Three Square Meals Ch. 164

Venkarys was an exceptionally beautiful planet, the Maliri homeworld swathed in rolling green plains and a patchwork of glittering aquamarine lakes. Dispersed across the planet’s surface were dozens of elegant cities, their golden spires attaining lofty heights, as if reaching up to touch the cloudless blue skies. Surrounding them were exquisitely designed parks, adding lush greenery and stunning water features to each metropolis for the citizens to enjoy.

The fleets of thralls that swarmed towards Venkarys cared nothing for the lovely aesthetics of the Maliri planet. Like a horde of sinister black locusts, the Galkiran forces blotted out the skies, the fleets dispersing around the globe to target all the major cities. They dropped to low orbit, with Dominator class battleships leading a cohort of cruisers and destroyers as they moved into position.

When the signal was given, they began their orbital barrage on the defenceless cities below. Tachyon Lances lashed down in blinding purple columns of malevolent energy, the beams searing through buildings and vegetation with equal ease. Wherever those beams slashed down, they left fires in their wake, setting the spires and parks ablaze.

Even more terrifying were the huge Quantum Flux Cannons that jutted from the hulls of the Galkiran battleships. Their barrels crackled with energy as power built up inside those formidable weapons, then they recoiled again and again, launching hyper-accelerated slugs into the urban areas below. Each shell punched through everything in its path, before striking the ground and detonating in huge explosions. Entire blocks were obliterated by each terrifying salvo, the blasts leaving nothing behind, and only huge impact craters marked the place where those graceful buildings had once stood.

Only one city escaped the wanton destruction that rained down on all the others. Surrounded by leafy suburbs, Kayrona was significantly larger than any of the other cities on the planet, clearly marking it as the planetary capital. On a hill overlooking the city was the magnificent matriarchal palace, where Keishara Venkalyn had ruled over her homeworld, and all the other systems owned by House Venkalyn, for the past two centuries.

An enormous Progenitor dreadnought descended from the heavens, its three-kilometre length casting a dark shadow across the golden palace below. It was accompanied by a host of thrall warships, the command group looming ominously over the Maliri capital. Hangar doors opened up in the hulls of those vessels, and a swarm of dropships emerged, their engines blazing brightly as they soared across the city in search of landing zones.

Among that horde of troop transports was Gahl’kalgor’s personal shuttle, the vessel faster, tougher, and more manoeuvrable than any conventional thrall ship. It was the first to land, retro-thrusters flaring as it touched down in a park near the centre of the city. The airlock split open, and Gahl’kalgor emerged, setting a booted foot down on his first Maliri world.

Scores more transports descended all around him, then thralls poured out of the parked craft, their arrival accompanied by the ominous beat of thousands of boots striking metal ramps. The planetary invasion could hardly have gone unnoticed by the city’s occupants, and sleek hovercars raced away, trying to escape from the alien forces. After being cooped up inside spacecraft for an interminable amount of time, the thrall troops were hungry for battle. No sooner had they disembarked from their transports, the thralls began to open fire, and fleeing hovercars were blasted out of the sky, plummeting to the ground in a plume of smoke and flame.

The sound of gunfire was like music to Gahl’kalgor’s pointed ears, as were the screams of terrified civilians, before those cries were cut off in strangled shrieks. He grinned in satisfaction, relishing the ugly sounds of war, the hellacious cacophony raising his spirits to new heights. It was exhilarating to finally be striking back at Baen’thelas’ empire, especially after spending weeks sitting around impotently.

He turned to look back at Valeria, who was standing in formation with her elite squad of bodyguards. “Let the Selan’kethari have their fun. I have something special planned for you, my loyal Matriarch.”

Valeria looked thrilled and she dismissed her cohort of bodyguards with a wave of her hand. The elite Galkiran troops wasted no time departing, and rushed off down the boulevard towards the city centre, eager to join in the slaughter.

“What now, my Lord?”

“Come with me,” he replied, and beckoned for her to follow after him.

