Three Square Meals Ch. 143

John followed his Lionesses across the hangar towards the parked gunship, their armoured boots ringing with every step on the titanium deckplates. As he approached the Raptor, its Crystal Alyssium hull caught his eye, the flawless white surface sparkling under the bright glare of the overhead lights. He came to a halt under the chin-mounted Tachyon Cannon and studied the predatory assault craft with a speculative look.

Alyssa turned back to face him and nodded in agreement as she overheard his thoughts. “It’s been a while since we re-plated the Raptor. It couldn’t hurt to toughen up the armour.”

“Alright, I’ll reshape it, you lock the plates back into position,” John agreed, shouldering his rifle and removing his Paragon helmet.

“Ready when you are.”

John gestured towards the psychically responsive metal and beckoned it towards him, intending to strip the armour from the gunship in one go. To his surprise, it obstinately refused to move, so he frowned in irritation and concentrated his will. A blazing tapestry of Progenitor runes appeared across its surface, instantly changing the white hull into gleaming gold, and John flushed with embarrassment as he realised what had happened.

“Sparks?” he yelled to the redhead, who had already boarded the Raptor. “Can you deactivate your runes please?”

Dana staggered into view and stared at him with wide eyes. “Holy shit!”

“What’s wrong?” John asked when he saw her shocked expression.

She removed her helmet and winced as she rubbed her temple. “That was like being smacked in the face with a sledgehammer! What the fuck did you do?!”

“I’m so sorry!” he apologised, jogging up the ramp to join her. “I completely forgot you’d protected the Raptor with runes. I’ve got used to repairing the Invictus and not having to think about it. Are you okay?”

Dana nodded and stood on tiptoe to give him a reassuring kiss. “I’m fine, I just wasn’t expecting it. I could feel you pulling against the runes... then I got clobbered over the head with whatever you did to them.”

“In John’s defence, your runes are as tough as old boots. He got frustrated and cranked it up a notch,” Alyssa explained, walking up to hug her friend. “I’m sorry too, Sparks. I didn’t think that was actually going to hurt.”

“You remembered it was runed?” John asked with a disapproving frown.

“Of course, I’m not a goldfish,” she teased him with a playful smile. “I was curious to see if Dana’s runes could actually stop a fully-fledged Progenitor from stripping away our armour. Now you’ve absorbed your guide, you must be at least as powerful as they are.”

“Well, at least we know the runes work. I couldn’t even shift the armour plating an inch,” he admitted, giving Dana a congratulatory pat on the shoulder.

The redhead didn’t look particularly relieved. “If you’d kept that up, there’s no way I could’ve stopped you for long. You pushed those runes to breaking point; a few more seconds and you would’ve busted your way through.”

“Hopefully they’ll last long enough that any Progenitor will give up on trying to break them,” John said, remembering just how resistant the eldritch glyphs had proven to be. “At least you know what to expect if it happens for real.”

“Yeah, it won’t be such a shock next time,” she conceded, waving her hand towards the gunship’s hull. “There you go, I’ve deactivated them. Do you want to upgrade our Paragon armour too?”

“That would be sensible; it won’t take long,” he agreed, walking down the ramp and backing away from the Raptor to a better vantage point.

When he gestured to the armour plating again, this time it instantly obeyed his siren call, melting effortlessly into viscous streams. He drew them away from the gunship into a huge globe of liquid metal, the orb rotating slowly as it absorbed every last droplet of Crystal Alyssium. John concentrated on reshaping the metal into a series of geometric shapes, switching between cubes and spheres to toughen the Etherium lattice.

“What level of plating did we start with on the Raptor?” he asked the blonde and redhead, who were watching silently as he worked. “I’ve reshaped it quite a bit and it’s still pretty easy.”

“You’re already up to twenty-nine...” Dana replied in an awed whisper.

“Really?” He paused and looked at them in astonishment. “Should I stop or keep going?”

“Keep going!” Alyssa urged him excitedly. “Let’s see how far you can push it!”

John focused on the metal again, telekinetically reshaping it until he felt that familiar resistance start to build.

“That’s about my limit,” he muttered, frowning with intense concentration. “Any more and I’ll struggle to make the armour plating.”

“That’ll be thirty-five times!” Dana exclaimed, shaking her head in disbelief. “Wow!”

Alyssa bounded over to his side and give him a jubilant kiss. “That was amazing! Well done!”

“Thanks,” John replied with a proud grin. “It was so much easier without my guide dragging me down.”

He had memorised the blueprints for the Raptor months ago, so forming the correct sized sections of armour was almost instinctive now. John coaxed the liquid metal into the relevant shapes, then floated them over to Alyssa, who used telekinesis to attach each newly-forged panel to its corresponding location on the hull. She hummed a jaunty sea-shanty as she worked beside him, her infectious good mood bringing a smile to his face.

“You seem happy,” he noted, delighted to see how much of a difference her short vacation had made.

“I am!” she gushed, while attaching another panel to the Raptor’s tail. Her cerulean eyes sparkled mischievously as she added, “Now that you’re so much better at this than me, I can leave re-armouring the Invictus in your wonderfully capable hands.”

That wiped the grin off John’s face and he groaned at the daunting prospect of having to re-plate the entire battlecruiser.

Alyssa laughed and leaned over to give him a reassuring kiss. “Don’t worry, I’ll still help out however I can. You’re right about the holiday though; having a little break from everything really made a big difference. I hadn’t realised how tense I’d been until I spent a few days being pampered... then all the stress just melted away.”

“You’ve been through a hell of a lot recently, with no time to process everything,” John said with sympathy. “I knew it was all building up though... I could feel it back before Karron.”

“You were right,” she said, her eyes softening. “Thanks for always looking out for me.”

“It’s my job as a Progenitor to take care of my matriarch,” John said solemnly, as he turned to face her. He hesitated and his brow furrowed in mock confusion. “Wait... I think I might’ve got that a bit wrong.”

She giggled and gave him a loving hug. “Yeah, afraid so. You’d make a terrible Progenitor.”

“What am I supposed to do with my matriarch then?” he asked, holding her close.

“I can think of a few fun suggestions...” she purred, nuzzling into him.

“Look at you two flirting together without a care in the world,” Dana said, her voice drifting down from the gunship’s wing.

John glanced up and saw the redhead watching them fondly. “I’m just glad to be back. I really missed all of you.”

“Yeah, I know,” she said with a lopsided smile. Jerking her thumb towards the cockpit, she continued, “Do you want to head inside and make a start on upgrading the Paragon suits? I need to inscribe a fresh set of protection runes on the Raptor, then I’ll join you.”

“Alright, I’ll see you in a minute,” John agreed, holding out his armoured gauntlet for Alyssa as she fixed the final section of armour into place.

The blonde slipped her hand into his and they walked up the loading ramp to board the gunship. After taking the grav-tube to the upper deck, they found the rest of the girls waiting for them in the cockpit. Dana had pre-emptively removed her runes from their Paragon armour, so John was able to start work immediately.

“The Raptor’s prepped and on standby, Master,” Jade said, turning to greet him with a cheerful wave. “I’ll take off as soon as Dana’s inside.”

The Nymph was wearing a flowery sundress, which meant there was a grand total of seven Paragon suits that needed to be re-plated. Rachel, Helene, and the twins waited patiently as John upgraded their armour, after which he turned his attention to the suits worn by Alyssa and himself. There was considerably less surface area to cover than the Raptor, but the work was more intricate, with each piece of armour plating designed to perfectly fit the contours of the wearer.

“Done!” Dana called out, as she bounded into the cockpit with her helmet tucked under one arm.

They could hear the dull roar of retro-thrusters for a couple of seconds until the loading ramp closed, then the cockpit was immersed in serene silence. John worked quickly to complete his enhancement of their armour, then turned his attention to Jade as she nudged the throttle forward and the Raptor raced towards the hangar door.

Instead of emerging into the unending darkness of space, a majestic nebula of rich purples swept across their view through the Raptor’s crystal canopy. John was already familiar with the Mists of Loralar after watching Tashana’s holographic simulation, but seeing it with his own two eyes was a breathtaking sight. He glanced at the local System Map that was floating above Jade’s console, but their sensors were unable to penetrate the inhospitable stellar hazard.

“Alright, take us in, Jade,” he said to their Nymph pilot. “We’ll hold position on the periphery to see how badly we’re affected by the Mists and give Helene a chance to get comfortable protecting the girls.”

“Will do,” the verdant-hued beauty agreed, pushing the throttle forward.

They all held their breath as they crossed into the nebula, with everyone glancing apprehensively at each other. When nothing happened after thirty seconds, there was a collective sigh of relief, quickly followed by nervous laughter.

“Are any of you feeling anything yet?” John asked, checking each of his companions for the slightest sign of distress.

They all shook their heads and the tension eased in the cockpit.

“Valada’s records reported that the Maliri who entered the Mists started to experience feelings of unease almost immediately,” Rachel informed him.

“Let’s just wait a few more minutes to be sure,” John said, pleased that everyone seemed to be unaffected.

“We’ve all been psychically enhanced,” Rachel mused aloud. “I wonder if that made us strong enough to resist the debilitating mental affects of the Mists?”

“If the thrall races are all essentially identical to each other, then none of the crew on a Progenitor dreadnought would be psychic,” Tashana said thoughtfully. “It wouldn’t matter if a Progenitor was immune to the anxiety the psychic field generates if his thralls were still prevented from approaching Kythshara. Keeping the thralls away would mean that a rival Progenitor who wanted to investigate the planet would have to do so alone.”

“Where is Kythshara?” John asked, turning back to study the purple expanse.

“It’s on the second orbital path around the star,” Alyssa explained, leaning over the console to tap a series of buttons. “Valada created an algorithm to plot the planet’s approximate position, so that her scouts wouldn’t have to waste time trying to locate it.”

A holographic map of the system appeared, showing the orbiting planet and a green flight path that would take them directly to Kythshara.

Irillith shivered involuntarily as she stared at the map. “Maybe this was a bad idea. Mael’nerak probably had a very good reason for keeping Valada and the Maliri away from this place. I mean... it might be dangerous down there.”

John shot a concerned glance at Rachel, immediately recognising the symptoms she’d warned them about.

The brunette reached out to Irillith, a grey mist swirling along her arm to envelop the hacker. “Adrenalin levels are spiking...” Rachel said, her brow furrowing as she gave the Maliri a thorough examination. “I’m seeing elevated activity in her Amygdala.”

“I’m fine!” Irillith protested indignantly, starting to look agitated. “I just think we should pull back and investigate the bunker under Saelihn Immanthe first!”

John placed his hand on Irillith’s shoulder to calm her. “Take it easy, honey. We’ll leave as soon as we can.” He glanced meaningfully at Helene and continued, “Are you able to sense whatever it is that’s affecting her?”

The aquatic girl closed her eyes and concentrated, pushing out with her subconscious to make contact with their minds. She sensed John and the girls immediately, each one shining brightly like a beacon in the Astral plane. What was disturbing however, was that the Astral itself seemed to have changed, the featureless plane now tinged with a murky purple that Helene found deeply unsettling.

“There’s definitely something there... but I don’t know how to protect us from it,” she said, looking at Irillith with concern.

The Empath quickly explained what she’d seen on the Astral plane to her captivated audience.

“Do you remember how you kept Tamolith stable? Try to picture us as islands like you did with her,” Alyssa urged the pensive mermaid.

“But that was for her internal emotions...” Helene said with a bewildered frown. “Tamolith’s grief was overwhelming and I just tried to keep her from drowning in it. I don’t know how to block whatever the mist is doing!”

“It’s the same idea,” the blonde persisted. “You just need to find a way of picturing the problem, then you should be able to come up with a way to deal with it.”

John nodded his agreement. “How you visualise anything on the Astral is completely up to you. Your imagination is given free rein there, so you can create any solution you like... but please hurry. If you’re not able to protect Irillith, just let us know, and we’ll think of another plan.”

Helene took a deep breath and spent a long moment trying to create a picture of the problem in her mind. It came to her in a moment of inspiration and she pushed out with her will, altering her perception of how she viewed the Mists eroding their sanity. In a flash the scene before her on the Astral Plane changed. Helene used a similar metaphor as before, but rather than an atoll of islands, she imagined John and the girls as a range of cliffs. Instead of the ocean threatening to wash over exotic sandy beaches, stormy waves were crashing into the rocky crags.

How each of the crew was faring under the psychic onslaught varied dramatically. She pictured John as a towering granite bulwark, the surging waves proving as ineffective against that immutable obstacle as if they were ripples in a puddle. Next was Alyssa, her metaphysical representation formed of the same unyielding rock, but her cliff face was substantially smaller. Jade came next in terms of stature, but the ocean was calm and placid along her section of the coastline, as if Poseidon himself had given up any hope of reclaiming that land.

The cliff formations underwent a change at that point, the igneous rock that represented John and his matriarchs shifting to sedimentary. Looming high above the others was a majestic escarpment of red sandstone, the crashing waves simply polishing the rock to a vibrant scarlet sheen. The sandstone shifted colours further along the coastline, the crimson rock changing to sturdy grey, then a stretch of sandy gold, before finishing with a low-lying ridge of pale violet chalk.

It was the last section of coastline that worried Helene the most. As she watched, the waves smashed into the base of the cliffs, constantly eroding the foundation and weakening it further. A crack formed near the raging sea, then widened with a horrible groan, the newly formed crevasse reaching up towards the clifftop. With its surface fractured, a section of the cliff broke away and crashed down into the ocean with a mighty splash.

Helene knew she needed to intervene immediately and pushed out with her will to support Irillith’s besieged subconscious. The tidal water reared back to crash against her mind once again, but the wave faltered, holding in place for a moment before collapsing in on itself. The psychic waters swirled in a furious spray of white foam, then a yawning whirlpool appeared in the ocean’s surface, reversing the inexorable tide. Robbed of their strength, the waves petered out entirely, sucked into the hungry maw of that maelstrom. The sea even receded from the cliff edge, giving the crumbling coastline some much-needed respite from the relentless psychic onslaught.

When Helene reopened her eyes, she focused on the Maliri hacker who was now swathed in a soothing teal glow. “Does that feel better?”

Irillith sagged with relief and gave her a grateful nod. “It crept up on me... I didn’t even realise I’d been affected. It feels like a huge pressure’s been lifted now though. Thank you, Helene!”

She smiled graciously, overjoyed to see her friend had recovered. “I was very glad to help.”

“What’s the situation, honey?” John asked with a worried frown. “How are the rest of the girls holding up?”

“They’re all okay for the moment,” she explained, giving him a reassuring smile. “Irillith was the most vulnerable to mental attack by the mists, so she started getting scared first.”

“It must be because I’m a Maliri... a thrall species,” Irillith said, nodding as her suspicions were confirmed. She darted a worried glance at her sister and added, “You better brace yourself Shan, you’ll be next.”

Helene shook her head. “I don’t think your species has anything to do with it. Aside from those three...” She pointed to John, Alyssa, then Jade. “Tashana seems to be the least affected out of the rest of you. Dana’s actually the one I’m concerned about now.”

“Me?!” the redhead squeaked, her eyes widening in alarm.

Helene nodded. “I’m afraid so. Don’t worry though, I can deaden the effects of the psychic waves, so you shouldn’t suffer from any side-effects.”

“How long can you keep that up?” John asked the empathic mermaid.

“I’m sorry... I don’t know for sure,” she said, giving him a helpless shrug of apology. “This is much harder than trying to soothe somebody’s feelings of grief or shame.”

“Helene’s using a lot more psychic energy than normal, but we’ve got plenty in our reserves to keep her going for at least a couple of hours,” Alyssa interjected.

“Are you shielding all of us?” Tashana asked, her curiosity piqued.

“The four of you don’t need my help,” Helene replied, her glance encompassing John, Alyssa, Jade and the Maliri archaeologist. She then gestured towards Irillith, Dana, and her girlfriend. “I’ve managed to hold back the psychic waves from wearing down their resistance.”

“What about you, Helene?” Rachel asked, concerned for the selfless empath.

Helene hesitated for a moment before answering. “I don’t feel like I’m being attacked, or at least, I’m not feeling anxious or frightened.”

“You should be far more resistant to this kind of psychic aura because of your runic affinity,” John explained, before blinking in surprise, startling himself with that sudden flash of insight. “We’ll keep a close eye on you to be careful, but let us know if you feel anything unusual.”

“I will,” she said earnestly.

John looked around at the group. “The clock’s ticking, so we better get moving. Unless any of you have any objections?”

There were none, so Jade swivelled around to sit back down in the pilot’s chair and ramp up power to the engines. She banked the Raptor to starboard and set a course which would closely follow the flight path that Alyssa had uploaded to the gunship. As they flew towards the star in the centre of the system, the occasional glance at the holographic map showed no new information, their sensors blocked by the Mists.

“I hate flying blind,” Tashana muttered, grimacing as she stared out into the swirling purple nebula. “You never know what’s lurking out there in wait.”

John slipped his arm around her shoulders. “Are you feeling alright? Is this anxiety from the Mists?”

She turned to give him a self-conscious smile. “No, just my time as a smuggler. In that profession you had to be wary of law enforcement, crime lords, double-crossing clients, your own crew... it’s not paranoia when everyone’s out to get you.”

“The offer’s still open to remove those memories,” John said, looking at her with sympathy.

Tashana considered it for a moment. “Not right now... but later maybe? When the war is over, I think I’d like to put all that behind me. As terrible as my time in the Unclaimed Wastes was, I learned some sneaky tricks that might come in useful against the Progenitors.”

“Just let me know whenever you feel ready.”

They turned back to the view, watching and waiting for any sign of Kythshara.

“We’re getting close to the outer ring of defences,” Alyssa warned her fellow matriarch. “I’ve plotted a course that should take us through one of the gaps Valada identified in the turret grid.”

“It seems a bit sloppy leaving holes in the defences,” Dana said with a frown. “I thought Mael’nerak was supposed to be super smart?”

