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“Please prepare all the materials we have available for transport,” Edraele said to the Maliri officer displayed on the holo-screen. “I want you to reserve as many docking bays as are necessary to expedite loading that cargo, so the entire process is completed as quickly as possible.”

The shipyard commander acknowledged the order with an obedient nod. “I took the precaution of packaging another shipment of ore, just in case the Invictus should return for an unscheduled visit. We can begin the transfers to the docking bays immediately.”

“I’m impressed by your initiative, Makaela. That’s excellent work,” Edraele said with a genuine smile of approval.

Her face shone with pride and Makaela sat a bit taller in her seat. “It shall be done at once, my Queen.”

“Thank you. Your efforts are much appreciated,” Edraele said gratefully.

She ended the call, then leaned back in her high-backed chair.

\*I believe I have found a solution to your resupply problem, John,\* she informed him via telepathy.

There was a long pause before he replied awkwardly, \*Um... can we discuss this later, Edraele? I’m a bit busy at the moment.\*

The Maliri monarch broke into a playful smile. \*There’s nothing to be embarrassed about, my Lord. As I’ve said before, it doesn’t bother me in the slightest that you’re bedding both my daughters.\*

\*I know... but it still makes me uncomfortable chatting with you like this while I’m...\* his voice trailed off into another awkward pause.

\*Sharing an intimate moment with Tashana?\* Edraele teased him.

\*Exactly.\*

\*In that case, I shan’t disturb you any further. Please could you tell Irillith and Tashana that I’m very proud of them; I can sense how much you’re enjoying their company.\*

\*You’re getting as bad as Alyssa,\* John grumbled. \*Bye for now, I’ll speak to you later.\*

She laughed softly to herself when John didn’t block her from his mind, which he would have done if he was genuinely upset with her gentle teasing.

“What’s making you laugh, Edraele?” Vestele asked curiously.

The Maliri Queen glanced across her office at the two elder matriarchs, who reclined on the pair of chaise longues while sipping steaming cups of Kelqiren tea. “Lord Baen’thelas doth protest too much,” she replied with a wry smile.

Vestele looked at her in momentary confusion, but when further explanation was not forthcoming, she changed the subject. “Is he well?”

“Very well indeed, considering the strain he’s under. The Galkirans continue to encroach deeper into our territory, despite the Invictus launching relentless attacks to hinder their progress.”

Emandra placed her cup on the table. “How many have they eliminated so far?”

Rising from her chair, Edraele walked around her desk to join them. “They’ve inflicted a huge number of casualties on the invasion force, but over 70% of the initial armada still remains. They have managed to divert ten fleets back towards the Brimorian border, but eleven Galkiran fleets are still heading directly for Venkarys.”

A brief flicker of a vindictive smirk curled the House Holaris matriarch’s lips, then she realised Edraele was watching her, and her expression quickly shadowed with guilt.

“That wasn’t very charitable, Emandra,” Edraele chastised her. “I know you had numerous spats with Kehlarissa’s mother, but Keishara is dead, and House Venkalyn is no longer your rival.”

“We are all united behind Baen’thelas now,” Vestele said brightly.

Edraele sat beside her and gave the Waephyran matriarch an encouraging pat on the hand. “Well said, Vestele.”

As Emandra shifted uncomfortably on her seat, there was a melodic chime from the doorway.

“You may enter,” Edraele announced, and the door spiralled open to admit her visitor. “Welcome, Auralei. How lovely to see you.”

The Larathyran Empress glided regally into the room, followed by Luna, her ever watchful shadow. She performed a carefully practiced curtsy to her fellow Matriarch.

“The pleasure is mine, Queen Edraele,” Auralei replied, answering in formal Maliri. “If you Kaes’harelle are free, I would like to cordially invite you to dinner this evening.”

Emandra bristled with outrage, while Vestele stifled a giggle with her hand.

Auralei looked at Emandra’s offended expression with concern. “Did I say something wrong?”

“You called us sleazy whores!” Emandra declared indignantly.

The green-skinned beauty looked mortified. “I’m so sorry!” she apologised. “That wasn’t what I meant at all!”

Edraele gave her an indulgent smile. “Your Maliri is coming along nicely, Auralei, but the inflection is on the third vowel. The correct pronunciation of ‘fine ladies’ is Kaesh’ayrel.”

Auralei listened carefully, then repeated it verbatim.

“Excellent, that was much better,” the Queen said. “You have a good ear for languages.”

“I’ve been trying my best, but Maliri is so much more proper than Larathyran,” Auralei admitted, as she flopped down on the sofa. She glanced around at the three older women, then sat bolt upright, attempting to emulate their elegant posture.

“I think you’re doing brilliantly,” Vestele said with an encouraging smile. “You’ll be a Kaesh’ayre in no time.”

“Thank you,” she replied, beaming back at her. “And I am very sorry for accidentally insulting the three of you.”

Emandra grunted and waved away the apology. “Forget it. We’ve called each other far worse.”

“Have the Young Matriarchs been taking good care of you, Auralei?” Edraele asked the cheerful young woman.

She nodded enthusiastically. “They’ve been perfect hostesses. I’ve never felt so well looked after, and they’re all very... affectionate.”

“I’m glad you’re settling in well,” Edraele said to the blushing Empress. “So, what did you have planned for dinner?”

“Oh! Kali suggested we have a picnic in the park!” Auralei gushed. “Then Valani thought it would be nice if we invited all the matriarchs to join us in the Arboretum. She thought it would be a good way of distracting Kehlarissa from worrying about the invasion.”

“What a splendid idea,” Edraele declared, ignoring Emandra’s grimace of disgust. “The three of us gladly accept.”

“That does sound like fun, thank you for the invitation,” Vestele enthused. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Sure! I’m just heading back to join the others in the kitchen. Would you like to join me?”

“Go ahead, Vestele,” Edraele said, when the House Waephyran matriarch looked to her for approval. “Emandra will be along shortly; she just wants to discuss an important matter with me first.”

The Larathyran monarch and Maliri noblewoman left the office, chattering together excitedly, with Luna following on their heel. The former assassin gave Edraele a furtive wave goodbye before the door closed behind them.

As soon as the last two occupants of the room were alone, Emandra let out an exasperated sigh. “Why did you have to accept on my behalf, Edraele? This is going to be a nightmare!”

“It will do you good to be surrounded by people who genuinely care for each other,” the Maliri Queen explained. “You’ve never really been exposed to normal interactions between close friends and family, and this will be an excellent learning experience.”

Emandra’s look of disdain shifted into apprehension. “I... don’t know if I can. They remind me too much of my daughters... how they were as young girls.”

“If it becomes too much for you to bear, I’ll provide a plausible excuse for leaving the picnic early,” Edraele said, her tone calm and reassuring. “I really would like you to attend though, Emandra. I’m not asking you to converse with everyone there, just to listen and observe.”

“So I can learn how to be like them?” Emandra snorted, unable to hold back her contempt.

“If you’re determined to have Baen’thelas fully restore your youth, then eventually, you will become exactly like them,” Edraele gently reminded her. “Seeing how they interact with each other will help to smooth the transition.”

“This is ridiculous!” Emandra protested. “Why does he insist his women act like simpering morons? It’s demeaning and offensive!”

Edraele rose from her seat. “I believe we’ve had this conversation before, Emandra. Just because those girls are kind, thoughtful, and vivacious, in no way reflects on their intelligence. Auralei in particular is an exceptionally gifted young woman, with a vastly enhanced intellect. As for why Baen’thelas has a preference for certain character traits, I would have thought that should be obvious.”

The House Holaris matriarch frowned, then shook her head in frustration. “No, it isn’t. Why?”

“Baen’thelas is offering us the gift of immortality. Would you really want to spend thousands of years in the company of spiteful, scheming, malignant bitches like we both used to be?” Edraele patiently explained. “Or instead, have us live out our lives in harmony, surrounded by kind and considerate women that genuinely care for our wellbeing? I know which I would prefer.”

Emandra slumped on the chaise longue, lost in thought.

Placing a hand on her shoulder, Edraele gave her a comforting squeeze. “I know this is a difficult journey for you, Emandra, but it will get easier... I promise. You should go and join the others in my kitchen now, but please do your best to refrain from saying anything unpleasant to them, no matter how provoked you might feel.”

“Why? Where are you going?” Emandra asked, looking up at her with a worried frown.

“I need to welcome home some old friends,” Edraele replied, smiling in anticipation.

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John pulled the covers up over the sleeping twins, who lay cuddled in each other’s arms. Feeding the insatiable pair had taken considerably longer than he’d been anticipating, as the beautiful Maliri sisters wanted to lavish far more affection on him than a simple double-blowjob. He shook his head in amusement as he walked into the en suite bathroom and turned on the shower. The fact that he had become so blasé about two girls going down on him, was a testament to how spoiled he’d become.

He stretched his aching muscles as the hot water sluiced over him, until he felt a cool pair of hands glide over his back.

“I wouldn’t consider you spoiled, Master,” Jade crooned in his ear. “It makes sense to bed your lovely mates in pairs; that way they all get to spend twice as much time with you.”

John chuckled as she massaged his shoulders. “I can’t even imagine what you would consider to be spoiled, honey.”

“Hmm. What an intriguing question...” Jade murmured happily, as she mulled that over.

They stood quietly in the shower together as the Nymph washed him clean, and John recovered from his exertions.

As his muscles relaxed under her skilful touch, John glanced over his shoulder at the green-skinned Nymph. “So... you overheard what I discussed with Jehanna.”

It wasn’t a question, and simply a statement of fact, as John hadn’t blocked the Nymph matriarch from his mind.

She stepped closer and hugged him from behind. “Yes, Master. I know what you were trying to accomplish.”

John turned around to face her. “Was I wrong to do that with Ailita? To nudge her and Jehanna into being a couple?”

Her feline gaze softened and Jade shook her head. “Ailita’s very fond of Jehanna. She’s about as close to being in love with a woman as a Nymph can be. Ailita also knows how much you enjoy seeing them together, so she was thrilled to be given another opportunity to please you.” She paused and her expression filled with remorse. “I’m just sorry I couldn’t give you that same pleasure with Helene.”

“That wasn’t about me,” John said, stroking her cheek.

Before he could continue, Jade said softly, “It’s always about you, Master. I thought you understood that about us by now?”

“I do... but there’s something extra special about you, Jade,” he said with conviction, placing his hand on the Nymph’s chest above her crystal heart. “It might be because of the changes the Achonin made, but you love your master so much, there’s not much room left in here for anyone else. I think Helene sensed that too.”

“I do love your mates though, Master. Very much,” Jade insisted earnestly.

“I know, but that’s different isn’t it?” John asked, giving her a knowing look.

She bit her lip and nodded.

He traced a finger down along her jawline, making goosebumps break out over the Nymph’s luscious flesh. “I’m glad that you and Helene have become close friends, but you didn’t need to get romantically involved with her to please me, Jade. It was a relief when some of the girls started pairing off, because I was worried I couldn’t give all of you enough attention. That doesn’t apply to you though, does it? Since I made you into my matriarch, we’re always telepathically connected.”

Her expression softened into a dreamy smile. “It’s been bliss, Master. I get to listen to all your hidden thoughts and secret desires, and I feel like I know you more intimately than ever before. My sisters also talk about you all the time, so there’s barely a second goes by when you aren’t foremost in my mind.”

“You’ve been doing a fine job as my matriarch,” John said, giving her a tender kiss. “I’m very lucky to have such a devoted little Nymph.”

Jade knew he was being completely sincere, and purred with contentment as she nuzzled into him. John held her for a while, enjoying how close he felt to the fanatically loyal girl, until she suddenly giggled and gave him an affectionate squeeze.

“What’s making you laugh?” he asked her curiously.

“You are, Master,” she admitted, breaking into a grin. “I can change into anyone you could possibly imagine, and indulge your most hedonistic desires... and yet you’re happy just having a cuddle.”

“Well, I am still recovering after the twins,” John explained, with a self-conscious smile. “But I always enjoy spending time with you, Jade. Maybe we should set up a date sometime so I can give you some proper attention.”

“If you really want to make me happy, could we arrange a Nymph orgy with my sisters?” she pleaded, looking at him with a hopeful expression.

“You’d prefer that to an evening with just me?” he asked, raising an eyebrow sceptically.

Jade gazed intently into his eyes as she replied, “As long as you really got into the spirit of using us as your exotic sex toys. We’d all absolutely adore that, Master.”

He looked at her in surprise for a moment, then nodded with understanding. “I’ve been talking about getting to know Nymphs better, but you still instinctively feel that need to satisfy your master’s fantasies don’t you?”

She nodded again, her emerald eyes flashing with excitement.

“Alright, I’ll leave it in your capable hands,” he agreed, with an indulgent smile.

Jade’s face lit up with joy. “Oh, you won’t regret it, Master! We’ll give you a night you’ll never forget!”