Gahl’kalgor led her away from his shuttle towards a large plaza, and when they reached the edge, he held up a hand. “Hold here a moment,” he ordered, before continuing onwards by himself.

Doing as he’d asked, Valeria waited obediently near the corner of the open square, watching as the Progenitor walked towards its centre. He came to a halt there, then closed his eyes, concentrating his will inwards as he summoned his psychic abilities. A nimbus of power began to gather around him, the eldritch energy flickering with a malevolent murky grey light.

His form started to swell, growing taller and taller by the second, until he was already twice her height. She watched him in awe as he continued to grow, until her Progenitor master towered above her, even looming over the nearby buildings. Gradually the psychic growth spurt began to taper off, and when his form had stabilised, he turned and took a step towards Valeria, the heavy impact on the ground sending vibrations through her booted feet.

Lowering himself to one knee, Gahl’kalgor held out one hand flat to the floor, directly in front of his tiny matriarch. “Come, Valeria,” he rumbled, his deep voice reverberating around the plaza. “Let’s find you a better view of the city.”

With catlike grace she vaulted onto the palm of his hand, then looked up at him with open adoration as he raised her up high. Gahl’kalgor carefully placed his matriarch on the roof of one of the nearby buildings, the city block at least twenty stories, giving her a spectacular view of the city below. Valeria could see squads of black-armoured Galkiran troops rushing through the streets, mercilessly gunning down civilians that tried to flee from the massacre.

Gahl’kalgor brought his head closer to the edge of the building and gazed down at her with his huge compelling eyes. “Pick one,” he said, turning to gesture towards the skyscrapers behind him.

Valeria bit her lip, then pointed towards the closest. “I choose that one, my Lord.”

The Progenitor grinned at her, then pulled on his helmet, and turned to line himself up with the huge golden building. With a roar he charged towards it, lowering his shoulder just before slamming into the elegant spire. Crystalline windows shattered into a million shards, the razor-sharp fragments raining down on him as the building let out a tortured groan of protest. The bone-crushing impact had done huge damage to the creaking building, bending enough beams and supporting columns to weaken its structural integrity. It slowly toppled over, the shriek of twisting metal drowning out the terrified screams of the inhabitants as the skyscraper crashed to the ground.

Valeria watched the brutal demolition in awe, then clapped her hands with glee, applauding her Progenitor master’s spectacular efforts.

\*That was incredible, my Lord!\* she gushed, thrilled that he was doing this for her entertainment.

He chuckled at her reaction, the deep rumbling laughter sending a thrill down her spine.

\*Pick another,\* he said, thoroughly enjoying her jubilant applause.

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Hundreds of light years away, Fleet Commander Lyshalla leaned forward in her chair, watching as her fleets of Galkiran warships rapidly approached the enemy system. Now that her battleship had closed the distance to the target, the sensor array was able to supply considerably more data to the tactical view.

The starbase was unlike anything she had seen before, the size, shape, and design radically different to the orbital facilities constructed in the Galkiran Empire. The space station was definitely armed, but she didn’t recognise the type of weapons in the gun batteries that were interspaced between ostentatious towers and gaudy domes. In Lyshalla’s experience, different always meant weaker, so she wasn’t fazed in the slightest by the space station’s peculiar appearance.

“Dropping out of hyper-warp in ten seconds, Fleet Commander,” the navigator stated, with an unmistakeable ring of excitement in her voice.

Lyshalla made no attempt to curtail the wicked grin that appeared on her face. She was just as eager for her first taste of real battle as her crew, who had spent the last week being harassed by the enemy Progenitor’s ambushes. She almost pitied the occupants of that space station, who were soon to be the outlet for her battle group’s seething frustrations.

The Galkiran forces began to slow, before abruptly leaving hyper-warp at the periphery of the star system’s gravity well. Lyshalla was just about to give the order to close up the fleets into attack formations, when a searing blue beam lashed across the holographic map. She blinked in surprise, then felt a flicker of dread as she frantically searched for the enemy Progenitor’s ship.