“The area these gun emplacements are covering is vast,” Alyssa explained. “There’s just way too much space to cover at this distance from the planet unless he built tens-of-thousands of turrets. This is like an outer layer of defences intended to slow down invaders and make them cautious; it’s the inner rings that Calara’s really worried about.”

Everyone was feeling on edge as the Raptor continued onwards, but it had nothing to do with the aura from the Mists. They all knew that dozens of gun turrets might already be tracking their approach, ready to open fire with lethal weapons that were designed to eviscerate powerful thrall ships. Their suspicions were confirmed when the pilot’s console chimed and an icon flashed on the comms interface.

“Incoming hail,” Alyssa said, reaching over to acknowledge the call.

A deep baritone voice rang out around the cockpit. “El Nareith hae’em dargonath.”

“What did he say?” Dana asked in a hushed voice.

“The light in the darkness,” Tashana translated, before glancing at John. “Is this some kind of riddle?”

“Maybe if we answer correctly, we can deactivate Kythshara’s defences?” Irillith said hopefully.

“Hold here for a second, Jade,” John said, patting her on the shoulder.

She did as he requested, bringing the Raptor to a halt.

“Any idea how we should respond?” John asked, looking around at the girls.

“Maybe he’s referring to the Shroud?” Dana suggested. “As far as we know, this is the only area in the galaxy that isn’t ruled by Xar’aziuth.”

“Even if that is the correct answer, it’s highly unlikely that Mael’nerak referred to it as ‘The Shroud’,” Irillith said, looking sceptical. “A direct translation into ancient Maliri would be ‘Ta’mariksha’ but he could’ve called it anything.”

“What about Valada?” Alyssa said, staring out into the nebula. “We know Mael’nerak loved her and she had a dramatic impact on his life.”

John nodded thoughtfully. “True... and it’s highly unlikely that an invading Progenitor would know the name of Mael’nerak’s matriarch.” He glanced around at the girls and continued, “Have you got any other suggestions? If not, then I think we should go with Alyssa’s.”

Nobody volunteered any other ideas, so John activated the comms interface and sent out a system-wide broadcast. “Valada,” he declared solemnly.

They waited for a couple of minutes but there was no other response.

“Shall I proceed, Master?” Jade asked, waiting for his permission to continue.

“Go ahead. We can’t afford to waste any more time.”

She powered up the engines and the Raptor surged forward, heading towards the heart of the nebula. They had only resumed flying for thirty seconds, when there was a sudden flicker from the System Map, the sensors finally close enough to an object to detect it.

“Debris...” Irillith muttered, staring intently at the shattered remnants of a spacecraft. “It’s a Maliri destroyer.”

“One of Great Grandmother’s scouts,” Tashana added, moving closer to the cockpit canopy to get a better look.

“Damn...” Dana said quietly, shocked by the extent of the destruction. “Those poor bastards were torn to pieces!”

The wreck looked like it had been hit by scores of beams, each one burning straight through the hull.

“Stay over to the port side,” Alyssa advised their Nymph pilot. “We don’t want to get anywhere near that turret.”

Jade made the course correction and they passed more obliterated hulks as they proceeded in-system. Each vessel had been blown to pieces the moment they were within range of a gun emplacement, giving the Raptor’s crew a macabre way of detecting a nearby turret whenever they drew near to its position. The final graves of those brave Maliri allowed them to serve their people for a final time and Tashana bowed her head with respect to each one they passed.

“We’re reaching the limit the scouts were able to penetrate,” Alyssa said, squinting into the purple gloom. “No ships returned from exploring any closer than this.”

Less than thirty seconds passed before a strobing white light lit up the cockpit. The shield status display registered hits a second later and the protective barrier began to drop at an alarming rate.

“Evasive manoeuvres!” John ordered, tightly gripping the back of Jade’s chair.

“On it, Master!” she replied, slamming the flight stick to the left and pushing it forward.

The Raptor performed a diving barrel roll, which the Nymph smoothly corrected as she brought the gunship back towards their destination. She flipped and spun the nimble assault craft, making it perform a chaotic dance to avoid the deadly incoming fire.

Dana rushed over to the canopy to get a better look at whatever was shooting at them. “They must be using some kind of rapid fire weapon in a fast tracking turret! It hits like a fucking truck!”

“John... take a look at this!” Alyssa exclaimed, pointing towards the holographic map.

He could see the beams thrumming past the Raptor, their wake crisscrossed by a forest of white columns. With the gunship’s incredible speed combined with Jade’s supernatural agility, Mael’nerak’s defences found it impossible to keep up with her chaotic manoeuvres. She performed the intricate ballet for the next several minutes, long enough to pull away from the turret that had initially fired on them. Just when they had cleared its field of fire, a second turret renewed the barrage, forcing Jade to frantically evade more beam volleys.

“Nice flying!” John said with admiration, rubbing the Nymph’s shoulder when they cleared the second emplacement. He glanced at the shields that had regenerated to a pale green. “You can ease off on the dodging now, at least until we come under attack again.”

“I guess the answer wasn’t Valada,” Irillith noted glumly.

Jade returned them to the original flight path, which would lead directly to Kythshara’s projected location. Their rapid progress was interrupted once again as another turret opened fire, with the Nymph reacting immediately and avoiding the worst of the initial salvo. She ducked and weaved, making the Raptor an impossible target, as they steadily proceeded towards the second orbital path around the star.

“There it is!” Tashana blurted out, pointing excitedly at the canopy as the gunship yawed wildly to starboard. With the Raptor’s nose flipping around in response to Jade’s wild dodging, the field of stars whirled past in a dizzying blur. “I definitely saw Kythshara!”

John and the girls were all on the lookout for the elusive planet now, but they saw only fleeting glimpses of a green world as it flashed past the window. When they were finally clear of the turret’s field of fire, Jade straightened out the Raptor and ramped up its engines, rushing onwards towards their destination. Kythshara was now directly in front of them, growing larger by the second as they closed the distance. The planet had a mystical feel to it, the verdant paradise like a gleaming emerald presented on a rich purple cloth.

“It looks so beautiful,” Helene whispered, staring at the planet in wonder.

“I can’t believe we actually found Mael’nerak’s homeworld,” Tashana said reverently. “Do you remember much about living there, Jade?”

There was no answer from the Nymph, so Tashana turned to see Jade’s reaction to setting eyes on her home for the first time in over 10,000 years.

“Jade!” she gasped, rushing over to their stricken pilot. “John, something’s wrong with her!”

The Nymph’s features were contorted in a silent scream of anguish, her body frozen in place with her eyes locked in terror on Kythshara.

John darted around the pilot’s chair to see for himself, and recoiled in shock at the dreadful expression on her face. “She must have reacted to the Mists! You need to shield her, Helene! Now!”

Helene’s eyes glowed with a soft teal light as she reached out to her friend. “I don’t think it’s the Mists,” she said fearfully, after hastily checking her on the Astral. “Nothing’s changed... the psychic ocean isn’t even trying to wear her down!”

The cockpit lit up with another staccato pulse of bright light, signifying that the Raptor had reached the final line of defences positioned around Kythshara. Their shields were hammered by energy beams, the dazzling white light immediately followed by a succession of bright colours, as the gunship’s shield status dropped from green to orange in a matter of seconds.

Tashana reacted first, lunging for Jade’s hands to yank back the joystick and avoid the incoming fire. To her surprise she couldn’t move those lithe green limbs even a millimetre, the Nymph’s fingers clenched in a death grip around the Raptor’s flight controls.

“She’s much too strong! I can’t budge them!” she cried out in alarm. “John, you’re the only one that’s stronger than her!”

He reached for Jade’s hands and hesitated, darting a worried glance at the paralysed Nymph. “If I use too much force, I’ll break her arms!”

“Leave her!” Alyssa shouted, as she dove for the co-pilot’s seat. “I’ll take over!”

A crimson flash illuminated the pilot’s console as the shields were overwhelmed, then the Raptor juddered as it was struck by coruscating beams. There was a dull boom as the gunship was rocked by an explosion, the damage display lighting up like a Christmas tree.

“They took out our starboard Tachyon Cannon!” Dana reported, before rushing over to the canopy and peering outside. “We’ve lost the entire right wing!”

Alyssa’s hands flew over her console. “Transferring flight control...”

She gripped the secondary joystick and shoved it forward and to the right, the retro-thrusters along the port flank flaring at full power to flip them into a dive. John glanced at the System Map and saw the next spray of shots go wide, unable to track the agile craft as it made the violent turn.

“Shit... we must’ve lost half the starboard retro-thrusters!” Alyssa snarled, her face twisted into a grimace of intense concentration.

“Just get us down to the planet!” John urged her. “We can’t call in the Invictus until we knock out whatever’s powering the Mists.”

“I’m trying,” she replied, desperately fighting the controls. “If I try to level us out with only half the thrusters, we’ll be a sitting duck for that turret!”

John turned to Rachel, meeting her worried gaze. “Can you shield us? We just need long enough for Alyssa to change course and clear the turret’s field of fire.”

“Shield the Raptor?!” Rachel exclaimed, gaping at him incredulously. “But it’s huge! I’ve never shielded anything that big before!”

“The principle’s the same... just build it with more hexagons!” John urged her. “I’d try it myself but you’re much better at making hex-barriers than me.”

“Alright... let me just think about how to do this,” she agreed, closing her eyes to concentrate.

“You don’t need to write a thesis on it, babes!” Dana blurted out, looking at the damage status with mounting alarm. “I hate to pile on the pressure, but that explosion ruptured a fuel line to the manoeuvring thrusters. If I don’t shut them down asap, they’ll bleed us dry!”

“Can you repair it from here?” John asked, turning to face the redhead.

She blinked in surprise. “What, you mean psychically?”

“I’ve seen you do it before with the Invictus. This should be easy in comparison.”

“Sparks uses shitloads of psychic energy doing that,” Alyssa warned them, not taking her eyes off her instruments for a second. “You’ll cut down on the amount of reserves we have for Helene.”

John didn’t hesitate and immediately replied, “Energy reserves won’t do us much good if we get shot out of the sky. Do it, Sparks. Just repair the worst of the leaks; anything to reduce the fuel loss.”

“A quick and dirty patch job... that used to be my specialty,” she said with a strained smile. Her eyes began to glow with a gleaming golden light as she hurried over to the starboard wall.

“Okay, I’m ready,” Rachel declared, taking a deep breath before holding out her arms. “I don’t know how long I’m going to be able to hold this shield. It’s going to require four-hundred times more hexagons to complete.”

“Four-hundred hexagons!” Helene exclaimed. “That’s a huge amount!”

The brunette shook her head as she focused her will. “No, you misunderstand. A standard spherical hex-shield has a one-metre radius and is constructed from 558 hexagons. To protect the Raptor, I’ll need to create a shield with a twenty-metre radius... which will require 223,200 hexagons.”

John stared at her in disbelief. “Goddamn... I had no idea. Alright, we’ll figure something else out.”

“I’m willing to try,” Rachel said solemnly, her eyes shining with a smoky grey light. “Get ready to make your manoeuvres in ten seconds, Alyssa.”

“Got it,” the blonde agreed, tightening her grip on the flight controls.

The lights flickered as Rachel drew more power, her face showing the strain as she channelled all that eldritch energy into a massive hex barrier. “Now!”

Alyssa pulled back on the stick and levelled out the one-winged Raptor, the manoeuvre much slower to complete with so many damaged retro-thrusters. When the gunship was pointing towards Kythshara again, she shoved the throttle forward, accelerating the Raptor up to maximum thrust.

“Brace yourself,” John warned Rachel. “Incoming fire!”

He watched the holographic map as the gun emplacement strafed its beams onto the rear of the fleeing Raptor. The gunship’s sensors were unable to interpret Rachel’s rotating hex barrier, but John could see the shots striking its curved surface, only for each dazzling blast to dissipate harmlessly.

“It’s working!” Tashana exclaimed, grinning at the brunette. “You actually did it!”

Rachel groaned with the effort, her hands trembling as she rebuilt hundreds of shattered hexagons every time they absorbed each beam. The barrier rotated as fast as she could spin it, always making sure that fresh tiles were facing the next salvo. Seconds ticked by as the Raptor roared towards Kythshara, the planet looming larger and larger until it encompassed the entire view from the canopy.

Beads of sweat appeared on Rachel’s brow and she wavered unsteadily as she withstood the onslaught.

“She can’t hold it much longer!” John warned Alyssa, poised to catch the Terran girl if needed.

“Just a few more seconds...” Alyssa muttered, darting a pensive glance at the system map.

They were now close enough to Kythshara for the inhibited sensors to finally locate the concealed planet, depicting Mael’nerak’s home as a huge Gaia-class world. Energy signatures had been detected and cities were marked on the surface, a bright sprinkling of lights revealing their location on the hemisphere shrouded under nightfall. Amidst all those signs of civilisation, a dazzling light blazed like a beacon, marking a source of massive power usage.

Rachel’s swaying became more pronounced, her arms drooping as if the effort to hold them up was beyond her flagging strength. She staggered back a step, then collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut, falling into John’s waiting embrace as he scooped her up in his arms.

“Shit!” Alyssa cursed, tugging the flight stick to the side to trigger a spin.

The Raptor began the turn, but the gun emplacement was already locked onto the evading ship. As soon as Rachel’s barrier collapsed, the next volley of beams struck the Raptor’s stern, obliterating the tail and blasting the engines. The gunship lurched violently, the inertia dampeners doing their best to limit the effect on the passengers, but it couldn’t prevent them from being knocked down by the impact.

Plunging into the upper atmosphere, the gunship spiralled out of control, flames and smoke trailing in its wake. Energy beams lanced down all around them, lighting up the cockpit with searing flashes as they continued their rapid descent.

“Right engine’s gone... left is badly damaged!” Dana called out, staring up at the damage report in shock, the gold glow fading from her eyes. “We’re down to 17% thrust!”

There was a lull in the barrage of beams, ending the frenetic light show and filling the cockpit with an ominous silence.

“Why isn’t it finishing us off?” Irillith asked in a hushed voice, her eyes like saucers as she waited for the kill shot.

“We must’ve cleared max range,” John replied, carefully lowering Rachel so she was resting on the deck. “Either that, or they stopped firing to avoid hitting anything on the ground.”

“Rach! Dana blurted out, scrabbling across the deck to her unconscious girlfriend. “What the fuck happened?!”

Remembering that the redhead had been distracted with ship repairs at the time, John quickly explained, “She put herself under a huge strain trying to maintain that shield.”

Alyssa glanced back at them over her shoulder. “She’s okay, Sparks... just exhausted.”

John crouched by the co-pilot’s chair and looked up at Alyssa. “Can you still land the Raptor or has it taken too much damage?”

She grimaced and gave the scarlet damage status display a meaningful glance. “I don’t know... we’ve been shot to hell. Even with a wing gone I should still be able to bring us down just using the thrusters, but the Raptor’s handling like a brick!”

Alyssa fought valiantly to correct the death spiral, the retro-thrusters blazing away on the port side to bring the gunship back under control. Below them, Kythshara spun like a wheel, making anyone who looked at it feel dizzy. Gradually she managed to correct the rotation, but they were still dropping at an alarming rate.

Dana scrambled over to the console and started scrolling through the endless damage report. “Shit... this is bad. We lost the vertical stabiliser and most of the tail. 62% of our ailerons are gone and we lost all the retro-thrusters on the back third of the Raptor. The engine explosion must’ve also breached the cargo bay, because the rear of the gunship’s been depressurised.”

“We’re dropping like a rock,” Alyssa informed them. “We’ve got about three minutes before we make a very big crater on Kythshara!”

“Alright, what’re our options?” John said, turning to get everyone’s input as they regained their footing and quickly gathered around. “I’m thinking that if it’s impossible to land the Raptor, we should abandon ship and use the Paragon suits to fly down.”

“But what about Jade and Rachel?” Tashana asked, gesturing to their incapacitated crewmates.

“Rachel’s fine, she’s just exhausted,” Alyssa called back over her shoulder. “But I don’t know what happened to Jade.”

John gently stroked the Nymph’s dark hair. “Did you sense anything from her before she froze like this?”

“Nothing... nothing at all... but I was pretty distracted at the time,” the blonde admitted, darting a worried look at her fellow matriarch. “Jade doesn’t really get very emotional, so it’s possible she was in distress but I missed the warning signs.”

“It wasn’t an emotional reaction that caused this,” John said with certainty. “We need Rachel to perform a comprehensive health check on her and find out exactly what’s wrong. For now, let’s focus on getting down to Kythshara and neutralising whatever’s generating the Mists.”

Tashana cleared her throat and said, “I actually meant: how are we going to bring them with us if we do have to jump?”

“Alyssa and I can carry them using telekinetic nets,” John replied, having already anticipated that question. “They’ll be perfectly safe.”

“I haven’t done anything like that before,” Helene said with a worried frown. “Is it difficult to learn how to fly in this armour?”

John hesitated and couldn’t help chuckling at the absurdity of trying to teach someone how to operate a Paragon suit in the middle of their first orbital drop.

She blushed and looked embarrassed. “I’m sorry, I know I’m causing you more problems.”

“I wasn’t laughing at you, I promise... just this crazy situation,” John said, giving her an apologetic smile. “Don’t worry, I should be able to carry you down safely too.”

“Actually, we might not need to abandon ship...” Dana murmured, lost in thought.

“What do you mean?” he asked, looking at her quizzically.

“I can’t replace the missing thrusters, but we could rebuild the Raptor’s superstructure... or at least you can. If you strip whatever’s left of the rear armour, you could use that to make another wing. We’ll be horribly exposed in a firefight, but at least Alyssa can glide us down to the surface.”

John glanced around at the rest of the girls. “Any other ideas?” When they all shook their heads, he continued, “Okay, let’s do it.”

With their helmets securely in place, John accompanied Dana out of the cockpit and sealed the door behind them. They descended in the grav-tube and walked to the door leading into rear loading area.

“Brace yourself,” John warned Dana, activating the magnetic clamps on his boots and locking himself to the deck.

