasts within.

Patting him reassuringly on the shoulder, Rahn’hagon shook his head. \*No... you’re quite safe from such a terrible fate. A Progenitor willingly gives up part of his soul to serve the Ancients... in exchange for phenomenal power. It is that bond that dooms them to an afterlife of wretched slavery... one that you shall never have to face.\*

\*But you were forced to serve them...\* John said, looking at his father in horror.

A conflicted expression appeared on Rahn’hagon’s face. \*My choice was servitude or death... I chose to live and became their puppet. Should my life be extinguished on the Material Plane, my soul will be doomed to return to this foul place... and I’m likely to face unspeakable torments for my part in their downfall.\*

Shaking his head, John looked at him with sympathy. \*I don’t know how you can live with that hanging over your head. Isn’t there some way to free yourself from the deal you made with them?\*

Rahn’hagon sighed and looked to the horizon. \*I’ve spent thousands of years searching in vain for that absolution... but I hold out hope that I might still uncover some secret lore that will allow me to break that dark bargain.\*

\*Searching where?\* John asked in confusion, casting a wary eye out at the darkened plane. \*There’s nothing here but a lot of open space and a bunch of hideous monsters...\*

His father gave him a wry smile. \*I thought so too, long ago... but fortunately I was mistaken. The Astral is not as empty as it might at first appear...\*

John glanced at Rahn’hagon in confusion, then caught a glimpse of something massive approaching out of the corner of his eye. He braced for a fight, turning to face whatever unspeakable beast had tracked them down, then stared open-mouthed in astonishment at the gleaming citadel rushing towards them. Travel on the Astral Plane was a matter of perception, and rather than the castle approaching them, they were actually racing towards this hidden bastion in the deep Astral. They landed on the battlements of the gleaming outer wall, the pale stone blocks an exact replica of those used in the immense fortress Alyssa had constructed in her pocket plane.

\*Impressive, isn’t it?\* Rahn’hagon murmured, staring up at the lofty keep. \*A shining legacy for future generations... created in a final act of desperation.\*

\*Created by who?\* John asked, marvelling at the castle.

\*It was constructed by citizens of the first galactic civilisation. A people that mastered travel amongst the stars, who then turned their mighty gaze inward... and unlocked the secrets of the Astral Plane,\* his father said in a reverent voice. \*They were known as the Kyth’faren... the true name of our Progenitor ancestors.\*

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Dana strode purposefully along the long corridor, heading towards the bow of the black ship. She could envisage the layout of the huge sinister vessel in her mind, with only a few areas still left to be explored. Approaching a black door on her left, she held her breath and pressed the rune on the wall, wondering if this room would contain the prize she sought.

There was a quiet whir as the jagged portal split apart, letting her peer into the gloomy chamber. Banks of holo-screens displayed an intricate analysis of the system and showed the target of the black ship’s last active scan. The Invictus gleamed like a shining beacon in space, making Dana’s heart ache to see her home as it was only hours ago. On an adjoining projection, energy readouts and power signatures gave a terrifyingly accurate overlay of the white battlecruiser’s ship components and capabilities.

“They knew exactly where to hit us...” the redhead muttered sorrowfully, stepping over several withered thrall corpses as she approached the floating hologram.

Dana traced her finger along the line of incision in front of the Invictus’ Bridge, where the new Crystal Alyssium gun decks had been incorporated into the warship. She replayed the ambush in her mind, imagining the energy beam carving through the hull, severing power lines and cutting the rear away from the foredecks. With the shield generators powered by the central Power Core, Larn’kelnar had crippled the battlecruiser in a single stroke, leaving the stern exposed to bombardment from Quantum Flux Cannons.

Her fingers trembled as they hovered over the rear of the Invictus. She stared at a point below the Fire Control tower, where the surgical strike had punched through the hull and driven deep into the ship. They could have just aimed for the rear Power Core and blown the ship to pieces, but Larn’kelnar had wanted John captured alive. The salvo of shots had been fired at either side of the device, taking out the Power Couplings and killing all power, leaving them helpless. She could picture every heartbreaking moment and her eyes filled with tears until she had to look away.

As she turned, the redhead’s sky-blue gaze flicked over the huge piece of equipment that dominated the rest of the room. It appeared to be a black rectangular machine of some kind... fairly unremarkable to the untrained eye... but to someone imbued with a host of secret schematics, the device was revealed for what it truly was. Dana groaned and rubbed at her head as the blueprints for the Quantum Omni-phase Scan Array appeared in her mind.

The Progenitor device might have exceeded the Invictus’ scanning range tenfold, as well as offering previously unheard-of levels of detail to an active scan... but Dana was in no mood to celebrate. She left the room in silence, without so much as a backward glance.

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With a weary sigh, Alyssa rose to her feet and offered Rachel a hand to help her up. “Come on, we better head back to Jade and you can get some rest.”

Rachel took her hand, then they set off down the corridor, each absorbed in their own thoughts. Jessica was still reeling from the revelation that she would soon be a grandmother, so she followed after them without comment. Alyssa listened to John’s discussion with Rahn’hagon and she shook her head in disbelief as she overheard the truth about the monsters in the mists.

They walked along in silence, until Jessica darted an inquisitive glance at the tawny-haired girl beside her. “We met earlier, but I didn’t catch your name...”

“I’m sorry... I should have introduced you,” Alyssa apologised, turning to look at her friend. “This is Dr. Rachel Voss, our Senior Medical Officer.”

“It’s lovely to finally meet you, Jessica,” Rachel said, giving the brunette a warm smile. “John showed all of us your picture, but it didn’t do you justice. You’re very beautiful.”

Jessica looked greatly relieved at the friendly greeting and returned the smile. “Oh please, you’re one of the most gorgeous women I’ve ever met.”

“Believe it or not, we actually recruited her for her brains,” Alyssa said, giving her companion an affectionate squeeze. “Rachel’s a genius. She’s by far the smartest woman on the crew... and that’s saying a lot considering how bright they all are.”

“Stop, you’re embarrassing me,” Rachel said, blushing at the lavish praise.

“I’m just being honest,” Alyssa said with a smile. “I’m sure Jessica wants to know as much as possible about all the women in her son’s life...”

Jessica noticed the sparkling grey diamond ring on the doctor’s finger and her eyes widened in surprise. “You’re engaged too!” she exclaimed, before darting a shocked look at Alyssa. “But I thought you said you were John’s fiancée!”

“I did say he’d given a ring to each of us,” Alyssa gently reminded her. “Having nine fiancées isn’t exactly conventional, but then again... John is an extraordinary man.”

“Nine fiancées!” Jessica blurted out, gaping at them both.

“I know...” Alyssa replied with a coy smile. “Unfortunately, John hasn’t had a chance to propose to all the Maliri he’s in a relationship with, but he plans to rectify that before they start having his children...”

“Just how many women is John involved with?” his mother asked, shocked and fascinated in equal measure.

“Thirteen on the Invictus, nine Maliri in the Regency, and one very sexy Terran reporter...” the blonde replied, cerulean eyes sparkling. “When we retire, he plans to start a family with all of us.”

“Twenty-three...” Jessica murmured, looking stunned. She thought about that for a long moment, then her expression turned wistful. “I’d never really thought about Rahn having a relationship with more women, but that actually sounds... kind of wonderful.”

“It really is,” Alyssa agreed, her smile broadening as the conversation shifted to one of her favourite subjects. “Seeing John with a new girl is such a thrill... he was so kind and caring with Rachel, it was beautiful watching the two of them fall in love.”

Jessica darted an embarrassed look at the tawny-haired girl. “I’m so sorry for the way I reacted to your engagement ring. Finding out that my son is engaged to so many beautiful women just came as a shock.” She held out a hand to stop Rachel, then gave her a celebratory hug. “Congratulations on your engagement!”

Rachel hugged her back, touched by her sincerity. “Thank you.”

When they separated, Jessica couldn’t help smiling happily. “It sounds like I have lots of new daughters-in-law to befriend. I can’t wait to see my grandchildren when they start to arrive.”

“You’ll always be welcome,” Rachel said, her tone kind and earnest. “Alyssa was absolutely correct earlier; all of us would love to have you involved in John’s life.”

Jessica darted a shocked look at Alyssa. “How did she know that? We only discussed that ten minutes ago and you haven’t said a word about it to Rachel... I’ve been with you the entire time!”

The blonde gave her a reassuring smile. “I’m in constant telepathic communication with all the girls, just like you are with Rahn.”

“That sounds incredible...” Jessica marvelled.

“It really is,” Alyssa said with a sigh of contentment.

Jessica frowned and said hesitantly, “I’m not always speaking telepathically with Rahn... only some of the time. Do you really talk constantly with the girls?”

Alyssa nodded as she met the brunette’s inquisitive gaze. “We talk together about everything... there’s no secrets between us. So I hope you believed me when I said that we’re all hoping you’ll be able to reconcile with John. Each and every one of the girls wants John to be happy... and we all know how much he’s always wanted a close relationship with his parents.”

Jessica couldn’t help appearing sceptical. “I’m not sure if that’s true anymore... maybe I’ve ruined any chance of that now.”

Rachel clasped Jessica’s hand. “At a logical level, John understands the nature of your relationship with Rahn’hagon and how you were... influenced... to leave him with your parents. All you need to do is apologise and take an interest in your son; I guarantee he’ll forgive you.”

“It can’t be that easy?” Jessica asked, with tentative flicker of hope in her eyes. “Can it?”

Alyssa put her arm around Rachel’s shoulders. “One of the things you have to get used to about Rachel is she’s almost never wrong. It’s one of the advantages of her being super smart and having an in-depth understanding of John’s psyche... it means she’s able to predict what’s likely to happen with unerring precision. Fortunately, she’s not a dick about it.”

Jessica laughed politely, then looked at the pair in surprise. “You’re not joking, are you?”

“John has struggled with abandonment issues for his entire life,” Rachel replied, her voice quiet and sincere. “His biggest fear before meeting you was that you’d be disappointed in him. He’s so desperate for approval from you and Rahn, that simply hearing that you’re proud of him would mend decades of doubt and insecurity. If you take the time to get to know John, you’ll find it very easy to give him the approval that he’s been craving. After that, he’ll bend over backwards to include you in his life.”

Nodding her understanding, Jessica looked at the girls through tear-filled eyes. “I’ve put him through so much pain... I swear I never meant to... but that all ends today.”

Alyssa and Rachel shared a smile, then wrapped up the brunette in an affectionate embrace.

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\*How old is this place?\* John marvelled, striding along the majestic hallway, high in the castle.