It didn’t take her long to locate the gleaming white battlecruiser, then she stared at the Invictus in astonishment as dozens more beams of azure light illuminated the map. “What are they doing?!” she blurted out incredulously.

The battleship’s senior tactical officer gawped at the enemy vessel, the thrall stunned into silence. A few seconds ticked by, then the map flared with light again and again, casting bright blue reflections around the dimly-lit bridge.

“Well?! Answer me!” Lyshalla demanded.

“They appear to be firing on the Maliri station,” the crewwoman stammered, watching the battle in shocked disbelief.

“I can see that!” the Fleet Commander snapped, narrowing her eyes dangerously. “Why is he shooting at his own forces?!”

The tactical officer could only give her a helpless shrug in response, as bemused by the Progenitor’s bizarre actions as she was.

The Invictus’ relentless assault soon began to inflict catastrophic damage on the space station, and the facility flashed red as it started to break apart. Large chunks of the superstructure fractured away from the main base, the dismantled pieces sailing off into space. Another searing blast slammed into one of those larger chunks, the colossal beam carving through the remnants like a hot knife through butter.

Explosions followed after that devastating blast, reducing the kilometre wide fragment of the starbase into a million pieces of glowing debris. It seemed like the enemy Progenitor wasn’t just content with destroying the battlestation, he wanted to obliterate it until there was nothing left. The Galkirans could do nothing except watch the wanton destruction in stunned silence. It was quite apparent that the Progenitor would thoroughly demolish their target long before they had any chance of reaching it themselves.

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The Invictus rapidly tore apart Genwynn’s habitation modules. The demolition charges safely ejected them from the concealed battlestation, which allowed Calara to destroy them with impunity. It didn’t take long for the outer shell to lay in utter ruins, blasted into oblivion by a combination of Nova Lance blasts, Tachyon Lance beams, and salvos from the four Quantum Flux Cannons.

Freed from the stifling additions to the core structure, Mael’nerak’s ancient battlestation was finally able to work as it had been originally intended many thousands of years earlier. Upper and lower turrets emerged from the central core, then pivoted to lower the enormous weapon barrels of the Quantum Devastators into firing positions. The reinforced starbase was now ready for battle, the muzzles of those weapons tracking the approach of the Galkiran fleets.

Alyssa rose from her chair and glided over to stand beside John, where they observed the invaders from the safety of their cloaked battlecruiser. The thrall forces cautiously approached the sea of debris, seemingly oblivious to the lethal danger posed by Genwynn’s massive cannons. Alyssa knew full well that a blast from the Quantum Devastators would instantly vaporise the closest pair of Galkiran battleships, but she also possessed an advantage that the thrall forces lacked. The Invictus was equipped with a Progenitor sensor array, allowing it to see the cloaked starbase, whereas the Galkirans had no idea it was even there.

“I was wrong and you were right,” she whispered softly. “You’re very clever, Mr. Blake.”

He responded with a relieved smile, before turning his attention to Calara. “Is there any chance the Galkirans can track Leylira’s fleet?”

She shook her head. “All the evacuation ships have moved well outside their sensor range now.” Pre-empting his next question, she added, “We’re right on the Brimorian border, so we’re a long way from any Maliri settlements. The closest is the secret colony built by the males, but it’s concealed by cloak generators and located outside of their current detection range.”

“Alright then,” John said, watching a squadron of Galkiran cruisers slowly skirt around the periphery of the debris field. “Let’s wait and see what they do now.”

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Far away in deep space, a fleet of sinister black spacecraft dropped out of hyper-warp, their hulls crackling with glowing particles as the tachyon field dispersed. The vessels engaged their propulsion systems, which blazed with a corona of orange light as the engines burst into life. The sleek warships manoeuvred into formation, then cautiously approached an ancient Progenitor edifice.

Triggered by their proximity, massive generators were activated, sending energy surging through the colossal onyx ring. Electrical discharges seethed over the surface, the purple lightning arcing wildly as the power levels climbed to dangerous levels. Suddenly a spatial rift burst into existence in the centre of that ring, the disc expanding until it filled the inner circumference. Just as it seemed like it would envelop the entire structure, it held in place, contained by powerful gravitational stabilisers.