He laughed and turned off the shower. “Yeah, I bet.”

After quickly drying himself off, John returned to the bedroom to get dressed. After Jade kissed him goodbye and slipped out through the door, he glanced back to check on the sleeping twins. They looked adorable, lying together fast asleep in each other’s arms, so John leaned over to give each Maliri girl a kiss on the cheek. Tashana let out a happy sigh and snuggled in closer to her sister’s embrace, but Irillith’s eyes flickered open and she gave him a warm smile.

“I didn’t mean to wake you,” John apologised, brushing a lock of white hair over her pointed ear.

“I didn’t mean to fall asleep, but somebody tired me out,” she murmured, her violet eyes sparkling as they reflected the muted lighting in the bedroom. “We’ll have to ask Edraele to chat to you more often when you’re with me or Tashana... it made a marked difference to your performance.”

“You’re as shameless as your mother,” he muttered, blushing with embarrassment.

“Absolutely,” Irillith agreed with a playful smirk. “We’re all wondering how long it’ll be before you bed the three of us together.”

John flushed even redder, but he couldn’t deny how much that thought turned him on. “Get some rest,” he said, leaning down to give her a kiss. “Let’s save that discussion for the next time we return to Genthalas.”

She grinned at him, then closed her eyes and relaxed in her sister’s arms. John walked over to the open door, then turned off the lights, and left the two Maliri in a blissful sleep.

\*So, Edraele,\* he began, as he headed for the Engineering Bay via the grav-tubes. \*You mentioned something about solving our resupply problem?\*

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The Maliri Queen watched as her House’s flagship glided into the massive hangar, the enormous battleship once the pride of her navy. It was startling how quickly the majestic vessel had fallen from grace, the hull of the Galaena Serine still the original gleaming gold, rather than the flawless white of the recently refitted Entheas Alar. More disturbing was the fact that both vessels were now considered obsolete, when compared with the scores of deadly Galkiran battleships that were rapidly approaching the Maliri homeworlds.

\*Lilyana’s fleet has just returned to Genthalas after relocating the Abandoned to their new home,\* Edraele explained to John.

She glanced to her left, where fully loaded grav-trucks were waiting to transfer ore containers to the docking battleship.

\*We have prepared another shipment of the ore required to make Crystal Alyssium, as well as the warheads necessary to build more spider mines, and will soon be loading everything aboard the fleet. I will then order Lilyana to transfer her cargo to Kythshara, where you can restock at your leisure, without worrying about drawing the Galkirans’ attention towards Genthalas.\*

\*That’s a great idea,\* John said after a moment’s surprise. \*It should fix all our resupply issues. Well done, honey!\*

\*I can’t claim the credit,\* Edraele admitted. \*It was Calara’s suggestion, I just provided the materials and necessary logistics.\*

\*A good team effort then,\* he said generously. \*Those spider mines have been very effective so far. It’ll make a huge difference being able to set up some more minefields.\*

\*I’m glad I was able to provide some useful assistance to the war effort,\* she replied, watching as the Maliri battleship smoothly descended towards the deck.

Edraele paused for a moment as she pondered how to frame the next subject of discussion.

\*John, do you still intend to lure this other Progenitor to Kythshara and fight him on the planet’s surface?\* she asked quietly.

\*That’s the plan,\* he confirmed. \*Why? Is there a problem?\*

\*Don’t you think it will be a little suspicious that you’ll be the only living being on Kythshara? Even if you have your combat team of Lionesses with you, that’s still only a handful of people. Kythshara is supposed to be your throne world, the very centre of your progenitor empire; surely there’d be a sizable population of thralls there?\*

\*Ah shit...\* John cursed in frustration. \*Yeah, you’re right. If the Galkirans scan the planet, it’s going to be obvious that we’ve set up some kind of trap.\*

\*I believe I might have found a solution,\* Edraele tentatively offered.

\*Really?\* he replied, his voice brightening. \*What have you got in mind?\*

\*Before we dispatched the Maliri fleets to retrieve the Larathyran warships, they disembarked a significant portion of their marine complement on Genthalas. I discussed the matter with the matriarchs prior to the fleets departure, and it seemed like a prudent choice that would expedite the transfer of essential personnel to their new vessels. Moving tens of thousands of marines between ships would have taken a considerable amount of time, and unnecessarily delayed their return to Maliri territory.\*

\*Okay... that makes sense,\* John said cautiously.

\*Might I suggest we employ Lilyana’s fleet to transfer as many of those troops to Kythshara as possible? If we also commandeer all the civilian shipping in Genthalas’ vicinity, we should be able to relocate several hundred thousand Maliri marines to the planetary capital before the Galkirans arrive.\*

Edraele waited patiently as John mulled it over, his tense silence speaking volumes.

When John finally replied, his voice was quiet and brooding. \*We’ll be exposing them to terrible danger, Edraele. Even in the best case scenario, where this Progenitor fights me in a duel, they could still be caught in the crossfire. If the Galkirans decide to launch a planetary invasion, or just stay in orbit and bombard the capital, it’ll be a bloodbath.\*

\*I know,\* the Maliri Queen admitted. \*But I can’t think of any other viable solutions to this problem. I briefly considered the possibility of deploying signal emitters to mimic organic life within the capital, but Progenitor sensor technology vastly exceeds anything we can provide for you. If the Progenitor scans the planet with his dreadnought, we have no chance of deceiving his sensors.\*

\*I hate the idea, but I can’t think of any alternatives either,\* John reluctantly conceded. \*How soon will I need to make a final decision?\*

\*We’ll begin boarding operations as soon as Lilyana’s fleet has docked,\* Edraele replied, watching as the elegant Maliri battleship touched down on the designated docking area. \*If you decide not to deploy the troops, inform me before her fleet lands on Kythshara and I’ll cancel the order to disembark the marines.\*

\*Thanks. I’ll let you know.\*

The crystal airlock spiralled open as soon as the Galaena Serine landed, and a trio of armoured Maliri emerged from the flagship. Two were wearing sparkling Paragon suits, and as the three women approached, they all removed their helmets. All three had hair as white as snow, with long tresses that now tumbled down around their shoulders. The distinctive look identified them as women that were intimately acquainted with the man who had claimed leadership of their species.

“Welcome home, ladies!” Edraele exclaimed, greeting them with genuine happiness. “It’s so good to see you all again.”

Almari and Ilyana beamed back at her, but hesitated for a moment, unsure exactly how they should address the Maliri Queen.

Edraele laughed and warmly embraced each of them in turn. “There’s no need to stand on ceremony. I think we’re all long past the need for such formalities.”

“It’s good to see you too... Edreale,” Ilyana said hesitantly, before hugging her back.

“How is Luna?” Almari asked with interest. “Lord Baen’thelas said that you two have become... very close?”

“Luna is very well, and yes, a lot has changed while you’ve been away,” the Maliri Queen replied. “She wanted to be here to welcome you home, but she’s currently protecting a very important guest. We’ll return to my suite and you can meet Luna there, while I explain everything that’s been happening over the past several weeks. Unfortunately, you won’t be able to meet our special guest until we can arrange for Lord Baen’thelas to discuss the situation with you personally.”

Edraele gave the assassin a significant look, which Almari picked up immediately.

“Oh, I can’t wait!” she gushed, her eyes shining with anticipation.

Lilyana stood a couple of steps behind the two assassins, waiting for them to finish greeting their matriarch. When Edraele turned her attention to the Fleet Commander, she snapped to attention.

“My fleet has docked at Genthalas as per your instructions, Queen Edraele,” Lilyana said respectfully. “What are your orders?”

Edraele approached her and enveloped the Maliri officer in a friendly hug. “There’s no need for you to stand on ceremony either, Lilyana,” she said, her voice full of admiration. “I’m so proud of you for everything you’ve accomplished; you served Lord Baen’thelas and the Protectorate with distinction. I’m exceedingly grateful that you were in command of our forces in the Battle for Terra, and your achievements in liberating the Trankarans and the Abandoned from the Kirrix were exemplary.”

The Fleet Commander gave her a self-conscious smile, and her hand drifted up to a long lock of hair that framed her striking azure features. “Lord Baen’thelas rewarded me mostly generously for that campaign.”

“It suits you,” Edraele said, studying the mature woman’s more youthful appearance coupled with her snowy-white mane. “You look very beautiful, Lilyana.”

“Thank you, Edraele,” she replied bashfully.

Turning and making a sweeping gesture towards the exit, the Maliri Queen said, “Come, let us retire to the comfort of my suite. I want to hear all about your exploits, and then I’d like to discuss a very important mission I have planned for the three of you.”

That intriguing declaration piqued their curiosity, and they followed Edraele out of the docking bay, wondering what the Maliri monarch had in store for them next.

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The door to the Workshop slid open with a quiet hiss, and as John entered, he glanced over at the engineering podium. He expected to find Dana engrossed in her work, busy designing an advanced new weapon for the Valkyrie, but instead she was in the middle of an animated conversation with Daphne. The adorable synthetic noticed him immediately, and turned to greet John with a friendly wave.

“Hello, father,” Daphne said, as the pair descended down the steps to join him.

John returned her wave. “Hey, Daphne.”

“You took ages!” Dana protested with a playful pout, as she bounded over for a hug.

“Sorry, I didn’t realise you two were waiting for me,” John replied, wrapping her in his arms and squeezing the redhead affectionately. “Irillith and Tashana were... very demanding.”

She gave him a sly grin. “Yeah, they can’t get enough of you.”

John responded with a helpless shrug, then gestured with a thumb towards the purified Soulforge. “Do you mind if I get back to the psychic shaping while we chat? I wasn’t expecting to spend so much time with the twins and I’ve still got a lot to do.”

“Nah, that’s fine. Go ahead,” Dana said, waving him onwards.

Dana and Daphne followed him over to the high-backed chair, where John picked up the control circlet and slipped it over his head. As he retook his seat, his two companions knelt on the floor beside him, and leaned against his thighs.

“So what did you want to talk about?” John asked, looking down at them curiously. “You mentioned something about the robots on Kythshara earlier?”

“Well... exactly that,” the teenager replied. “When I was tinkering around with that armour, it got me thinking about those synthetic thralls. I reckon they could come in handy.”

He gave her a puzzled frown. “Really? I thought Alyssa destroyed them all when she demolished that city block?”

“I doubt it,” Dana scoffed, crinkling her nose as she shook her head. “She just smashed up all the ones who were attacking her at the time. I bet there’s a bunch more down there.”

“What makes you so certain?” he asked with interest, surprised by her certainty.

“Because we weren’t down on Kythshara very long before we knocked out the AI running the place, and that was a hell of a big city. There’s bound to be a load more robots that didn’t make it to the crash site in time... plus the ones at the factory.”

“The factory?” John asked, raising an eyebrow. “Didn’t it get sucked into that black hole?”

The two girls exchanged a glance, then Daphne responded, “We believe that the manufacturing plant for the synthetics is a separate facility to the ziggurat that powered the Mists of Loralar.”

“Why would Mael’nerak stick everything in the same building?” Dana asked rhetorically. “It’s not like the guy was short on real estate; he owned the entire planet!”

“Alright, that’s a fair point,” John conceded, after giving it a moment’s thought. “I assumed we’d destroyed their factory because the robots stopped attacking us, but maybe it was just because we shut down the AI that was running the place.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking too! So that means there must be some huge robotics plant still on Kythshara!” Dana said with mounting enthusiasm. “If we can find it and reactivate the factory, we could build a whole bunch of synthetic thralls to help us defend the city against the Galkirans!”

Caught up with her enthusiasm, John felt a huge surge of relief. Suddenly the plan to deploy Maliri marines on Kythshara didn’t seem quite so terrible, not if Dana was able to build robotic forces to help bolster their ranks.

“But how would we control them?” he asked with a puzzled frown. “We destroyed their AI...” John’s voice trailed off as his gaze flicked to Daphne in sudden understanding.

When she saw his frown of concern, Daphne’s cute features shifted into a look of chagrin. “Your reticence is perfectly understandable, John,” she said quietly. “In light of your past experiences with malevolent AI, you must have serious misgivings about permitting the Collective to command a legion of robotic warriors.”

He blinked in surprise, then gave her a fond smile. “It’s not that at all. I trust you, Daphne,” John said, brushing his fingers through her soft hair. “I’m just worried that you might be in danger if you try to connect to those robots. Who knows what traps Mael’nerak or his AI might have left behind.”

Daphne froze as her expression shifted rapidly through a series of unfamiliar synthetic emotions, then she looked up at John with a loving smile. “Thank you for your concern over my wellbeing, father.”

“Hey, I wasn’t planning to just hook Daphne up to the bots!” Dana protested indignantly. “I’m going to have a chat with Irillith and see if she can help make sure it’s totally safe before we try anything.”