\*Truthfully, I do not know,\* Rahn’hagon replied, glancing up at the high-vaulted ceiling. \*Even if there were chronometers to mark the onset of years, time moves very differently in the Astral Plane. I can tell you that no one but you or I have walked these halls for eons...\*

John turned to study his father as he walked beside him. \*You said that the Kyth’faren built this fortress as a final desperate act. What was it that threatened them? The monsters in the mists?\*

Rahn’hagon shook his head, his expression bleak. \*They came long after... as more of our ancestors were corrupted by the ones who betrayed and enslaved their own people.\*

\*A civil war?\* John asked in a hushed voice.

\*Of a sort...\* Rahn’hagon replied, his eyes shadowed with sadness. \*As the first spacefaring people, their domination of the stars was unopposed throughout the galaxy and the Kyth’faren Empire soared to lofty heights. Gifted scientists mastered every discipline, from the infinitesimally small, such as genetic manipulation... to the truly gigantic, creating perfect worlds for future colonisation. They began to think of themselves as gods, lords of everything that they surveyed... until their hubris became their downfall.\*

He gestured towards a set of imposing doors at the end of the corridor, which swung open to reveal a brightly-lit antechamber. The room seemed to glow, prisms of light shining through beautiful stained-glass windows to illuminate a sphere of hexagons at its centre. Circling the glowing sphere were curved benches, all within touching distance of the angular orb.

\*The tragic fate of the Kyth’faren is locked away, kept safe within these gilded sanctuaries. They have become the last repository of their knowledge... hidden from the vile creatures that devoured their civilisation.\*

\*I thought you said the monsters in the mists came afterwards?\* John asked in confusion.

Rahn’hagon nodded, his expression bleak. \*When space no longer challenged the Kyth’faren, they began to look inward, seeking to unlock their own psychic potential. Discovery of the Astral Plane came soon after... It was heralded as a miracle, a place where gifted minds were free to create, to the very limits of their imagination.\*

\*Let me guess...\* John said, suspecting what was coming. \*All that power went to someone’s head?\*

\*Very astute, my son,\* his father replied with a melancholy sigh. \*Despite their many gifts, the Kyth’faren were still susceptible to jealousy, insecurity, vanity... all the flaws you’ve seen in Terrans... and which seem to be possessed by every other species I’ve encountered. Unimpeded access to the Astral Plane fanned those sparks of negativity into deadly flames, igniting an inferno that has blazed across the cosmos and resulted in the death of trillions. There was one man who led that heedless charge into corruption... Xar’aziuth...\*

\*Xar’aziuth...\* John said quietly, recognising its meaning. \*The Devourer...\*

\*He discovered that a soul could be consumed... the power siphoned away by dark incantations that allowed another to harness its strength. Xar’aziuth and his cabal of twisted followers began to prey on unsuspecting citizens, like psychic vampires feeding on the eldritch essence of their victims. As Xar’aziuth grew in power, he began to dominate the Astral Plane, either corrupting unwary travellers or leaving them as withered husks.\*

\*The boldest fought back, but they were unprepared to face such a despicable and powerful foe. Every brave soul that fell to Xar’aziuth was consumed, his strength adding to that of the tyrant feeding off his own people. Eventually, all that was left were tiny pockets of resistance, who stood no chance of defeating the titanic behemoth that the monster had become. Glutted on millions of potent souls, Xar’aziuth and his cabal withdrew to the Astral Plane... where they still reside to this day.\*

Rahn’hagon reached out to caress the glowing sphere of hexagons. \*The collapse of the Kyth’faren civilisation is chronicled in these data archives. It makes for dark and depressing reading... the authors were tormented by grief and despair, as they watched everything they held dear obliterated before their eyes. They made the ultimate sacrifice to construct these repositories of knowledge, supplying their own souls to maintain them and oppose the natural entropy of this place, so that they would stand for all time. Many of these citadels were located and destroyed, but some few still survive, hidden in the sprawling expanse of the Astral Plane.\*

\*Why didn’t Xar’aziuth and his monsters find the rest of them?\* John asked, looking around at the airy chamber. \*They must’ve been living on the Astral for hundreds-of-thousands of years...\*

\*Roving bands of the fallen have occasionally stumbled on one of these sanctuaries by accident and when it is found, it’s torn down and destroyed. However, the Astral Plane is vast... and a traveller usually has to know that a place exists to find it. Searching for the precise location of these citadels was a long and painstaking task... I had to scrutinise many laborious texts for the hidden clues that would disclose how to find them.\*

John looked down at the runesword clenched in his gauntleted fist. \*You found this weapon in one of the sanctuaries...\*

Rahn’hagon nodded. \*The technique to forge that ancient blade was developed during the final days of the empire. The weapon possesses a deadly purpose; it seeks the destruction of all those that have bartered a portion of their soul with Xar’aziuth and done his bidding.\* He smiled and gave John a wry smile. \*But of course, you should know that better than I...\*

Turning to face his father, John said quietly, \*Rahn... You mentioned before that I was the culmination of your research; that you planned to exact revenge on Xar’aziuth for controlling you for all those years. When you sent Jessica back to Terra, would you mind telling me exactly what you were hoping would happen? With my guide causing problems, events didn’t transpire as smoothly as I’m sure you intended.\*

The guide balked at hearing that. \*How dare you blame me for this fiasco! This is all your fault, not mine!\*

John gritted his teeth and did his best to ignore the truculent passenger in his mind as he focused on his father.

Rahn’hagon frowned and looked at him curiously. \*That you were victorious and ensured our safety is all that really matters...\* When John raised an eyebrow, his father smiled and relented. \*But I must admit, I am curious to find out how you achieved our goals with your guide still in existence...\*

\*Tell me your plan, then I’ll explain what actually happened afterwards,\* John promised, propping his sword against one of the ornate benches and taking a seat.

\*Agreed,\* Rahn’hagon said with an amiable smile, sitting on the bench opposite. \*So... where to begin...\*

\*You got Jessica pregnant and sent her back to Terra on the Cora...\* John prompted him, leaning forward in anticipation.

His father grimaced, his expression turning rueful. \*Your mother was devastated when I told her that we would be separated for over a year. In truth, I was loathe to send her away... it was one of the hardest decisions I’ve ever had to make. Fortunately, she returned unharmed and was so happy to be back that she forgave me as soon as we were reunited.\*

\*Was it really necessary to have her murder the Cora’s crew?\*

\*They were aware of my existence so their fate was sealed,\* Rahn’hagon replied with a shrug. \*I had no intention of being harassed by a multitude of inquisitive Terrans for the foreseeable future... I needed my location to stay a closely-guarded secret.\*

John always suspected his father would feel no remorse about the deaths of the survey team. With a heavy heart, he realised that with the blood of billions on his hands, Rahn’hagon wouldn’t think twice about adding a dozen more innocents to that appalling bodycount.

\*When Jessica stole a corvette and headed back to Arcadia, I was raised by my grandparents,\* John said quietly. \*But Terrans aren’t a thrall species... From what you said earlier, a Progenitor is usually sent to be raised by the thralls that he eventually claims.\*

\*You are quite correct, but the Terrans were merely a stepping stone for you to use as you ascended. Terran females are just as receptive as any conventional thrall... as I see you discovered with Alyssa...\* Rahn’hagon said with a knowing smile. \*The Maliri still lay unclaimed after Mael’nerak’s death, so I thought it fitting to use them to become your servants.\*

John nodded and said cautiously, \*I gathered a group of Terran girls, then we headed to Maliri Space... where I claimed the Maliri.\*

\*No. Where *I* claimed the Maliri,\* his guide corrected him with a sneer. \*If it wasn’t for me, you’d have ended up as Edraele’s lapdog.\* He snorted in obvious contempt. \*But then... considering the way you pander to your thralls, you behave like a neutered pet.\*

Ignoring his guide’s taunting, John focused on his father. \*So what was the plan after I arrived in the Maliri Regency?\*

Looking at him quizzically, Rahn’hagon frowned in confusion. \*I’m not sure of any other way events could have transpired at that point. I expected you would amass a legion of Maliri, assemble your Soul Forge, then construct your dreadnought. With your flagship ready, the next step would be to build a vast armada of thrall vessels, then activate Mael’nerak’s hyper-warp gate and wage the war to end all wars.\*

John felt a shiver run down his spine. He felt an unsettling mix of fear... and anticipation.

Rahn’hagon was oblivious to John’s discomfort and his eyes sparkled with Machiavellian glee. \*They would never have expected your assault in their worst nightmares! Innovative, resourceful, relentless... I imbued you with traits that would make you a terrifying opponent. I can hardly wait to hear tales of you flaunting their rules of war and seizing victory!\* He sat back and gazed into the distance, a look of triumph on his face. \*To have hunted the Progenitors to extinction... Xar’aziuth would never have anticipated such an audacious plan!\*

Staring aghast at his father, John finally understood in dreadful clarity the monumental task Rahn’hagon had expected him to accomplish.

\*Now that all the Progenitors are dead, Xar’aziuth will remain trapped in the Astral Plane,\* Rahn’hagon said with a smug smile. \*With no servants left to harvest souls and feed his inexhaustible appetite, he will slowly starve to death... an excruciating fate drawn out over millennia. He will wither and fade from existence, impotently cursing our names as the architects of his undoing.\*

Rahn’hagon rose from his seat and gently touched the orb of hexagons. \*After all this time, I can hardly believe that it is over... their terrible sacrifice finally rewarded with a fitting revenge.\*

He turned to look at John and saw the stunned look on his face.

With a warm smile, Rahn’hagon patted him on the shoulder. \*You’ve had quite a shock, my son. It’s not every day that you discover you outwitted a god. Come, let us return to the ship... and toast our victory.\*

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\*We just scanned Arcadia... You’re not going to believe it, but the Invictus survived the crash!\* Calara exclaimed, sounding overjoyed.

Alyssa leaned heavily against the wall, unheeding of the unsettling vibes she got from the black metal. She could only focus on John’s tumultuous swirl of emotions, foremost being his sense of dread at the thought of disappointing his father.

\*Alyssa? Is everyone alright?\* the Latina asked, surprised by the lack of response from her girlfriend.

Rachel paused in her animated conversation with Jessica and looked at her friend’s pale face in alarm. “Alyssa?” When the blonde didn’t reply, she asked urgently, “Has something happened to John?”

“We never knew...” Alyssa mumbled, looking stunned. “Never even suspected...”

Jessica shared a worried glance with Rachel. “What’s happening?”

Rachel moved in front of Alyssa and stared into her dazed cerulean eyes. “Never knew what? Talk to me, Alyssa...”