She slipped her arms around him and held on tight, locking her own boots to the metal deck plates. John held her close and activated the door, which slid open to a whistling roar. The buffeting was intense as the corridor decompressed, the air sucked out in a matter of seconds.

“You okay?” John asked glancing down at the redhead.

She nodded giving him a brave smile. “Yeah... I’m with you.”

De-clamping themselves from the deck, they walked through to see the ragged rear of the gunship. When the starboard engine had been destroyed, the explosion had ripped the loading ramp from the hull, leaving a gaping hole. There were also melted patches on the starboard side, where beams had blasted the Raptor’s flank at an oblique angle.

Warning icons flashed on the Paragon suits HUD, alerting John to the climbing temperature.

“Heat from re-entry burn,” Dana explained. “It’s friction from the Raptor hitting the atmosphere.”

“Cruising along at 2000 mph in a balmy 500 degrees... perfect psychic shaping conditions,” John remarked with a wry smile. “How do you want to do this?”

“Most of the armour protecting the cargo area is still intact. If you strip all the plating, you should have enough Crystal Alyssium to make a wing,” Dana replied in a rush. “It doesn’t need flaps and shit like that... just the basic shape should keep us stable, and give us enough lift for Alyssa to glide us down.”

“Right... but what about actually attaching it to the Raptor?” he asked, walking over to the starboard airlock. “It’ll be like trying to thread a needle in a wind tunnel.”

Dana gave him a rueful shrug. “I was hoping you might be able to think of something.”

“Right,” he muttered with a grimace, placing his hand on the DNA reader.

Opening the airlock, the howling roar intensified as did the external temperature. He edged near to the open portal and looked up at the jagged remains of the wing jutting from the fuselage. John knew that he’d have to create some kind of barrier that would shield a newly formed wing, to stop it being torn away with the wind until he’d attached it to the Raptor.

“Got it,” he said in a moment of inspiration.

Gesturing outwards he projected a telekinetic barrier, the translucent construct hard to spot against the pale blue sky. The wall of psychic force wasn’t constrained by the normal rules of physics, so he was able to position it thirty metres ahead without worrying that it was about to be ripped away. Abruptly the shrill scream of the wind cut out to a high-pitched whistle and the scorching temperature began to drop.

Reaching out with his mind to the Crystal Alyssium coating the rear half of the Raptor, John liquefied the metal and drew it away from the hull, then gathered the sparkling material off their starboard flank. He knew the dimensions of the gunship by heart, having helped repair the armour so many times over the last six months, and the metal obediently flowed into the shape he pictured.

“How’s that look?” he asked, rotating a fully formed wing for Dana to study.

“That looks perfect!” she said enthusiastically. “Stick it on!”

John stripped the armour from the damaged hull, then shaped the wing’s Crystal Alyssium a final time as he inserted it into the gunship and welded it in place. Satisfied that it was secure, he dismissed the force barrier and watched the wing for a few painfully-long seconds to look for any signs of structural weakness. To his relief, it seemed to be stable and safely secured in place.

“Awesome job!” Dana crowed patting him on the back.

Reaching out with his mind, he informed Alyssa, \*The new wing’s attached. You’re good to go.\*

He could feel her shock over their bond, the blonde stunned by his declaration.

\*Oh, ye of little faith,\* John teased his matriarch, as he followed Dana back to the grav-tube. \*If you thought I had no chance of repairing the Raptor, why didn’t you say anything?\*

\*It’s not that...\* she replied, her voice rapidly fluctuating from bewilderment to elation. \*You’re pushing your thoughts to me!\*

\*What do you mean?\* he asked, floating up in the blue anti-gravity field beside his Chief Engineer.

\*I’m not reading your mind... you’re actively using telepathy!\* Alyssa exclaimed sounding thrilled.

Now it was John’s turn to be surprised. \*I guess it was inevitable after merging with my guide. Contacting you that way felt instinctive.\*

They had to wait a few more seconds for the corridor to regain atmospheric pressure before Dana opened the cockpit door. She hurried over to Rachel and knelt beside her girlfriend to check the brunette was still comfortable.

\*Can you hear me like this too, Edraele?\* John asked his Maliri matriarch, projecting his thoughts to her the same way.

\*Loud and clear,\* she responded, sounding equally pleased for him. \*It is a little disconcerting, as I’m hearing your telepathic voice a split second after you think about what you’re about to say. I would wager a sizeable sum that Progenitors don’t encounter this problem, because they never grant their matriarch’s unfettered access to their mind.\*

\*Yeah, true. I’ll just stick to letting you read my thoughts for now; we can fine-tune any changes later.\*

\*Speaking of which, I’ve been listening to your predicament with mounting dread,\* Edraele continued, letting her worry seep into her voice. \*Is there anything I can do to help?\*

\*With Jade out of action, I’m going to have to rely on you for psychic energy,\* John replied, walking over to the co-pilot’s chair.

\*Of course. I’ll endeavour to supply you with enough energy so you shouldn’t need to use your own psychic reserves. If I start running low, I’ll give you plenty of advance warning.

\*Perfect, thanks, \* he replied. squatting down beside Alyssa. “How’s the Raptor handling now? Can you bring us down safely?”

“The new wing works fine; we should be able to glide down to the surface without any problems. I’ll just use the thrusters to help with manoeuvring instead of trying to keep us airborne,” she said, leaning over to tap an icon on the console. “I’m heading for this energy source. It’s generating more power than any reactor I’ve seen, so I figured it’s got to be connected to whatever’s generating the aura in the Mists.”

“Yeah, agreed,” John said, staring at the map of Kythshara’s surface. “It’s possible that the two are unrelated, but I highly doubt it. That’s an enormous energy signature... it has to be providing power to something important.”

Alyssa had eased the angle of their descent, weaving through the clouds as she brought the gunship closer to their target. The ancient cityscape should have been shrouded in darkness, but as the gunship approached, John could see thousands of twinkling lights illuminating the slender buildings.

“There’s still power in the city,” John said, staring out the cockpit window at the gleaming spires. “I’m amazed everything’s working after all this time.”

“Leaving the lights on for ten-thousand years... Mael’nerak must’ve racked up one hell of an electricity bill,” Dana said with a wry smile.

“That energy signature is coming from over on the far side of the city,” Alyssa said, glancing at the holographic map of the planet’s surface. “I’ll circle around and we can check it out.”

“I can’t believe we’re actually about to land on Kythshara,” Tashana murmured, gazing at the Maliri city in awe. “We’ll be the first living souls here for millennia.”

Alyssa banked the Raptor around in a smooth turn, circling the forest of tall spires that reached majestically towards the sky. The golden buildings were all in remarkably good condition, with no sign of derelict areas anywhere within the city limits. There was an eerie sense of familiarity to the ancient settlement, with the architecture similar in style to buildings John had previously seen in Melfalas, the capital on Valaden. Tree-lined boulevards bracketed city blocks that were regularly interspersed with verdant parks, in what seemed to be a well-planned and beautifully designed metropolis.

“It’s almost as if Mael’nerak and his thralls only left yesterday,” Tashana marvelled, peering down at the immaculately preserved city. “It’s like looking through a window into the past...”

John stood beside her, equally fascinated by the view of Kythshara’s capital. “How did it stay in such a pristine state? After all this time, I would’ve expected the city to be swamped in vegetation.”

“Maybe there are energy fields around the parks that keep them confined?” she suggested, giving him a helpless shrug.

“Wow! Take a look at that!” Irillith gasped, pointing towards a massive construction that dominated the skyline on the outskirts of the city.

Unlike the surrounding buildings that were coloured the traditional Maliri gold, this new one was a glistening white. It looked something like a pyramid, but with each of its four corners separated into quadrants and split down the middle. In the gaps between each sloped surface was an ascending series of pylons, the ziggurat illuminated by jagged bursts of purple lightning that arced up to the summit.

“What do you think, Sparks?” John asked the redhead, who had hurried over to look for herself. “Is that what we’re looking for? If we do land here and that’s not the device that controls the Mists, then we could be in big trouble.”

“I don’t know for sure,” she admitted, staring wide-eyed at the huge edifice. “You haven’t given me blueprints for anything exactly like that... but we have seen something very similar before”

“The Quantum Annihilator that Nexus was controlling on the moon,” Irillith murmured, nodding her agreement. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

John stared at their destination in disbelief. “You think Mael’nerak built a Quantum Annihilator here to defend Kythshara?”

“No... I don’t think it’s a weapon,” Dana hesitantly replied, leaning closer and squinting as she studied it. “If I had to guess, I’d say that Mael’nerak modified the energy capacitor system from a Quantum Annihilator to give this device all the power it needed. There’s something else about it though... it looks vaguely familiar... but I can’t figure out why.”

“We’re on the clock,” Alyssa warned them. “Should I land here or do we want to keep looking? Mael’nerak’s palace must be around here somewhere as well.”

“Well that’s the biggest energy source on the planet,” Dana said, jutting her chin towards the huge reactor. “If Mael’nerak did build a device that projects a psychic field over an entire star system, I bet it would need a massive amount of juice to keep it going. I reckon this must be it.”

As John gazed at the lightning seething across the top of the pyramid, his eyes felt heavy and unfocused. He rubbed at them for a moment and when he looked again, it was like gazing at the pyramid through a filter. Streams of energy were pouring out from the sunken dish at the centre, the chaotic eldritch maelstrom making him wince against the glare.

“John?” Tashana asked with concern. “Are you okay?”

He nodded and looked away, blinking to shake off the momentary blind spots. “That’s it alright. I could see psychic energy pouring off the top.”

Alyssa stopped staring at the device and turned to look at him. “Are you sure you want to handle this as a ground mission? Instead of trying to shut it down from the inside, we could just shoot it with the Raptor’s Tachyon beams.”

Tashana looked at her in horror. “But the explosion would take out the entire city!”

Before he could reply, John noticed Dana shaking her head. “You don’t think it would be that bad?” he asked his Chief Engineer.

“Oh it definitely would; the blast on the moon wiped out everything in at least a 30 mile radius,” the redhead blithely agreed. “I just doubt we can shoot it. Mael’nerak must’ve gone to a lot of effort to build something that huge and I’d be amazed if it’s not protected by immense shield projectors. They’d have to be super strong to shrug off an orbital barrage from a Progenitor dreadnought.”

“You’re right,” John said, before placing his hand on Alyssa’s shoulder. “Take us down. If Mael’nerak’s palace is nearby, we can’t risk it being obliterated in an explosion. The Nexus files showed that the lab was near the city... and that’s our best shot at bringing back Faye.”

“Alright, will do,” she agreed, turning her attention back to the holographic projection of the city. “I’ll bring us down on that street; it’s the closest I can get to the pyramid.”

“Perfect.”

She eased the flight stick to starboard and began a gentle turn as they descended, bringing the Raptor around for an easy landing on the long, straight road. When the Raptor flew over the outskirts of the city, they were at a much lower altitude this time, approaching at just over five-hundred feet. Being closer to the ground gave John and the girls a clear view of the elegant buildings and empty streets below... as well as the streams of tachyon bolts clawing into the night sky around them.

“Incoming fire!” John warned his pilot, as the cockpit was illuminated by staccato purple flashes.

“Where’s it all coming from?” Dana blurted out, her gaze sweeping over the ground for the source. “Are there automated turrets in the city?!”

“I spotted movement!” Tashana shouted in alarm, pointing out the window to their left. “There are troops in black armour down there... they looked like thralls!”

“That’s not possible!” Irillith protested, shocked at the possibility. “How could they have survived exposure to the Mists?!”

John rushed to the cockpit window and followed the streams of purple energy bolts down to their source. Sure enough, there were squads of black-armoured soldiers firing up at them using long-barrelled underslung guns.

“Could another Progenitor have beaten us here?” John asked, tensing up at the thought of confronting someone as strong as Larn’kelnar without having time to properly prepare for battle. “He must have found a way to shield his thralls from the side-effects.”

The Raptor’s shield status was darkening from green to orange as the gunship took sustained fire from the troops below.

Dana glanced at it with a worried frown. “We’re taking a lot of hits. Can’t you speed up or dodge some of this shit?”

Alyssa grimaced and shook her head. “I’m gliding in with one barely functional engine and half my thrusters missing. I can barely keep us in the air, let alone do any aerobatics!”

Dropping lower, Alyssa began her final approach to the pyramid. It loomed ahead of them, lighting up the darkness with dazzling bursts of electricity that crackled along the delicate pylons. The Raptor was getting hit from all directions now, the troops positioned along both sides of the street spraying tachyon bolts towards the damaged gunship.

“Shields out,” Dana warned her friend.

“Yeah, I know,” the blonde said through gritted teeth as energy bolts started to hit the hull. “You better get strapped in... this might be a rough landing!”

John checked that Jade was still buckled to her seat, then scooped up Rachel and placed her in the chair beside him. As Dana fastened her safety straps, the twins hurried to the seats opposite, sitting next to Helene.

“You doing okay, honey?” John asked the teal-hued mermaid as he buckled her in.

She nodded, her eyes sparkling as she looked up at him. “Are your missions always this exciting?”

“Things do tend to get a bit hectic,” he conceded, double-checking that she was secure.

There was a sudden thump from behind them and the Raptor juddered, the vibrations going up through their boots.

“What the hell was that?” John asked, hurrying over to the spare seat next to Dana.

“We stripped all the armour off the rear,” she explained, giving him a worried frown. “We’re totally exposed back there!”

Alyssa tapped a button on her console. “Shit... they hit the undercarriage. Brace yourselves, this is going to be a rough landing!”

She lifted the Raptor’s nose as they glided down to the street, then there was a horrible grinding as the gunship’s belly skidded along the road’s surface. The tough metal hull ploughed a furrow through the ancient Maliri infrastructure, until they were brought to a lurching halt in a shower of sparks, dirt and chunks of fractured concrete.

The crew sat in dazed silence for a moment as they recovered from the impact, then John and the girls sprang into action, knowing speed was of the essence. They had been brought down in a war zone and it was only a matter of time before they were overrun by hostile forces.

“Helene, stay with Rachel and Jade,” John said firmly as he headed for the cockpit door behind the twins. “We’re going to defend the crash site. We’ll be back for you as soon as it’s clear.”

“Come home safe with a full net,” she replied earnestly. When Helene saw his look of surprise, she blushed and explained, “It’s what we used to say to the fishermen when they left Neptra village.”

“I will,” he said, waving goodbye.

Alyssa caught up to John as he reached the grav-tube and they stepped into it together. \*We need to keep an eye on the twins,\* she warned him. \*You remember how Tashana reacted when she met your dad... well they were just as bloodthirsty against Larn’kelnar’s thralls.\*

\*We could be in serious trouble if there’s a Progenitor with them.\*

\*How do you want to handle it?\* the blonde asked, looking as worried as he felt. \*Wearing him down would be a bad idea without Jade. She’s got huge energy reserves, but I don’t want to tap into her at the moment, not when she’s like that.\*

\*Yeah, we shouldn’t disturb her until Rachel’s given her a full physical,\* he agreed. \*If we do get attacked by a Progenitor, let’s just hit him with everything we’ve got right out of the gate. No holding back from any of us.\*

\*I almost feel sorry for the poor bastard,\* Alyssa said with a wicked grin.

The front of the Raptor was buried in a pile of dirt and broken road, so they turned right to follow the rest of the girls into the rear cargo area. It had only been a few minutes since John was last there, but the floor and walls had been devastated by gunfire from the thrall troops, with dozens of scorched holes melted through the deckplates.

“I’m not seeing much on infra-red,” Dana said, peering out into the gloom beyond. “There’s movement, but it’s not clear at all. Maybe they’re using upgraded armour that masks their heat signatures?”

“It’s not like Progenitors to innovate,” John said dubiously.

“I’ll check out a thrall suit after the battle to make sure,” she said, looking excited by the prospect.

“Fan out, ladies and we’ll cover all the angles of attack,” John ordered his team. “I’ll stay here with Dana. I want the twins on either flank, and Alyssa can watch the pyramid reactor for reinforcements. The troops attacking along our flight path are already on high alert, but we might get attacked from any direction.”

The girls acknowledged his orders with a nod, then spread out to set up a defensive perimeter.

\*I’ll watch Tashana. Let me know if Irillith goes on a rampage,\* he requested, as Alyssa shouldered her rifle and floated up into the air, her body shrouded in a soft white glow. \*Hey, where are you off to?\*

\*I’m just getting us a bit more firepower,\* Alyssa explained, landing on the Raptor’s hull.

“Here they come!” Dana warned, dropping to her knee and aiming out into the night. “Switch to mag-view, you can’t miss ‘em!”

John activated the enhanced view with his optical HUD and saw hundreds of armoured figures shining brightly against the darkness. He raised his rifle and aimed the crosshairs at centre-mass, steadying his breathing to take the long shot. The targeting reticle measured the distance to target and activated auto-zoom, making the thrall appear larger as she approached. John’s crosshairs swept over her breastplate, the form-fitting thrall armour making the woman’s gender abundantly clear.

His finger touched the trigger and John knew that the gentlest squeeze would bring a brutal death to that thrall.

He heard the bark of Dana’s underslung railgun, the heavy slug rocketing out across the deserted city. There was a faint thrumming sound far off in the distance as the round was harmlessly deflected by a thrall’s personal shield.

“Shit...” she muttered under her breath, sounding embarrassed. A second later, she broadcast a message to the team, her image appearing on his HUD. “Don’t forget they’re shielded guys!”

To John’s left and right, blue tachyon bolts set the night ablaze as the Maliri twins opened up on the incoming thralls.

Tashana’s twin pistols strafed fire in two directions, hammering multiple squads and savaging their shields. “Don’t worry, we didn’t forget,” the Maliri said with a reassuring smile. Her face broke into a teasing grin as she added, “I can’t imagine anyone letting something so important slip her mind.”

Irillith’s face appeared alongside her sister, violet eyes sparkling with amusement. “That was the main reason you built us a double-barrelled Tachyon rifle wasn’t it? How could we possibly forget after you showed such diligence to our mission?”