“That sounds sensible. I’m sure she’ll be glad to help,” John said, cupping Dana’s scarlet mane in his other hand and gently stroking her hair. “This was a great idea, you two. I’m sure the robots will be really useful for defending Kythshara.”

“We thought it might even the odds a bit,” Dana explained. “If the Galkirans do invade the planet, then they won’t just be fighting Maliri troops.”

“You know all about Edraele’s plan then?” John asked, raising an eyebrow. Before she could reply, he rolled his eyes. “Why am I even asking. Of course you do.”

“Calara mentioned that we might have a problem,” the redhead admitted. “Edraele’s idea to try to trick a sensor sweep is actually pretty smart. If I can reverse engineer our Progenitor sensor array and build a really powerful signal emitter, it might just work.”

“So we won’t need the Maliri marines there after all?” John exclaimed, breaking into a broad smile of relief.

Dana turned her head to nuzzle into his hand. “I love your absolute confidence in my skills, but there’s no guarantee I can figure it out in time. If the emitter doesn’t work, and the Progenitor gets suspicious, then he might not leave his dreadnought... and we’ll be royally screwed.”

John deflated a little, then leaned down to give her an appreciative kiss. “You’re right, I can’t keep expecting you to pull miracles out of your hat. We’ll still go ahead with deploying the Maliri marines, but if we can reactive the robots, they’ll make a big difference. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Leave everything to us, father,” Daphne said, rising to her feet. “The Collective is making appropriate preparations to assume control over the dormant synthetic chassis.”

“Yep, just keep working on the psychic shaping for now,” Dana agreed, glancing at the revolving Soulforge. “We need to finish upgrading the Raptor and Valkyrie before anything else... which reminds me, I’ve got schematics to finish!”

John returned her exuberant hug, then watched as the redhead scampered back to the Engineering Podium.

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“Walker! Your lawyer’s here,” the guard growled, followed a moment later by the clang as his cell door was unlocked.

Thomas Walker rose from his bunk and left the small room, then accompanied the trio of guards down the drab grey corridor beyond. The hair on his neck stood up as they walked, and it was almost like he could feel their hostile glares at his back. After the combat footage from the Callopean Shoals massacre had been shown in court, he could sense that their opinion of him had dramatically worsened. He was led to the meeting room, where Caspian Kincaid was already waiting, and as Tom’s manacled hands were chained to the desk, the lawyer paced back and forth.

“That was outrageous!” Caspian snarled, as soon as the guards left the room. “I’ve never seen such an appalling abuse of due process! They can’t just spring evidence on us like that! They had a duty to disclose that black box footage to us before the trial even started!”

Tom sat in silence as he watched his lawyer continue to pace the room, the usually composed professional reminding him of a caged animal.

“I’ll make them regret trampling over your rights!” Caspian declared vehemently. “The first thing tomorrow, I’m filing for a mistrial!”

“The judge will never agree to that,” Tom said with weary resignation. “They won’t allow this farce to be dragged out any longer than necessary.”

Caspian pivoted on his foot and continued his pacing. “The prosecution can’t just ignore judicial proceedings! That footage was material evidence, and Bromidus was obliged by law to give full disclosure to the defence. We’ve got the bastards!”

“They’re convinced I’m guilty,” Tom said, slumping in his chair. “They won’t let me off on a technicality.”

“It doesn’t matter what they think about you, they still have to abide by the law,” Caspian insisted. “It might just seem like a pedantic technicality to you, but this is a fundamental principal of the entire legal system. I will not allow them to run roughshod over centuries of jurisprudence!”

“I don’t want to win on a legal technicality. I need to prove to everyone that I’m innocent.”

“I’m doing everything I can, Tom,” Caspian replied, shrugging his shoulders in helpless frustration as he strode across the room. “But with all the evidence stacked against you, we need to grab at any opportunity we can get.”

“Caspian...” Tom said, his eyes tracking the angry lawyer. “You haven’t looked at me once since I stepped foot in here. If my own lawyer thinks I’m guilty, what chance have I got with the jury?”

That caused Caspian Kincaid to pause and look at him with chagrin. “I’m sorry, Tom. I just...”

“I understand,” Tom said waving away his apology. “The black box recordings made me look guilty as hell... but everything I’ve told you is the truth. I’m being set up, and I want to take the stand and defend myself.”

“That’s a really bad idea,” Caspian said, grimly shaking his head.

“If I don’t take the stand to testify, it makes me look even more guilty,” Tom protested. “Even if you convince the judge to declare this a mistrial, the only chance I’ve got of having any kind of normal life afterwards is if I prove to everyone that I’m innocent. Otherwise I’ll spend the next fifty years being hounded as the ‘Rat of the Federation’. How long do you think I’ll last before some nutjob decides to take justice into his own hands?”

“As your lawyer, I’m advising you against this,” Caspian said, finally taking a seat opposite his client. “Bromidus will be like a bulldog with a chew toy. With all the circumstantial evidence they’ve gathered against you, it’ll be easy for him to put you on the defensive and make you look more guilty. This is going to make the situation even worse.”

“At this point, what have I got to lose?“ Tom said, his mind already made up. “But that doesn’t mean you need to go down with the sinking ship. I’m firing you as my lawyer, Caspian. There’s no reason to destroy your career and reputation trying to defend a lost cause.”

Sitting up straighter, Caspian finally looked him in the eye. “I’ve never abandoned a client before, and I’m not going to start now. If you’re determined to take the stand, then you’ll need me more than ever. We have to go over all the evidence they’ve got against you and make sure you’re fully prepared to testify in your defence. Bromidus will try to trip you up and make you contradict yourself, which means you can’t afford to make any mistakes.”

Tom gave him a relieved smile. “Thank you.”

Caspian inhaled deeply, then retrieved a data pad from his briefcase. “Alright, let’s get you ready.”

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Alyssa hummed to herself as she gestured towards the rotating sphere of white metal, then guided by her telekinesis, streams of the liquid alloy began to form distinctive shapes. It didn’t take long for her to psychically mould all the necessary parts, and after mentally going through a checklist to make sure she hadn’t missed anything, she lowered them to the deck. Six of the maintenance bots were waiting patiently for her to finish, and as soon as the gleaming white Crystal Alyssium components were ready, they quickly went to work.

The whir and click of multi-tools filled the hangar, as the floating robots assembled the second of the two Tachyon Lances. Alyssa glanced over at the Raptor to see how the Collective were proceeding with the installation of the first, and watched as the team of automatons carefully lowered the powerful weapon into the gunship’s starboard wing hardpoint. Once it was docked in position, half of the refit team began to secure it in place with magnetic locks, while the other half attached snaking power couplings to the auxiliary ports.

“Are your boys ready to install the new power core?” she asked the feminine-shaped automaton that stood at her side.

“Yes,” Daphne replied succinctly.

The gleaming white device was a marvel of advanced alien technology, and with the use of almost indestructible parts created in the Soulforge, this was the first of a new wave of power generators that would finally unleash the design’s full potential. Alyssa held out her hand towards the spherical component and effortlessly lifted it off the deck plates with an imperious flick of her fingers. She guided it towards the Raptor’s fuselage, where a second team of robots had opened up the maintenance access panels, and already removed the obsolete power core in preparation for the refit. Four of the automatons dropped down into the hole as the floating device drew closer, then they guided it into position within the chamber below.

Nodding with satisfaction, Alyssa glanced towards Daphne again. “John’s nearly finished assembling the new shield generator.”

Daphne stared straight ahead and replied in a bland monotone, “I know.”

The blonde raised an eyebrow at the short response. “Is everything okay, Daph?”

Blinking rapidly, the synthetic girl turned to give her a rueful frown. “I sincerely apologise for the curt reply, Alyssa. I have diverted a significant portion of my processing capabilities to preparing a tactical software package for the synthetic thralls. The Collective have no fighting experience, so I am basing these instructions on footage of the Lionesses in combat. It’s surprising how many variables need to be accounted for in even the simplest of battle scenarios.”

“Gunfights can get pretty hectic,” Alyssa agreed, then gave the cute automaton a reassuring pat on the arm. “I’ll let you get back to your programming. I was just letting you know that I’m heading up to the Workshop to bring down the new shield generator.”

“I will ensure that a team of maintenance robots will be ready to assist with the installation,” Daphne replied, acknowledging the Terran matriarch with a respectful nod.

\*Hey, gorgeous,\* Alyssa said to the seventh Lioness. \*Want to meet me in the Engineering Bay?\*

\*Has she finished?!\* Sakura asked eagerly.

\*Yep.\*

\*I’m on my way!\*

Smiling at her friend’s unbridled enthusiasm, Alyssa left the industrious robots in the Secondary Hangar, and walked through the two sets of double doors to the Cargo Bay. Instead of taking the loading lift up to Dana’s Workshop, she shrouded herself in a glowing light and lifted off the titanium deck plates, then soared up through the access hatch into the Engineering Bay.

“Alyssa said you’d completed the schematics!” Sakura gushed, bouncing up and down with anticipation beside their Chief Engineer.

Dana laughed and gestured to the newly finished blueprints with her thumb. “Yeah, like 10 seconds ago.”

“I sprinted down here... with psychic speed,” Sakura admitted with a grin.

“I thought it’d be wise to get Sakura’s feedback now, before we start building anything,” Alyssa explained as she walked past the Mass Fabricators in their direction. “With all the combat flight time she’s logged in the Valkyrie, she’ll be able to spot any problems you might have missed.”

“Problems?” Dana blurted out, her voice rising indignantly. “That I missed?!”

She was about to furiously defend her new schematic, until she saw Alyssa give her a playful wink.

“You asshole,” the redhead snorted, as she broke into laughter.

John rose from his chair, and reached for the psychic control circlet that controlled the Soulforge. “I’d like to see what you’ve been working on too.”

Dana held out a hand palm-up towards him. “Wait a sec! Stay right there, and we’ll come to you.”

As John settled down again, Alyssa sauntered up to his side and leaned down to give him a sultry kiss. “Hey, handsome,” she said, after their lips parted. “Is Ailita taking good care of you?”

“She’s been amazing,” John replied, stroking the attentive catgirl’s furry pink ears. “I’ve been feeling very looked after.”

His Nymph assistant beamed in delight, then sprang to her feet. “Would you ladies care for some refreshments?” she asked politely.

“Yeah, I’m gasping,” Dana said, smacking her lips. “Something cold would be awesome.”

“Sounds good,” Alyssa agreed.

“Umm, me too,” Sakura added a moment later.

Ailita studied the Asian beauty, then gave her an encouraging smile. “What did you really want? I should be able to make you almost anything.”

“Could I have a jasmine tea instead?” Sakura asked tentatively. “If it’s not too much trouble?”

“No trouble at all!” Ailita replied, before skipping away towards the exit.

“Grab a cushion,” John suggested to the trio, as Dana jogged over with the data reader clutched in her hand. “My attentive assistant wanted to make sure any visitors would be comfy.”

Sakura smiled as Alyssa handed out the plushly padded cushions. “She was anticipating lots of kneeling girls then?”

John brushed his fingers through her silky black hair as the trio knelt around him. “I can’t imagine why.”

The Asian girl blushed furiously, but there was no mistaking the hungry gleam that appeared in her exotic almond-shaped eyes.

“Okay... just give me a second...” Dana murmured, propping her elbows on John’s knees as she tinkered with the holo-projector settings. “There we go.”

She activated the device, then held it flat on his lap, and a projected three-dimensional holograph of her new design schematic floated between them. John could immediately see a noticeable difference in the agile mech, and not just the removal of the belt fed underslung Punisher cannon that it normally held in its huge hands.

“Has the Valkyrie been working out?” Alyssa asked with a wry smile. “It looks a lot more buff than before.”

“I had to add some space in the limbs,” Dana explained, tapping another button to expand the image and focus on its right arm.

“Is that some kind of Gatling gun?” Sakura asked, staring in fascination at the stubby multi-barrelled weapon that protruded below the Valkyrie’s right forearm.

“Not exactly. This is something completely new,” the redhead replied. “It’s based on Quantum Flux technology, but I had to make some compromises in exchange for much greater stopping power.”

John studied the mech’s bulging bicep. “Am I reading this right? Did you internalise the ammo feed?”

“Yep!” Dana agreed, nodding enthusiastically. “We’ll need to complete rebuild the right arm, because the bicep now contains a flux charging chamber. You feed ammo from the torso down into the bicep, where it’s then charged with a quantum flux field. When you pull the trigger, the shells are fed through the forearm into the gun’s six barrels, and it blows through a dozen rounds per second!”

“Wow, nice!” Sakura exclaimed, her eyes widening in awe. “How many rounds can I fire in a continuous burst?”

Dana gave her a rueful smile. “A dozen rounds. Then you have to wait six seconds while the next batch is charged up.”

Sakura couldn’t help laughing at that.

“It’s got reduced range too, because of the much shorter barrels,” Dana reluctantly admitted. She turned to glare in accusation at the revolving Soulforge. “The size limitations from building it with that thing were a real pain in the ass.”