Despite the ominous black disc being an affront to the natural laws of the galaxy, the thrall warships boldly pressed forward, until the squadron of cruisers in their vanguard made contact. Those vessels were then dragged into the featureless abyss, and to an observer, it would seem that they had been completely obliterated. However, those warships were instantaneously transported thousands of light years across the galaxy, where they were disgorged by an identical Hyper-warp gate... deep in the heart of Maliri territory.

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The image of a triple-stranded DNA helix slowly rotated, with key parts of the structure highlighted in blue. Those sections could be expanded and viewed in more detail, with accompanying runic text explaining how to make the necessary modifications.

Rahn’hagon studied the ancient Kyth’faren script with meticulous precision, searching through the notes to find the answers he was seeking. Thousands of years ago, when he had first stumbled across the Kyth’vindathys project, the instructions had seemed so straightforward. Now that he was scrutinising the details, he realised that the genetic coding contained numerous subtle modifications that were not listed in the scope of the explanatory text. That unnerving discovery made him wonder precisely what the other changes entailed.

Not all the instructions were contained in this particular Kyth’faren archive, and Rahn’hagon gritted his teeth in anger, knowing he’d never be able to research the largest depository ever again. As much as he blamed his reckless son for the destruction of that Astral citadel, Rahn’hagon bitterly regretted his own decision to take John to visit that particular archive. The choice had been made from force of habit, as he’d spent far more time in that citadel than any of the others, during the millennia that he’d been plotting his revenge against Xar’aziuth.

The Kyth’faren’s genetic enhancement procedure had originally been intended for a fully-grown adult Progenitor, but Rahn’hagon had never had any intention of experimenting on himself. When Jessica Blake had stumbled into his life, she had provided a unique opportunity to implement the Kyth’vindathys project, one which would not expose him to any risk. Modifying Jessica’s DNA so that she would give birth to the instrument of his vengeance had been a simple task, at least in comparison to altering the original project so that it was tailored for a Terran female and her progeny.

Rahn’hagon paused, a sudden intriguing thought coming to him. Jessica’s DNA remained unchanged, which meant that she was a living repository for everything he’d implemented from the Kyth’vindathys project. If he studied her DNA, it was possible that he might find the elusive answers to why his son had been such a disappointing failure. He could then correct those mistakes, and simply try again.

His brief surge of optimism died just as quickly as it had arrived. There was nothing simple about his interactions with Jessica anymore, the brunette blaming him for the disastrous confrontation with their son. Every time he’d attempted to reconcile with the obstinate Terran female, she’d been openly hostile, even to the point of threatening him with violence.

Pulling back from the biometric data, Rahn’hagon withdrew his consciousness from the Kyth’faren polyhedron. He sat there staring bleakly at the globe of glowing hexagons, feeling an inexplicable surge of unfamiliar and painful emotions. As much as he was loathe to admit it, Rahn’hagon was lonely for the first time in his unnaturally long existence. He dearly missed his former companion, who had made such a tremendous difference to his life over the past four decades.

As the Progenitor wallowed in melancholy thoughts, he was dimly aware of a disturbance near his corporeal form. Rahn’hagon stopped resisting the pull of his astral cord, and sailed back through the high-arched corridors until he’d left the citadel. He raced across an endless grey plain, covering incalculable distances in the blink of an eye, until his astral form was reunited with his body.

It took a moment for the disorientation to pass, then Rahn’hagon looked up at the holographic map that floated above the dreadnought’s Bridge. To his surprise, a proximity notification had been triggered. The runic icon flashed insistently on the three-dimensional display, while emitting a chime that reverberated around the empty room.

He tapped on the controls built into the armrest of his command throne, shifting the focus of the holographic map to the ships that had triggered the proximity notification. His initial surprise turned into stunned disbelief, as the runic script advised him that a fleet of his empire’s warships had completed a hyper-warp jump close to his vicinity. Close in this case being the centre of Maliri territory, nearly a thousand light years away.