“Yeah, yeah... you two are hilarious,” Dana snorted, her cheeks reddening at their teasing.

There was a pulsing flash of light that illuminated her beautiful face, quickly followed by another angry bark from the railgun. Dana’s embarrassment shifted to professional pride and she nodded in satisfaction.

“Incoming thralls from the pyramid,” Alyssa informed them.

“Do you need help?” Tashana asked, glancing behind her.

“Nah, I’ve got this,” the blonde nonchalantly replied.

The high-pitched scream of a Tachyon Cannon tore through the night’s sky, followed a moment later by a second in close proximity. Their multiple barrels spat an unending stream of tachyon bolts towards the approaching thralls, hammering shields and blasting glowing holes through armour.

“Hey!” Dana protested, turning to look up at the floating support weapons. “You swiped the Raptor’s guns!”

“Yep,” Alyssa agreed. “It’s not like we can use them on the gunship at the moment.”

The two Tachyon cannons were still connected to the Raptor by snaking power-couplings, but the long-barrelled weapons were floating clear of their weapon turrets now. They moved as if possessed of their own malevolent will, making rapid shifts to track new targets and cut them down.

\*The twins seem fine,\* Alyssa said, before a lengthy pause. \*But you don’t. What’s wrong, John?\*

His crosshairs was still lingering over the thrall’s chest as she jogged towards the Raptor. The woman was three-hundred-metres away, but was quickly closing the distance on their position along with the rest of her squad.

\*I can’t do it...\* he said, his finger stubbornly refusing to clamp down on the trigger. \*She’s his victim... they all are.\*

\*You can’t think that way, handsome,\* Alyssa said, her voice gentle and sympathetic. \*That woman’s a stone-cold killer. She wouldn’t hesitate for a second to gun down Sparks, or Helene, or any one of us.\*

\*But if we can take out the Progenitor, we could save them... save all of them,\* John said, flinching as the twins opened up with their railguns, blasting gaping holes through exposed thralls.

\*That’s true... but until we nail that bastard, all his thralls are our deadly enemies. It’s kill or be killed with every thrall we encounter, which is why it’s so important we assassinate each Progenitor before they can drag us into a bloody war of attrition with their armies. I’m sorry, John, that’s just the way it has to be.\*

John stared at the thrall in his crosshairs, wondering what had led her up to this point. Was she a young woman like Kali Loraleth? An innocent that hadn’t chosen this fight, but was lured into it by a Progenitor’s irresistible allure?

\*Picturing Kali’s face on her isn’t helping,\* Alyssa said with a wry smile.

\*I know what you’re saying is true... it just feels fundamentally wrong,\* John said sadly.

“What the fuck?!”

John glanced to his side at Dana, who was staring in open-mouthed astonishment into the distance.

“What is it, Sparks?” he asked the stunned redhead.

“I cut that thrall in half and she’s still coming after me!” Dana explained, pointing to their rear. “See for yourself... 250 metres in that direction.”

He aimed his Tachyon rifle at her target and was just as shocked to see the thrall dragging her disembowelled torso towards their position. A dozen metres behind her, two severed legs twitched erratically, a trail of brightly glowing blood the only thing connecting them to what was left of the thrall.

John frowned in confusion, then zoomed in closer to maximum magnification. The glowing blood turned out to be a trail of small objects, but he couldn’t understand why internal organs would be highlighted on mag-view... unless they were made of metal.

“It’s a robot!” he exclaimed, sagging with relief. “That’s why they weren’t affected by the Mists!”

Swinging his rifle around, he took careful aim at the thrall who had put him in such a moral quandary. He had no hesitation about squeezing the trigger this time, firing a stream of azure energy bolts towards the jogging automaton. The shields flared brightly as they absorbed the first dozen bolts, but the pulsed beams from the Tachyon rifle were relentless and soon the personal field collapsed. John switched to the railgun and after readjusting his aim, fired a 10mm slug at the thrall’s arm.

The slug hit the black suit of armour in the bicep, completely severing the limb with the overwhelming force of the impact. Knocked sprawling backwards, the thrall staggered to her feet, with chunks of metal cascading down from what should’ve been a bloody wound.

“A robot? Really?!” Dana asked, looking at him with a euphoric mixture of hope and joy. “That must mean Mael’nerak left an AI running this place! That’s why the city was so squeaky clean! John... if we can study it, we could bring back Faye!”

He laughed too, sharing her happiness. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, honey. We still have to shut down whatever’s generating the Mists, then dismantle or deactivate all these robot troops. We’ll also have to disable the defence grid around Kythshara so the girls can join us with the Invictus.”

“All just a mere technicality,” she said with an optimistic grin.

They turned their attention back to the army of robots and John had no compunction about destroying them. “I’ll strip the shields, you finish them off,” he suggested to Dana. “That’ll save us having to switch gun barrels for each one.”

“Good idea,” she said, aiming at the black-clad figure that John was strafing with blue energy bolts.

Working as a pair was much faster, with John quickly overloading their shields and leaving the synthetic troops vulnerable to a slug from Dana’s railgun.

“Where do you think they got all this armour?” she asked, after finishing off a flailing robot. “Did Mael’nerak have it made for a robot army, or did the AI loot a barracks for spare suits?”

“He probably had it specifically made for them,” John said after giving her question some thought. He jerked a thumb towards the lightning-shrouded pyramid behind them. “You don’t build something like that on a whim. Mael’nerak must have carefully planned out these defensive measures, then spent months, if not years, building them.”

“And left a super-smart AI in place to oversee it all?” Dana said with a grin.

“Anything’s possible,” he agreed, before glancing her way and making eye-contact. “I’m not trying to rain on your parade, but I don’t want you to get your hopes up and be disappointed. Nexus went completely haywire after being left alone for thousands of years. If there is an AI here, who knows what kind of state it’s in.”

“Nexus only turned homicidal because T-Fed scientists took him apart, then fucked up putting him back together again. Any AI on Kythshara has been completely undisturbed since Mael’nerak left.”

“Alright, fair point,” he admitted, strafing energy bolts over an approaching squad. Activating the Paragon suit’s comms interface, he continued, “How are the rest of you doing? Having any trouble?”

“Nothing’s attacked from the flanks yet,” Irillith replied. “We’ve been assisting you and Dana because Alyssa clearly doesn’t need our help.”

\*How’s it looking back there, beautiful?\* John asked the blonde.

\*No problems so far, but we’re fighting over open ground with a massive range and firepower advantage,\* the blonde readily admitted. \*Rachel just woke up by the way. She seems fine, just very tired.\*

\*Thanks for letting me know. I’ll go in and see her when we’ve finished off these robots.\*

The steady waves of robotic soldiers started to ease as they crashed against the impenetrable line of defenders surrounding the Raptor. Soon there were high piles of mangled corpses strewn over the battlefield, with fragments of shattered armour carpeting the ground.

“The twins have volunteered to be on sentry duty while we check on Rachel,” Alyssa said, stepping off the Raptor’s broken fuselage and floating down to land beside John. “Are you joining us, Sparks?”

“Yeah of course!” she exclaimed, ejecting a spent magazine and slotting in a new one.

Dana led the way into the battered gunship’s interior, rushing ahead of Alyssa and John in her eagerness to check on Rachel. When they caught up with the anxious redhead in the Raptor’s cockpit, they found her showering the groggy doctor with kisses.

“Hey, I’m glad to see you too,” Rachel said, laughing as she fended off the onslaught of affection.

“How’re you feeling?” John asked, crouching down beside the brunette.

“I’m fine,” she replied, giving him a strained smile. “If Sparks stops kissing me for a moment, I might actually be able to stand up.”

“I was worried about you,” Dana said with a pout, but she leaned back to give her girlfriend some room.

John could see how tired Rachel was, so he helped the doctor to her feet, then guided her into one of the passenger seats. “You’re exhausted, honey. Just rest here a moment.”

She was about to object, but realised it was pointless to deny the obvious. “Maintaining a hex shield that size was considerably harder than I expected,” she admitted, before glancing ruefully through the window at the tilted view of the cockpit embedded in the shattered street. “Helene told me about the crash. I’m sorry I couldn’t protect us longer.”

“You did an incredible job keeping us safe for as long as you did,” John said, gently cupping her cheek. “If it wasn’t for you, we never would’ve made it to Kythshara.”

She leaned into his hand, then looked up at him with worry in her grey eyes. “What’s our plan now? We’re running out of time and we still need to neutralise the Mists.”

“Alyssa managed to land us near a massive power generator that we think is being used to maintain Kythshara’s defences. We’ll head out and shut it down.”

Rachel nodded and took a deep breath before exhaling. “Alright, I’m ready.”

“You’re in no shape for combat,” John said, firmly shaking his head. “Besides, I have a more important job for you. I want you to find out what happened to Jade.”

The brunette’s protest at having to stay behind died on her lips, her troubled grey eyes flicking to the paralysed Nymph. “It must be something awful. That expression on her face... she was terrified.”

“I know,” John said, his brow furrowing with concern for his devoted shape-shifting matriarch. “I don’t want to leave her side until we figure out what’s wrong... but the clock’s ticking.”

“I’ll do my best to diagnose her condition,” Rachel said, giving him a reassuring smile. “After all, I’m probably the galaxy’s leading expert on Nymph physiology at this point.”

“My thoughts exactly. If anyone can help her, it’s you.”

Falling back into her professional composure, Rachel tapped her chin thoughtfully. “We’re actually in the best place to find out more about the Nymphs. If we can locate Mael’nerak’s lab, he might have left notes on how and why he created them.”

“After we shut down the Mists, finding that lab is my number one priority,” John agreed, leaning down to give her a farewell kiss. “Make sure you get some rest and recover, don’t push yourself too hard.”

“A preliminary scan of her body won’t take much energy. I’ll try to see if there’s anything obvious that could be wrong.”

“Thank you,” John said gratefully.

He straightened up and turning his attention to the stricken Nymph, before walking over to stand at her side. Jade’s features were still locked in a silent terrified scream, her emerald eyes like saucers as they stared in horror at some unspeakable sight that only she could see.

“Help’s coming, Jade,” he whispered, leaning down to gently kiss her forehead.

When he rose again, John saw Alyssa watching him with a look of consternation on her face as she overheard what he was thinking.

“Someone needs to stay behind and protect her,” he said, looking at the blonde with sympathy. “I know how much you want to come with me, but I can’t think of any alternatives. Can you?”

He could see the conflict in her eyes as her shoulders slumped in resignation. “You need Dana and the twins for their specialist skills... and I’m the best choice to defend the Raptor.”

John nodded in agreement as she voiced his thoughts.

“Showing off with the turrets really bit me in the ass, didn’t it?” Alyssa muttered, before giving him a wan smile. “I don’t like it, but we haven’t got any other options. I think Helene should stay here with me; she’s got enough range to shield the girls while they’re in the pyramid and I’m sure you don’t want her getting involved in any gunfights.”

“Not if we can avoid it,” he said, glancing at the gentle mermaid. Her eyes were glowing with a soft teal light as she concentrated on shielding her friends from the relentless psychic assault on their subconscious. “Helene’s the only thing protecting the girls from the Mists and I don’t want to risk exposing her to any danger.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep them all safe,” Alyssa said, leaning in for a lingering kiss. “Please don’t make me regret letting you go in there without me, John.”

“We’ll be very careful, I promise,” he said, returning her kiss before turning to his Chief Engineer. “Ready to go, Sparks?”

The redhead grabbed her helmet and rifle. “Ready!”

They waved goodbye to Alyssa, Rachel, and Helene, then left the cockpit together to rejoin the twins.

“Any sign of movement out here?” John asked the Maliri sisters.

Tashana shook her head. “Not for the past few minutes.”

“Well that’s not entirely true...” Irillith replied, gesturing towards the shattered robotic bodies that lay strewn across the street.

John followed where she was pointing and saw that many of the synthetic thralls were making unsettling twitches as they tried to crawl towards the Raptor.

“We’re heading over there anyway. Let’s finish them off,” John said, raising his rifle as he set off towards the pyramid.

“Hold on a sec!” Dana called after him as she jogged to his side. “Can you try to leave one in decent shape? I wouldn’t mind checking them out.”

“Sure,” John agreed, shouldering his rifle and drawing his sword. “What about that one over there?”

He pointed with the tip of his blade towards a flailing robot that had been cut down by the Raptor’s Tachyon Cannons. Alyssa had strafed energy bolts across it horizontally, severing its body just above the waist and melting through both arms below the elbow. The damage left it incapacitated, but the torso was still intact.

“Yeah that looks perfect,” she said eagerly. “Can you pry open the armour please?”

John nodded as he walked over to the mangled automaton and flipped it over with his boot. It twitched and tried to take a swipe at him with what was left of its arm, until two heavy chops from his runeblade cleaved the mangled limbs away at the shoulders. Wedging the tip of his blade into the join along the side of the breastplate, John carefully sawed through the latching mechanism then levered the armour open.

Squatting down beside the exposed innards of the synthetic thrall, Dana studied it in fascination. “Wow... this is state-of-the-art,” she murmured, her eyes glowing as she stared into the sophisticated machinery.

“More advanced than Faye’s chassis?” John asked, watching her indulge her curiosity.

The redhead nodded. “Whoever built these bots really knew their shit.”

He joined the twins in neatly dispatching crippled robotic thralls for a couple of minutes, then patted Dana on the shoulder. “We better get moving, Sparks.”

“Yeah...” she murmured, rising to her feet. “I’ll have to come back and take a proper look later.”

Falling into formation together, they walked along the street towards the huge pyramid, their senses heightened for danger. Now that they were on the ground and the power generator loomed above them like a storm-shrouded mountain, John was able to truly appreciate just how vast it was. He could hear the sizzling crackle as lightning arced up the pylons towards the summit, followed shortly afterwards by a deafening peal of thunder, the deep booms reverberating around the city.

“Those aren’t random power spikes,” Dana said, her attention drawn to the same fearsome monolith. “They go off every minute as regular as clockwork.”

“Any idea how it works?” John asked, darting a glance at his gifted engineer.

She hesitated, then ruefully shook her head. “A Quantum Annihilator gathers a massive amount of energy before unleashing it in one planet-busting blast. All the electrical surges we saw on the moon were overflow from that crazy power spike. This is something totally different; it’s outputting a ton of energy but it must be closely regulated to keep it at a steady level... and has been for thousands of years.”

He nodded in understanding, suitably awed by the scale of the ancient construct.

“That looks like an entrance over there,” Irillith said, pointing towards a colonnade adjoining the east side of the pyramid.

From where they stood, they could see that the south face was smooth and unbroken, the white surface gleaming in the starlight.

“Yeah that must be the way in,” John agreed and they set off towards the rows of columns.

“I’ve seen this style of architecture before!” Tashana exclaimed, jogging ahead of them to gaze up at the ornate masonry. “There were pillars like this in the recruitment facility where I found Faye’s operating device.”

At the end of the row was a huge set of doors, each embossed with a grandiose mural that depicted Mael’nerak seated on a throne, surrounded by dozens of servile thralls. The Progenitor looked down at the visitors standing before the entryway with an arrogant sneer that made John grit his teeth in irritation. He found himself wishing that Mael’nerak was still around, so he could wipe the condescending smirk from his face.

“Wow... it turns out Mael’nerak was a real egomaniac right to the end, wasn’t he?” Dana said, shaking her head in disgust.

“I thought he’d changed for the better,” Irillith said, looking up at her forebear with disappointment.

Tashana frowned and ran her gauntleted fingers over the metal doors. “He did. This pyramid must date back to the last few years of his reign here and we know that falling in love with Valada greatly affected his personality... we’ve seen video footage of the caring man he became.”

There was a dull click and the doors yawned open, revealing a long corridor that stretched away into the pyramid’s interior. It was pitch black inside, but red lights along the base of the walls slowly banished the darkness, replacing it with an eerie crimson glow.

Dana playfully nudged John with an elbow. “Home sweet home, eh? I seem to remember you actually like this creepy Progenitor shit.”

He flushed with embarrassment and gave her a helpless shrug. “I can’t help it. The red on black feels... I don’t know... relaxing?”

Tashana’s frown deepened and she took a few cautious steps inside. “Mael’nerak’s throne room didn’t look like this and his lab didn’t either.”

“Maybe he regressed at the end?” Irillith suggested, turning to stare up at the cruel expression on her ancestor’s face. “It could’ve been the stress... he was losing the war against Rahn’hagon.”

“So he returned to his old evil ways, then willingly sacrificed himself to save Valada and the Maliri?” Tashana muttered, rolling her eyes at her sister. “Of course, that makes perfect sense.”

Irillith blushed a deep indigo. “Alright, I freely admit, I don’t know what he was thinking. What does it matter anyway? We need to stop wasting time and deactivate this reactor.”

“Very true,” John agreed, sheathing his sword across his back and readying his Tachyon rifle. “Let’s go, ladies. We can try to figure out Mael’nerak’s state of mind after we’ve shut down the Mists.”

The girls fell into step beside him as John walked into the pyramid, their footsteps ringing with a metallic click on the black floor. The entry corridor continued for fifty metres, then ended in a ramp that descended into an ominous scarlet-lit gloom, like a forbidding passageway that led straight to the fiery depths of hell.

“Down we go, I guess,” Dana said, darting an apprehensive glance at John.

He nodded and patted her on the shoulder. “Afraid so, Sparks. There must be a control room somewhere on the lower levels and we need to find it.”

They set off down the ramp, which descended at a gradual incline into the bowels of the pyramid. The tunnel made multiple turns, the passage following a corkscrew pattern as they travelled deeper underground. Eventually the ramp ended in a corridor, which made an abrupt turn to the left, then continued onwards before making several more left turns. The surface of the walls were covered with elaborate murals, each one showing images of domination and slaughter as Mael’nerak waged war against his many enemies.

Dana paused and glanced over her shoulder at the wall. “That’s weird...”