“You said you made these compromises for a reason,” John reminded his frowning Chief Engineer. “How hard will the charged shells hit?”

The change of subject brought a broad grin to Dana’s face. “It’s basically a baby version of the Invictus’ Quantum Flux Cannons. Even though it’s only small, it has about ten times the firepower of the old Punisher Cannon.”

Sakura exchanged a startled glance with John, then whistled appreciatively.

“Holy crap,” John muttered, staring at the forearm mounted weapon with much greater respect. “Can that thing punch through a dreadnought’s armour?”

Dana pursed her lips thoughtfully. “It should be powerful enough to breach a weak point, like an airlock... but I mainly designed it for taking out thrall warships. If you unload this bad boy on their hull, it’ll really fuck them up!”

“Can I use it to take out shields too?” Sakura asked, remembering how effective the Quantum Flux Cannons had been against fully shielded ships.

“Yeah, but I wouldn’t waste the rounds unless it’s an emergency,” Dana replied. “The Valkyrie has far less ammo capacity than the Invictus, so I’d use the four Tachyon Lances to strip their shields, then blow out their engines with the Quantum Flux Vulcan Cannon.”

“Is that what we’re calling it?” Alyssa asked airily.

Dana’s brow furrowed as she glanced at the blonde. “Why? Is there something wrong with the name?”

“It’s just a bit of a mouthful,” her friend replied with a saucy smirk. “And not in a good way.”

With a sigh of frustration, Dana glanced around at the others. “Alright, any suggestions?”

“Maybe just call it a ‘QF Vulcan’?” Sakura suggested.

“Nope, no way,” Dana declared adamantly. “I’m not having you lot calling it the Kweef Vulcan for the next six months.”

John couldn’t help laughing as Sakura burst into a fit of giggles.

“As if we’d do such a thing,” Alyssa protested, adopting an innocent expression.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. It’s not happening,” Dana said stubbornly.

“What about just shortening it to ‘Quantum Vulcan’?” John suggested, looking around at the girls for their reaction. “It’s different enough that there won’t be any confusion with the Quantum Flux Cannons.”

The redhead considered it for a moment, then her face lifted into an approving smile. “Yeah, sounds good. I like it.”

“Quantum Vulcan it is then,” Sakura agreed, before pointing at the bulkier mech. “So the internal ammo feed explains the larger right limb, but what about the left arm, the torso, and the legs? Was that just done for aesthetics?”

Dana shook her head. “I needed to balance up the flight profile anyway, and I figured some more internal capacity could be useful.”

She tapped on the holo-reader again and the image shifted focus to the rear of the torso, and a second view appeared of the Valkyrie’s calves.

“The retro-thrusters are bigger,” John observed, seeing a notable difference in scale.

“I figured if we’re upgrading to Progenitor engines and thrusters, we might as well make them a bit chunkier at the same time,” Dana explained with a smile of satisfaction.

“Will the increased bulk make the Valkyrie less agile?” Sakura asked with concern.

“Actually the opposite,” the redhead explained. “Because most of the extra mass is going on manoeuvring thrusters, it should be even quicker and way more responsive.”

“You’ve done a remarkable job with the upgrades,” John said, looking at Dana with admiration. “I think the compromises you’ve made with the Quantum Vulcan for more firepower were very clever. The Valkyrie is going to be so fast now, Sakura won’t have any problems closing to short range to finish the job when she knocks out enemy shields.”

Sakura nodded her enthusiastic approval. “I can’t wait to take it on a test flight!”

Leaning over to her friend, Alyssa gave Dana a kiss on the cheek. “Sorry for teasing you earlier. When we refit the Valkyrie, it’s going to be an absolute monster.”

Dana blushed self-consciously. “Aww, thanks guys.”

“All the praise is well deserved,” John said warmly. He then threw a thoughtful glance at the Soulforge, and continued, “What should I start working on next after I’ve finished the Raptor’s new shield generator?”

“Start with the Power Core,” Dana replied, after mulling it over for a moment. “Then the rest in this order: the shields, retro-thrusters, engines, shell for the right arm, and finally the Quantum Vulcan. If we get unexpectedly dragged into combat for some reason, all the other upgrades are dependent on the new power core, so we definitely need that finished first.”

“Okay, will do,” John said giving her a thumbs up.

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The overhead lighting had gradually dimmed in the arboretum on Genthalas, simulating the fading radiance of a glorious mid-summer evening. Some of the small songbirds still twittered to each other as they flew overhead, lamenting the inevitable approach of the simulated twilight. The only other sound in the beautifully sculpted gardens came from the animated chatter of the Maliri matriarchs, who sat on picnic blankets covering the meticulously manicured lawns.

“I think we need to be very careful to make sure that the males don’t feel like we’re ordering them where they have to live,” Leena Ghilwen said, looking around at her fellow matriarchs for their reactions. “They all associate the matriarchs with cruelty, bitter feuding, and brutal assassinations... and it’s going to take us time and effort to convince them that things have changed for the better.”

“Definitely,” Valani Naestina said, bobbing her head in sombre agreement. “I’m still amazed that Baen’thelas was able to convince them to return to the homeworlds. If we accidentally give the males the impression that we’re attempting to assert our leadership over them, we might undo all the good that he’s accomplished.”

“Perhaps we should take an accurate census of the populations on all our inhabited worlds,” Tsarra Perfaren suggested, her expression thoughtful. “If we know exactly how many females are living on each planet, we can present that data to the males, then let them decide amongst themselves where they want to reside.”

“What if they just want to go back home?” Kali Loraleth asked, reaching over to one of the many plates stacked high with delicate pastries. “They all grew up on the homeworlds when they were boys.”

“I only have limited knowledge of how male society operates,” Edraele admitted to the attentive noblewomen. “But I do know that they renounced their House allegiance when they ventured out to the Border stations. If anything, they will probably choose to live elsewhere, rather than return to their childhood homes.”

“To escape painful memories?” Nyrelle Aeberos asked with sympathy.

Edraele nodded, her expression bleak.

“When the males have chosen where they want to live, maybe we could organise street parties to welcome them to their new homes?” Kali suggested brightly. “They’ve been forced to leave behind everything they’ve built on the border stations; I think they’d appreciate knowing that we’re very glad to have them living with us on the homeworlds again.”

“I think that’s a lovely idea!” Nakiasha gushed, the youthful House Torcyne matriarch smiling widely at the prospect. “You’re so clever, Kali!”

Kali laughed and waved away her effusive praise. “Oh, hardly. I was just thinking about what would make me feel happy if I were in their position. The more at ease we can make the males, the faster their transition will be into productive members of our society.”

Nyrelle gave the House Loraleth matriarch a knowing grin. “And it certainly wouldn’t hurt for the males to intermingle with all the females in a big social gathering. The women are going to be overjoyed to see them, and I’m sure they’ll be welcomed home with open arms.”

“Well, we are trying to encourage a massive population boom,” Kali replied, reflexively caressing her own tummy with a contented smile.

Edraele had been subtly watching her newest recruits during this discussion, and she was fascinated to see that they were all captivated by the Young Matriarchs. Despite John’s best efforts to convince the Maliri noblewomen that the old House Rankings were a thing of the past, she knew that a significant part of their deference came from the knowledge that the Young Matriarchs represented five of the top seven ranked Houses. The fact that those same noblewomen were also all pregnant with John’s babies, had not gone unnoticed either.

“Would you care for a Faerana wrap, Edraele?” Marsendra Helewynn asked politely, offering her the plate of delicacies. “I don’t know what magic ingredients Lyvia used, but they taste divine.”

The shy House Amarille matriarch blushed self-consciously. “I’m glad you like them.”

“I’d very much like to try one. Thank you, Marsendra,” Edraele replied, taking one of the precisely wrapped fish parcels from the plate.

She smiled inwardly to herself as she noticed that the Young Matriarchs’ warmth and friendliness was rubbing off on even the haughtiest of the new recruits. It seemed that the eldest daughters were not immune to their endearing charm, especially as the Young Matriarchs had set a precedent for the kind of behaviour that would lead to deeper intimacy with Baen’thelas.

Edraele glanced over to the other side of the gathering, where the two remaining women from the previous generation of matriarchs sat together. As Vestele Waephyra grew more accustomed to her newly created personality, she was gradually losing the unsettling vacant look behind her inquisitive gaze. Living in close proximity to the other matriarchs, and spending most of her days interacting with them, was definitely helping to develop her social skills.

To the Maliri Queen’s surprise, even Emandra seemed to be listening to the ongoing discussion with genuine interest. Edraele had expected Kali’s suggestion of throwing a street party to be met with a derisive sneer, but the House Holaris matriarch appeared to be giving the idea serious consideration.

\*They’re not quite as vacuous as you assumed, are they Emandra?\* she asked the only woman there who rivalled her own advanced years.

Emandra started in surprise at hearing Edraele’s telepathic voice, then she locked eyes with the Maliri Queen and slowly shook her head. The look was thoughtful and introspective, and it appeared that the insightful conversation during the picnic had forced Emandra to re-evaluate many of her preconceived notions about the Young Matriarchs.

\*Edraele, we’ve finished the loading operations, and boarded as many marines aboard the fleet as we can fit,\* Almari informed her. \*Lilyana is preparing the fleet for departure.\*

\*Thank you, Almari,\* she replied. \*I wish you all good luck and a safe journey.\*

\*We’ll make the Galkirans regret landing on Kythshara if they do try launching an invasion,\* the former assassin said confidently.

The Maliri Queen let out a heavy sigh, and hoped fervently that it wouldn’t come to that.

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“I think we covered everything,” Caspian Kincaid said, rubbing a hand across his face, as he slid the datapad back into the briefcase. “I know you’ll have a lot on your mind, but try and get plenty of sleep tonight. You’re going to have to be sharp and focused on the stand tomorrow.”

Tom Walker nodded wearily. “Don’t worry about that. I’m so mentally drained, I’ll sleep like the dead.”

Caspian looked at him with sympathy. “Just remember, don’t let Bromidus draw you into speculating about conspiracy theories. He’ll do everything he can to discredit you, so you need to just stick to the facts, and focus on the evidence they’ve brought against you. It is all circumstantial, so do your best to keep pointing that out. The other area we can attack them on is motive. It doesn’t make any sense that someone from your privileged background, no offence, would betray his closest friends and comrades-in-arms for a quick payout. If you can make the jury start doubting motive, we might have a decent shot at undermining their case.”

“I’ll do my best,” Tom agreed, before meeting his lawyer’s pensive gaze. “I’m innocent, Caspian... I swear it. I don’t know why I’m being framed for this, but I’d never betray my friends, or the Terran Federation.”

Kincaid locked eyes with him for a long moment, then blew out his breath in a rueful sigh. “I believe you, kid. That’s what got me into this pickle in the first place. Just convince everyone else in the courtroom tomorrow, and you’ll be a free man.”

Tom couldn’t help breaking into a wry grin. “Okay, no problem.”

He raised his hand to shake Caspian’s, only for it to jerk against the handcuffs with a rattle of chains.

The lawyer gave him a sympathetic smile and patted Tom on the shoulder. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Caspian knocked on the door, and it opened a few seconds later. Tom could hear quiet conversation in the corridor, then his heart soared as he recognised his fiancée’s familiar voice.

Anna entered the meeting room, and gave him a tremulous smile. It quickly disappeared and she rushed over to him and flung her arms around his neck.

“Oh, Tommy!” she gasped, hugging him frantically. “It’s been awful! That horrible video has been playing everywhere! And the looks people give me... it’s like they think I’m the worst person in the world for being engaged to you!”

“I’m so sorry, baby,” Tom said, closing his eyes and leaning into her embrace.

She pulled back and stared intently into his eyes. He could see the flicker of uncertainty on her face, her faith in him badly shaken by everything she’d witnessed in the courtroom.

Tom met her gaze and said with all the confidence he could muster, “You’re right, it was awful seeing the battle again, but that video proved everything I’ve been saying is true. Someone tampered with my Claymore, so I couldn’t shoot at the Brimorians. The Brimorians were in on the plan to frame me, so they didn’t fire a shot in my direction. It all fits.”

He saw some of the tension and doubt ease from her, so quickly pressed on, “They captured me in a tractor beam after the battle, then drugged me and damaged my gunship, but did it in an obvious way to make the Federation suspicious. I’ve been railroaded into this trial with that secret account they found, but since when have I ever cared about money? My Dad’s loaded, and when we get married, you’ll inherit from your parents as well. You know me, Anna. What do I really care about?”

“Me, Mace, your career as an officer,” she said quietly.

“You, Mace, my career as an officer,” Tom stated at exactly the same time. “In that order.”

Her beautiful blue eyes softened, and Anna leaned in to give him a tender kiss. “I’m so sorry you’re going through this, Tommy. I love you... and I know you’re innocent. We just need to make everyone else believe that too.”