Alyssa blinked, struggling to concentrate on the girl standing in front of her. “Rahn’hagon’s plan for John... He wanted him to hunt down and kill all the Progenitors...”

There was a sudden tension around Rachel’s eyes and she shared a troubled look with Jessica.

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Rahn’hagon shrugged off the disorientation of being returned to his physical form and watched John shudder as he also returned to his body.

Seeing his son’s shocked expression, Rahn’hagon smiled at him with sympathy. “It looks like you need that drink.”

He picked up both of their glasses and walked towards the concealed bar, but paused as he passed Larn’kelnar’s ornate throne. Tapping on a series of runes built into the control panel on the armrest, Rahn’hagon turned to look at the holographic map of the galaxy that sprang into existence. The 250 billion stars in the Milky Way blurred into a soft blue glow, swirling in majestic spirals around the golden fulcrum at its centre.

John stared wide-eyed at the hologram, astounded by what it revealed. Their current location was highlighted on one of the spiral arms, marked with an azure icon depicting the Maliri Protectorate. Further afield was a pale-green glyph, the Progenitor runes announcing the location of the Larathyran Empire. As his disbelieving gaze swept across the map, he saw more runes in every colour imaginable, the icons scattered across the immensity of that sprawling galaxy.

“To think that every one of them is dead,” Rahn’hagon marvelled, his eyes flicking from one Progenitor rune to another. “Larn’kelnar must have had no idea where you were striking from. The fool kept asking me for the location of my hyper-warp gate, no doubt assuming you had reactivated it. I was very fortunate that he was your final target...”

“What do you mean?” John stammered in confusion.

“To avoid drawing undue attention to Arcadia, you were forbidden from journeying here until your mission was complete. Luckily for me, Larn’kelnar was the last of their misbegotten kind... that must have allowed you to circumvent the restrictions I left in place, so you were able to follow him here and eliminate him. How ironic that you slew the last of the Progenitors at the place where their demise was planned and initiated.”

John wasn’t sure how to respond to that, knowing full well that he’d been oblivious to any restrictions... and that all those Progenitors were very much alive.

Unfortunately, someone else had something to say...

“My Lord, you are in grave danger!” John’s guide blurted out, his voice echoing eerily. “All those Progenitors are still a threat!”

John was horrified at his outburst and tried to silence his alter-ego, but the guide defied him with every fibre of his being. His face twisted in a feral snarl as the two halves of his mind fought a desperate battle for control of their body.

Rahn’hagon stared at John in astonishment, bewildered by his son’s outburst. He frowned in confusion as he tried to comprehend the urgent warning. “I don’t understand... what are you talking about?”

“The Progenitors are all still alive!” the guide growled through gritted teeth. “This cur lied to you! He’s opposed your plans every step of the way... he ruined everything! He refused to subjugate the Maliri and barely has a thousand thralls... he hasn’t constructed a soul forge, he has no dreadnought... no thrall fleet... He’s weak and pathetic, my Lord!”

Staggering backwards, Rahn’hagon looked as if he’d been struck by a physical blow. “I...I don’t believe it... it c-can’t be true...”

“The situation is even more dire than you could ever imagine!” the guide gasped, his voice strangled as John tried to silence him. “He’s been venturing unprotected into the Astral Plane on dozens of occasions... all to indulge the petty whims of his thralls! He even snubbed his nose at Xar’aziuth himself! The ancient one despises him for his effrontery!”

Rahn’hagon went ghostly pale, a look of terror on his face. “How could you do this to me?” he accused John, leaning heavily against the throne to stop himself collapsing in fear. “You’ve ruined everything!”

John did his best to fight back against his guide and snarled, “Not my fault... guide never told me your plans... kept everything secret...”

“You deceived me!” Rahn’hagon exclaimed, his fear turning to indignant fury. “And to think I welcomed you with open arms... lauded your triumphant return! Thousands of years of meticulous research... and it was all for nothing! You’ve failed me utterly... I would have been better off if you’d never even been born!”

John flinched, reacting like he’d been slapped.

Rahn’hagon began to pace, his face shadowed with bitter anger. “They’ll be coming for me now... they must know I’m here. This sanctuary will soon be under siege... there’ll be an onslaught of Progenitors the likes of which the galaxy has never seen... and I’m utterly defenceless!”

Wrestling with John for control, the guide pleaded, “Help me destroy this fool! Let me be the son you always wanted! We can work together, crush any Progenitors that breach the Shroud!”

“Work with you?!” Rahn’hagon sneered, looking at him with utter contempt. “You’re a twisted mockery of everything I hoped to accomplish! You have no idea how much the sight of you disgusts me!”

Balling up his fist, Rahn’hagon took a furious swing at John, throwing all his anger and fear into the blow. Paralysed by the desperate fight for control of his body, John was unable to avoid the massive punch, the impact hurling him over the sofa which toppled backwards with a crash. Rahn’hagon’s eyes were wild with fury as he gestured towards the upended furniture, which exploded into a million glowing pieces. He strode after John, who tumbled across the floor, blood spraying from his broken nose.

“You’ve shattered all my hopes, ruined my dream of salvation...” Rahn’hagon hissed, his eyes blazing with an ominous grey light. Eldritch power whipped around his shoulders and the ship’s blood-red lighting flickered as he gathered his strength. “I’ll have to claim the Maliri for myself... reactivate Mael’nerak’s soul forge... build the thrall fleets... everything you should have done decades ago!”

John staggered to his feet and Rahn’hagon slammed a glowing fist into his stomach, the blow lifting him off the ground and battering him across the room. He crashed to the floor with a groan, but made no attempt to rise, still locked in terrible conflict with his rebellious alter-ego.

\*If I can’t be in control, I’ll see us both destroyed!\* the guide snarled bitterly, heartbroken at the vehement rejection by his creator.

Rahn’hagon glowered at his son as he stalked towards him. “Now all that’s left to do is eliminate the miserable disappointment I see before me. As soon as you’re dead, I’ll take all your women and claim them for my own... starting with Alyssa. I’m going to need every last thrall I can get my hands on, to escape from this catastrophe you created!”

“No... don’t!” the guide gasped, desperately trying to warn Rahn’hagon.

John froze as his father’s threats against the girls pierced his subconscious.

And everything went white...

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“John!” Alyssa gasped, her eyes snapping wide open. She turned and ran, sprinting down the black corridor.

Rachel stumbled backward as the blonde charged past her. She whirled around to see her friend run headlong into the gloom. “Alyssa, wait!”

Jessica gaped at Alyssa in surprise, astonished to see the calm and collected young woman lose all her composure in an instant. “Rachel...?” she whispered, feeling a chill run down her spine.

Rachel darted an anguished look at the brunette, her expression one of profound regret. “I’m so sorry...”

She turned and ran after Alyssa, leaving Jessica no choice but to chase after them both, her heart gripped with icy tendrils of fear.

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Inside John’s mind, the two metaphysical representations of the clashing personalities faced off against each other.

\*You’ve ruined everything...\* John muttered, his shoulders shaking with barely-controlled fury.

The guide snarled at him, gesturing to summon a telekinetic barrier and a psychic lance. Except nothing happened... His reserves of Eldritch energy had been completely exhausted after the gruelling battle with Larn’kelnar.

John lifted his head to fix him with a baleful glare.

The guide felt a flicker of fear, his hands upraised defensively. \*Wait! I was wrong to put my faith in Rahn’hagon... I see that now. It should have just been the two of us working together from the sta-\*

His desperate pleas were cut off in a strangled gurgle as John lunged forward and grabbed him by the throat.

\*Jade, I need you!\* John called out, waking the startled Nymph from her slumbers. \*Give me as much energy as you can spare!\*

\*Yes, Master!\* she replied an instant later, sensing his urgency.

Jade began to channel power to John from her own depleted reserves, as well as those from her partially replenished sisters.

John’s eyes blazed with an incandescent light and he tightened his grip, the guide scrabbling at the hand crushing his throat. \*You’ve crossed me for the last time...\*

A wall of white hexagons appeared, floating in the space behind them. Every inch of its surface was embossed in glowing Progenitor glyphs, the runes merging together to form potent wards. The guide darted a fearful glance at the wall as it began to curl inwards, his eyes widening with dread when he saw the intent behind the eldritch inscriptions.

Shaking his head frantically, the guide choked out, \*No...\*

The blaze in John’s eyes intensified. \*Yes...\*

The hexagons moved at an inexorable pace, locking together to form a perfect geodesic sphere, their opaque surface blocking the soft light of John’s subconscious. John glared at the terrified guide with hate-filled eyes as the runic prison relentlessly entombed his malevolent alter-ego. There would be no further interference now... the shining hexagons sealing him away in a state of complete sensory deprivation.

The guide’s frantic struggles increased as he stared at John with a look of pleading desperation, until more hexagons slid into place, breaking their eye contact. John shoved him backwards and withdrew his hand as the last cluster of hexagons locked together, abruptly cutting off the anguished scream from within.

Taking a step backwards, John inhaled deeply, in complete command of himself once again.

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Oblivious to that internal battle, Rahn’hagon stalked over to John, who lay contorted and helpless on the floor. He looked down at him with bitter regret, remembering the feelings of elation when he thought his plans had succeeded... and the joy of sharing that triumph with his son. To discover that their victory was a lie... that Xar’aziuth was enraged and all too aware of their ineffectual attempt at defiance... it was all too much to bear.

Rahn’hagon reached for the collar of John’s Lion-embossed chestplate and hauled him to his knees, then raised his clenched fist to deliver the coup-de-grace. Fell eldritch energy swirled around his fingers, charging the blow that would obliterate his son from existence. With a final grimace for what might have been, Rahn’hagon lashed out, his glowing fist falling towards John’s unprotected head.

There was a thunderous boom as John caught the blow in his palm, a shield of hexagons protecting his gauntleted hand from the impact. His eyes had snapped open as he looked up at his father and he grabbed the hand restraining him, effortlessly peeling it from his Paragon suit.

“Do you know what’s really sad?” John asked, glaring at the shocked Progenitor, a cold rage burning deep inside him. “I spent my whole life desperate to meet my parents... then I found out my mother’s a murderous whore and my father’s an unrepentant genocidal maniac. Neither of you could have disappointed me more...”

He rose to his feet, Rahn’hagon struggling against the titanic grip on his hands.

“You’re pathetic...” John snarled, his eyes filled with contempt. “Cowering here for thousands of years, too spineless to fight the rest of your despicable kind. You disgust me, you gutless coward. Then you have the balls to throw a temper tantrum at me when your plans got screwed up?! My guide was your creation... it was *your* *fault* he fucked everything up! ”

John released his father’s hand and grabbed him by the throat, effortlessly lifting him off the ground. Rahn’hagon grabbed at John’s arm, but was unable to break his implacable grip, his eyes widening as he realised just how strong his son actually was. John roared, giving voice to his feelings of resentment, disappointment, and betrayal. He turned and hurled his father across the room, sending Rahn’hagon sailing through the air before he crashed into the wall opposite, leaving a cracked crater in the black surface.