It was a notification that he’d seen hundreds of times before, triggering memories of brutal conquests against rival progenitors. What made it so shocking, was that Rahn’hagon had not ruled over an empire or laid claim to a thrall species, for over nine-thousand-years.

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Valeria couldn’t stop herself from beaming with joy as she strolled back to the landing zone at her master’s side. It had been thrilling to watch him level the city, with Gahl’kalgor effortlessly demolishing one ostentatious tower after the next. The Galkiran Matriarch had never felt so powerful before, the adrenalin rush as her master unleashed his glorious might at her command, left her giddy with euphoria.

“Your surly disposition seems to have greatly improved, Gladiatora,” he noted with wry amusement, as they entered the plaza where his shuttle was waiting for them.

She blushed, and fidgeted with the helmet tucked under her arm. “I... wish to apologise for my outburst this morning. It was inexcusable to behave in such a petulant manner.”

Gahl’kalgor came to an abrupt halt, then studied the woman he’d known for nearly a thousand years, an unreadable expression on his face. “You are forgiven. There is something... very special... about this place. You are not the only one to have succumbed to its pervasive influence.”

Valaria glanced around in confusion at the devastated metropolis. “We razed the city to the ground, my Lord. I don’t understand... what makes it so special?”

“No, not this city, or even this planet,” Gahl’kalgor murmured, his gaze rising towards the heavens. “Can’t you sense it all around us? It feels like someone draped a vast psychic net over this sea of stars.”

She followed his stare skyward, but the clouds of smoke billowing up from the demolished city obscured any view she might have had of the local star clusters. A rock clattered nearby, distracting Valeria as it skittered across the pockmarked boulevard. Following its trajectory back to the source, she saw her squad of bodyguards approaching, with Camine at their lead. Unlike Valeria’s jubilant mood, Camine looked particularly disgruntled, as did the rest of the Selan’kethari.

“Please excuse me a moment, my Lord,” she requested politely.

Gahl’kalgor dismissed her with a grunt, his focus still on the skies above.

“Matriarch,” the thrall muttered, having the good sense to greet Valeria with a respectful nod, despite her foul mood.

“What vexes you, Camine?” Valeria asked, raising an eyebrow. “I would have thought you’d be thrilled to savour this battle, especially after being cooped up on the ship for weeks.”

“Battle? What battle?” Camine snorted with disgust. “There was barely enough of those Maliri rats to crew a garbage scow. I didn’t even get to fire a shot!”

The Galkiran Matriarch looked at her in surprise. “The city was deserted?”

Camine scowled and nodded. “They knew we were coming and abandoned this wretched hovel... perhaps two days ago at most.”

Valeria cast a sweeping glance over the desolate ruins, her brow furrowing. “This isn’t just some rural village. With suburbs this extensive, the city must have had a population of at least five million thralls. So where did they all go? You can’t evacuate that many people off-world in just a few days.”

The red-skinned woman shrugged with barely-concealed disappointment. “They must have predicted that we’d assault the capital, so they fled and cowered in the other cities. Trust the fleets to steal all our kills.”

Her frown deepening, Valeria was about to question Camine’s theory, but was cut off before she could reply.

“Come, Valeria, it’s time we continued the hunt,” Gahl’kalgor declared, his tone expecting her instant obedience. “My trophy room grows impatient for its next prize.”

She hurried to join him as he walked towards the shuttle, with her cohort of bodyguards falling into step behind her. Gahl’kalgor appeared to be preoccupied with his private thoughts, and made no further effort to converse with his matriarch. Feeling relieved to just be in his close proximity after days spent apart, Valeria was content to remain silent and wait for her Progenitor master to initiate the next conversation.

When they returned to his dreadnought, Gahl’kalgor headed up to the Command Deck, with his dutiful matriarch in attendance. As they entered the Bridge, his gaze was drawn to the holographic display, those piercing eyes burning with a fierce intensity.