He chuckled under his breath, then leaned into her again. “That’s what my lawyer just said.”

She pulled back and looked at him in mock surprise. “Caspian Kincaid is in love with you?!”

Despite the dire predicament he was in, Tommy couldn’t help laughing, and his shoulders shook with big guffaws as Anna giggled along with him.

As their laughter gradually subsided, he gazed in adoration at the stunning blonde. “I love you so much, Anna. I couldn’t get through this without you.”

She returned his gaze with the same singular obsession, her devotion to him just as absolute. “You’re my soulmate. We’re destined to be together forever.”

The two embraced and Tom felt his doubts and fears evaporating. He knew Anna too, and she was just as fanatically loyal to him, her brother, and her career as a Terran Federation officer. They’d both had their faith in each other badly shaken, but now that he was in her arms again, he somehow knew that he’d been a fool to ever doubt her loyalty.

He lost track of time as they held each other, until a sharp knock at the door signalled that their brief visitation was over.

Anna pulled away, and gave him one last lingering look as she walked to the door. “I love you, Tommy. I’ll be waiting for you.”

Tom sighed with relief, feeling bolstered for the trial tomorrow. He had to convince the court that he was innocent, whatever it took, for Anna’s sake as well as his own.

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“All magnetic locks have been disengaged, Alyssa,” Daphne informed her.

The blonde telekinetic reached out towards the mech’s arm and clasped it in her psychic grip. “Clear below!” she called out, as she tugged the massive limb free from its torso.

The long bar of the locking joint slid out of the shoulder socket and she carefully placed the obsolete limb on the deck plates, next to its replacement. John had already built the new hollowed out bicep, complete with Quantum Flux chamber, and several maintenance robots descended to the limb to begin transferring usable components. Their multi-tools whirred at a frenetic pace as they detached armour plating, exposing frictionless joints and synthetic muscles to be repurposed in the new limb.

Alyssa beckoned towards the discarded armour plating, then melted it into a stream of liquid metal that flowed into a glistening orb. She turned her attention back to the Valkyrie, and began siphoning off the Crystal Alyssium from the armour encasing the left bicep, as well as the mech’s armoured calves. The sphere of psychically responsive alloy continued to grow in size, until Alyssa had stripped away all of the unusable components. She then began to reshape the orb, strengthening the crystalline lattice within.

\*I’ve finished the Quantum Vulcan,\* John announced, sounding tired but satisfied at having finally completed the full list of components. \*I’ll bring it down to the mech bay.\*

“You sound worn out, John,” Alyssa said aloud for Daphne’s benefit, while simultaneously replying via telepathy. “Why don’t you have a rest? I’m sure the maintenance bots won’t have any trouble delivering the new gun.”

The synthetic girl listened intently, then nodded to the blonde to acknowledge her request.

\*I’m fine,\* John protested.

\*You’ve been psychic shaping for the past eight hours,\* Alyssa said sternly. \*I know how draining that is, and I wasn’t even using a Soulforge. Go take a quick break, or I’ll have Rachel declare you unfit for duty.\*

He hesitated before replying, \*What about the test flight for the Valkyrie and Raptor? If Jade or Sakura find a problem, you might need me to build some replacement components.\*

\*There won’t be any problems. Despite all the teasing I was doing earlier, Dana’s inventions never go wrong. The only reason we had an issue with the Wormhole Generator was because there was an inbuilt design flaw. You’ll be able to see them both in combat soon anyway.\*

\*Okay, you’re probably right, I am feeling pretty drained,\* John admitted.

\*Speaking of which...\* Alyssa said, her full lips curving into a coy smile. \*Are you just going to have Ailita relieve the tension, or do you want company?\*

\*I have been monopolising Ailita’s time recently,\* John said after a brief pause. \*Maybe you should ask Jehanna if she wants to join us?\*

\*Leave it to me,\* she replied, breaking into a grin.

\*Thank you,\* he said gratefully.

The maintenance robots were working together as an incredibly efficient team and they had already finished assembling the upgraded limb for the Valkyrie. One of them turned to wave at Alyssa, notifying her that the work was complete, then joined his companions in floating towards the mech.

\*Hey, gorgeous,\* Alyssa said cheerfully, reaching out with telepathy to their newest recruit. \*Do you fancy joining Ailita and John in the Observatory? He really wants to see that beautiful brown tummy of yours stuffed full of cum.\*

\*Really?\* Jehanna replied, sounding flustered. \*He actually said that?!\*

\*No, of course not. He mentioned something about you might be missing Ailita... but that’s what he was really thinking,\* Alyssa added conspiratorially.

\*I’m on my way!\* Jehanna gushed, already getting turned on.

The next step in the refit was to start upgrading the retro-thrusters, so Alyssa lifted them off the deck and moved them into position next to the Valkyrie. The older variants had already been melted down to salvage the metal, so the maintenance bots were immediately able to start bolting the Progenitor versions into place. When the power couplings had been connected, the robots initiated the test firing sequences, and there was a split-second roar as each one flickered briefly to life.

“The power core is performing beyond our initial predictions for energy output, Alyssa,” Daphne informed her. “I temporarily activated the Quantum Flux chamber and all parameters are well within acceptable limits.”

“That’s great to hear, Daph,” Alyssa said, as she watched the maintenance bots on the left calf move aside so that she could fit the reformed armour plating. “Is the Quantum Vulcan on its way?”

Turning towards the door, Daphne made a gesture and the reinforced bulkhead split open at her command. A few seconds late, two maintenance robots glided into the mech bay, carrying the forearm-mounted cannon between them.

“Nice timing,” she noted, before reaching out with her mind to take a firm grip on the prototype weapon. “I’ve got it now.”

The robots released their hold on the Quantum Vulcan, then floated up beside the weapon as Alyssa moved it into place underneath the Valkyrie’s forearm. She supported its weight while it was locked onto the chassis, then she lifted up the sculpted armour plates that would protect the integrated cannon. Before the doors into the mech bay had a chance to close, Sakura raced inside, the Paragon suited Lioness skidding to a halt beside Alyssa.

“Are you nearly finished?” she asked eagerly.

“Yep, all done,” Alyssa replied, as the last armour plates were bolted into position. “Jade’s already outside giving the Raptor a test flight. Why don’t you power up the Valkyrie, and start putting it through its paces?”

Sakura soared upward as she triggered the thrusters in her power armour, then she landed on the gantry beside the mech’s cockpit and ducked inside.

“Please thank the Collective for their help, Daphne,” Alyssa said, smiling appreciatively at the petite automaton. “We couldn’t have finished all these upgrades in time without you.”

“It was our pleasure to be of assistance,” she replied, inclining her head politely.

Alyssa set the diminished orb of Crystal Alyssium on the deck and rolled it out the way as Sakura strode the Valkyrie clear of the maintenance gantry.

“I’m going to head up to the Bridge and watch the test flight with Calara. Could you take the spare metal back to the Cargo Bay for me please?”

“Of course,” Daphne agreed without hesitation.

Alyssa was about to depart, but she turned back and gave the cute synthetic girl a heartfelt hug. “I really appreciate how much you’ve done to help us, Daphne. Thank you.”

Blinking in surprise, Daphne gently returned the embrace. “You’re welcome, Alyssa.”

“You remind me so much of Faye,” Alyssa murmured, her voice cracking with emotion. “We all care about you... very much.”

When the blonde teenage pulled back from the hug, Daphne was startled to see her cerulean eyes were welling up with unshed tears.

“Did I say something that upset you, Alyssa?” the synthetic girl asked with concern.

Alyssa shook her head and brushed the tears from her eyes. “No... I just wish...” her voice trailed off with a sigh of regret. “If I get another chance, I’ll make it up to her... I promise.”

Even more bewildered by the sudden outburst of Terran emotions, Daphne simply nodded, then watched as Alyssa hurried out of the mech bay. She decided to archive the confusing encounter for later study, having no idea how to decipher the subtle interplay of emotions she’d seen flicker across Alyssa’s face.

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\*Hey, handsome... it’s time to wake up.\*

John felt the fog of sleep recede, but he still felt groggy, and it took him a while to regain his bearings. He was warm and cosy in bed, with two delightfully soft and curvy girls snuggled into him, their arms draped possessively over his chest. Glancing down, he saw one mane of fluffy pink hair, and the other jet black, reminding him that his delectable bedmates were Ailita and Jehanna.

He had his arms around both girls, so pulled them closer, and felt their rounded stomachs brush against his flanks. A smile of contentment appeared on his face as he recalled the events that had preceded their brief catnap. After making love to each sensuous girl, Ailita had begged him to fill Jehanna with his heavy load. He hadn’t taken much persuading, and after pounding Jehanna to ecstasy, the Nymph had shared his cum between them.

John leaned down and placed a tender kiss on their foreheads. He considered waking them so that he could get up, but didn’t have the heart to disturb the two girls, who were both fast asleep. Summoning two dozen telekinetic hands, he gently scooped the pair up, rolled out of the way, then carefully placed them back on the bed.

Drawn together like magnets, they were soon lying intertwined in each other’s arms. The only thing preventing them from a really close embrace were their cum-filled tummies, and seeing Ailita’s pale pink curves pressed against Jehanna’s rounded belly was a truly alluring sight. John valiantly resisted the urge to rejoin the nubile pair in bed, and covered them with the duvet so they could sleep off their substantial meal.

He dressed quickly and strode out of the Observatory, making his way over the arching bridge as he crossed the Lagoon. \*Are you up in the original Bridge or down in the Combat Bridge?\* he asked his executive officer.

\*The Combat Bridge,\* Alyssa replied. \*We moved down here when we started shadowing the Galkiran Fleets.\*

\*On my way,\* John stated, as he brushed aside leafy fronds and made his way through the jungle foliage to the express grav-tubes.

After plunging down through the levels to Deck Four, John stepped out of the glowing red anti-gravity field and strode across the Armoury to an equipping frame. He donned his Lion armour suit, then immediately removed the helmet, tucking it under his arm as he made his way down the ramp. The usual combat crew were at their positions, with Jade and Sakura being the notable exceptions. He returned Alyssa’s welcoming smile, the blonde now seated in the Pilot’s chair, and exchanged greetings with Dana, Rachel, and the twins. The four combat-trained Nymphs all waved at John, as he walked over to join Calara at her Tactical Station.

“How did the flight test for the Raptor and Valkyrie go?” he asked the Latina, after she removed her own Paragon helmet and tilted her head up for a kiss.

“Very impressive,” Calara replied, as she settled back in her seat. “I don’t have any reservations about deploying them against the thrall fleets.”

“Bravo, Dana,” John said, acknowledging the redhead’s hard work with a respectful nod in her direction. Facing the brunette again, he continued, “So what’s our plan of attack?”

Calara tapped a couple of icons on her console, and the holographic Sector Map refocused on the Galkiran forces. The sinister looking black spacecraft were racing through Maliri territory, looking like a horde of voracious locusts in a frantic search for their next meal.

“There are approximately eleven fleets of warships in this attack group,” she explained, highlighting the loose clusters of enemy vessels in each formation. “They’re currently in hyper-warp with their shields activated, but they must lower them soon, or they’ll be risking a burnout. If they follow their previous tactics, the Galkirans will drop out of hyper-warp and gather closer together for protection, then hold position for the next 30 minutes to give their shields a chance to recover. So that’s when we strike.”

“It’s a shame we can’t jump back to restock. Some more spider mines would come in handy,” Dana said with a wistful frown.

“We can’t afford to lose twelve hours waiting for the Wormhole Generator to recharge,” Calara said, her expression grim. “Time is becoming critical.”

“Still no sign of the dreadnought?” John asked, glancing up at the thrall ships and wondering if the enemy Progenitor was lurking amongst them.

“We haven’t seen any sign of an active wormhole,” she replied, looking increasingly pensive. “I can only assume that the dreadnought is with the other attack group, and that could be a real problem.”

“Are they still heading directly towards Genwynn station?” John asked, sharing her concern.

She gave him a grim nod. “There are ten fleets in that attack group. We urgently need to start wearing them down, but this group has stubbornly refused to make any course changes.”

“And these ships are still flying towards the Venkalyn homeworld?”

“Exactly. We don’t have enough time to disable them all, so unless we can scare them off, our only other option is to encourage these fleets to alter their course.”

John shook his head, a sceptical frown on his face. “The thralls won’t retreat. They’ll keep fighting until their dying breath.”

“Well, let’s hope we can make them chase after us this time,” Calara said, her furrows in her brow deepening with worry.

“The Galkirans have started dropping out of hyper-warp,” Alyssa informed them. “I’m moving the Invictus to an attack vector.”

“We’ll stay cloaked until we’re right on top of them,” Calara explained. “As soon as we launch the Raptor and Valkyrie, we’ll activate our shields and give the thralls a pasting at point blank range.”

“Is that so the Invictus draws fire from Jade and Sakura?” John guessed.