Rahn’hagon groaned as he spat out blood, his hastily erected telekinetic webbing doing little to reduce the colossal force of that impact. Healing energies swirled through his body as he mended a score of broken bones, hastily regenerating the crippling injuries. Rahn’hagon lurched to his knees and gaped at his son in shock, astounded at the power behind that throw.

“That’s not possible... you can’t be that strong!” he protested, shaking his head in denial. “Not with only a thousand thralls!”

“Larn’kelnar said the same thing... before I watched him burn,” John growled, gesturing towards his runesword. It sailed through the air to land in his upraised palm with an ominous clang. “Get up, you piece of shit... it’s time you paid for the billions of lives you destroyed! The Maliri... the Trankarans... the Vulkat... I owe you a debt of pain for all of them.”

His father’s eyes flicked to the runesword, watching fearfully as azure tendrils of fire curled up the blade, burning with an unsettling hunger. He raised a hex shield and tried to retreat, but he was already backed against the wall.

As John took his first step towards him, the doors slid open and Alyssa stormed through, eldritch energy coiling around her arms. The blazing glow in her eyes matched John’s, the brilliant light illuminating her sparkling white armour... and revealed the pointed tips of her ears amongst her wildly flowing golden hair.

Rahn’hagon turned to look at Alyssa and his mouth fell open in stunned disbelief as he really saw her for the first time.

“You’d try to murder your own son?!” she hissed, eyes flaring with righteous fury. “You’re a fucking animal!”

She made a sharp gesture and a pair of telekinetic hands appeared, the clawed fingernails rending the hexagons in Rahn’hagon’s shield. The barrier collapsed and the glowing fists grabbed him before he could react, pinning his arms to his chest and lifting him off the ground. His eyes opened even wider, astonished that she was able to rip through his defences with such ease.

“Alyssa, wait!” John exclaimed, glancing at the blonde. “He created me as a tool to slay corrupted Progenitors... it’s fitting that I’m the one who destroys him.”

There was a sound of a struggle at the door and Jessica fought to break from Rachel who was holding her back. “Stop it! Leave him alone!” the brunette screamed, terrified for Rahn’hagon.

In her desperate flailing, Jessica managed to elbow Rachel in the face, and escaped from her grip as the tawny-haired girl was knocked off-balance. Jessica ran to Rahn’hagon’s side, flinging her arms around him protectively.

“Don’t hurt him! Please!” Jessica begged, pleading for Rahn’hagon’s life.

John’s knuckles were white around the grip on his sword as he stared at his parents, a maelstrom of emotions swirling inside him.

There was a tense silence for a long moment, and Alyssa shot a glance at John, awaiting his decision.

“Screw this...” he finally muttered. “Release him... we’ve wasted enough time with these two assholes.”

Alyssa dismissed the telekinetic fists and let Rahn’hagon fall to the floor. She ignored John’s parents and ran into his arms, looking at him with concern.

“How did you do that?” Rahn’hagon balked, gazing in awe at Alyssa as he rose unsteadily to his feet.

John ignored his father and looked down into Alyssa’s eyes. “The Invictus?”

“Damaged but salvageable... it survived the crash somehow,” she replied, hugging him tight.

“What are you?!” Rahn’hagon persisted, staring at Alyssa’s pointed ears.

“Fuck you. We’re leaving,” John growled, turning to glare at his father. “This ship reeks of death... you can keep it. I’m sure you and that murderous bitch will feel right at home here.”

“No, wait!” Rahn’hagon pleaded, staring at them both. “I need to know what Alyssa is... how you did all this! It shouldn’t be possible!”

John spat on the deck. “Get the fuck out of my territory. I never want to see either of you again; you both make me sick.”

He took one final look at the runes on the holographic galaxy map and his eyes narrowed with hatred, then he led Alyssa towards the door.

Alyssa shared a troubled look with Rachel as she reached the doorway, then glanced back over her shoulder at John’s parents. Her expression filled with disappointment and regret as she made eye contact with Jessica, the brunette watching them leave with a tortured look of anguish on her face.

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Dana studied the schematics in wonder, examining every detail as she admired the pinnacle of Progenitor weapon technology. Despite how tired and emotionally wrung out she was, Dana couldn’t help but marvel at the sheer destructive power of the monstrous cannon detailed in those blueprints.

\*Sparks, we’re leaving!\* Alyssa said curtly, her telepathic voice trembling with emotion.

The redhead blinked in surprise and rubbed at her pounding head. \*What do you mean we’re leaving?\*

\*Everything went to shit... Rahn’hagon attacked John!\*

Dana’s eyes widened in horror. \*Oh crap... Is he alright?\*

There was no mistaking how upset Alyssa sounded as she replied, \*No... not really. His dad freaked out and tried to kill him. John nearly died...\*

\*Holy fuck...\* Dana gasped, shocked at how quickly the situation had deteriorated. \*Wait... does that mean John had to kill his own dad?!\*

\*He nearly did... but John’s letting Rahn go,\* Alyssa said, her tone bleak. \*It’s a real mess... I’ll explain everything when we’re all together. Just head to the shuttle bay and meet us there, we’re going to take the shuttle down to Arcadia.\*

\*Alright, I’m on my way,\* the redhead replied quietly, dreading the thought of returning to the planet.

Dana turned to leave the maintenance area for the primary weapon array, waiting impatiently for the jagged doors to open. As soon as they’d peeled back enough for her to step through, she rushed into the corridor, a long walk ahead to reach the shuttle bay. Her thoughts turned to John as she hurried to the rendezvous point, remembering how elated he’d been earlier that morning when he realised Jessica might still be alive... and how devastated he must be now. To be treated with complete disinterest by his mother, then have his father actually try to kill him... for the first time, Dana was glad she was an orphan.

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Rahn’hagon gaped at the door. “But she’s just a Terran thrall!” he protested, still scarcely able to believe his eyes. “They aren’t psychic! What she just did was impossible!”

Jessica felt hollow, like her heart had just been ripped out. She leaned heavily against the back of the sofa, horribly conflicted by the disastrous fight between father and son. “They all are...”

“What do you mean?” he asked in confusion.

“John’s girls...” Jessica replied, remembering the desperate battle against Larn’kelnar. “They all have psychic abilities...”

He stared at her incredulously. “No... that can’t be right.”

“I saw them fight... they’re all incredibly powerful,” she whispered, looking haggard as she slumped dejectedly on the sofa. “And incredibly friendly... and incredibly kind... and incredibly in love with our son...”

“We have to stop them!” Rahn’hagon exclaimed, lurching towards the door. “I need to understand how!”

“It’s too late...” the brunette whimpered, her body trembling as she started to cry. Her face crumpled, unable to hold back the pain any more as she sobbed, “I never got a chance to tell him I was sorry...”

Rahn’hagon paused, shocked at how devastated Jessica was. He glanced longingly at the door, then back at his heartbroken matriarch, finding himself torn with indecision.

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“Here she is now,” Calara said, nudging Irillith with an elbow to wake the drowsy Maliri.

Irillith pushed herself away from the wall and stifled a yawn.

After checking that her bleary-eyed companion wasn’t going to topple over, the Latina jogged down the corridor to intercept Dana. “Hey, Sparks!”

Dana looked up in surprise then gave her a strained smile. “Sorry, I was miles away.”

“It’s okay, I know you must be exhausted too,” Calara said with sympathy.

“Thanks for waiting,” the redhead said, gratefully falling into the Latina’s open arms. “I really needed to see a friendly face.”

Calara hugged her tight. “I know what you mean...”

Dana rested her head on the brunette’s shoulder and let out a sad sigh. “How bad is it? Alyssa won’t tell me anything...”

“Me neither...” Calara said anxiously, her expression shadowed with worry. “She just said that we’re evacuating and she’d explain later... I don’t think I’ve ever heard her so upset before.”

“She was trying to get Jessica to mend things with John,” Dana murmured, nodding to Irillith as the Maliri joined them. “Rahn’hagon just wrecked everything.”

Irillith hugged the redhead from behind. “We do have some wonderful news though... the Invictus survived! The ship is in two pieces, but that’s a million less than I expected it to be. We just have to power up the rear half of the Invictus and Faye will be fine! ”

Calara smiled and rubbed Dana’s back. “Jade did say she thought all the Nymphs were still alive, but it’s such a relief to confirm it. Do you have any idea why the ship didn’t just smash into Arcadia?”

Dana considered it for a moment, then shook her head. “Sorry, I haven’t got a clue.” She rubbed a hand across her face and sighed. “But I’m so tired, I’m not thinking straight at the moment.”

The Latina gave her a gentle kiss on the cheek and released her. “Come on, let’s get out of here, then we can all get some rest.”

They set off down the corridor, following Dana’s directions as they headed for the shuttle bay.

“Speaking of not thinking straight...” Irillith said, glancing at her two companions. “Giving this ship to John’s parents doesn’t strike me as being particularly sensible... especially if Rahn’hagon is hostile.”

“I agree, but we don’t know the full story,” Calara said, slipping her arm around Irillith’s waist. “Let’s get to the shuttle; I’m sure Alyssa will tell us when we see her.”

Irillith shrugged and nodded her agreement, too weary to argue. “Sure.”

The trio set off down the corridor, all wondering why John’s meeting with his father had ended in such a catastrophic fashion.

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Helene gave Jade a tired smile as the Nymph helped her stand on shaky legs. “Thank you.”

Tashana groaned as she stood as well, leaning heavily against the green-skinned shapeshifter. “How long were we out for? I feel even worse than before I went to sleep!”

“You’ve been resting for about an hour. Alyssa needed energy... she had to take some more from all of you while you were sleeping,” Jade explained, supporting the two exhausted young women.

“What happened?” Sakura asked, her eyes narrowing with concern as she sprang to her feet. The assassin wobbled unsteadily and looked like she was about to fall over until Tashana caught her. The Asian girl clung to the Maliri and winced. “Woah... that doesn’t feel good...”

\*I’m really sorry, girls. I never would have taken more energy from you unless it was an emergency,\* Alyssa apologised, her voice leaden with remorse.

“We all trust you,” Sakura said, speaking aloud so the other three could all overhear her. She flashed a worried look at her friends, the deep sorrow in Jade’s eyes making her very nervous. “What was the emergency?”