“What is?” John asked, following her bewildered gaze.

“On the other side of that wall should be the ramp back up. We’ve just walked around in a great big circle, but I don’t get why.”

“Maybe Mael’nerak just wanted to show off his gruesome artwork collection?” Irillith suggested, raising an eyebrow as she studied a picture of him blasting another Progenitor with a lightning bolt from his staff.

John didn’t find the murals particularly surprising, as they followed the same kind of motif as the ones the Ashanath had discovered. The pictures catalogued violent and tyrannical behaviour which he assumed was typical of all Progenitors, and with their towering egos, celebrating their victories must be equally commonplace.

He glanced at the Maliri archaeologist who was staring at the walls with a perplexed expression on her face. “Any idea why we’re walking in circles, Tashana?”

“I don’t know...” she murmured, shaking her head. “But something about this place doesn’t feel right... not right at all.”

“Hold up a second, ladies,” John said, raising his hand to halt their progress. “Let me take a quick look around.”

The girls waited patiently as his eyes started to glow with a deep blue light and John gazed intently at the wall beside Dana. The surface turned translucent under his enhanced vision and he could make out what looked like odd-shaped machinery embedded in the walls. Turning, he saw the same mechanical objects in all the surrounding passageways, until his attention was drawn to a cavernous chamber to the north.

“What did you see?” Dana asked in a hushed voice as she saw the expression on his face shift from confusion to surprise.

“I don’t know for sure... there’s some kind of machinery in the walls,” he murmured, glancing to either side. “There’s also a massive room over in that direction... with some big equipment in it... and what looks like a bridge leading across to the other side.”

Dana’s frown deepened and she brushed her hand across the mural. “Can you break through this? I’d like to take a look at whatever’s hidden inside.”

“Wait!” Tashana protested, before she winced and her shoulders slumped. “Never mind... go ahead.”

“What’s up?” John asked, looking at her with concern.

“I realise it’s sensible to investigate the walls as a precaution... I just hate the thought of destroying any ancient artefacts.”

“I’ll try to keep the damage to a minimum,” John said, waving the girls back as he unsheathed his runesword. “Give me some room to swing.”

They moved away from the engraved black wall and watched as John planted his feet then swung hard with his blade. The blade struck with a mighty clang, the ringing crash of metal on metal echoing around the corridors. Despite the immense force behind the blow, the wall was merely dented, with a gleaming white divot carved out of its lustreless surface.

“It’s made from the same metal as the bunker on Valaden!” Dana exclaimed, darting forward for a closer look. “Check it out... it’s just been painted black!”

Sure enough, John could see his blow had shattered the paintwork, with cracks spiralling outward from the impact point.

“Why would Mael’nerak bother to do that?” Irillith mused aloud, before her bewildered gaze flicked to John. “Hold on a second. You said red on black feels relaxing to you; do you think he was trying to make a Progenitor feel at ease in here? Maybe trick you into letting your guard down?”

“I don’t like this, John,” Tashana said quietly. “It feels like we’re being lured into a trap.”

John hesitated, unsure how to proceed. Logically he could see that it was sensible to be suspicious, but he couldn’t help feeling like the twins were just being paranoid and overreacting to inconsequential details.

He met their worried gaze for a moment, then contacted his blonde matriarch. \*Alyssa, are the twins okay? Tashana in particular.\*

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Alyssa swept her gaze over the open street, taking advantage of her vantage point atop the Raptor to watch for any more robotic troops. \*I can sense they’re both feeling anxious. I’ll check with Helene to make sure they’re not being affected by the Mists.\*

\*Thanks.\*

She reached out telepathically to the teal-hued girl who was waiting inside the Raptor with Rachel and Jade. \*Helene, has anything changed with the twins?\*

\*They’re not being influenced by the Mists yet, but the psychic sea in the pyramid is much more turbulent,\* the Abandoned girl replied, an undercurrent of apprehension in her voice. \*I’ve deepened the whirlpools to keep the waves at bay and protect them from any more erosion.\*

\*I’m going to start feeding you more power to help keep them safe. Let me know if you run into any problems.\*

\*I will, thank you.\*

\*Helene says they’re both okay,\* Alyssa informed John, while widening the telepathic connection between herself and Helene. \*Calara, I’ve started tapping you for energy.\*

She channelled more eldritch power to the mermaid, carefully maintaining a steady stream to help fuel her empathic abilities.

\*I’m worried about John,\* Calara replied, her voice thick with tension. \*Hell, I’m worried about all of you! This mission’s been one disaster after another... and now you’re all marooned on Kythshara. Are you sure you don’t want me to head in-system with the Invictus? We could fight through the defence grid and perform an emergency evac. By the time we start suffering from the side-effects from the Mists, we’d be on Kythshara and Helene could shield us.\*

\*No, hold position,\* the blonde stated, her tone making it clear it wasn’t up for discussion. \*I appreciate how nerve-racking this must be for everyone on the Invictus, but we can’t risk putting Helene under any more strain. John’s counting on you to obey his orders... please don’t let him down by doing anything reckless.\*

\*Wow... pulling out the big guns,\* Calara said softly. \*Alright, we’ll hold position.\*

\*Good... thank you.\*

The Latina was quiet for a long moment. \*That almost sounded like it wasn’t just me you were trying to convince. Are you okay?\*

Alyssa bit her lip and darted a worried glance towards the pyramid. It took everything she had not to sprint after John to be at his side.

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“There’s a lot of data streams down here...” Irillith murmured, her violet eyes glowing with an inner light as she gazed up towards the ceiling. “It’s almost as busy as the Invictus’ bridge.”

“Can you hack your way into them?” John asked. “Maybe they could tell you more about what’s ahead of us.”

The glow from her eyes intensified for a moment, then the Maliri shook her head. “The data streams are encrypted in a format I’m not familiar with. I’d need to follow them back to a data port and break into the local network from there.”

Tashana walked over to him, the worry in her eyes plain to see. “John, I think we should return to the surface and try to shut down the power generator remotely. I can’t shake the feeling that going any deeper into this place would be a terrible mistake.”

John considered their options, then turned to their companions. “What do you two think?”

Dana darted a pensive glance at Tashana. “I agree with her; there is something dodgy about this place... but I think our best shot at shutting down the generator is from a control terminal inside.”

When John’s attention switched to Irillith, he saw she was nibbling on her lip in an uncharacteristic display of nervousness.

“I think we should stay too,” she said quietly. “Mael’nerak constructed this device, which means he built the digital defences. There’s no guarantee I can even hack into the network remotely, let alone locate the correct procedure to deactivate the Mists.”

The trio stood in silence after voicing their opinion, waiting for him to make a decision.

“I don’t think we have any choice but to keep going,” John finally said, giving Tashana a rueful look. “You’re probably right... that it is dangerous down here, but Helene can’t keep shielding you forever. We need to shut the Mists down as quickly as possible.”

Tashana reluctantly nodded and drew her two pistols. “Alright... let’s keep going then.”

He patted her on the shoulder, then set off down the corridor with his rifle trained on the murky crimson gloom ahead. The tunnel followed a set of turns that brought them around in another wider circuit, before the sequence of left corners ended with the first right, which turned towards the north. This passageway looked the same as all the others, with black walls under-lit by red lights, but it opened out at the end, into what appeared to be a cavernous room.

“Holy shit...” Dana whispered in awe as they drew closer and could see into the vast space beyond.

A narrow bridge crossed a colossal chamber, with huge pieces of arcane machinery visible to either side. Arcs of electricity burst into existence in the darkness below, the staccato light casting wild shadows as the halo of lightning danced up the immense devices and disappeared high overhead.

“I can’t even see the ceiling or the floor!” the redhead exclaimed, marvelling at the staggering scale of the room.

Tashana shivered involuntarily, her eyes like saucers as she stared at the towering devices flanking the bridge. “I’ve seen machines that looked like this before... in the Underworld.”

“That’s it! I knew it looked weirdly familiar!” Dana exclaimed, feeling an odd mix of satisfaction and trepidation. “The pyramid had four sides, but they were split in two... that makes eight faces, just like the tech on the Achonin station!”

Now that they’d made the connection, John could immediately see that the machinery in the enormous room was also built to an octagonal design. Unlike the ancient Achonin refinery, instead of the walls being a beige tan, they maintained the same dark colour scheme as the corridors.

“John, the source of the data streams is across the bridge,” Irillith informed him, her focus on the colourful ribbons of bright light that flowed across the cavern. “If there is a control room down here, it must be in that direction.”

He eyed the slender bridge with suspicion, then moved to the side to squat down and take a look underneath at the structural support. “It looks solid enough, but I don’t see any point in tempting fate. Mael’nerak might have rigged the bridge with booby traps, so we’ll just use our Paragon suits to fly over.”

“Good idea,” Dana agreed, activating flight mode on her body armour.

The thrusters on her Paragon suit ignited and she lifted off the ground, with the twins quickly following her lead as they waited for John to proceed across.

“I’ll take point,” he said, using the optical HUD to activate flight mode in his own Paragon armour. “Space out as you follow me, ten-metre intervals... Dana, then Tashana, and Irillith covering the rear. Keep your eyes open for trouble. Ready, everyone?”

Dana and the twins nodded, apprehension on all their faces as they firmly gripped their weapons.

“Ready,” Tashana declared, looking the most confident of the three despite her concerns.

John ramped up power to his suit’s thrusters and he took off, lifting into the air with practiced expertise. Angling his body, he shifted from floating in the entrance to flying parallel to the bridge, using it to guide him across the gaping crevasse. He covered the first hundred metres without incident, the only sign of life being the cavorting arcs of electricity that sheathed the immense machinery. Each flickering burst of lightning gave them brief glimpses of the room ahead, and John’s eyes swept from side to side, wary of any sign of ambush.

Amidst the high-pitched crackling coming from the massive capacitors, John heard a much deeper sound... an ominous grinding clang that seemed to come from behind them.

“John! Did you hear that?!” Dana called out, her wide-eyed face appearing in his HUD.

He shifted to a hover and glanced back at the redhead. “It sounded like it came from behind us?”

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She nodded vigorously. “Yeah, that’s what I thought too!”

The twins stopped as well and stared back the way they’d come.

“The bridge looks the same,” Tashana said, sweeping her gaze along its length.

“I see movement!” Irillith warned them, pointing towards the entrance into the room. “Back in the corridor!”

“What should we do?” Dana asked, her brow furrowing with worry. “Go back and check it out?”

Irillith turned to look at John for guidance, then she spotted more movement and shouted in alarm, “Look out! Above you!”

His head snapped up and John gasped in shock as the ceiling seemed to be collapsing above him. He activated psychic speed to help him react faster, but just as he felt his body accelerate, a claustrophobic weight settled on his mind. It was like being plunged underwater, his eldritch abilities instantly stifled by the oppressive blanket of an overwhelming psychic dampening field.

Sparking electricity from the generators briefly lit up the ceiling as it fell and John’s eyes widened in alarm as he scrambled to get clear. It wasn’t the ceiling collapsing, but a massive multi-limbed robot that dropped towards him like a stone. One of the arms snapped out and clamped around his torso, dragging him with it as it plunged downward.

“Oh shit!” Dana yelped, as the massive bulk of the robot’s torso smashed her aside, the impact sending her flying out of control.

Tashana gasped as she lurched out of the way, narrowly avoiding being battered as well.

“John!” Irillith screamed, staring in helpless horror as he was swallowed up by the murky darkness below.

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Alyssa froze with fright as she heard her friends’ frantic thoughts, until they were suddenly and brutally silenced.

\*John!\* she screamed in panic. \*Dana? Tashana? Irillith?! Answer me!\*

Her resolve to stay with the Raptor crumbled in an instant and she whirled around, ready to rush to their rescue. Before she could take a step, a fusillade of energy bolts streaked out of the dimly-lit buildings, hitting her from a dozen different directions at once.

\*Alyssa!\* Calara cried out as she heard her distress. \*What’s going on down there?!\*

The Paragon suit’s shield display seemed to turn from green to red in a split second as the protective field was battered from all sides. Acting purely on instinct, Alyssa leapt off the Raptor’s topdeck and dived for cover on the ground, just as her shields collapsed from the onslaught. The fuselage of the wrecked gunship provided her cover from behind and dropping into the furrowed trench that the gunship had ploughed through the street took Alyssa out of line-of-sight of the enemies on the opposite flank. The momentary respite gave the shocked teenager a few seconds to recover.

\*I’m under attack!\* she snapped, her response as short as her fraying temper. \*John and the girls are in trouble!\*

\*Alyssa...\* Helene said, her voice filled with worry. \*I was just cut off from Dana and the twins! I can’t protect them anymore!\*

The blonde grimaced as streams of energy bolts zipped overhead, blasting glowing holes in the Raptor’s hull. “Fuck!”

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Tashana whirled around frantically to check on her sister. “Irillith, are you okay? Did you see what happened to John and Dana?!”

Irillith nodded and was about to respond, when it felt like a warm comforting blanket had been ripped away from her mind, leaving her naked and horribly exposed. She gasped at the sudden chill that ran down her spine and couldn’t stop shivering as she felt an oppressive cold seep into her soul.

“The robot... it grabbed John and crashed into D-Dana,” Irillith stammered through chattering teeth. Pointing off to the left, she managed to blurt out, “I think she was knocked d-down over there!”

\*Irillith! Tashana!\* Alyssa called out to them both, an edge of desperation to her voice as it rushed through their subconscious. \*Can you hear me?!\*

\*Yeah, we hear you!\* Tashana replied, as she peered down into the darkness below. \*I can’t see John or Dana... we think a robot might have captured them! I’m going to-\*

\*We got cut off!\* their matriarch interrupted. \*Something blocked me from using telepathy with you for a second!\*

Tashana blinked in surprise, her mind whirring. \*It must’ve been the robot! I bet Mael’nerak built a psychic dampening device into its chassis! We need to get to John, he could be in big trouble!\*

\*Stop! Listen to me!\* Alyssa demanded, making the Maliri archaeologist freeze. \*Helene lost contact too... and she can’t reconnect unless she can see you. You’re exposed to the Mists and it’s much worse down there!\*

Irillith was barely paying attention to the conversation, the rushing noise in her ears distracting her from Alyssa’s voice. Her heart was hammering in her chest and she breathed in short breaths as she fought down a rising tide of panic. She suddenly felt like something was creeping up behind her, so she spun about, wobbling unsteadily in the air as she fired off a wild burst from her Tachyon rifle. The blue laser bolts zipped across the canyon and slammed into the wall, leaving a line of glowing scorch marks in their wake.

“They’re coming to kill us!” Irillith quailed, her eyes like saucers as she searched for a hidden legion of unseen enemies. “We’ve got to get out of here!”

Tashana gaped at her sister in horror, watching Irillith’s sanity unravelling by the second.

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John plunged down through the darkness, the huge clawed hand wrapped around his torso holding him in a vice-like grip. He still felt disorientated after being blocked from using his psychic abilities, the oppressive presence of the dampening field making it hard to think clearly. He knew that he needed to free himself and strained to pry the claws apart, but he’d been robbed of his psychic strength and was unable to break their grip. As they hurtled downwards, he used the Paragon suit’s thrusters in an attempt to arrest his fall, but they couldn’t support the massive weight of the huge robot above.

Closing his eyes, John took a deep breath and tried to shut out any distractions. He felt that same sense of sluggishness he’d experienced outside the bunker under Saelihn Immanthe, but the stifling feeling was much stronger this time. The flickering torch that had previously offered him salvation, was an elusive and ephemeral thing, barely visible in the distance. He tried to reach for it and shrug off the effects of the dampening field, but it was like moving in slow motion as he grasped in vain for the light.

Before he could try anything else, John struck the floor, the huge impact barely cushioned by his protective Paragon suit. He cried out in agony as it felt like someone had stamped on his chest, burning pain radiating outwards from his back and ribs. The only upside was that the force of the collision broke open the robot’s grip and its arm bent awkwardly, flinging him across the floor as the rest of the hulking automaton smashed into the ground.

John landed with a crash, his crumpled body skittering across the metallic grating until he came to a groaning halt. Behind him, he could hear clanking as the robot attempted to right itself, heavy limbs thumping the floor in rapid succession. Trying to ignore the flashes of pain, he clambered to his knees and reached behind him for his runeblade. With mounting dread, he realised it had been knocked off his back in the fall and was nowhere to be seen... just like his missing Tachyon Rifle.

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Unlike Irillith, who was succumbing to the insidious effects of the psychic mists, Alyssa’s mind was razor-sharp and focused intently on the situation at hand. The heightened danger of combat burned away any indecision and she knew exactly what she needed to do. Her first priority was to protect the girls inside the Raptor and clear the crash site of any hostiles. The quicker she could make sure they were safe, the faster she could mount a rescue for John and the missing girls.

Alyssa peeked out around the shattered paving slabs, searching for the squads of robotic thrall soldiers that she expected to see rushing towards her position. To her surprise, there was no sign of any movement on the street, and she could tell from the angle of the incoming shots that many of them were being fired from an elevated position.

“Shit...” she cursed under her breath, realising that Mael’nerak had fooled them yet again.

It seemed painfully clear to her now that the initial waves of robotic troops, which they’d easily dispatched, had merely been a ruse to lure them into a false sense of security. Dana had been surprised and impressed by the robots’ sophistication, so with the benefit of hindsight, their decision to mount a suicidal charge across open ground seemed utterly nonsensical. Now Alyssa was seeing what the machines were really capable of, as they executed a well-coordinated ambush that caught her in a lethal crossfire.

The robots spotted her and she was forced to hug the ground as a storm of energy bolts ripped through the broken ferrocrete. The incoming fire was accurate and relentless, keeping her pinned down without any sign of stopping. As Alyssa slithered back into a deeper section of the trench, she couldn’t help worrying what the robots behind her were planning while she was preoccupied.