She nodded in confirmation. “The Raptor and Valkyrie are extremely agile now, and their shields are much more resilient, but I still don’t want to risk them being hit by a lucky shot from a Quantum Flux Cannon.”

“Yeah, I bet,” John said, shuddering at the thought.

He looked up at the holographic Tactical Map, which was now active in the centre of the Bridge. The Galkiran fleets had all dropped out of hyper-warp now, and he could tell by the sensor icons that they had also deactivated their shields. The formations of black ships were gathering together in a close huddle, with bristling gun decks sweeping the stars for any sign of attack. After being constantly harassed every time they halted their advance, John wasn’t surprised that the thralls were at such a high state of readiness.

Calara saw what he was looking at and let out a frustrated sigh. “I was hoping to keep jumping between the two groups, so we could continue to hit them at random intervals and catch them by surprise. Unfortunately, the Progenitor countered that tactic by making no effort to protect this attack group and staying with the other thrall fleets.”

“At least with him not being around, you can maximise the number of casualties with each attack,” John pointed out.

“That’s a good point,” the Latina replied, brightening considerably.

“Dropping out of hyper-warp,” Alyssa advised them, as the glistening white battlecruiser raced towards the stationary warships. “Taking us in closer.”

She pushed up the throttle and the Invictus’ six Progenitor engines roared to life, blazing with a ferocious glow as the battlecruiser catapulted forward. John was amazed that the cloaking device could still keep his ship concealed, but the thralls remained oblivious to the vicious predator charging towards them.

“Launch strike craft,” Calara ordered, knowing that Alyssa would pass on the command telepathically.

Sure enough, the Raptor and Valkyrie peeled away from the Invictus, each of them making a beeline for the destroyer screen.

“Allocating targets,” Calara announced, splitting up the cruiser groups and sorting them by priority for her team of eager Nymph gunners. “All ships... open fire!”

The dark gloom of space was suddenly ablaze with light, as bursts of sapphire tachyon beams streaked out from the Invictus towards the enemy formations. Seven cruisers were savaged by the Nymph’s opening broadsides, with the dazzling beams scorching through the armour plating and detonating their engines in blossoming explosions.

The blistering salvos from the Tachyon Lance batteries were accompanied by the pounding recoil of the Quantum Flux Cannons, as Calara opened up with the massive heavy guns. She struck the battleship squadron with unerring accuracy, the charged shells slamming into the engine housings of those huge behemoths and brutally hamstringing all four of her targets. Another battleship crew reacted faster than the others, and managed to reactivate its waning shields. No sooner had the protective field flickered into existence, it was seared by the blazing conflagration of a Nova Lance blast, which promptly overloaded the shields and left the capital ship vulnerable again.

John was vaguely aware of the catastrophic damage being inflicted by the Invictus gunners, but his attention was mainly focused on the Raptor and Valkyrie as they raced into battle. Jade had managed to catch the closest group of destroyers by surprise, and their shields were still deactivated as she tore through their formation. The gunship’s Tachyon Cannons hammered the closest destroyer, with hundreds of bright blue tachyon bolts raining down on the stationary ship.

Those guns would have proved largely ineffective against the thicker armour plating of a thrall cruiser, but they had enough penetration to punch through the smaller destroyer. The sapphire hail ignited several explosions in the engines, knocking the destroyer sideways as it was rocked by the blasts. She quickly moved onto the next ship and locked in her optical targeting, before aiming the primary reticle at the black-hulled destroyer directly ahead. The pair of Tachyon Lances proved more than adequate for the task of crippling the escort vessels, and the opening salvo speared through the stern, melting through fuel lines and coring out the propulsion systems.

The Valkyrie proved to be even more potent, with an almost constant stream of tachyon beams skewering one destroyer after another. John couldn’t confirm it from the Tactical Map, but he knew Sakura must be using her psychic abilities to cool her Tachyon Lances, allowing her to fire them continuously at the sitting ducks in front of her. She pivoted the mech as it passed close by to a cruiser, and pointed the Valkyrie’s right arm towards the rear of the formidable warship. A streak of blue flashes hurtled across the holographic screen, and then explosions larger than the mech itself were tearing apart the cruiser’s engines.

John glanced across the Bridge at Dana, who was watching the action just as closely. She looked at him and the two exchanged grins, both as impressed by the combat performance of the newly upgraded strike craft. Their optimistic smiles were soon wiped from their faces though, as the exhausted thrall crews finally began to react to the ambush.

The first thing John noticed was the rippling wave of green dots that appeared next to each enemy ship, each one signifying that it had reactivated its shields. Far more alarming, however, was the staggering wave of purple tachyon bolts that suddenly seemed to engulf the map. The destroyers were exclusively targeting the Raptor and Valkyrie, and John felt like his heart was in his throat as he watched that vicious storm sweep towards each ship.

“Holy shit...” Dana muttered, staring wide-eyed at the unbelievable volume of firepower being unleashed against the smaller vessels.

“It’s no wonder thralls don’t bother fielding strike craft,” Calara murmured, grimacing at the onslaught. “Even fighters using thrall-level technology would be torn to pieces.”

“But not us,” John noted, watching his two Lionesses weave through the storm.

Jade was evading the thrall defence grid by taking advantage of the Raptor’s incredible speed, the enemy gunners unable to track a target moving that fast. She looped around cruisers, then barrelled toward the next cluster of destroyers, hitting them with a vicious strafing run before turning for another pass. The Raptor swept back and forth, picking on the weakest ships and leaving them crippled.

Sakura was using different tactics, but they were proving to be just as effective. The previously agile mech had now been given the manoeuvrability of a professional gymnast, and enhanced by Sakura’s psychic speed, the Valkyrie now moved in an eerie white blur. She zigged and zagged through the enemy lines, dodging so fast that she tricked the target-fixated thrall gunners into accidentally unloading on their allies. Sakura dived behind a cruiser, and the hapless vessel was struck by scores of badly aimed tachyon bolts.

The Invictus took a deadly toll on the biggest ships in the thrall fleet, with Calara quickly marooning all six battleships within the opening twenty seconds of the battle. Blowing up engines might have been an excellent tactic for sparing thrall lives, and was a quick way of knocking out enemy ships from future engagements. Unfortunately, those battleships were still very much operational, and while the Invictus was in range, the gunners were determined to have their revenge.

A relentless hurricane of tachyon beams followed close on the Invictus’ trail, and despite Alyssa’s excellent piloting skills, she couldn’t avoid all the incoming fire. The main thing she was intently focused on dodging were any salvos by each battleship’s battery of Quantum Flux Cannons. As soon as she spotted their tell-tale targeting beams, she yanked the flight stick back, or pushed the battlecruiser into a rolling dive.

“Oh my god,” Jehanna said in a hushed voice, as she padded across the Bridge to join him.

John glanced at the former reporter, who was only wearing a silk robe she’d hastily wrapped around her luscious figure. “I know. Terrifying, isn’t it?”

“How are they managing to avoid all those beams and bolts?” she whispered in shock.

“They’re all extremely good pilots, flying incredibly advanced ships,” John explained, slipping an arm around her bare shoulder. “I thought you’d sleep through the battle, otherwise I would have brought you with me.”

“I woke up and you weren’t there, so I came looking for you,” she said with a half-hearted shrug. “I would have filmed the battle, but fitting in a Paragon suit might be a bit of a problem at the moment.”

Jehanna gave him a self-conscious smile, then cradled her cum-filled belly.

“Oh, I thought you already knew,” John said with an apologetic frown. “Dana specially designed the Paragon suits to protect you girls when you have a full tummy.”

The redhead looked up from her Engineering Station and nodded in confirmation. “You can still wear the armour, even if you’re big enough to be knocked up with twins.”

“I better go change then,” Jehanna said, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment.

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She slipped away to the Armoury, leaving John to focus on the battle again. The Invictus rocketed through the ranks of the six immobilised battleships, as Alyssa banked the white ship around to begin another attack run on the cruiser formations. The thrall gunners tried to saturate the area ahead of them, blocking her path with an interlaced weave of tachyon beams, which was guaranteed to strafe the Invictus as it flew through the killing zone.

John held his breath as Alyssa flew heedlessly towards the crossfire, and was about to blurt out a warning, when the battleship on the right suddenly ceased all fire. The Invictus performed a lazy roll, and effortlessly slipped through the hole in the deadly trap, without its shields taking so much as a scratch. For a moment, he wondered what had possessed the thrall gunners to stop shooting at the worst possible time, then he realised that it wasn’t the thralls that was possessed.

The scores of turrets covering the battleship’s hull all began to turn, pivoting from the rear towards the bow. They just happened to stop as they were pointing at the cruiser formations directly in front of the Galkiran capital ship, then the behemoth opened fire, blasting its allies at point blank range. The battleship knocked out the shields of several cruisers in that first treacherous attack, causing the rest to make emergency manoeuvres to avoid this latest threat. Capitalising on their vulnerability, Calara began to open fire with the Singularity Drivers, hammering the rear of those denuded cruisers and eviscerating their engines.

He glanced back over his shoulder at Irillith, and her playful wink confirmed that she had been responsible for sowing chaos amongst their ranks. John acknowledged her hacking exploits with an appreciative nod, then turned back to study the wider battlefield.

In the previous engagements against the thrall forces, their destroyers had always been overlooked, with Calara and the Nymph gunners prioritising the larger, more dangerous ships. Now with Sakura and Jade tasked specifically with hunting the escort vessels, the Galkiran defence screen was being dismantled at an astonishing rate. Out of the original 48 destroyers in the thrall fleet, the Valkyrie and Raptor were able to immobilise nearly half of them in the opening minute of the battle.

The destroyers needed manoeuvrability to be able to bring their full complement of Tachyon Cannons to bear, but with one ship after the other having its engines destroyed, their effectiveness was greatly diminished. Jade was able to use the Raptor’s unrivalled speed to roar away from the front ranks of destroyers, pulling well out of range and nullifying them as a threat. Freed from dodging their waves of incoming fire, she was then able to launch a blistering assault on the destroyer groups flanking the thrall formation.

Sakura was just as effective at nullifying the destroyers’ anti-fighter capabilities, by simply positioning larger warships between her mech and the crippled destroyers. She began to harass the cruiser squadrons in the centre of the thrall formation, strafing them with her Tachyon Lances to knock out their shields, then ripping apart their engines in savage bursts of Vulcan fire. John watched as three of the sleek black destroyers charged at full speed towards Sakura’s current position, where she was hiding behind a menacing thrall cruiser.

As soon as the Galkiran destroyers circled the sinister bulk of the cruiser’s hull, the Valkyrie’s torso pivoted at the waist and the mech began spraying pulsed tachyon beams in their direction. Sakura wildly strafed her shots over each ship, the beams striking their shields in multiple places. The moment that the defensive barriers were overloaded, she took careful aim and obliterated the engines, scything them from the stern in fiery blasts as the severed fuel lines ignited. Momentum carried those stricken destroyers onwards, and the crippled wrecks tumbled bow over flaming stern, as the crew desperately tried to stabilise themselves only using retro-thrusters.

John glanced back at Calara and gave her a wry grin. “I must admit, I had some doubts about letting Jade and Sakura fight out there, but I was wrong. They’re tearing those destroyers to pieces!”

“Hmm?” Calara murmured distractedly, as she squeezed the trigger on her gunnery controls.

The Quantum Flux Cannons on the Invictus’ topdeck recoiled as they fired, unleashing a barrage of shells at a squadron of four Galkiran cruisers. The thrall warships all had fully intact shields, but they offered scant protection against a salvo of Quantum charged slugs. When the first shell struck each shield, it created a massive divot in the protective barrier, as the energy field desperately tried to compensate from the colossal impact. The second slug struck a second later, overloading the destabilised barrier and causing it to collapse. That meant there was nothing left protecting the engines, so the subsequent rounds punched through exposed armour plating and they erupted in bright orange explosions.

“The Raptor and Valkyrie,” John clarified, after watching the dazzling display of pyrotechnics. “They’re way more effective than I thought they’d be... and the girls seem to be evading everything the thralls throw at them.”

“Yeah, I noticed that too,” the Latina muttered, appearing lost in thought. “It was just a matter of achieving sufficient tech disparity.”

John walked over to her Tactical station and placed a hand on her armoured pauldron. “Hey, are you alright?” he asked with concern, gently shaking her. “It’s not like you to lose concentration, especially in the middle of a battle.”

She blinked and looked up at him, focusing on his face. “Sorry! I was just thinking about something.”

“What is it?” he asked, wondering what could have got her so distracted.

“I was thinking about the way Progenitors structure their thrall fleets, and that maybe there’s a weakness we could exploit,” Calara explained. “But we don’t have the kind of tech available yet to upgrade our forces to the level they’d need to be.”

“How are their fleets vulnerable?” John asked with interest.