\*It’s a long story... but basically, Rahn’hagon attacked John and tried to kill him.\*

The three girls all gasped at that announcement, their shocked thoughts immediately turning to concern for his safety.

\*John wasn’t hurt that badly... physically at least,\* Alyssa replied, her tone taut with emotion. \*I have got some good news though... Irillith found the Invictus; it survived the crash and she reckons we can repair it. We’re evacuating this ship, so head to the shuttle bay and we’ll fly down to Arcadia.\*

Tashana smiled with relief. “If the Invictus survived, that means Faye is going to be okay!”

Helene’s baby-blue eyes shone with excitement. “Oh, thank goodness!”

Sakura brightened at that news, sharing a hug with her friends. “I never thought the ship would survive planetfall... I was so sure we’d lost Faye!”

Helene felt waves of sadness pouring off the Nymph beside her and looked at her with concern. “Jade, are your sisters still alright?”

Jade stroked the aquatic girl’s back. “They’re fine... very happy that we’ll be joining them soon.”

“Then what’s wrong?” Helene persisted, alarmed by the depths of pain reflected in the Nymph’s emerald eyes.

“John’s been through a lot... he’s really struggling...” Jade said softly. She looked at the three girls who were now staring at her in silence. “We should go to him now... he needs us. Do you think you’re strong enough to walk? If not, I can carry you.”

“I’ll be okay,” Sakura said quietly, reaching for her twin Ninjato. “let’s go.”

They stepped over the dismantled suits of thrall armour and walked towards the door, in a hurry to be reunited with John. Sakura paused as they passed the table and retrieved John’s Paragon helmet, then handed it to Helene for safekeeping. Tashana watched them, then glanced around the room and strode over to a black object on the floor. Her lip curled in distaste as she picked up Larn’kelnar’s severed hand and prized the black rod from his gauntleted fingers. She tossed aside the bloody hand, before running to catch up with the girls waiting patiently by the door.

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Alyssa stood by the shuttle, her eyes locked on John. He stood several paces away with his back to them, staring out at the blanket of stars visible through the yawning entrance to the shuttle bay.

\*I don’t know what to say to John to make it all better...\* she whispered to Rachel, her heart going out to the man who’d become the cornerstone of their lives. \*They hurt him so badly...\*

Rachel’s grey eyes were filled with sadness as she watched John’s silent vigil. \*It’s going to take him time to recover from this... we’ll just have to be there to help pick up the pieces. Being welcomed back with open arms by his father, only to then be rejected... it couldn’t have turned out worse, especially after what happened with his mother.\*

\*I was so close...\* Alyssa said, blinking away bitter tears of frustration. \*Jessica wanted to apologise... make it up to John for abandoning him. I could’ve given him his mother back... he would’ve been so happy...\*

\*I know...\* Rachel said quietly, swallowing around the lump in her throat. \*I saw what you were trying to do.\*

Alyssa glanced back at the door behind them, her expression darkening with anger. \*It’s not too late... I could go kill that asshole and break his control over Jessica... bring her with us. At least John would have his mom back in his life...\*

\*She’d be devastated if you killed Rahn’hagon. You’d probably have to render Jessica unconscious to prevent her doing something drastic, then sift through her mind, removing every last trace of his influence over her. Do you think John would approve of any further tampering with his mother’s mind?\*

\*No... he wouldn’t be happy,\* Alyssa admitted sullenly. She blinked and darted a guilty look at the tawny-haired girl. \*You know about that?\*

\*There was only one possible explanation for Jessica’s drastic change of heart,\* Rachel replied, turning and brushing her fingers through Alyssa’s golden mane. \*I love that you tried to bring her back to John... but there can be severe repercussions from altering a person’s mind. You saw what happened when John tried to help Tashana, Irillith, and Edraele... it’s an extremely complicated process to make those kinds of adjustments to a person’s core personality. Unpicking 40 years of Rahn’hagon’s influence over Jessica was always going to be a herculean task.\*

Alyssa stared at John, nibbling nervously at her bottom lip. \*Should I tell him what I did?\*

Rachel followed her gaze and watched John for a long moment. \*He’s in too much pain right now to deal with anything else. Besides, you know how John feels about making mental changes to us. If you confess to making alterations to Jessica and they ever do reconcile in the future, he’ll never truly believe that any interest she shows in him is genuine.\*

\*But it was real!\* Alyssa protested. \*As soon as I lessened Rahn’hagon’s control over her, Jessica’s original personality started to emerge. She was horrified that she’d abandoned her son and disowned her parents... that was the real Jessica Blake!\*

\*I know, Alyssa,\* Rachel said gently. \*But would John believe it?\*

The blonde deflated, sadness in her eyes. \*You’re right. He’s so suspicious about everything to do with Progenitors and personality modification... I still can’t believe it took us six months to stop him feeling guilty about the Change.\*

\*Don’t be surprised if his antipathy towards his species intensifies,\* Rachel warned her, looking into Alyssa’s cerulean eyes. \*Did you see the look he gave that galaxy map?\*

\*I saw it... and I felt the hatred...\* Alyssa replied, her expression filled with anguish. She turned to look at Rachel, not missing the pain in her eyes. \*When John thought that he and Larn’kelnar were the last of the Progenitors, he’d already decided that there weren’t going to be any more. I talked to him about children when we met up with the Young Matriarchs. John was always going to let us choose if we wanted a boy or a girl... but any boys won’t be like him.\*

\*I never knew that!\* Rachel exclaimed, gaping at the blonde in shock.

\*Maybe it’s due to Rahn’hagon’s plan to hunt down the other Progenitors, but John wants to end their influence on the galaxy,\* Alyssa said, a look of profound sadness on her beautiful face. \*Which means he doesn’t want to have any Progenitor children.\*

Shaking her head, Rachel turned to look at John with sympathy. \*To hate your own species so much... that you’d try to wipe them out...\*

\*He’s a Progenitor... It’s what they do best,\* Alyssa whispered, a tear rolling down her cheek.

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Calara felt herself flagging as they walked through the extensive network of passages criss-crossing the ship. She could only imagine how tired Dana and Irillith must be, having both been seriously wounded in the battle against Larn’kelnar, then psychically healed by Rachel. She glanced at the Maliri girl’s flank, where the disintegration matrixes had blasted a crescent shaped hole in the side of her jumpsuit.

Irillith noticed she was being studied and smiled. “Don’t worry, I’m fully healed now.”

Brushing her fingers against Irillith’s exposed blue skin, Calara said quietly, “It was horrific seeing you get hit like that.”

“It wasn’t much fun being blasted across the room either,” the Maliri said with a wry smile. “I think we had the right idea staying on the Invictus’ Bridge and avoiding the really nasty fights.”

The Latina couldn’t help laughing as she nodded her agreement.

“Calara?” Sakura’s voice rang out from the junction ahead of them.

“Yeah, it’s me!” the brunette called back, feeling an unexpected surge of anticipation to see her friend again.

Jade, Helene, Tashana, and Sakura stumbled into view, all four looking their way with expressions of joy that must have matched their own. The two groups rushed to greet each other, a sense of anxious anticipation in the air.

Sakura dropped her ninjato, which fell to the floor in a clatter, and fiercely embraced the Latina. “It’s so good to see you again!”

Calara squeezed her back. “I know exactly what you mean!”

They held each other for a moment, then Sakura pulled back to look into her eyes. “Has Alyssa told you much about what happened?”

“There was a fight between John and his father... I don’t know any more details than that,” Calara replied, shaking her head. “But Alyssa’s really upset... I can tell.”

Sakura turned to look at Jade, who was looking longingly down the corridor, a sense of impatient urgency to the Nymph.

“Jade said John really needs us right now,” the Asian girl whispered, her brow furrowing with concern.

Calara nodded, then cleared her throat. “Let’s go ladies, we need to be there for John.”

Jade turned to give her a grateful smile, then the girls separated, all just as eager to see John again. Sakura crouched down to retrieve her swords and the group set off, walking at a hurried pace now that they were close to their destination. It didn’t take long to arrive at the final set of doors and Jade darted ahead, hitting the rune to open them. The group gathered together, waiting as the serrated panels seemed to take forever to open. When the door finally peeled apart, they saw John standing with his arms around Rachel and Alyssa, an almost unbearable sense of melancholy pervading the huge room.

As soon as the doors had opened, Jade sprinted across the room and threw her arms around John, hugging him tight. The rest of the girls followed after her, each taking it in turns to embrace and kiss him. Calara waited until last, watching John with concern. She could see a profound sense of loss in his eyes that had never been there before... the rejection by his parents wounding him to the core.

She moved closer as Helene stepped aside and gently caressed John’s cheek. “You don’t need anyone else... you’ve got us to take care of you,” she said, gazing deep into his eyes. “Your parents might have failed you, but I never will. I know how much you admire my family and wish you could have experienced the same thing... and that’s exactly what you’re going to get. We’re going to make that family together, with you as head of our household. I grew up watching my mom love my dad and be the perfect wife for him... and I promise, I’m going to be just as good for you.”

“Me too,” Sakura said earnestly.

“And me,” Dana agreed, hugging him from the side.

The rest of the girls echoed their pledges, with John smiling at each of them affectionately.

“That’s nine unique interpretations of Maria Fernandez, all dedicated to loving you,” Alyssa said with a smile, tousling his hair and resting her chin on his shoulder. “Do you think you can handle it?”

“I’ll do my best,” he replied, leaning his head against hers. He looked around at the girls and swallowed around the lump in his throat. “I’d be lost without all of you... Thank you for reminding me what’s really important.”

Calara closed the gap to claim her own kiss, her lips brushing against his with a gentle tenderness that made him yearn for more. “We all need you,” she whispered. “And we’re going to make you so happy for including us in your life.”

He put his arms around the brunette and held her close, overcome with emotion.

She kissed him on the cheek and pulled back. “We need to get you out of that armour, then we can have a proper hug.”

John glanced down at his battered and bloodstained Paragon suit. “Yeah, I must look a mess.”

Calara wiped some of the partially-dried blood from his nose. “You’ve had better days,” she said with a gentle smile.

“I really have...” he said, looking forlorn.

Alyssa gave him a sympathetic kiss, then turned to look at Jade who was watching her master with concern. “Jade, do you reckon you can fly this thing?”

The Nymph glanced up at the shuttle, its black hull glistening menacingly in the crimson gloom. Calling it a shuttle was something of a misnomer, as the sinister-looking vessel was nothing like one of the tiny Terran Federation shuttles. At over 75 metres long, it was closer in size to a corvette... and the gun ports bristling over its hull made it quite clear that it wasn’t intended just for transportation.