She clenched her fist and gathered her will, preparing to unleash a wave of psychic energy that would allow her to identify and track her enemies. Alyssa was about to unleash that pulse of light when she suddenly froze and snarled in frustration. Her ambushers weren’t living creatures, so she wouldn’t be able to use a telepathic sweep to locate them in this urban battlefield, where plentiful cover could conceal a huge army of robots.

It was a stark reminder of how ill-suited some of her abilities were at dealing with mechanical foes, a weakness she was sure Mael’nerak fully intended to exploit to the maximum.

\*\*\*

“C’mon, let’s get the hell out of here!” Irillith panted, eyes flicking wildly from side to side as she anticipated an attack from all sides.

“Rill, you’ve got to keep it together!” Tashana begged her sister, grabbing hold of her arm.

Irillith whipped her head around, a dishevelled curtain of white hair obscuring half her face inside her Paragon helmet. “Let go of me!” she shrieked, yanking back out of her sister’s grasp.

Tashana watched in dismay as her twin cartwheeled through the air, thrown off balance when she tore herself free. “Irillith, please! I need your help!”

The Maliri hacker sobbed with fear as she clawed at the air, eventually managing to right herself. She shot an angry glare back at her sister, then her eyes softened for a fleeting moment. “If we stay here we’ll die! Come with me, Shan... save yourself!”

“I can’t... What about John and Dana?!” Tashana protested.

Irillith’s expression shifted rapidly, displaying a procession of intense conflicting emotions. Any sign of lucidity faded as she was quickly overwhelmed by a madness borne of raw terror. She let out a strangled cry and lurched drunkenly for the bridge, then as soon as she touched down, sprinted away as if the hounds of hell were snapping at her heels.

Forced to choose between rescuing John and chasing after her terrified sister, a tear rolled down Tashana’s cheek as she watched helplessly as Irillith fled. No matter how desperately she wanted to protect her twin, Tashana couldn’t abandon John and Dana to the mechanical monstrosity that had brought them down.

She turned her back on Irillith and soared down into the darkness, searching for her missing companions.

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Now that the huge robot had righted itself, John was finally able to get a good look at Mael’nerak’s construct. It vaguely reminded him of a centaur, or at least the offspring of one of those fantastical equine creatures if it had mated with a gigantic heavily-armed mech. Four sturdy legs ended in a set of broad claws, while a squat torso rose up from its elongated body, sprouting multiple limbs. The right arm held a serrated blade and the left carried a strange cross-shaped object, while two segmented tentacles emerged from its back. Each of the metallic tentacles ended in a multi-clawed hand and every square inch of the robotic behemoth appeared to be covered in thick armour plating.

John clambered to his feet and winced at the waves of pain that triggered in his chest. His first instinct was to heal himself before the mechanical monstrosity could charge, but he was still within range of the dampening field and his psychic abilities were being heavily suppressed. He slowly backed away from his assailant, keeping a wary eye on the robot while darting frantic glances around as he searched for his missing weapons.

Instead of immediately rushing to charge after him, the robot seemed to pause, its multi-faceted head turning as if searching for something. John watched in surprise as it suddenly lurched off to the right, one of its undulating tentacles reaching down to scoop up something from the floor. His heart sank as he spotted his runeblade, the glinting white weapon held tightly within its grasp. The robot clasped the sword with a second prehensile limb, then both appendages flexed and tensed as it prepared to snap the blade in half.

He dreaded to think how much force that hulking monster could bring to bear, and he watched with his heart in his mouth as it tried to break the sword. There was an odd whine from the machine and the two tentacles shuddered as they strained against the metal, but no matter how hard they tried, it proved to be too tough for them to break. John sighed with relief as the mech failed in its attempts and appeared to give up, but the momentary elation proved to be short-lived. The robot pivoted and hurled the runeblade far away into the impenetrable darkness, before swinging around and stalking menacingly towards him.

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As bright pulses of energy raced over Alyssa’s head, she heard an explosion from somewhere above, and chunks of scorched white metal rained down on the street below. She recognised the smoking barrel of one of the Tachyon Cannons and realised the robotic troops were making sure she couldn’t use the Raptor’s turrets against them again. A second explosion a few seconds later confirmed her suspicions as they destroyed the other exposed Tachyon Cannon.

\*Irillith’s scared out of her mind!\* Tashana called out to her matriarch, the devastation in her voice painful to hear. \*She wouldn’t listen to reason... she ran away!\*

Alyssa could feel the waves of terror radiating from the Maliri hacker, Irillith’s thoughts scattered and incoherent as she fled through the pyramid.

\*I could’ve stopped her... but I had to let her go,\* Tashana continued, sounding distraught at abandoning her sister. \*I needed to protect John and Dana...\*

\*You did exactly the right thing,\* Alyssa said, her voice warm and soothing. \*Keep them both safe and don’t worry about Irillith, I’m coming to rescue her.\*

\*Okay... I’ll try to find John and Dana,\* Tashana replied, sounding relieved after her matriarch’s reassurances.

Despite her calm words, Alyssa’s eyes blazed with anger, her patience for hiding in the dirt coming to an abrupt end. A shield of glowing hexagons materialised around her and she rose smoothly from the trench that the gunship had ripped through the street. The incoming shots from the robots immediately homed in on her, with streams of bright energy bolts hitting the hex barrier from a dozen different directions on this side of the Raptor.

Ignoring the daunting barrage of fire, Alyssa concentrated on repairing the damage to her hexagons as she levitated into the air, her hex-barrier spinning rapidly to spread the load. When she rose above the Raptor’s fuselage, the other half of the ambushing force re-engaged, opening fire on her glowing shield. Despite the damage the hexagons were sustaining, they were repaired almost instantaneously, the protective globe deflecting a terrifying volume of firepower.

She tracked one of the streams of energy bolts back to its source, and spotted one of the synthetic thralls firing at her through a fourth-floor window. A telekinetic lance popped into existence beside Alyssa and streaked out towards the building, leaving a glittering trail behind it. The psychic projectile skewered the robot through the torso and pinned it to the wall behind with a satisfying thunk that could be clearly heard in the street below. She allowed herself a victorious smile, then gestured in several more directions, launching more of the psychic spears at the robotic snipers.

Despite scoring a direct hit on each of her targets, Alyssa realised she was facing at least a hundred troopers and retaliating like that would take forever to destroy them all. She briefly considered summoning a legion of telekinetic blades, then sending them into the adjacent buildings to sweep each floor clear of enemy snipers. Unfortunately, without being able to track all her opponents using a telepathic pulse, locating all the robot troops would be a laborious and time-consuming process. That was time she couldn’t afford to waste, not while John and the girls were in mortal danger.

\*Calara, I need power!\* she informed her girlfriend.

\*Of course, take whatever you need,\* the Latina immediately replied.

\*No, not from you or Sakura. I know how much I can safely take from you two and I want to keep you in reserve in case I need to divert energy to John or Tashana. Are the Nymphs with you?\*

\*Yes, they’re all here on the Combat Bridge.\*

Reaching out to Jade’s sisters, Alyssa sent a telepathic message to each of them, knowing they wouldn’t be able to respond to her directly. \*We’re in big trouble and I really need your help. I don’t have the same precise control over your energy levels as Jade and I don’t want to risk hurting any of you. I’m going to start tapping the four of you for power, but tell Calara immediately if you start to feel any pain or discomfort.\*

\*We understand, Alyssa,\* Neysa replied a moment later, her composed telepathic reply taking Alyssa completely by surprise. \*Leylira, Betrixa, Marika, and I will provide you with as much power as you require. I would recommend against harnessing energy from Ailita as John has not yet had a chance to fully develop her capacity.\*

\*O-okay... that’s fine,\* Alyssa stammered, shocked that the Nymph was somehow able to reach out to her with telepathy when they weren’t bonded.

The momentary distraction caused Alyssa to lose focus on her shield and a cluster of hexagons crumbled before she could repair them. The hex-barrier was being hammered from all directions, so when a gap in the protective globe finally appeared, several energy bolts punched through and struck her helmet. Alyssa let out a startled cry, her head snapping back with the impact, which knocked her sprawling across the Raptor’s topdeck.

\*Alyssa!\* Calara cried out in alarm as she sensed her girlfriend’s sudden flash of pain.

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Tashana descended through the darkness, keeping her eyes peeled for her missing companions. She darted a glance at the Paragon suit’s HUD, to check the altimeter for a reading, but being underground in an ozone-charged chamber was interfering with its telemetry. At the rate she was dropping, a quick mental calculation estimated that she’d already descended for two-hundred-metres, and there was still no sign of the ground.

Amidst the high-pitched crackle of electricity, she heard deeper noises coming from below, the booms and crashes sounding like a pitched battle was taking place. Rather than being alarmed, Tashana felt a surge of relief, because that meant John had survived the fall and was able to put up a fight against the robot. Twisting her body, she angled herself towards the sound of combat and swooped down to join the battle.

Before she could locate the combatants, she spotted a flicker in the darkness, the shaft of light projected at a strange angle. It winked out shortly afterwards, then reappeared again twenty seconds later. Tashana headed in its direction and felt a surge of relief when she saw the source of the intermittent light.

\*I found Dana!\* she excitedly informed Alyssa.

There was no response from her matriarch as she drew closer, but after seeing the redhead’s limp body, Dana now had Tashana’s full attention. The missing lioness was dangling over a broken pylon, the machinery having broken her fall. An electrical surge swept up the capacitor, the charge briefly activating the Paragon suit’s shoulder lamps before they went dark once again.

Tashana waited until the latest electrical pulse had stormed up the column, then glided down to her friend. Acting quickly, she carefully untangled Dana and scooped her into her arms, then kicked herself clear of the generator before the next lightning surge. Hovering in mid-air, Tashana held her breath as she gazed through the Paragon suit’s clear faceplate, then let out a sigh of relief when she saw Dana was still breathing.

The redhead had a nasty bump on her head that she must have received when the robot smashed into her, or when she crashed into the generator when she was sent flying out of control. Either way, the young woman was currently unconscious but still alive.

“I’ve got you, Dana,” Tashana said softly, as she continued her descent. “Now we just need to help John.”

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John cried out in pain, clutching at his wounded flank as he staggered backwards, the robot’s clawed foot smashing the ground where he’d been standing only seconds before. He narrowly avoided being stomped on, but with a couple of broken ribs and more bruises than he could count, he was in no fit state to be performing these kind of acrobatics.

The robot reared back and its huge serrated blade kicked into life, the jagged edges whirring around the sword with a shrill screech. It lunged towards him with the chainsword and John dived to the side to avoid the blow, the slash narrowly missing him and striking the floor. A storm of sparks lit up the darkness as the mechanised blade carved into the metal, leaving jagged furrows in the buckled plating.

Instead of drawing back its sword arm for another swipe, the robot’s torso kept turning in the direction of the blow, pivoting at the waist as it rotated in a circle. As John scrambled to his feet again, one of the metallic tentacles whipped around and clobbered him in the chest, sending him sailing through the air to crash down on the floor a dozen metres away.

He groaned in pain, reeling from another vicious blow that aggravated all his previous injuries. John knew he had no chance of beating this robotic nightmare, not when he was wounded, unarmed, and deprived of his psychic abilities. With fighting no longer an option, he was left with flight, and flying away from this lethal behemoth sounded like a very good idea.

Praying that his Paragon suit’s capabilities hadn’t been damaged in the fall, John activated flight mode and was greatly relieved to see that the aeronautic subsystems were still functional. He used the thrusters to leap to his feet and launch himself skyward, ignoring the stabbing pain in his chest as he made his escape. The robot galloped towards him, but John was in the air and climbing, already out of range of the whirring sword.

John smiled as he soared higher, but the grin was instantly wiped from his face when the robot clamped a claw onto his boot. Glancing down, he gaped incredulously at the robot, which had fired the claw from the end of one of its tentacles, a snaking cable keeping him securely anchored to the machine. Trying to fight down a surge of panic, John ramped the jets up to maximum, giving him enough thrust to launch him into orbit. The robot refused to let go and it swayed beneath him as it tried to reel him in, like an excited child flying his first kite on a blustery day.

As John fought to free his boot, the robot stomped over to one of the massive capacitors and clamped onto it with its second clawed tentacle. Before John realised what it was doing, a sizzling bolt of electricity raced down the robot’s limb, then surged up the other, engulfing his Paragon suit in a crackling burst of power. Smoke poured out of the thrusters until they shut down with an agonised whine, the body armour shorting out as its systems were overloaded.

John’s eyes widened in shock as he started to fall again, dropping back into the robot’s malevolent clutches.

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Lying flat on her back, Alyssa stared up at the blackened scorch marks that now covered the faceplate of her Paragon helmet. The shots had hit with enough force to knock her down, but the psychically reinforced metal had refused to yield, saving her life. As she rose to her feet, she reached up and tossed the damaged helmet aside, her renewed psychic shield blazing white-hot with her rage.

\*Give me power,\* she said to the Nymphs, as she slowly lifted off the Raptor’s topdeck.

Eldritch runes swirled around her arms, the ancient Kyth’faren script supercharged with a ferocity that was only kept in check by her will. She could feel the stream of energy from the four Nymphs pouring across their widening connections, her synapses tingling with anticipation as she felt it building within her.

\*More...\*

The lights in the surrounding city block started to flicker ominously, until the darkening metropolis looked as though it was cringing back in fear. While everything around her was plunged into shadows, Alyssa was shining brighter by the second, the runes now blazing with a frightening intensity.

\*More!\*

The robots continued to fire at the spinning globe, but the hexagons weren’t even damaged by the incoming shots now. Alyssa’s shield moved in a blur, moving faster than the eye could track, until the light pouring off its creator made the sphere impossible to see. The robots hesitated and began to back away from the figure shining like a supernova.

“Hahaha!”

Alyssa threw her head back and laughed with elation, revelling in the staggering levels of power coursing through her body. For the first time in her life, she was completely free... unbound by any natural limitations. Her heart swelled with joy, the possibilities felt endless.

Movement in her peripheral vision caught her attention and Alyssa’s head snapped to the right. With her senses heightened, she easily picked out scores of synthetic thralls as they retreated from their firing positions. Her radiant gaze narrowed into a blazing glare and she held out a gauntleted fist towards her attackers.

A deep boom resonated through the city, the sound rolling on and on as she unleashed a psychic Nova Lance on the closest building. The incandescent beam carved through the foundations, blasting a thirty-metre swathe of destruction through material that was there one moment and obliterated the next. With an agonized groan, the towering skyscraper toppled backwards, crashing to the ground in a storm of masonry and debris.

Lashing out again and again, Alyssa vented her full fury on the enemies that were keeping her from her friends. Golden spires toppled like tenpins, collapsing one after the other as she systematically demolished every structure in a two-hundred-metre radius. A huge cloud of dust swirled around the devastated metropolis, but it did nothing to obscure the blazing beam of light that continued to pound the robot forces into oblivion.

Panting with the exertion, Alyssa finally released her grip on the runes, which scattered to the four winds like fallen leaves. She slowly descended and stood on shaky legs, staring grimly at the utter devastation she had just unleashed. Controlling that much power had been intoxicating and she felt fundamentally changed by the experience, her perceptions altered to a significant degree.

John had ridden that same euphoric high and Alyssa realised that she’d only felt a glimpse of what it had been like until she experienced it for herself. She smiled to herself with satisfaction, knowing that she was one step closer to him now, and better able to support him as a result.

“Wow...” Rachel murmured, her hushed voice easily heard in the deathly-silent aftermath of Alyssa’s rage.

Glancing down, Alyssa saw the brunette standing just outside the Raptor’s airlock, a Tachyon rifle clutched in her trembling hand. Hearing that her friend was in trouble, Rachel had rushed to her rescue, just in time to see Alyssa’s outburst of raw psychic power. She glanced up and made eye contact with her matriarch, then just shook her head in awe, lost for words.

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Tashana cradled Dana in her arms as she floated down to the floor, then gently touched down on the black grating. Being careful not to jostle her injured charge, the Maliri laid the redhead down, watching her with concern. She knew that the young Terran had been exposed to the crippling mental effects of the Mists and wondered if it was still eroding her psyche while Dana was unconscious. Despite the care she took in placing Dana on the ground, the teenager stirred awake and looked up at her groggily.

“Tashana...” she mumbled, a flicker of recognition in her dazed eyes. “What the fuck just happened?”

“We were attacked,” the Maliri replied, answering quickly in clipped sentences. “A robot dropped from the ceiling. It knocked you out and took John.”

There was a loud crash behind them, emphasising his plight.

“Shit!” Dana gasped, struggling to sit up. “We’ve got to help him!”

Tashana placed a hand firmly on the teenagers chest. “I will... but you’re in no shape to fight.”

Dana stopped reaching for her Tachyon rifle, the tangled strap still slung over her shoulder. She looked like she was going to protest for a second, then sagged back on the ground.

“Where’s Irillith?” she asked weakly. “Is she already with John?”

Tashana bit her lip and shook her head. “The Mists... we’ve all been exposed. Helene’s not protecting us anymore.”

The redhead’s eyes widened in alarm as she realised the implications.

“Stay here and stay calm,” the Maliri gunfighter said, drawing her two pistols. “Alyssa is on her way.”

From somewhere out in the darkness, John’s agonised scream made them both freeze.

Dana recovered first and shoved her friend. “Go! Help him!”

Tashana nodded and took off at a sprint.

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Stunned senseless by the fall after his Paragon suit shorted out, John had been unable to defend himself when the robot pounced. The first sign he was in big trouble was a jarring vibration that shook him to the core, quickly followed by searing agony as the robot’s chainblade carved through the armour above his forearm and bit into his flesh. Whirring through meat and bone, it sawed off his arm at the elbow as John screamed in agony, leaving him gaping in horror at the gruesome stump.

Blood splattered across his faceplate as the robot hefted the snarling blade, the claw around John’s foot yanking him into position to begin a brutal excavation of his chest. He stared up at the grotesque weapon that was now dripping with his own gore, and watched his life flash before his eyes, desperately searching for any solution that might save him.