She shook her head and gave him a rueful frown. “We can’t take advantage of it yet anyway. You’re right, I should be giving the battle my full attention. We can discuss it afterwards if you like.”

“Sure,” he agreed, turning back towards the Tactical Map.

“We’re down to 30% shields,” Dana called out across the Bridge. “If you’re going to try to lure the thralls into following us, now’s probably the time.”

The fleet they’d targeted had been systematically dismantled in the ambush, with only a handful of cruisers still mobile. Many more Galkiran warships were converging on their position though, as the furious thralls sought their vengeance against the battlecruiser that had constantly harassed their progress through Maliri territory. Despite all the destruction, with ten fleets still unscathed, the Galkirans still had nearly a thousand powerful warships ready to continue the invasion.

“Okay, let’s disengage. Retreat on escape route alpha,” Calara ordered, her eyes fixed on the incoming thrall forces. “Don’t go faster than 60% throttle; they know we’re faster than them, so if you go any slower, it’ll be obvious we’re trying to lure them into chasing us.”

“Got it,” Alyssa replied, lowering the throttle as she banked the Invictus around.

Now that she didn’t have manoeuvre the Invictus into position to attack the thrall fleet, it was much easier for Alyssa to dodge the incoming ribbons of purple tachyon beams. She jinked from side to side, slightly slowing their overall velocity, but the Invictus was still travelling fast enough to pull away from the pursuing thralls. Jade and Sakura followed her cue to retreat, but as they weren’t the bait, the Raptor and Valkyrie raced ahead of the Invictus and were soon safely out of range.

“That’s right... this way...” Calara murmured, staring at the vanguard of the closest thrall fleet as they pursued them at full speed.

Suddenly, elements of that fleet began to slow, with more and more of the thrall warships calling off the pursuit, until they’d all abandoned the chase.

“Goddamn it!” the Latina cursed, clenching her fists in frustration.

John frowned in confusion. “What happened? We weren’t that far ahead. Did they realise they’d never be able to catch us and just give up?”

Dana grimaced as she stared up at the map. “Maybe we overdid it with the spider mines. They’re probably worried that we’re leading them into another minefield.”

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Captain Keylessae stood aboard the Bridge of her Dominator class battleship, and glared at the holographic map, watching in helpless frustration as their tormentors made a clean getaway.

“All fleets are returning to the assembly point... as per your orders, Fleet Commander,” Tyelia stated, barely managing to keep the ring of disapproval from her voice.

“Shut down our shields,” Keylessae snapped. “As soon as the shield projectors have fully recovered, we can leave this accursed place.”

Her second-in-command approached the fuming Galkiran officer, unable to hold her tongue any longer. “We should be hunting that Progenitor down like the rabid dog he is, Keylessae,” she whispered under her breath.

“Don’t you think I know that?!” Keylessae hissed, her eyes narrowing as she rounded on the younger woman.

Tyelia wasn’t expecting such a vitriolic outburst, and she fell back a step in the face of her commander’s fury. “Then why did you...?”

“Why did I call the ships back? Why didn’t I order everyone to chase him across the galaxy?” Keylessae growled. “Because I’m following Lord Gahl’kalgor’s orders, that’s why! Do you take me for a fool? What do you think that vindictive hag will do to me, if I dare to disobey him?”

Shivering with fear, Tyelia suddenly seemed far less belligerent. “I thought we were supposed to pursue this Progenitor to his throneworld?” she said falteringly.

“That’s not what I’ve been told,” Keylessae muttered. “We’re under orders to keep advancing into Maliri territory. The second group is supposed to be hunting down this Progenitor. I’ve sent a dozen messages informing Valeria that we’re under constant attack, but she’s not responding to any of them. Until I get told otherwise by Lord Gahl’kalgor himself, I’m not ordering a single ship to stray off course.”

Tyelia’s frown deepened. “But...”

“But nothing!” the Galkiran Fleet Commander snapped. “It’s taken me forty years to finally get recognised by Gahl’kalgor. Do you think I’m going to throw that all away on a whim?!”

The other thrall hesitated, then slowly shook her head.

“Tell me when the shields have recovered,” Keylessae grumbled, glaring at the junior officer. “Oh, and Tyelia... one more thing?”

“Yes, Fleet Commander?” she asked respectfully.

“Don’t question my orders again.”

The younger Galkiran gave her a curt salute, then turned on her heel to follow her captain’s commands.

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John waited until the girls had all taken their seats, then he sat down himself at the head of the conference table. Everyone could see how tense Calara was, and her pensive mood had spread to the other members of the crew.

“So... it’s time to make an important decision,” John said, looking around at his crew. “Do we keep harassing this Galkiran invasion force, or do we make a wormhole jump and begin our attacks against the second group?”

“How far away is the second group from Genwynn station?” Sakura asked.

“They’re about the same distance as this group is from the Venkalyn homeworld,” Alyssa replied, her expression sombre. “They also appear to be using the same tactics as these thralls. They keep their shields up in hyper-warp, then make regular stops to let the shield projectors recover.”

The Asian girl nodded in understanding. “And how many more stops will they need to make before they reach their targets?”

“One more,” Alyssa replied.

“Oh shit...” Dana muttered, her face falling. “So no matter what we do, we’re screwed, right? There’s no way we can stop them all in time!”

“That’s why we’ve been trying so hard to divert this group away from their current course,” John said, glancing at Calara. “But for some reason, they’re not taking the bait.”

She shook her head in sorrow. “I’m sorry, John, I’ve let you down. I don’t understand why they’re not budging. Dana’s probably right... I must have overdone it with the minefields. I just assumed that the thralls would be so infuriated, they’d leap at any opportunity to get revenge against the Invictus, especially knowing there was a rival Progenitor aboard.”

“I don’t know what they’re thinking,” John admitted, shrugging helplessly. “But you mustn’t blame yourself for this. You need to always remember that these thralls are being led by a Progenitor, and they’re a bunch of vicious psychopaths. It’s impossible to accurately predict how they’re going to react to any situation.”

The Latina nodded, her expression glum.

“Can I ask a question?” Jehanna asked tentatively.

John glanced her way, and could see that the dusky reporter still looked perturbed after witnessing the ferocity of the last battle.

“Go ahead, honey,” he said, with an encouraging smile. “Just go ahead and ask, you don’t need permission.”

“Umm... this is probably obvious to all of you, but why do we need to wait for the thrall forces to stop before we attack them? Can’t we just chase after them as soon as our shields have recharged, then keep interdicting their ships in hyper-warp? We’d be able to attack the Galkirans lots more times if we did that.”

“The main reason why we’re only ambushing them whenever they drop their shields, is so that our opening salvos are far more devastating,” Calara patiently explained. “Otherwise we’d have to wear down their shields before we could start inflicting damage, which means a much longer engagement to eliminate an entire fleet. That particularly applies to their battleships, which are by far the biggest threat to the Invictus. One unlucky hit by a Quantum Flux Cannon would cause serious damage, and might even punch through the shields and rupture the hull, so I want to minimise contact with their capital ships as much as possible.”

“There’s also the psychological element at play,” Rachel interjected. “If we subjected the Galkirans to relentless attacks, it would certainly cause them stress, but not as much as hitting them every time they’re really vulnerable. If I was a gambling girl, I’d make a large wager that the Galkirans absolutely dread having to stop and lower their shields. That kind of lingering fear and mounting anticipation of an attack really takes a toll.”

“Another factor we have to consider is crew fatigue,” John explained. “The Galkiran ships have enough personnel for day and night shifts, so they’re able to alternate bridge crews for each battle. We need the same girls for every fight, so we’d eventually start getting worn down with combat fatigue. We can’t risk making any mistakes, so we need to stay sharp for every battle.”

“Sorry, I knew it was a dumb question,” Jehanna apologised.

“No, not at all,” Calara said kindly. “Constantly hammering the Galkirans every step of the way is still an option, but it’s risky, and I want to avoid that if possible.”

Dana had stayed quiet through this exchange, but as soon as there was a lull in the conversation, she piped up, “If we can’t get this lot to change course, and we can’t get the other lot to change course either, what the hell are we supposed to do then?”

John grimaced at that dire prospect. “Then we’ll be forced to make an even worse choice. Do we defend Genwynn Station, or protect the Venkalyn homeworld?”

“Fuck me...” the redhead muttered, her face going pale. “What happens to the one we don’t defend?”

The ominous silence spoke volumes.

She waited for a long moment, then asked tersely, “And whichever one we do pick, we’ll be up against ten fleets of really fucking pissed thralls?”

“And maybe the dreadnought too,” Alyssa interjected.

Dana slumped back in her chair, rendered speechless by the bleak choices looming in the near future.

“I think the dreadnought has to be the deciding factor,” John said, watching Calara for her response. “While the Progenitor is still with the other attack group, I think we should keep focusing on these thrall fleets. We caused a huge amount of damage with the Valkyrie and the Raptor joining the fight, so if we concentrate on maximising casualties next time, rather than trying to lure them away, we might just encourage these thralls to react differently.”

The Latina nodded thoughtfully, her mood brightening. “You’re right. There could be any number of reasons why the thralls are behaving this way. If we can cripple at least two entire fleets next time, it might force them to pursue us out of sheer desperation.”

“Anyone else disagree?” John asked, glancing around at the rest of the group. “I’m open to any ideas at this point.”

They all shook their heads, unable to suggest any better alternatives.

“Alright, let’s eat together, then we’ll have an early night,” John suggested. “I want everyone to be bright and alert when we ambush the Galkirans tomorrow morning.”

“Helene and Ailita have been busy preparing dinner,” Alyssa informed him. “It’s ready and waiting for us.”

“Fantastic,” John said with relish, his stomach rumbling at the prospect.

Rachel was the first to rise from her chair. “I have to say, promoting Helene to catering officer has been one of your more inspired command decisions. I certainly appreciated your dedication to filling up our tummies, but there’s something to be said for having regularly scheduled breakfast, lunch, and dinners.”

Alyssa tapped her finger on her chin, and said, “Hmm... When we were back on the Fool’s Gold, John was always very diligent about making sure I never missed a meal. What happened, handsome?”

“I did my best, but you did insist on recruiting every beautiful woman we ran into,” John said, with a wry smile. “I couldn’t keep up with demand.”

“I’ve got no complaints,” Jehanna joked, running her hand over her rounded belly.

The girls laughed, relieved to lighten the mood, and started to file out of the Briefing Room with John following them out through the door. Marika was acting Watch Commander on the Bridge, and she greeted the crew with a friendly wave as they headed for the grav-tubes.

“I’ll be down shortly,” John said to Alyssa, before reaching out to clasp Jehanna’s hand. “Join me for a minute, honey?”

“Of course,” she immediately agreed, following John into his Ready Room.

He took a seat on one of the sofa’s then pulled Jehanna down, so she was sitting sideways across his lap. “Did you manage to record much combat footage this evening?” he asked with interest.

She nodded, and John felt her tense slightly in his arms. “The holographic maps are so detailed, they’ll be a spectacular sight for anyone viewing the battle.”

“Just three of us against nearly a hundred thrall warships. Pretty crazy odds,” he agreed, placing his hand on her stomach and gently stroking the rounded curves.

The affectionate caress made Jehanna melt in his arms, and she snuggled into him as he soothed her. “The girls were amazing,” she murmured.

“They are pretty incredible.”

“I don’t know how they were able to avoid everything the thralls threw at them,” Jehanna said with a shudder. “And I don’t think I saw Calara miss once.”

“Her gunnery skills are impressive,” he agreed, in a mastery of understatement.

Jehanna pulled back a bit so she could turn to look at him. “John, she was firing the Quantum Flux Cannons with the same precision as a surgeon with a laser scalpel. We shouldn’t have stood a chance against that thrall fleet, but the girls ripped them apart... and made it look easy!”

“Is that what’s bothering you?” he asked, meeting her tense gaze. “I know space combat can be terrifying at times, but you can trust the girls to keep us safe. Calara’s very careful about taking unnecessary risks, and she’d never do anything reckless unless she had no other choice.”

“The battle was shocking, but I do trust Alyssa and Calara,” Jehanna said quietly. “It’s just that they’re so... indomitable. I’ve been doing my best to improve my skills, but I’ll never be in their league.”

“Ah,” John said, nodding in understanding. “Well, first of all, you girls aren’t in competition with each other, so don’t worry about how you compare with the others. You’ve also only just joined the crew, so it’ll take you some time to master all your skills and psychic abilities. Second, you’re all exceptionally gifted at different things. Calara is a phenomenal strategist, and she’s probably the best gunnery marksman in the galaxy... but she hates ground combat, and can’t stand all the blood and gore.”

“Really?” Jehanna asked, looking startled.

“That’s the honest truth,” he replied. “Calara often feels guilty about not joining us for more ground missions, but it’s not really her area of expertise, and I don’t see any point in making her uncomfortable for no reason. She’s usually far more valuable providing fire support in the Invictus.”