“Show me the progress of the other attack group,” he demanded, taking a seat on the command throne. “Have they destroyed that starbase? What news of Baen’thelas?”

As the tactical officer rushed to obey his command, operating the holo-display with deft fingers, the comms officer cleared her throat to draw his attention.

“Yes? What is it?” he asked, glancing her way.

“We have received several communications from Fleet Commander Keylessae,” she explained. “I took the liberty of memorising her messages so that I could give you a concise summary.”

He turned to give her his full attention. “Tell me.”

“Our forces moved to engage the starbase, but just before they entered the system, the enemy Progenitor appeared.”

“He ambushed them?” Gahl’kalgor muttered, his black gauntlet clenching into a fist. “How long until our Wormhole Generator is ready?”

“It’ll be fully charged in two hours,” the Senior Engineer quickly interjected.

As Gahl’kalgor scowled with irritation, the comms officer continued, “He didn’t attack our ships, my Lord. He attacked his own starbase.”

“What?!” he balked, giving her a sceptical frown. “Why would he do that?”

“I don’t understand his actions either,” the Galkiran replied helplessly. “Is it possible that he’s mentally defective in some way? He has spent the last week deliberately crippling hundreds of our warships, when it would have been far simpler to just destroy them.”

“That would explain a lot,” Valeria said softly. “His actions have been bizarre to say the least.”

Gahl’kalgor seriously considered her suggestion for a long moment, grimacing at the thought of facing an unhinged maniac. If that was the case, this Baen’thelas would be even easier to dispatch than he was expecting, and provide no challenge at all.

“How disappointing,” he muttered, feeling robbed of what could have been a glorious victory.

Deciding to take a look at Keylessae’s messages himself, his gauntleted hand activated the comms interface built into the black chair. It appeared a moment later, the glowing panel listing all the recent incoming messages. He saw the several updates from his Fleet Commander, but below them were dozens of urgent messages from Captain Narzera, who led the scout group ahead of the other fleets.

He opened the latest, and scanned through the text, his scowl deepening as he read onwards. Narzera was almost begging his matriarch to respond, the scout captain desperate to notify her that she had located his rival’s throne world. Gahl’kalgor glanced back through the list of ignored correspondence, each one requesting he be informed that Captain Narzera had successfully completed her mission.

Gritting his teeth with barely suppressed fury, Gahl’kalgor followed Narzera’s instructions on how to tap into the hidden data feed she had discovered. When he glanced up at the holographic map again, it showed an unfamiliar star system, not far from his current location. The map teemed with Maliri ships, the golden-hulled vessels surrounding what was obviously Baen’thelas’ homeworld. What erased any doubts about its authenticity, was the presence of a fleet of black-hulled thrall warships, which had moved into a defensive position around the planet.

He slowly turned his accusatory gaze towards Valeria. “Why did you keep this from me?” he asked bluntly.

She looked stricken, her beautiful scarlet face a picture of desperation and contrition. “Ashryn...” she pleaded, unable to meet his furious glare. “You were ignoring me... and I was jealous.”

After all the effort he’d just made to raise her spirits, this was a galling betrayal of his trust. Gahl’kalgor delved into his psychic network, and located the dazzling crimson flame that represented Valeria. Focusing his will on that blazing light, he knew that it would only take the briefest of efforts to snuff the life out of his rebellious matriarch. He savoured the moment, his fury at her insolence demanding the severest of punishments.

Valeria shivered with dread, sensing that her soul was only seconds away from oblivion. She gave Gahl’kalgor one last look of profound regret, then her shoulders slumped as she waited for the inevitable.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, resigned to her fate. “I love you... I always have.”

He froze, her sincere declaration triggering deeply repressed memories. He remembered Delsanra kneeling down and pulling him into a hug, enveloping a young boy in pure maternal affection. His mother used to tell him that she loved him... told him every day until...

“Go,” he snarled, pointing towards the reinforced doors. “Get out of my sight.”