He had no weapons to strike back. He was cut off from his psychic abilities, so there was no salvation to be found there. His guide, who had saved him so many times before, was now gone forever. Images of the girls filled his final thoughts, but as much as he wanted to live for them, no last-second escape plan sprang to mind.

The blade swung down, its serrated edges slicing towards his helpless body... until a booming retort drowned out the grating buzz.

“Vrmm-pkaow!”

John instantly recognised the distinctive sound of a Punisher railgun being fired at close range. It was followed in rapid succession by a dozen more shots, the bursts of hyper-accelerated shells slamming into the robot’s arm. The force of the impact smacked the descending limb askew, making it strike the ground several metres away and instantly granting John a reprieve from the Reaper’s scythe.

Then Tashana was there, standing over him protectively with her twin pistols glowing in the darkness. She aimed them both at the claw clamped onto his boot and opened fire at point-blank range, hitting the thinner armour at the joints. The shriek of exploding metal was like music to John’s ears, then the Maliri holstered one of her guns and dragged him away.

“Thank you!” John gasped, as he clamped his hand over the ragged wound to try to stop the bleeding.

Tashana looked pale with fright, her skin almost the same baby blue as Helene’s eyes. “I’ll distract it... you get to safety!”

His instincts were screaming at him to protect her instead, but reason intervened and he nodded in acknowledgement. He staggered back as Tashana took off at a sprint, the lithe Maliri peppering the robot’s torso with 10mm slugs to keep its attention. Each shot struck its armoured hull with resounding force, making booming clangs with every impact. The plating was too thick for the rounds to penetrate, but each shot did knock it back a few inches, and left a trail of ugly pockmarks in its black chassis.

Judging this new target to be the biggest threat, the robot swivelled to face her, bringing its left arm down across its body. The cross it was holding began to glow and when Tashana’s next salvo hurtled towards it, the bullets deflected away with a very familiar thrumming sound. One of its tentacles now ended in a smoking lump of twisted metal, so it simply jettisoned the wrecked claw and reached behind itself to its back. There was a smooth shunt of servos, then the tentacle arm swung around with a long gun barrel attached.

Supporting the weapon with its free claw, it opened fire on Tashana, sending a stream of energy bolts after her. She ducked and dived, using every trick she knew to stay one step ahead of the strafed shots. Despite her exceptional agility, it was impossible to dodge everything and some of the shots struck home, weakening her ailing shields.

John could only watch helplessly as she weathered the onslaught, but he continued to retreat, taking advantage of the invaluable reprieve she was buying him. He nearly jumped out of his skin when something tapped his shoulder from behind, then he sagged with relief when he realised it was Dana.

“Need a hand?” she asked him with a grim smile, looking even paler than Tashana had a few moments earlier.

He couldn’t help letting out a short bark of laughter, but his voice sounded strained even to his own ears.

“C’mon, let’s get you the fuck outta here,” she muttered, slipping an arm around his waist.

John hesitated, then shook his head. “We can’t leave Tashana to fight that thing alone... it’s too dangerous. Besides, my Paragon suit has been fried, I can’t use flight mode to escape even if I wanted to.”

She looked at him incredulously for a moment, her gaze flicking down to what was left of his blood-drenched elbow. “What the hell are you going to do? Bleed on it?!”

“I don’t know... but we’ve got to do something,” he said through gritted teeth, readjusting his grip on his severed arm.

Blood dripped down the gauntlet, the flawless white now stained dark crimson.

“Shit... you’re gonna bleed out first,” Dana muttered, tugging apart the broken plates covering his bicep.

She scooped out a patch of bio-gel and gently tugged John’s hand away from the wound. Her pale skin took on a greenish tint as she looked at the ragged stump, then she squashed the globule of viscous liquid over his bleeding flesh.

“The medi-gel should’ve kicked in automatically, but all the circuits in your suit must be fried,” she noted, looking up at him. “Did that help?”

John shivered at the soothing wave of relief that seeped through his ravaged limb. “That feels so much better, thank you.”

She turned to look back at the ongoing fight and stared at the robot as Tashana led it further away.

“That thing’s got a powerful psychic inhibitor built into,” John said, following her worried gaze. “We need to shut it down if we’re going to have any chance of destroying the robot. If you were Mael’nerak where would you put it?”

“I dunno... the upper torso maybe?” Dana replied, carefully studying the massive automaton. “No...I’d stick it in the main body where I could protect it with the most armour.”

“Yeah, that makes sense.,” John said, nodding in agreement. “Can you help me find my rifle? Then we can catch it in a crossfire while Tashana has it distracted. Maybe the armour is weaker to the rear.”

Dana shook her head. “Let me go shoot it in the ass. You need to break through this inhibitor like you did at the bunker.”

“I tried to... but it’s too strong,” John admitted, his shoulders slumping in defeat.

“John, you can’t do shit with just one arm. You need your powers back to heal yourself before you can start fighting again,” Dana said firmly. “Also, what if we’re wrong about it being the source of the inhibitor? Even if it does have one, there’s no guarantee we can even punch through that armour to destroy it!”

He paused as that sank in, finding himself unable to disagree with anything she’d said.

“You can do this,” she urged him, giving John an encouraging smile. “I know you’re stronger than any normal Progenitor. There’s no way Mael’nerak could’ve anticipated someone like you turning up on Kythshara!”

“Alright... I’ll give it another try,” John said, not sharing her confidence.

Dana looked him in the eyes. “My suit’s wrecked as well, John. I won’t be able to escape if that thing comes after me.”

“I understand,” he said, knowing how high the stakes were.

She blew him a kiss, then unslung her rifle and chased after the robot that was rapidly closing the distance on Tashana.

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Irillith sobbed with fear as she ran through the tunnels, desperate to find her way out of the pyramid. She knew all she had to do was follow the passageways around a few right turns and she’d be back at the ramp that would let her escape this nightmare.

Except the path to safety had changed.

The very first corner now turned in the opposite direction and it didn’t take long for her to encounter a T-junction where there had been none before. She chose turns at random, fleeing through a maze of tunnels where red lights cast frightening shadows across the sinister black walls. Scenes of carnage and destruction seemed to loom out at her from the darkness, with Mael’nerak’s mocking face always sneering at her in contempt.

A bright burst of light was her first hint at danger, then her shields flashed as they were hit by gunfire. She whirled around, eyes wide with fright as she searched for attackers... but was left staring at an empty corridor. Another burst hit her from the opposite direction, and just like before, there was nobody there when she turned to confront them. Irillith whimpered in the darkness, no longer sure what was real and if it was her mind playing tricks on her.

She was terrified to go on, but just as scared to go back, so she was left with no choice but to keep running through the madhouse. Her shields failed in the next ambush, then the energy bolts hit her armour, knocking her over when she was shot in the back. Clambering to her feet, she hugged the wall, eyes like saucers as she searched in vain for whoever was responsible.

With tears rolling down her cheeks, she bolted down the corridor, crying hysterically as she edged closer to the precipice of insanity. Once she’d been forced to take that final leap, there would be no coming back.

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“Go, I’ll be fine,” Rachel said, giving her matriarch a brave smile. She jerked her thumb towards the smoking remnants of the city block and added, “By the time any reinforcements can get to me past all this rubble, you’ll be back with everyone safe and sound.”

“Just let me know if you get in any trouble,” Alyssa replied gratefully. “I’ll come back here as fast as I can.”

“I will. Don’t worry about Jade, I’ll protect her.”

Alyssa turned towards the third girl standing outside the Raptor, who had a look of astonishment on her face as she gaped at the scenes of devastation. “Ready, Helene?”

She quickly nodded. “I’m ready!”

Rachel handed Alyssa two Tachyon Rifles, which she promptly levitated into the air above her shoulders. The blonde then set off down the street at a fast pace, with Helene hot on her heels.

“Did you really knock down all of these buildings?” the Abandoned girl asked in a hushed voice, as they wove their way around smoking chunks of masonry.

“It was the fastest way to stop the robots attacking,” Alyssa explained, keeping a wary eye out for another ambush by synthetic thralls. “We need to rescue the girls as quickly as possible, so I didn’t want to waste any time.”

Helene was quiet as they approached the pyramid, lost in her own thoughts.

“Are you alright?” Alyssa asked, darting a concerned glance at her companion.

She hesitated for a moment, then said wistfully, “I was just wondering what it’s like to be that powerful.”

Now it was Alyssa’s turn to hesitate, unsure exactly how to reply.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable,” Helene hastily apologised.

“No, it’s okay,” the blonde replied, giving her a reassuring smile. “I’m not going to lie... it is pretty awesome. I just didn’t want you to feel like you were missing out; I know you would’ve liked to join the rest of us on combat missions.”

They turned down the adjoining street as they neared the pyramid and ran towards the colonnade leading to the entrance. When they arrived at the doors, Alyssa discovered that they were closed once again. She brushed her hand across the embossed surface, but they didn’t respond to her touch.

“I did... I mean, I would like to learn how to fight, so that I could help protect my family,” Helene said earnestly, as she looked up at Alyssa’s floating guns. “But John wants me to stay out of combat.”

“He’d give in, if you really pushed him,” Alyssa said, making a quick gesture and summoning a massive disembodied hand.

She clenched her fingers in her Paragon gauntlet, the telekinetic projection mirroring her actions. The glowing fist then launched forward and slammed into the sealed portal, the colossal impact smashing the huge doors off their hinges. They toppled backwards to hit the floor with a deafening clang, but the ringing crash didn’t even make Helene flinch as she gazed at Alyssa.

“But John’s done so much for me and never asked for anything in return,” she said to her matriarch. “He’s worried about combat changing me... so how can I refuse him his only request?”

Alyssa beckoned her to follow as she strode into the corridor. “Have a think about whether you just want to be able to blow stuff up, or if you genuinely want to support the team. If what you really care about is helping us, I can tell you that right now, I consider you the most valuable Lioness on Kythshara.”

“Really?” Helene asked, looking at her in astonishment.

“Yeah, absolutely. Protecting the girls is always my number one priority and no one else can shield their minds like you can. It wouldn’t bother me if you learned to shoot too, but one extra gun on the team won’t make much of a difference.”

They reached the ramp at the end of the corridor and after a quick glance to check if it seemed safe, Alyssa hurried downwards.

“I might be useful now, but that’s just because we’re on Kythshara. Once we’ve shut down the Mists, you’ll never have to worry about them again,” Helene said, jogging to keep up. “I know I was able to help when John cut himself off from you, but he promised to never do that again either. I’m just worried that I won’t be able to help you very often.”

“We’re going to be fighting some of the most powerful bad guys in the galaxy,” Alyssa said with a wry smile. “If you’re able to protect us from their psychic bullshit, you’re always going to be my star player.”

Helene beamed at her in response. “In that case, I’m happy to stay out of combat, if that’s what John wants.”

“Sounds good to me...” Alyssa said, but her brow was now creased with worry.

“Is something wrong?” Helene asked, watching her matriarch with concern when she saw her expression darken.

“Yeah... it’s Irillith. I’m not sure how much longer she can last,” Alyssa said, feeling the waves of terror radiating from the Maliri hacker. “We better hurry!”

They picked up the pace and sprinted down the ramp, bouncing off the walls as they ran full-tilt around the corners. When they reached the lower level, Alyssa skidded to a halt and stared in shock at the wall blocking their path. It was covered in a mural like many of the walls in the pyramid and Mael’nerak sneered down at them, as if mocking their attempt to save their friend.

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John sank to his knees and took a deep breath, trying to steady his rapid pulse. Ever since Mael’nerak’s construct had launched its ambush, he’d been forced onto the defensive, fighting just to survive its determined attempts to murder him. He tried to block out all the surrounding distractions, from the throbbing ache in his arm, to the clanking robot in the distance.

He felt himself calming, his mind shifting to that zen-like state he’d spent many years meditating to attain. With sharper clarity and focus, he could sense that stifling blanket over his mind, and visualise it actively suppressing his abilities. The flickering candle that represented the psychic potential burning within him seemed so far away, hidden in a claustrophobic shroud of shadows.

Reaching out with his will, he stretched towards that light, struggling against the cloying inertia that tried to hold him down. It felt like his early forays into the Astral Plane, with his truculent guide weighing like an anvil around his neck. The more he strained, the heavier that load became, making even the slightest movement impossible.

Sweat ran down his brow with the exertion and John pulled off his helmet to escape the musty air inside. He panted for breath, then slowly exhaled, readying himself for another attempt. He heard bursts of gunfire nearby and knew that Dana must have joined the battle, sharply reminding him of the urgency of his task.

Pushing aside the distractions, he tried again, straining with everything he had to break free of the psychic inhibitor.

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Tashana ran full tilt from the robot, her legs pumping furiously to keep her one step ahead of the unending stream of energy bolts following in her wake. Even though the robot was charging after her, its four sturdy legs kept it very stable, and the incoming fire was alarmingly accurate. She’d already lost her shields, and the melted crater on the back of her right pauldron was testimony to the power of that weapon.

Her sharp ears picked up more shots being fired behind her, but instead of the deep thrumming of the robot’s pulsed cannon, she immediately recognised the distinctive bark of a Punisher railgun. They were followed by a steady percussion of hyper-accelerated rounds slamming into the robot’s armour, each deep crack sounding promising, rather than a high-pitched squeal of a ricochet. Tashana realised that Dana must be shooting the robot in the back, because it wasn’t deflecting her shots with its portable shield. She decided to try to keep it distracted for as long as possible.

The Maliri gunslinger risked a glance over her shoulder to check it was still keeping up the pursuit and was shocked to see that it was right behind her. Its arm came crashing down in a huge overhead strike, the snarling chainblade whistling towards her head. Tashana dug in hard with her heel and flung herself to the side, narrowly avoiding the sword as it crashed into the ground she’d been standing on only seconds ago. Rolling into the dive, she kicked off the deck plates and sprang to her feet, making an abrupt turn to her left as she started running again.

The robot hadn’t anticipated her charging directly towards it, so Tashana caught it by surprise as she ran between its two front legs. Servos whined all around her and the massive machine reared up, then slammed down to squash her beneath its body. The Maliri had been waiting for that opportunity and took advantage of being out of its line-of-sight, to skip to the side when she saw it rise up. The floor shook with the massive impact, but Tashana was already in the air, bounding up onto its back.

She aimed at the faint lines in the armour covering its back, knowing that was where the robot had stored its gun in a concealed compartment. Holding down both triggers, her twin pistols vibrated in her hands as they pumped round after round of full-auto fire into the massive robot. Armour plating buckled outwards as she blasted the weak point over and over again, then the 10mm rounds began to punch through, ricocheting inside its torso and making some very promising cracks and thumps. She would’ve loved to launch a fiery sprite into its internals, but the oppressive weight of the psychic inhibitor field made that impossible.

As Tashana was relishing turning the tables on her pursuer, the robot ratcheted its torso to the right with several loud clicks, then released the lock. Whipping around at incredible speed, it backhanded her across the chest, with a blow that felt like she’d been rammed by a truck. The whirring chainblade clipped her boot, its serrated edge flipping her into a spin as she was sent cartwheeling away.

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Dana’s heart lurched as she watched Tashana sail through the air and crash to the floor. The robot sprang up with surprising agility for a machine of it size, then stomped around to charge after the Maliri it had batted aside like an annoying bug. Tashana struggled to her knees, dazed and disorientated after the rapid spin and the heavy landing, seemingly oblivious to the approaching danger.

“C’mon... get up!” the redhead muttered under her breath.

She opened fire on full auto, wishing she could hit the damaged back from this angle, but settled for aiming at its hip joints. The robot was forced to slow down as the barrage of incoming fire kept knocking it sideways, the railgun rounds punching into its flank or careening off at crazy angles. A lucky hit pierced straight through a weakened armour joint and ripped apart the upper actuator in its right rear leg. The robot juddered and made an ungainly hop, before the leg twisted awkwardly and it toppled over onto its side.

“Fuck yeah!” Dana crowed, ejecting her spent magazine and slamming in a new one. “Eat that, you metal bastard!”

The robot thrashed to right itself, then brought its arm around to protect its body from another salvo. Although its torso was now twisted to face Dana, the tentacle arms repositioned themselves to train its cannon at Tashana. Kneeling on the ground she had no chance of dodging and it blasted her in the back, the impact sending her sprawling with a startled shriek of pain.

As Dana looked on in horror, the mechanical behemoth continued to advance on Tashana, its chainblade now raised to execute a coup de grace. She fired at it again, but all her rounds were harmlessly deflected by the shield, ricocheting away with an eerie thrumming sound. Switching to the Tachyon barrel she hit it with a stream of pulsed beams, the defensive field undulating wildly as it tried to fend off the azure storm.

The protective shield shorted out with a defeated whine, then the tachyon bolts sprayed over the robots torso. Seeing they weren’t having much effect, Dana quickly switched to her rifle’s punisher railgun while ejecting her spent magazine. She slotted in a fresh mag, then renewed her fire, slamming round after round into its remaining right leg.

The robot’s heavy cannon swung around in Dana’s direction and she cursed as it returned fire, the energy bolts lighting up her Paragon suit’s shields in retaliation. Despite being involved in a ferocious gunfight with Dana, the robot showed no sign of stopping as it limped towards Tashana, intent on finishing her off while she was down.

“John! Help me!” Dana screamed in alarm. “It’s going to kill her!”

Her desperate cry pierced John’s thoughts, instantly shattering his concentration and sending his heart rate skyrocketing. His eyes snapped open and John took in the nightmarish scene before him, with the blood streaked killing machine dragging itself towards its next victim.

Calmness and serenity were replaced by a savage fury, the thought of that malevolent construct harming the lovely Maliri girl more terrible than he could bear. John focused his will inwards, then held out a commanding hand towards the flickering torch that danced elusively in the shadows of his mind. It blazed to life like wildfire, the eager flames banishing the shadows that had tried to suppress its brilliance. Instead of John reaching out to touch the torch, it came to him, soaring out of the darkness to be reunited with its master.