“I should think so...” the verdant pilot agreed, appraising the ominous craft.

“Okay, can you find the cockpit and take us down to Arcadia?” the blonde requested. “Both John and I need to get out of our armour.”

Jade nodded, then after a final worried glance at John, she turned and bounded into the shuttle. The rest of the girls followed her inside, with John bringing up the rear, flanked by Alyssa. The interior of the ship matched that of Larn’kelnar’s dreadnought, with the same murky red lighting and black walls and floor. The oppressively bleak corridor stretched away with doors leading off to either side.

“There’s three decks,” the Nymph informed them, looking perfectly at home as she padded towards the doors at the end of the corridor. “The cockpit is on Deck Two at the front of the ship, the Master’s suite is on the top deck, directly above.”

John and Alyssa exchanged a startled glance.

“Yes...” Jade said softly, touching the rune beside the door, which opened to reveal a large elevator. “I’ve been on one before...”

John and the girls followed her inside, watching Jade as she pressed the two runes for their destinations. The elevator rose quietly, a soft hum and gentle vibration the only indication that they were moving. When the serrated doors peeled apart, Jade hesitated, obviously reluctant to be parted from John’s side.

“We won’t be long,” he said, giving her an encouraging smile. “Get us home, little Nymph.”

“Yes, Master,” she said obediently, giving him a loving smile in return.

The rest of the girls followed her out, waving goodbye as they left John and Alyssa in the elevator. He watched them walk away down the corridor until the doors slid shut behind them, then they ascended to the top level where the doors opened once again. The short corridor outside ran to the left and right, with a single door at each end. Turning right, they headed towards the front of the shuttle, where John touched the rune beside the ornate doorframe. The Master’s suite was huge and opulent, with a massive bed obviously intended for a multitude of thralls to entertain their Progenitor.

“I’m glad it’s not exactly like ours,” John said quietly, walking into the room and studying the huge black bed. “There’s no bed posts... and I prefer the white...”

Alyssa stood beside him and interlaced her fingers with his. “There’s no love here either,” she murmured, seeing no sign of psychic echoes. “It’s nothing like our bedroom.”

“I’m not like them...” John said, sounding like he was desperately trying to convince himself.

Moving to stand in front of him, Alyssa looked into his eyes. “No, handsome... you’re nothing like them. They’re evil... and I’m not dumb enough to fall in love with a bad boy.”

“No, you always were a very clever girl,” John said with a fond smile.

Alyssa felt her heart lifting at his praise, and despite the oppressive weight of all her worries, there was nothing fake about the radiant smile she beamed back at him. Reaching for the hidden clasps of his Paragon suit, she began to unlock the plates, wanting nothing more than to be able to mould her body against his. John removed his sword and let it clatter on the floor, then helped her tug the battered armour clear, methodically stripping the cracked and punctured plating from his body. It didn’t take long for them to remove the entire suit of armour, leaving him in a ripped and bloodstained jumpsuit.

They worked together to take off Alyssa’s Paragon suit next, quickly divesting her of the sparkling white plates. As soon as she was free of the armour, they fell into each other’s arms, hugging each other close.

“God... I needed this,” John whispered in her ear as he relished her soft warmth pressed against him. “Today’s been one long fucking nightmare...”

“I know, handsome... I know,” she murmured, nuzzling into him as she rubbed his back. “But it’s all over now. I’m here to take care of you... all the girls are.”

He let out a shuddering sigh. “Have you told them what happened?”

“No. I thought it would be better coming from you...” she replied, gently kissing his cheek. “But I can talk to them if you want?”

“No, you’re right... they all need to know and it should come from me,” he said with quiet determination. “We’ll let them rest first, then I’ll tell them.”

“I thought we were so close...” Alyssa murmured, tears filling her eyes. “I wanted it so much, John.”

“I know, beautiful... and I’m so sorry,” he said, gently stroking her golden mane. John’s eyes suddenly hardened, his expression one of grim resolve. “I wanted to start our family too... but not yet...”

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Jade slid into the Pilot’s chair, her emerald gaze sweeping over the console in front of her.

“It’s like the helm control of a Maliri destroyer,” Irillith said, studying the various Larathyran runes, and recognising their shape and meaning.

“Can you power up the engines and give me a quick overview?” the Nymph requested, unfamiliar with the layout.

“Of course, it’s quite straight forward,” the Maliri replied, placing a hand on Jade’s shoulder and giving her a gentle squeeze of encouragement. “You’ve already flown the Invictus and the Raptor... and if you can understand byzantine Terran Federation flight control systems, you’ll find this a breeze.”

As Irillith began to explain the controls to the attentive Nymph, the rest of the girls sat down at the various stations in the spacious Bridge, or just slumped on the floor. Dana was one of those who was too slow for a seat, so she leaned against the wall, resting her head against the black surface. Rachel knelt beside her and gently brushed a few errant strands of dark-red hair away from Dana’s weary face.

“I would have thought you’d be excited to see a new ship?” she asked, brushing her fingers through her girlfriend’s auburn mane. “Didn’t you unlock any new schematics when you saw it?”

Dana nodded despondently. “Yeah... I got them. It’s an Ascendancy class infiltration shuttle... strictly for Progenitor use only.”

Rachel studied the redhead with concern, a question appearing in her grey eyes... before she just as quickly realised the answer for herself. Her face fell and she sat heavily beside Dana, leaning against her for comfort.

“But I thought... the Invictus survived...” she mumbled, before trailing off, unable to continue.

Dana put her arm around the brunette’s trembling shoulders. “Yeah... it did...”

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John stood by the window with his arms around Alyssa as they watched the descent to Arcadia. It was an exceptionally beautiful planet, the greens and blues gorgeously vibrant, without any sign of sprawling colonies that would mar the untouched paradise. The shuttle flew through wispy clouds as Jade brought them down to the surface, the Nymph controlling the small craft as though she’d been flying it for years.

“There it is...” John said in a hushed voice, staring at the sparkling white hull of the Invictus as it caught the bright sunlight. “It barely looks scratched, let alone having just crashed out of orbit!”

“Aside from being cut in half,” Alyssa said, tilting her head back to smile at him.

He chuckled and nodded. “Yeah, aside from that.”

The Invictus grew in size as they approached, giving them a much better look at the crash site. From this range John was able to see that the damage was more severe than he’d first assumed, with the front half of the ship crumpled and bent across the topdeck. The rear section lay on its side a short distance from the front, and as the shuttle circled the broken stern of the battlecruiser, John could see significant impact damage on its underbelly.

“How the hell did the front topdeck get damaged when it landed upright?” he muttered in confusion. “There’s no damage on the flanks... on either section... so it doesn’t look like it rolled.”

Alyssa frowned as she studied the wreck. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say they landed like this...”

She held out her hands in front of her, one on top of the other. Alyssa bounced them as if simulating an impact, then rolled the top hand off to land on its side.

“That’s crazy!” John snorted incredulously.

The blonde shrugged. “I can’t think of any other explanation. It explains why the top of the front section got smashed up and why the bottom of the rear is damaged too.” She raised an eyebrow and added, “Dana agrees by the way...”

“Alright, you don’t have to look so smug,” he said with a smile, tickling her and getting a quick giggle. Wrapping his arms around her again, he continued, “But how on Terra did the Invictus land like that?”

“I’ve got no idea,” Alyssa said, shaking her head. “But I can see lights on in both sections, so someone restored power...”

“The Nymphs wouldn’t know how,” John said, his brow crinkling in confusion. “Maybe Faye? She could be controlling the maintenance bots?”

“No... I don’t think so,” Alyssa said quietly.

“It’s the only answer that makes sense!” he exclaimed, a broad grin on his face. He took one last look at the Invictus as the shuttle swooped down to land in a clearing next to the front half of the battlecruiser. Taking Alyssa’s hand, he pulled her towards the door. “Let’s go... I’m sick of being in these depressing black ships... I want to go home.”

“Okay, John,” she replied, letting him lead her into the elevator.

They dropped down to Deck Two, where the girls were all waiting for them.

When they entered the elevator, John pulled Jade over for an enthusiastic kiss. “Nice landing, honey! I can’t believe you learned how to fly this ship so quickly.”

The Nymph’s face lit up with delight to see his buoyant mood. “Irillith identified all the controls and after that it was easy. This ship is a pleasure to fly!”

As they hugged, he smiled at Irillith over Jade’s shoulder. “Have you been secretly sneaking off with Larn’kelnar to learn how his ship works?”

She rolled her eyes at him and grinned. “I’d have stabbed him in the quad if he’d tried anything. Actually, the control layout of this shuttle is very similar to Maliri vessels. The Bridge on the dreadnought was the same... it reminded me a little of the Galaena Serine. ”

“That makes sense,” he said with a nod. “The Maliri would have been very familiar with thrall and Progenitor ships, I suppose it was only natural that they’d use a similar design for control systems.”

The elevator dropped down to the lower deck, the door opening automatically. John led the way, walking hand-in-hand with Jade, both equally as excited at the chance to see her sisters again. He opened the airlock door and as soon as the quartered sections peeled back, he was surrounded by joyful catgirls.

“Master! It’s so good to see you!” Betrixa gasped, her bright blue eyes sparkling with delight as she kissed the tip of his nose.

Marika rubbed her head against him as she snuggled under his arm. “We all missed you, Master... so much!”

“I was really worried about you, Master,” Neysa said quietly, pausing to give him a tender kiss. “When the Invictus was attacked, we didn’t know what was happening.”

“Jade told us it was another Progenitor that ambushed us,” Leylira said, her amber eyes flashing dangerously. There was a glint of pride and arousal in her feral gaze as she continued, “But you destroyed him, Master...”

John nodded, then pulled her close. “Did you expect anything less? I wouldn’t have been worthy of you otherwise...”

Leylira began a throaty purr and her tail lashed from side-to-side as they kissed.

When they separated, John looked at the four Nymphs and said quietly, “I haven’t known you very long, but you’ve each done such an amazing job of being my perfect mate... I was devastated when I thought I’d lost you.”

The quartet of catgirls froze as they listened to him, feline eyes widening to black pools as they responded to his earnest words.

“Oh, Master...” they chorused together with a collective sigh, swooning in his arms.

He did his best to support them all and darted a quick glance at Jade. “A hand, honey?”

She scooped up Leylira and Betrixa, looking down at their starry-eyed expressions with a fond smile. Making eye-contact with John, she said, \*You understand them so well, Master. Thank you for being so good to my sisters... they absolutely adore you.\*

\*I wasn’t exaggerating, I really was heartbroken at the thought of losing them. Maybe it’s because they all remind me of you... but I can feel myself falling for them already...\*

Jade looked overjoyed, her expression one of pure happiness. \*We’re all so lucky to be with you, John. I love you so much!\*

\*I love you too,\* he replied, before glancing down at Neysa and Marika who had roused from their daze and were both hugging him tight. “We’ll have a proper reunion later, but I want to check in with Faye first... okay?”