Valeria blinked in surprise, astonished that she’d been spared. Then she bolted from the Bridge, not wanting to risk doing anything that might change his mind.

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“Look!” Jade exclaimed, pointing at the holographic tactical map. “They’re leaving!”

John stared up at the ten Galkiran fleets, and sure enough, the hundreds of black warships were turning away from the field of wreckage surrounding Genwynn station. They ramped up power to their engines, then raced towards the edge of the gravity well at full speed.

“It looks like they took the bait,” Calara observed, noting the abrupt change in course from their previous flight path. “They’re heading directly towards Kythshara.”

“How long until they run into any colonised planets?” John asked, gesturing towards the map. “Can we check?”

“Two days,” Alyssa interjected, without needing to verify it on the map. “51 hours and 17 minutes to be precise, based on maximum thrall hyper-warp speeds.”

“What about the other attack group?” he asked, turning to look at his gifted XO. “How long until they reach Kythshara?”

“If the thrall armada is still at Venkarys, and they’ve just left too, then thirteen hours,” she replied with certainty. “But the dreadnought might be ready to use its wormhole generator in as little as thirty minutes, depending on when they did their last jump.”

“Shit...” John muttered, thinking how exposed Kythshara was at that moment.

“Ours won’t be fully recharged until 4PM,” Dana informed him, looking as worried as he felt. “What if this asshole jumps straight to Kythshara now he knows where it is? We haven’t even got the defence grid fixed yet. He’ll be able to just sail right up to the planet and blast the hell out of all the cities. Faye won’t stand a chance!”

Rachel hesitated then spoke up confidently, “From everything we know about typical Progenitor behaviour, that would be wildly out of character. Their typical modus operandi is to throw thrall fleets at the enemy, while monitoring the battle from the rear.” Making eye contact with John, she continued, “I believe you told us that Rahn’hagon was outraged that Larn’kelnar attacked him directly?”

“Yeah, I’m guessing that was a drastic breach of protocol,” he agreed. “From what we know about fights between Progenitors, they grind each other’s thrall forces down in prolonged wars of attrition, until just the dreadnought is left. Then they hunt down the weakened Progenitor and finish him off.”

“Wait... that doesn’t make any sense,” Calara suddenly objected. “How are they able to track down a dreadnought if it’s cloaked? They wouldn’t be able to stop the losing Progenitor from just running away and hiding.”

“There were lots of pictures in Mael’nerak’s palace showing dreadnoughts being blown up,” Tashana said, recalling the long gallery displaying his many victories. “So there must be a way to stop them escaping.”

“Mael’nerak built the Lianelis Saevath network,” Irillith reminded them. “So he obviously developed sensor tech that was strong enough to detect cloaked dreadnoughts.”

Tashana shook her head. “I got the distinct impression that all those victories were from before Mael’nerak wiped out the Achonin. If he left the Shroud to finish off any Progenitors that attacked him here, then wouldn’t Xar’aziuth just take control of him again?”

“She’s right,” Alyssa concluded. “Larn’kelnar and Rahn’hagon were both adamant about not leaving the Shroud. That must mean ordinary Progenitors have some way to track and destroy a defeated enemy in his dreadnought.”

A shiver ran down John’s spine, and a kernel of knowledge unlocked in his mind. “The Soulforge,” he stated without a flicker of doubt. “When that’s destroyed, it cripples the dreadnought’s Stealth Field Generator. Everything built by a Soulforge is psychically connected.”

“So this Progenitor wants to locate and destroy your Soulforge, to stop us from cloaking the Invictus?” Calara mused aloud. “No wonder the thrall fleets are all making a beeline for Kythshara.”

“Except Mael’nerak already dismantled his Soulforge,” Tashana said, her brow furrowed with concentration. “And we’re using a Stealth Field Generator that we salvaged from Rahn’hagon’s crashed dreadnought.”

Alyssa gave John a wry smile. “If these red-skinned thralls are from the same species that your father previously claimed, then that means our Stealth Field Generator was built using the same Soulforge as theirs.”