Kyth’vindathys returned to his gauntlet with a resounding clang, the runeblade bursting into sapphire flame as it surged with eldritch power. John leapt to his feet and strode towards the behemoth closing on his wounded Lioness, the archaic weapon blazing brighter with every step. While his right hand clutched the sword, his left arm tingled as sinews wrapped around the reforming bone, before being sheathed in strong flesh and smooth skin.

John slashed the air before him, unleashing a telekinetic blast wave that smashed into the robot with enough force to lift it off the floor, and send it careening across the room.

“Dana, tend to Tashana,” he said quietly, striding past her towards the machine.

She looked at him wide-eyed and nodded. “Yeah... okay!”

The robot flailed around until it regained its footing, the cannon held by the tentacles now trained squarely on John. It opened fire, pouring high-powered bolts towards its target. A spinning hex-shield absorbed the succession of energy blasts, the blue hexagons repairing faster than it could damage them. Realising the weapon was useless against John, the robot lined up a tentacle arm in his direction and launched the claw.

John’s body had already fully regenerated, his severed forearm back in action with a healthy replacement. Activating psychic speed, he smoothly sidestepped the splayed talons as they rocketed past, then reached out to grab the extended cable. Before the robot could react, he yanked it towards him with all his strength, making it topple forward onto its multi-faceted face.

The hulking automaton almost seemed to react with shock as it was tipped over, its limbs jerking forward in a futile effort to protect itself. While it was disorientated at being up-ended, John broke into a sprint, his psychic abilities accelerating him to incredible speed. His two-handed slash slammed into the robot’s shoulder, Kyth’vindathys cleaving through the joint with a tortured screech of metal that almost sounded like the machine was in agony.

“That was for the hand,” John muttered, skidding across the deck before turning back towards his dismembered foe. His broken ribs had already healed, but he vividly remembered how much breaking them had hurt. “Now, let’s settle the rest...”

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“Tashana!” Dana called out, as she skidded to her knees beside the wounded Maliri.

“My back!” the gunslinger hissed through clenched teeth. “Holy fuck that hurts!”

“Hold on... just let me take a look,” Dana replied, grimacing as she looked at the wound. “I think you’re okay... it looks like the armour took the worst of it.”

“It’s burning!” Tashana protested, writhing on the floor in pain.

Dana deftly unlocked the clasps holding the chestplate together using the emergency release, then tugged away the scorched backplate. It only took one glance and she saw the problem immediately.

“Those shots to your back took out your suit’s main thruster. It also ruptured a fuel line and with all the damage to the body armour...” she said, reaching inside to wipe away the boiling hot liquid. “The fuel heated up and melted through your jumpsuit. Let me get some medi-gel on that burn until John or Rachel can patch you up.”

“Thank you,” the Maliri said gratefully, before letting out a moan of relief as Dana applied the cool gelatinous substance to her burnt skin. She sat up and reached for her discarded pistols with trembling hands. “Where’s the robot?”

“It’s just working out a few things with John, man to machine,” the redhead replied with a wry grin.

Movement caught Tashana’s eye and she saw the robot’s battered chassis go sailing through the air before landing with a thunderous crash and tumbling across the floor. It had already lost both arms as well as both tentacles and crashing into the ground ripped off its damaged rear leg in a shower of broken parts.

“Looks like that’s going pretty well,” Tashana said, holstering her pistols and sagging with relief.

“Oh shit...” Dana whispered, in a voice laden with dread.

“What is it?” the Maliri asked, immediately noticing her unsettling tone.

When there was no reply, she turned to look quizzically at Dana and found the young woman looking upwards, her frightened face a vivid picture of dismay. Tashana couldn’t help but follow her shocked gaze and gasped when she saw the octagonal capacitors. Electricity was now pouring off them in a seething storm and jagged bolts of lightning arced between the massive machines.

“How long till it blows?” she asked quietly.

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“Get back, Helene!” Alyssa said, waving her towards the ramp. “I’m going to try blasting my way through!”

The teal-hued mermaid retreated in a hurry, trying to give the blonde as much space as she required. When Helene turned back to watch, Alyssa’s arms were already surrounded by eldritch runes, the glowing script moving in languid circles but gathering speed. Backing away several paces, Alyssa raised her fists and pointed them at the wall that was blocking them from reaching Irillith.

A beam of light appeared in a dazzling flash, the beam as wide as a dinner plate as it seared Mael’nerak’s image from the mural. Alyssa narrowed her eyes and frowned in frustration, then the beam tripled in width as she channelled more power into the blazing column. The roar as it blasted the wall was deafening, with rivulets of liquid metal dripping down the surface to pool on the floor. She intensified it even further, the shaft of light so bright that it hurt to look that way as it pounded into the wall.

Just as suddenly as the beam had appeared, it winked out, leaving behind a glowing halo where it had burned through the metal. Heat radiated out from the steaming rent, making it hazy and indistinct as they both stared at the molten remains.

“Goddamn that metal’s tough!” Alyssa exclaimed, glaring at the obstinate wall.

“You managed to melt a hole through it though,” Helene said optimistically.

Shaking her head, Alyssa’s brow furrowed with worry. “I had to use a ton of energy to even do that. When I blasted Larn’kelnar’s shuttle with a beam that size, I melted a hole straight through several layers of hull plating. It’ll take me forever to reach Irillith at this rate and she’s running out of time.”

Alyssa could feel Irillith’s mind breaking down, her thoughts becoming even more crazed and incoherent. She had read the autopsy reports that had been unearthed from Valada’s tomb and knew that if she didn’t reach the Maliri in the next few minutes, there was a dreadful possibility that Irillith might turn her gun on herself.

Helene closed her eyes and reached out with her mind, trying to make contact with the terrified Lioness. The big problem she had, was that Helene had no idea exactly where her friend was located, so it felt like fumbling around in the dark and hoping to bump into someone by blind luck.

“I can’t find her,” she was forced to admit, looking at Alyssa in anguish. “There must be something else we can do!”

There was a shining radiance in the teenager’s eyes that hadn’t been there before, and her full lips turned up into an enigmatic smile. “Calm yourself, hope is not lost. There are still other possibilities we can explore.”

She raised a hand, her slender fingers tracing an oval in the air. As if mirroring her actions, a glowing elongated disc appeared before their eyes, stretching until it was their own height. Before Helene could say a word, Irillith burst through the dimension gate and crashed into Alyssa’s open arms. The Maliri was in a wild frenzy, clawing at Alyssa’s face as she fought to free herself.

“Quickly, Helene... shore up her mental defences!” the blonde urged her, jerking her head back to avoid Irillith’s clutching hands.

Helene blinked in surprise, then rushed to do as she asked, reaching out with her empathic abilities to the terrified Maliri. This visit to Irillith’s subconscious revealed her mental condition to be in a shockingly different state to before. Huge chunks of the chalk cliff face had toppled over into the raging ocean, leaving behind only the broken remnants of its foundations. Towering waves crashed over the shoreline, dislodging chunks of rock and washing them out to sea.

Fearful for her friend’s rapidly decaying sanity, Helene was desperate to intervene, but she had no idea how to repair the dreadful erosion to her mind.

A radiant figure suddenly stepped into view, appearing as if from nowhere. \*Trust your instincts, Helene,\* she urged the Abandoned girl. \*John has provided you with all the tools you require. Simply envision a way in which you can assist Irillith.\*

\*But what should I do?\* Helene asked the woman, bewildered by her explanation.

\*Help her... in whatever way feels most comfortable to you,\* Athena said, her tone warm and full of encouragement.

The Abandoned girl looked at her in amazement and asked in a hushed voice, \*I can do anything I want?\*

\*In this place, the possibilities are endless... for those with the strength to bend it to their will,\* Athena replied, giving Helene a knowing smile. \*And John does love to lavish all of you with such extravagant gifts.\*

Helene looked at the ravaged coastline, then darted an anxious glance back at her mysterious advisor.

\*Go on... I believe in you.\*

Athena’s calm belief in her bolstered Helene’s confidence and she dove into the waves, letting them sweep her to shore. Instead of being dashed on the jagged rocks, the surging water placed her gently upon the beach, letting Helene step away as the tide parted beneath her feet. She turned towards the waves, which splashed playfully around her, as if in enthralled by her presence.

\*Roll back please,\* Helene politely requested, and watched as the sea drew backwards, the waves crested with white froth in its eagerness to obey.

Scattered over the sandy seabed was battered debris from the cliff that had collapsed under the tide’s onslaught. Helene crouched down beside a worn chunk of rock and gently caressed its surface. She could feel the memory contained within, of Irillith lying in John’s arms for the first time, feeling a profound sense of contentment that had eluded her all her life.

\*These are precious,\* she said reverently, rising to her feet. \*Could you put them back where they belong, please.\*

Athena watched in silence, marvelling at the sight of Helene subverting the debilitating Mists and turning them into a force for healing. The seas washed over the shore, returning the ragged boulder to the place it originated from, quickly followed by all the scattered remnants that had collapsed into the ocean.

\*Thank you,\* Helene said, before turning to gesture upwards with both hands.

The rocks tumbled together, sliding and rolling with a loud rumble as the chalk cliff face was systemically rebuilt. Helene took great care to restore Irillith’s shattered subconscious, smoothing out a number of stress fractures she found until the escarpment gleamed flawless white in the brilliant morning sunshine.

Nodding with satisfaction, she approached Athena. \*Was that okay?\*

\*You’re a wonder, Helene,\* the radiant girl murmured, leaning in to warmly embrace her. She held her close for a moment, then instead of pulling back from the hug, she whispered in her ear, \*Listen to John... don’t let your soul be hardened by the brutalities of war. He needs you... they all do.\*

Helene turned to ask what she meant... but Athena had gone, leaving her standing alone on the beach.

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“We don’t have long...” Dana muttered, watching as the gathering electrical storm intensified. “The AI running this place must have rigged the generator to go into a meltdown. It probably activated an emergency protocol to detonate the reactor in a last-ditch effort to kill John.”

“What do we do?” Tashana asked, staggering to her feet. “Should we try and run?”

“We’d never clear the blast radius in time,” Dana replied, slowly shaking her head. “When this thing blows, it’ll take the entire city with it.”

“What about a failsafe?” Tashana suggested, turning to look at the Chief Engineer. “If we can find that control room, maybe we can abort the meltdown?”

“Irillith’s our best shot at hacking into their network and safely deactivating this place. Where is she anyway?”

Tashana’s face fell, her concerns about her sister flooding back. “She was already affected by the Mists back at the border. When we got cut off from Helene, there was nothing to protect her mind from the side-effects anymore.”

“Shit... I’m sorry,” Dana said with sympathy, her own heart aching for her friend.

The Maliri glanced up at the increasingly unstable reactor. “At least she won’t suffer long...”

“No way, fuck that. I’m not giving up,” Dana said defiantly. Turning towards the robot, which John was methodically hacking apart with sweeping blows from his runesword, she yelled, “John! Look up!”

He did as she asked, his eyes widening when he saw the looming threat building above their heads.

“Stop screwing around with that thing and take out the inhibitor!” Dana shouted over to him. “We need to get in contact with Alyssa!”

John gave her a thumbs up, then rose into the air, his sword blazing with power. He brought the blade down in a massive overhead chop, which scythed through the Robot’s mangled chassis, cleaving it in half.

Both girls felt the difference at once, as the psychic inhibitor field burst like a popped balloon.

“Oh, that feels so much better,” Tashana said, removing her helmet and rubbing her temple. “That inhibitor was giving me a headache.”

\*There you are!\* Alyssa cried out, her elated voice dancing through their mind. \*Are you okay? What the hell happened?\*

“This place was a trap,” Tashana replied aloud, so that Dana could hear as well. “All the warning signs were there. Mael’nerak never went evil at the end... he rigged his throneworld to lure an invading Progenitor to his death.”

\*What about John?!\* their matriarch asked, her question fraught with worry. \*He just said he’s fine... that means he got hurt.\*

“It was close for a minute there... but he’s okay now,” the Maliri replied.

“Alyssa, we’re all in deep shit!” Dana interrupted. “The AI running this place has done something to overload the Power Generator. I reckon we’ve only got a couple of minutes, then this entire place is going to be a smoking crater ten miles wide!”

That stunned Alyssa into silence for a moment, then she asked quietly, \*What are our options?\*

John jogged over to join the conversation, greeting both girls with a nod. He stayed silent, waiting for Dana’s response.

She rubbed at her face and glanced up at the impending disaster unfolding before her eyes. “I don’t know... I’ve no idea how this place works. I’m not even sure we can shut it down at this point. I mean... just look at it!”

John didn’t bother to look up, having already seen enough to know she was almost certainly right. “Okay then, we can’t shut this thing down and we won’t be able to clear the blast radius in time... so what else? There must be something we can do.”

Dana gave him a helpless shrug. “I dunno... contain the blast somehow?”

“How do we do that?” he asked, listening intently.

“You actually want to try to contain a thermo-nuclear explosion?” she asked incredulously.

“Yep,” he insisted. “There must be a way, we just need to figure out how.”

“In like... two minutes,” Dana said sceptically, grimacing at their predicament.

“I’ve got an idea,” Tashana said, her tone solemn. “Do you know the one thing that can survive a black hole?”

John frowned at her. “Nothing can survive a black hole. They can destroy anything.”

“Yeah... exactly,” she replied, her violet gaze settling on Dana.

“You want me to create a black hole down here?!” she balked, gaping at them both in disbelief. “Are you crazy?!”

John chuckled and nodded. “Yeah, probably. You might as well give it a shot, Sparks. It’s not like you’ll be cutting down on our life expectancy if it doesn’t work.”

She couldn’t help laughing too, although there was an edge of hysteria to it. “Fuck it... let’s do this!”

Tashana exchanged a glance with John, then asked, “What do you want us to do? Should we try to get to a safe place? Aren’t we going to get sucked into it?”

Dana shook her head. “Stay here. I’ll set up a gravitational field to nullify the effects.”

\*Sparks, I’ve already tapped out the Nymphs, but Edraele’s almost full, and I’ve got Sakura and Calara as reserve. I should be able to give you whatever you need.\*

“Just keep it coming. I’m going to have to make this one small but insanely powerful,” she said, cracking her knuckles. “Alright, everyone... hold on to your butts!”

The halos around her pupils began to glow, the radiance intensifying until her eyes were gleaming with a golden light. She gazed up into the cavernous room above, watching jagged bolts of lightning criss-crossing the huge space between the capacitors. Gesturing towards a point hundreds of metres above them, Dana triggered a gravitational singularity, the pinprick of blackness immediately making its presence felt.

Lightning bolts swerved into the tiny orb, the golden halo that surrounded it expanding as Dana fed more power into the astronomical hazard. It appeared to be wreathed in an apocalyptic lightning storm as all the arcing electricity was drawn into its core. The bridge twisted and snapped, then sailed up into the insatiable maw of the black hole, where it twisted and crumpled into a densely packed block of mass.

“Dana, the gravity field!” John reminded her, as he felt himself being pulled upwards.

He slipped one arm around Tashana and held her tight, then drove his runeblade into the floor to anchor them both.

“Oh crap... I forgot. Sorry,” Dana apologised, waving a hand in their direction.

Golden lines marking the gravitational field appeared nearby, the forces opposing the pull from the black hole and cancelling it out. John gave her a grateful nod, then glanced up at the golden-limned sphere that was greedily consuming everything it could touch. The sound of metal snapping and objects crashing into each other grew louder, as anything not tightly secured was sucked skyward.

The crumpled remains of the robot lifted off the ground, its remaining limbs dangling loosely until they succumbed to the black hole’s inescapable lure. It seemed almost graceful as the battered chassis soared into the air, the robot smoothly pirouetting as it sailed towards the core. Before it reached its final destination, the intense gravitational forces compressed the robot, ruthlessly crushing it into oblivion.

Dana let out a gasp as she harnessed vast amounts of psychic energy, pouring it all into the ever-expanding singularity. The gravity well it created had started demanding more matter to consume and the forces at work grew ever stronger. With a squealing crash, one of the massive capacitors tore free from the ceiling and tipped towards the black hole. John watched as it crumpled inwards like a crushed tin can, the ensuing burst of electricity it released in its death throes sucked safely into the insatiable maw.

Whether it was the capacitors being torn free that did it, or the generator had already reached a critical point, the reactor was engulfed in a massive explosion. From his ring-side seat below the black hole, John watched in horrified fascination as the blast roared outwards... only to slow before his eyes. It inched towards them, appearing to move in slow motion, until the inescapable vortex dragged the atoms back. Then it was like watching the blast in reverse as detonated matter and blazing flames were sucked into the black hole’s maw.

A ear-splitting crack reverberated through the chamber from the ceiling and a steady stream of masonry crashed down from the pyramid above. It all veered straight into the singularity, like a massive vacuum cleaner was sucking up everything in sight. As Mael’nerak’s ziggurat was consumed, they could see starlight above in the night’s sky, but that view started to distort, the stars growing hazy.

“It’s strong enough to bend light...” Tashana murmured, staring at the incredible spectacle in awe.

“Dana!” John said, grabbing her arm to get her attention. “You did it! You saved us! Now shut this thing down!”

Her golden gaze turned to focus on him and she nodded in understanding.

John was expecting the black hole to slowly decrease in power, winding down until it dissipated, but the redhead clicked her fingers and it disappeared in a snap. A condensed core that contained everything the singularity had consumed dropped to the ground and plunged straight through the bare floor, its weight so massive that the surface couldn’t support it.

“Is that going to be a problem?” John asked, staring at the pit bored through the ground.

Tashana shook her head. “If it doesn’t slow down, it’ll reach the planet’s molten core and just be harmlessly absorbed.”

“That was amazing, Sparks,” John said, shaking his head in admiration. “You did an incredible job.”

“Looks like I found the off-switch...” she said quietly.

John laughed and looked up at her, then froze when he saw blood trickling from her nose. Dana’s eyes rolled backwards and she collapsed in his arms.

\*Alyssa!\* he called out to his matriarch in alarm. \*We need Rachel... now!\*