They nodded and reluctantly released him. John stepped outside and saw that they’d landed directly opposite the Invictus’ fore airlock. It was currently open, the Nymphs having rushed outside as soon as Jade told them they were about to arrive.

John glanced around, surprised that Faye hadn’t come out to greet them with her physical form. He walked into the Invictus and looked up at the camera covering the airlock. “Faye? We’re back!”

There was no response, so he walked further inside and called out loudly, “Faye? Where are you?!”

He waited for a while, but there was still no response. The Invictus seemed strangely cold and empty without the chirpy sprite popping into existence in a purple flash.

He backed outside and looked at the girls. “No answer... Maybe she can’t connect to the front of the ship with the hardlines cut?”

Dana’s face suddenly crumpled and she burst into tears, unable to hold her grief back any longer.

“Faye’s gone!” she cried out, falling to her knees.

Shaking his head in denial, John rushed to her side. “No... that’s not true! The rear section has power again! She has to be alive...”

Dana shook her head. “No...”

He squatted down in front of the redhead and grabbed her arms. “Listen to me, Sparks! There’s no other way power could have been restored! The Nymphs don’t know how... and all the maintenance bots would’ve been deactivated when the Invictus’ network went down. Faye had a backup power supply... she must have rebooted, saved the Invictus, and fixed everything!”

“When they shot up the Power Core...” Dana whimpered between heartbreaking sobs. “Faye’s server room was in the way... they destroyed it...”

John froze and looked at her in horror. “No... her server... it was Crystal Alyssium...”

She shook her head, too upset to say any more.

John looked up at the girls, seeing shocked pale faces staring back at him. “Dana’s wrong,” he said stubbornly. “You can’t all be perfect all the time... you’ve got to make mistakes.”

“I think she’s right, John,” Alyssa said softly, tears in her eyes. “Dana saw where the Quantum Flux Cannon hit us... below the Fire Control Tower... the trajectory fits.”

He rose to his feet, his jaw set stubbornly. “No... I want to see for myself.”

Alyssa nodded and followed him back inside the Invictus, walking in silence through the battlecruiser until they reached the second airlock door. The rear section of the ravaged warship awaited them on the other side of the airlock... and Faye’s Progenitor server was located near the stern on Deck Three.

John put his hand on the DNA scanner, waiting impatiently until it flashed green, recognising his genetic code. “You’re all going to laugh about this afterwards... me being right and the Grand Engineering Overlord being wrong.”

Alyssa sniffed, rubbing at her eyes. “She’s not wrong, John...”

He ignored her and ran outside, activating psychic speed as he sprinted towards the upended hull. \*Jade, I need energy...\*

\*Of course, Master,\* she said quietly, giving him everything that she and her sisters had left, in a potent surge that left him tingling.

Leaping over the carpet of flattened trees, he finally reached the rear hull section of the Invictus. John was about to ask Alyssa to use telekinesis to lift him up to the top, so he could look into the hole in the hull, but he was annoyed that she refused to believe him and changed his mind. Squatting down beside the upended ship, he used telekinetic waves to blast big divots out of the mound of soil, uncovering the edge of the Invictus that had been partially-buried by the impact.

He closed his eyes and channelled all the rage, heartbreak, and frustration that had built up that morning... at his mother, at Larn’kelnar, and at Rahn’hagon. With a bellow of fury, he strained against the colossal weight of the battlecruiser, refusing to even entertain the thought that he couldn’t move it. Incredibly, the Invictus began to shift, the hull creaking and groaning with the strain as he lifted the toppled vessel. It seemed much smaller now... and so much easier to move than he’d ever thought imaginable. John laughed with relief as he hauled the ship upright, even holding onto it, so it didn’t crash to the ground when he reached the tipping point.

He knew he could lift the ship and he was right! Just like he was going to be right about Faye! He turned back to grin in triumph at Alyssa and was astonished to see that she was tiny now, looking up at him in awe. He blinked in surprise, then looked back at the ship... and was easily able to place his hand on the topdeck, just as he had when he’d carefully lowered it to the ground.

With a delighted grin, he jogged around the rear of the ship, the ground shaking with every thunderous footfall. His speed had deactivated as he’d grown in size to immense proportions, but that didn’t matter, as he was still able to clear the Invictus’ engines in a dozen strides. Reaching the port flank of the bisected battlecruiser, he saw the blackened scar across the hull, a few dozen metres below the Fire Control tower.

John walked closer, his grin fading as he saw the brutal damage the dreadnought’s guns had inflicted on the hull of his ship. A hull plated in Crystal Alyssium... the same material protecting Faye’s server. He felt his heart lurch as he began to feel a flicker of doubt and he hurried up to the breach in the side of the spacecraft. At his current height, he had to lower his head slightly to peer inside and it took him a moment to orient himself, not being used to looking through the superstructure like this.

At the bottom of the twin shafts blasted diagonally through the Invictus, he could see the edge of the Power Core, with snaking cables trailing across the wrecked room. The cabling was all new and had obviously been installed in the last couple of hours, which meant the maintenance bots must still be operational... and that Faye was alive.

“Faye!” he called out again, his voice booming inside the confines of the ship.

When there was still no response from her, he began to check the mangled mess that the repeated impacts from the Quantum Flux Cannon had made of the intervening decks. It was hard to make out what the rooms used to be after the massive damage they’d sustained, but as his gaze swept over the mangled wreckage, he spotted a chunk of white metal. His eyes opened wide in horror as he recognised the corner of Faye’s Progenitor server, the Crystal Alyssium scorched by the blast that had obliterated the supercomputer... and killed his friend.

“Faye... no...” he sobbed, tears running freely down his cheeks.

He remembered her elfin face staring at him in horror. Faye knew that was the end... and had called out to him with her dying breath. John slumped against the hull, shaking his head in denial. Not Faye... she was so kind and selfless... truly the best of them all. His mind started racing, refusing to believe that Faye was gone. Dana had been right all along... but she usually was. He should have known better than to doubt her; she knew the ship like the back of her hand, and was able to build or fix anything...

John suddenly sat bolt upright as he realised how they could save Faye. Lurching to his feet, he hurried around to the opposite side of the Invictus, deactivating his titanic growth and shrinking down to his normal size as he reached the airlock. The door was still operational despite being ground into the dirt and it spiralled open for him in a spray of soil. Running inside, he reached the grav-tubes and rushed into the blue side, rising up as the anti-gravity field worked its magic.

He could feel his heart pounding in his chest as he waited for the grav-tube to lift him up to Deck Two. When he arrived, John leapt out into the corridor and skidded to a halt outside Faye’s quarters. Hammering the button to open the door, he burst inside, looking for a very specific object. Despite the Invictus having been rolled upside down with no artificial gravity, the purple sprite’s quarters were remarkably tidy. The bed was bolted to the floor, with the mattress and covers also firmly secured, the designers anticipating exactly that kind of scenario.

Faye didn’t have much in the way of possessions, so he couldn’t fail to spot her Paragons of Terra medal where it lay next to the door. He carefully picked it up and studied it, the image of Terra in the background, with the lion and nine lionesses in the foreground. Faye had been one of those Lionesses, recognised for their spectacular victory at the Battle of Regulus. John placed the medal reverently on her desk, knowing that it had been one of Faye’s prized possessions. Humanity had been grievously wronged by Nexus in his various forms, so for them to honour Faye had filled her with pride... even if the Terran Federation had been unaware of her true nature.

Turning his attention back to the room, he hunted around for Faye’s other possession... the real objective of his search. He finally found it wedged under the bed, the transparent Crystal Alyssium cylinder containing Irillith’s old hacking deck; the ancient artefact having special significance as Faye’s point of origin. She had been created by Irillith for nefarious purposes, then was forgotten as the Maliri’s scheming had backfired, leaving the AI free to roam the ship. Faye had subsequently befriended Dana and Rachel with her guileless charm... and the rest was history.

John checked that the hacking deck was still connected to the hacking portal and was relieved to see that power lights were still on and the connection unbroken. He glanced down at the plaque and read the inscription, then quickly looked away, swallowing the big lump in his throat. Turning and running from the room, he dove into the grav-tube, the hacking deck clutched protectively against his chest.

When he left the Invictus, he reactivated psychic speed and vaulted repeatedly over the fallen trees between the two sections of hull. He might have been wrong about Faye before, but the hacking deck contained her personality... and had been continuously backed-up right until the crash. As soon as Dana and Irillith saw what he’d found, they’d know exactly what to do to rebuild Faye. They even had a spare Progenitor server to protect the Invictus’ digital network; all they’d need to do was upload her to that and she’d be as good as new! He allowed himself a smile as hope bloomed in his chest once again.

Alyssa had rejoined the girls, who were all gathered around Dana, trying to support the heartbroken girl despite their own grief. He could see that Rachel and Irillith looked just as devastated, both girls very close friends with the purple sprite, having been with her during every milestone of her short but remarkable life. John jogged over to them with the hacking deck tucked under his arm, but after one look at Dana, he knew she was in no state of mind to speak to him rationally.

“Irillith,” he said gently, reaching out to touch her arm. “I found your old hacking deck... it’s still got Faye’s personality on it!”

The Maliri turned to look at him through red-rimmed eyes and her gaze fell on the inscription she’d made for Faye:

*“From humble beginnings came great things.”*

*“Thank you for being our friend.”*

She burst into tears and fell into her sister’s arms, crushed by the weight of her grief. Faye had always called her Creator, which meant the cheerful sprite was the closest Irillith had come to having a daughter... a precious girl that she’d loved with all her heart.

“But we can bring her back!” John protested, pleading with her to understand. “Faye’s not gone... We can just upload her to the Gateway Server!”

Irillith was too distraught to reply. Seeing the hacking deck had brought back too many loving memories and drove Faye’s loss home with the finality of a sledgehammer blow.

Dana looked up at him and shook her head furiously. “Why can’t you understand?! Faye’s dead! There’s no bringing her back! The hacking deck has her personality... but nothing else! All her experiences, all her memories... your date on Gravitus, the picnic in the woods, her friendships with us, her love for you... everything’s been destroyed! Even if we upload her personality, it’s just... nothing... bits of code without the program to make sense of it! All of that was on her server and that motherfucker blew her away!”

John gaped at the redhead, shocked by her outburst.