“Yeah, I can see why.”

“That’s one of the reasons why you’re such a perfect fit for the team,” John said with a warm smile. “Sakura has been piloting the Valkyrie in most of our recent battles, so you’re filling the gap that she left in the ground team. Even when Sakura does join us on missions, she’ll be working with me to eliminate the big threats, while you work defensively, protecting the rest of the girls.”

Jehanna could tell he was sincere, and her expression brightened considerably. “You really think I’ll be able to make a useful contribution to the team?”

“I know you will,” John said with confidence. He gave her cum-filled stomach a reassuring caress and added, “Don’t worry about a thing. You’re going to be magnificent.”

She let out a contented sigh, and her eyes began to glow with a soft pink light.

“You’re such a good girl,” he said, tilting up her chin and giving Jehanna a tender kiss. “Why don’t you go back to bed? I’m enhancing you at the moment, and you need plenty of rest. I’ll come down to join you after dinner.”

“Okay,” she agreed. “Can I sleep next to you again tonight?”

“Of course. Having to leave you and Ailita earlier was torture.”

Jehanna gave him an adoring smile, then they left the Ready Room hand-in-hand.

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Gahl’kalgor leaned back in his chair and patted his stomach with a deep sigh of satisfaction. “That fish stew was excellent, Mother.”

“You’re a growing boy, Kal,” Ashryn said, rising from her chair and walking around to collect his empty bowl. “You need a hearty meal so you’ll grow up to be big and strong.”

As she cleared the table, Gahl’kalgor reached out to gently clasp her wrist. She paused, feeling a thrill of excitement at the touch of his skin against hers, and looked at her Progenitor master with a curious smile.

“Thank you,” he said earnestly, his voice catching with unfamiliar emotions.

She bit her lip, then placed the bowls back on the table, and reached up to lovingly brush her fingers through his hair. Closing his eyes in bliss, he leaned into her hand, relishing her comforting touch. Ashryn held her breath as she watched him, her mind in turmoil. She glanced at the neatly folded bundle of clothing that she’d tucked away on a shelf, and after a moment of uncertainty, decided that there would never be a better time.

“Excuse me for a moment, Kal,” she said, trying to keep her voice from stammering with nerves. “I’m going to freshen up after dinner. Why don’t you get ready for bed, then I’ll sing to you if you’d like?”

“I would like that... very much,” he said gratefully.

The Progenitor rose from his chair and ambled over to the bed, humming a quiet tune to himself.

Moving swiftly as soon as his back was turned, Ashryn reached over to grab the bundle of clothing, then ducked into the adjoining bathroom. She closed the door behind her, then let out her breath as she stared at her reflection in the mirror. The Galkiran thrall was wearing a peasant blouse and a pleated skirt, with her long dark hair tumbling loosely down over her shoulders.

Ashryn quickly stripped off the clothes, but took extraordinary care not to rip or tear each item as she placed them to one side. Next she reached for the folded bundle that she’d smuggled into the bathroom, then hurriedly began to put on her old uniform and boots, her fingers fumbling with the clasps as she did up her jacket. The final step was to braid her hair, and Ashryn darted nervous glances at the door as her scarlet fingers weaved back and forth, recreating the elaborate hairstyle.

“You’re doing this for him,” she whispered, staring at her reflection as she tried to convince herself that her motives were completely selfless.

With a final inhalation of breath, she turned on her heel and marched out through the door.

“Lord Gahl’kalgor,” she greeted him, her voice ringing with deep respect rather than maternal love. “Can you spare a moment of your time? I wish to make a formal request.”

He turned to look at her in surprise, then his expression contorted with anger and disbelief.

“What have you done?!” he snarled, crossing the room in a blur. He gripped the thrall by her throat, his eyes bulging with barely suppressed rage. “Where is she?! Bring her back right now!”

“My Lord!” she croaked. “I can be her again... your mother... but better!”

His eyes narrowed with suspicion. “What do you mean?”

The iron grip relaxed a fraction, and Ashryn gasped for breath. “I’m too old...” she panted, looking at him beseechingly, trying to make him understand. “Delsanra... she was fifty years younger than me!”

Gahl’kalgor cocked his head sideways, listening carefully now. “What are you asking? Speak plainly.”

“You can make me younger... I’ll look even more like her!” she blurted out in a rush.

He blinked in surprise, then studied her appraisingly. “You want me to feed you... like I do with Valeria.”

She nodded in confirmation. “Just a bit, so that I look the same age as Delsanra. That’s why I’m asking as Ashryn. To keep things... pure... between you and your mother.”

He looked at her with wide eyes, and his hand fell away from her throat. “I didn’t understand,” he said falteringly. “I.. apologise for hurting you.”

Ashryn stepped closer, then leaned up to give him a tender kiss on the cheek. “I didn’t mean to make you angry, my Lord. I just want to be exactly like her... forever.”

Gahl’kalgor surprised the thrall captain by wrapping his arms around her and hugging her close to his chest. “This is a wonderful gift, Ashryn. Thank you.”

Her face lit up with glee, and she nuzzled into his shoulder with a happy sigh. “I’ll do anything for you, Kal,” she murmured. “Your happiness is all that matters to me.”

He tensed for a moment at the accidental slip of his childhood nickname, then relaxed again and stroked her back. “Kneel by the bed,” he said quietly. “I’ll give you what you desire.”

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John rose from the dining chair and gave Helene a grateful hug. “Dinner was wonderful! It tasted just like the pasta my grandmother used to make. Thanks, honey.”

The rest of the girls echoed his praise as they got up from their seats.

“I just helped Ailita,” the teal-skinned mermaid confessed. “But she did teach me how to make mushroom Tagliatelle, so I can make it for you on my own next time.”

He glanced at the pink-haired catgirl and raised an eyebrow. “Have you been snooping through my memories?”

“Just a little bit, Master,” the Nymph admitted. “I wanted to make you something that I was sure you’d enjoy.”

“Well you’re a natural chef,” he said with admiration. “It’s not easy following a new recipe for the first time, but that was cooked to perfection.”

Ailita bounded over to him and gave him a joyful kiss. “Thanks, John!”

He noticed her accidental slip, and the Nymph blushed self-consciously as she listened to his thoughts. “You’re making great progress, Ailita. I’m proud of you.”

She kissed him again, then skipped off to the kitchen with a stack of plates, purring happily to herself.

“Care for a nightcap?” Alyssa asked, as she glided over to the bar.

“You’re a mind reader,” John joked. “It seems I’m surrounded by them.”

“Take a seat, I’ll bring it over,” the blonde replied with an indulgent smile. “What do the rest of you girls fancy?”

After placing her drink order, Calara walked with John over to the sofa, then glanced questioningly at the space beside him.

John patted the plush upholstery. “I saved you a spot.”

She gave him a knowing grin and slid into the seat. “I suppose you want to hear all about what distracted me during the battle?”

“I’ll take any excuse I can get to have a cuddle with my beautiful fiancée,” he said, slipping his arm around her shoulders. “But I was intrigued to hear you might have spotted a weakness in the Progenitors’ fleet tactics.”

“Whiskey with ice,” Alyssa called out, as she levitated the crystal cut tumbler over to John’s hand. “And a Cosmopolitan for the lady.”

They sipped their drinks and waited as the rest of the girls walked over to sit on the adjoining sofas.

“Don’t get your hopes up too much,” Calara warned him. “We’re nowhere near the tech level to be able to take advantage of this yet... and I’m not sure it’s even possible.”

“Caveats noted,” John said, placing his drink on the coffee table, then slipping his other arm around Sakura.

Well... the thrall fleets don’t use any strike craft at all. They rely solely on destroyers, cruisers, and battleships, then use their Tachyon Cannons to suppress enemy fighters.”

“Yeah, but that’s a formidable defence grid,” Sakura said with a rueful frown. “I managed to avoid taking any hits from Tachyon Lances, but it’s impossible to dodge all those tachyon bolts, even for a mech as agile as the Valkyrie.”

“I know,” Calara admitted. “But relying only on destroyer picket screens to suppress strike craft isn’t actually the best way of clearing out enemy fighters. There’s a very good reason why most of the other races we’ve encountered rely on interceptors to battle for fighter supremacy.”

“What does that matter if the thralls don’t even use fighters?” Dana asked, her brow furrowing in confusion.

“Well, once you’ve achieved fighter supremacy, then you’re free to use bomber wings with impunity,” the Latina explained.

Sakura frowned dubiously. “Bombers wouldn’t stand a chance. They’d be cut to pieces by a hail of tachyon bolts long before they ever got in range.”

“Yes, of course they would... unless we had a large enough tech advantage,” Calara stated with a hungry gleam in her eyes. “Just imagine waves of fighters and bombers as fast as the Raptor sweeping through the thrall fleets. Those strike craft would be too fast for the destroyers to track, and they wouldn’t be able to stop us from devastating their forces at will.”

Dana grimaced and shook her head. “I hate to burst your bubble, but there’s no chance of that ever happening. We’d need to be able to roll out Progenitor level tech to all our fighters and bombers, and we can’t even mass produce thrall grade equipment yet!”

“I know,” Calara said, taking another sip of her drink. “But a girl can dream.”

The redhead laughed. “I think you need a better imagination. In my dream, we’re zooming around in the Invictus with all the Tachyon Lances upgraded to Quantum Annihilators. You could vaporise an invading armada in seconds with that bad boy! Ka-boom!”

“How soon until we get a working prototype?” John teased her.

“Umm... I’m still working out a few kinks in the schematics at the moment,” Dana joked, breaking into a cheeky grin. “Give me a couple of millennia and I’ll see what I can do.”

“Awesome! I can’t wait,” he said, as the girls laughed at their banter.

They quickly changed the subject, then relaxed together amid light-hearted chatter, with everybody eager to keep the mood upbeat after the bleak discussion earlier. John enjoyed seeing the girls giggling and laughing, feeling his own spirits being raised in their charming company.

\*What are we going to do if he’s forced to choose tomorrow?\* Edraele asked Alyssa quietly.

Alyssa concealed a worried frown behind her glass as she slowly sipped her drink. \*I don’t know, Edraele. Let’s just pray it doesn’t come to that.”

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Gahl’kalgor sat on the bed beside the sleeping thrall, watching Ashryn with a bewildered expression on his handsome face. He couldn’t remember ever being that aroused before, and the female’s stomach was hugely swollen with a massive load of cum. There was a strange lightness in his chest as he studied Ashryn, and his mind seemed to lose any sense of focus, his thoughts scattered amongst a swirl of peculiar emotions.

As the hours rolled by, he saw the wrinkles around Ashryn’s eyes begin to fade, her skin becoming smoother and more supple. The thrall already bore a remarkable resemblance to Delsanra, but she had been absolute right; the rejuvenation process that unwound the passage of time only heightened the facial similarities with his mother. He was overwhelmed with another surge of strange feelings, and Gahl’kalgor cupped his face in his hands as he tried to make sense of these bizarre sensations.

The unsettling sense of giddiness gradually receded, and feeling more in control of himself once again, he lifted his face from his hands. A strange trick of the light caught Gahl’kalgor’s attention, and it almost seemed like there were hints of white amongst the roots of Ashryn’s hairline. He returned to a careful scrutiny of her face, but as more time rolled by, the creeping change to the thrall’s hair became unmistakeable.

Gahl’kalgor gaped at Ashryn in horror, watching as her lustrous black mane was progressively bleached of all colour. His temper blazed like a furnace in his chest, and he clenched a fist to take out his rage on the thrall who had conspired to deceive him. Just as quickly as his fury burned hot, it flickered out like a quenched candle, and he slowly unclasped his hands. He could tell by the serene expression on Ashryn’s face that she hadn’t planned this... whatever ‘it’ was... and a brief excursion through her mind confirmed that to be a fact.

The exploration of Ashryn’s subconscious also gave Gahl’kalgor a far greater insight into her real feelings about him. While it was true that she would do anything for him, the thrall hadn’t been completely honest when she said that his happiness was the only thing that mattered to her. Shocked by the overpowering rush of sensation, he jerked back out of her mind, and stared at the thrall in bewilderment.

With trembling fingers, he reached out a hand towards Ashryn’s head, then brushed his fingers through the silken softness of her hair. As the white expanded from root to tip, he gradually grew more accustomed to the new colouration, finding it oddly appealing in a peculiar fashion. While it was true that Ashryn now looked almost nothing like Delsanra without her jet-black hair, Gahl’kalgor was shocked to realise that he didn’t mind that so very much after all.

He continued to stare at Ashryn in fascination, wishing that she would awaken from her slumber. From millennia of experience, he knew that the female’s puny mind was still reeling from making contact with his own towering psyche, and it would be many more hours until she recovered. With an impatient sigh, Gahl’kalgor rose from the bed and reluctantly left the suite, while vowing to return to the snowy-haired thrall the second she awoke.