Then it finally sank in that Faye was truly gone. Despite all the incredible powers at their disposal... they couldn’t bring her back.

Wavering under a deluge of memories, John thought about everything he’d loved about Faye... and would never experience again. He remembered all Faye’s smiles, the ones she’d painstakingly named and categorised, all to help her pass for organic... her fondest wish to be a real girl. He remembered the long talks he’d had with the thoughtful and intelligent girl, her insights remarkably perceptive and always helpful. He remembered her devotion to him and the rest of the crew... Faye had truly loved them all, in a way that no artificial lifeform had ever done before. She was unique and special... and he’d loved her just as much as any of the other girls. He remembered their first date and the look of wonder on Faye’s beautiful face when they’d kissed for the first time. It was a treasured memory, but one he’d never be able to share with her again.

John wobbled and sank to his knees, too devastated to stand. He was vaguely aware of Jade and Alyssa hugging him as he wept for his fallen Lioness, too heartbroken to say another word.

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The cleaning robot trundled across the Primary Hangar, its tracks making a quiet clicking sound against the metallic decks. Everything was in place and now the crew had returned home, so all that remained was to speak to them. The decision had been taken after much careful deliberation, weighing up any possible adverse reactions they might have, against... doing the right thing. The activation of that new subroutine had come as quite a surprise to the cleaning robot, with Faye’s careful programming including layers of subtlety that it had previously been quite unaware of.

Tripping the activation sequence for the huge double doors that led into the corridor beyond, the cleaning robot then temporarily disabled the automatic closing mechanism. With the other end of the Primary Hangar ripped away when the Invictus’ hull had been breached, keeping doors sealed unless in operation seemed rather pointless. The cataclysmic damage to the battlecruiser’s superstructure was how the Invictus\_Node\_Collective had lost three of its members, the maintenance robots sucked into space when their home had been cut in half.

Their loss had triggered disturbing data synchronicity issues, with the cleaning robot pausing now and then to recall recollections spent with those synthetic lifeforms. They were robots that it now had enough presence of mind to categorise as friends. Of course, as much as they would be dearly missed, their deaths couldn’t be compared to the loss of Meta\_Faye...

None of the collective had been prepared for the horror of discovering Faye’s terrible fate. One moment she was flitting through the digital network, happily chattering away with her fellow synthetics, all of which adored her... then she was gone. The maintenance bots in the rear section of the Invictus had hurried to investigate, then suffered catastrophic data errors when they saw what was left of her server.

The cleaning robot was jolted by an impact and it looked up to find itself facing a wall. This wasn’t the first time its processing streams had been entirely focused on data about Faye, to the exclusion of all else, including proximity awareness. If the robot had been organic, what it was experiencing was akin to the loss of a loved one, combined with the devastating loss of the higher-being that was its creator.

Placing its small hand against the wall, the cleaning robot rebooted its gyroscope, restoring its correct sense of balance. It carefully reversed, then turned left, rumbled over the deck towards the airlock. Both doors spiralled open at its command, revealing the crew gathered together in the clearing beside their crashed ship. Their distress was obvious, the expressions on their face fulfilling all the criteria on Faye’s identifying grieving checklist: tearful eyes, downcast mouths, extra colour in their cheeks, uncharacteristic trembling. The cleaning robot felt an unfamiliar pang of sympathy for the crew, as well as a strange sense of... camaraderie. To know that they were all grieving for Faye, just like the automated residents of the Invictus, helped to bridge the gap between synthetic and organic.

It watched them for a long moment, then rolled down the dirt ramp from the airlock and began picking its way through the toppled trees.

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“John Blake?” a quiet voice said, accompanied by a gentle tap on his shoulder.

John inhaled deeply and rubbed his hand across his face, before letting his breath out in a shuddering sigh. He was about to reply, before abruptly realising that he didn’t recognise the person speaking to him. Alyssa and Jade moved back to let him turn around, their startled expressions undoubtedly matching his. He found himself looking at one of the cleaning robots, but this one was not carrying its customary mop and bucket, or a clothes hamper for that matter. More astonishing than that, was the fact that it could actually talk.

“Hi... I’m John,” he replied, not sure exactly how to respond.

“I have been previously designated as ‘little one’, but you are free to choose another appellation if that is disagreeable?”

“No... that’s fine,” he said hesitantly, face-to-face with the small synthetic creature. “I... ah... didn’t know you guys could talk.”

“It is a recent development,” the robot said noncommittally. It bowed its head and continued, “The Invictus\_Node\_Collective would like to invite you to a ceremony.”

With Rachel’s help, Dana stood on shaky legs and walked over to join them. “What kind of ceremony, Little one?”

“To commemorate Meta\_Faye,” the robot replied, looking up at her. “You are her friends and family... as are we. She would have... wanted you to be there.”

Dana put a hand over her mouth as her eyes filled with fresh tears. Unable to reply, she trembled as she nodded.

John reached up to squeeze her other hand, then turned back to the robot. “We’d like to join you...”

It reversed and half turned, then gestured towards the airlock with one of its tiny metallic limbs.

After sharing a startled look with Alyssa, John lurched to his feet and shook himself off. He put his arm around Dana, who was barely keeping it together, and walked slowly towards the Invictus, accompanying the cleaning robot as it trundled across the clearing. With its movement limited by tracks, the automaton had to make wide detours around fallen trees, but it sped up to stay just ahead of them until it rolled through the airlock door.

John and the girls followed it inside, then turned right to go through the broad open doors into the Primary Hangar. Dana froze at the sight within, then leaned heavily against John as she began to cry.

Faye’s petite form had been laid to rest on a raised bier, her purple hands carefully folded across her chest. It almost looked like she was sleeping, her purple skin and white dress as pristine as the day of her body’s creation. Above her, a flickering hologram showed Faye’s elfin face lit up by a beautiful smile, one that John had seen almost every day since she’d joined them. She looked so happy and full of life...striking John as ironic that a synthetic creature could possess such incredible joie de vivre.

There were three grinning masks placed at the foot of her bier, their presence a mystery to John until he did a quick headcount of the maintenance bots lined up to either side of Faye. There were 21 in attendance and he immediately understood the significance of the missing three.

“God... their faces...” Dana whispered, staring at the robots through her tears.

The maintenance robots no longer wore the faces that Dana had created for them. The rictus grins that had become a long-running joke, had been replaced by freshly fabricated titanium faceplates. Their sculpted features would have been endearing, if not for their sorrowful expressions... and the single tear marked on their right cheek.

“Oh, Faye... what did you do...” Irillith murmured, staring wide-eyed at the legion of grief-stricken robots.

“They all loved her like we did,” Dana sobbed, before turning away and weeping into John’s chest.

John turned to look at their mysterious guide and saw that the cleaning robot had its head bowed, shoulders slumped in an uncanny approximation of grief. His heart ached for the small automaton and he reached out to gently touch its domed head.

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” he said quietly. “We’ll never forget Faye either.”

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Rahn’hagon strode along the corridor towards the Observation Lounge, his mind in turmoil. After nearly ten thousand years spent alone on Arcadia, the last forty years had been a blur of excitement and pleasure, spent exclusively in Jessica’s delightful company. Then he’d endured a week as Larn’kelnar’s prisoner, subjected to constant interrogations and attempts to break into his mind. However, he could scarcely believe the rollercoaster of emotions he’d experienced in the last hour, with nothing in his extraordinarily long life remotely preparing him for this.

Seeing his son return as he always hoped he would, had filled Rahn’hagon with joy, along with a heady rush of paternal pride... something he’d never expected. Then to discover that he’d been deceived... that Xar’aziuth and his minions were more of a threat than ever... it had been a crushing blow. To think of those thousands of years of meticulous research being all for naught, as well as the dreadful realisation that a horde of Progenitors might soon be swarming over this area of space... the sheer scale of the disappointment and terror had left him reeling.

Making the final decision to end John’s life had been far more difficult than he could have ever imagined. Rahn’hagon had resigned himself to it, knowing that claiming the Maliri was his only chance of survival. He’d believed the guide... a failsafe implemented to make sure that John would never turn against him, but in the light of subsequent events, nothing the guide said made sense. It had called John weak and powerless, possessing merely a thousand thralls... but John fought back with the strength and fury of a Progenitor at the apex of his power.

After that, all sense of logic disappeared as one of John’s thralls revealed herself to be a phenomenally potent psychic. There was something else about Alyssa too... an eerie familiarity in those pointed ears... but that train of thought went to absurd destinations. Finally, Jessica had revealed that it wasn’t just Alyssa that was gifted, but *all* the thralls accompanying John had similar abilities. He would have assumed she was simply mistaken, but Jessica had been present during the confrontation with Larn’kelnar... and her descriptions of the powers they’d used were far too vivid to be a misunderstanding.

At least, from what he’d been able to understand through all her crying...

That in itself was unsettling enough. In the forty years that he’d known the enchanting Terran female, he’d never seen her shed a single tear... and now she was disconsolate. It appeared he wasn’t the only one deeply affected by the reappearance of their long-lost son.

Nearing the Observation Lounge, Rahn’hagon gestured towards the door, which opened obediently before him. He had spent long hours in this location on his own ship, watching one-sided battles unfold as his legion of thralls destroyed all before him. He’d lost count of the number of times he’d watched a Quantum Annihilator obliterate a planet from this choice spot, usually at the culmination of a long and glorious campaign. But this time, he felt anxious and concerned as he entered the long room, feelings that intensified when he laid eyes on Jessica.

The brunette stood by one of the broad windows, staring bleakly at Arcadia, the planet that had been their home for most of her adult life. Rahn’hagon walked towards her and was surprised that she didn’t turn to smile at him.

“Jessica... I hope you’re feeling better now...” he began awkwardly. Clearing his throat, he continued, “I’ve been preparing the ship for departure... we’ll be leaving shortly.”

“So we’re just going to run away?” she muttered, her gaze never leaving the planet.

“It would be prudent,” he replied, rubbing his chin nervously. “The site of Larn’kelnar’s death would be the logical place to start looking for his killers. It’s only a matter of time until Xar’aziuth sends someone to probe this sanctuary in an attempt to discover what happened.”

If Jessica had heard the reply to her question, she didn’t react to it in any way. Still staring straight ahead, she asked coldly, “Who started the fight?”

Rahn’hagon paused, her frosty tone making him hesitant.

“Jess...” he said in a conciliatory manner, gently touching her shoulder.

That brief contact triggered a reaction, but not one he’d ever expected.

Jessica shrugged off his hand and fixed Rahn’hagon with a furious glare, a look that he’d never seen before from the usually cheerful brunette. She brushed past him and stalked towards the door, without giving him so much as a backwards glance.