John considered that for a moment, then nodded. “Yeah, apparently so.”

“In that case, we just need to locate his throne world and destroy that Soulforge,” Calara said, sharing a look of relief with John.

“We should also build a replacement cloaking device as soon as we get the chance,” Dana suggested. “We don’t want to accidentally wreck ours when we blast his Soulforge.”

“I don’t think we’ll have the time or opportunity before he attacks Kythshara,” John said, pondering the impending battle. “But if we can force him to retreat, at least now we know how to make his dreadnought vulnerable.”

A flicker of confusion crossed Sakura’s face. “Hey, I just thought of something. We already destroyed Larn’kelnar’s Soulforge, so does that mean your father can’t use the cloaking device in Larn’kelnar’s dreadnought anymore?”

Dana giggled and shook her head. “Nope, because we didn’t destroy Larn’kelnar’s original Soulforge, only the external amplification rings. We swiped the important part, and that’s down in my Workshop. If we did destroy it, then Rahn would be in deep shit.”

Jehanna had been trying to follow which ships were connected to the different Soulforges, and she finally groaned in protest. “This is all really confusing.”

Rachel gave her a sympathetic smile. “It is a bit of a convoluted mess. I suppose that’s our own fault for stealing anything that isn’t nailed down.”

“We *requisitioned* it,” Alyssa corrected her. “We’re the good guys, so that makes it okay.”

The girls all laughed, and John rolled his eyes at the blonde, but he shared their buoyant mood. They’d managed to avoid a brutal battle that would have cost millions of Galkiran and Maliri lives. It was reassuring proof that he’d made the right decision to protect Genwynn station, even if it came at the terrible cost of abandoning Venkarys.

He was sorely tempted to jump back to the Maliri planet as soon as the Wormhole Generator recharged, to see if there was anything he could still do to save them... but the rational part of him knew it was too late. All they could do now was prepare for the upcoming battle at Kythshara. There would be plenty of time to mourn the dead if they somehow managed to survive this invasion.

Rising from his chair, John swept his gaze over the Combat Bridge and saw that he had everyone’s attention. “Alright, let’s get moving, ladies. We’ve got a lot to do before we jump back to Kythshara.”

“What’s the plan?” Dana asked, listening closely.

“First of all, we need to pick up Marika and Neysa from Genwynn station,” he replied, glancing at his Nymph matriarch. “Jade, do you want to fly me over there in the Raptor? I need to have one last chat with the Maliri elders.”

“Of course, Master!” she eagerly agreed, springing up from the pilot’s chair.

“While we’re visiting the station, I want the rest of you to deactivate the minefield and retrieve all the spider mines. I’m sure they’ll be very useful when we’re defending Kythshara.”

“I was just about to suggest that,” Calara said, nodding her approval. “I’ve already started to plan out where we can utilise them to maximise their impact.”

“Do you want me to modify the mines back to their original settings?” Irillith asked, giving him a meaningful look.

John hesitated, then glanced at Calara. “What do you think? Is there any chance we can cripple thrall ships to keep them out of this final battle, instead of destroying them?”

“Leave it with me,” the Latina said with a reassuring smile. “I’ll try to spare as many Galkiran lives as possible.”

“Thank you,” he said gratefully. “Make the changes then, Irillith.”

The Maliri acknowledged his order with a nod. “Will do.”

“Hey, John,” Dana called out. “When you’re speaking to the elders, would you mind asking them a big favour?”

“Sure, what do you need?”

“Well, it sucks that those Quantum Devastators are too wedged in for us to swipe, but Genwynn also has a bunch of Quantum Flux Cannon batteries. Can you ask Elder Darthas if he’d mind lending us a few?”

Calara perked up and nodded enthusiastically. “If we can borrow four of those cannons, we can replace the ones we took from the defence grid. Those turrets will bring a lot of firepower to the battle.”

“Good idea. It won’t hurt to ask,” John agreed, before looking around at his crew. “Anything else?”

“Can I come with you?” Jehanna requested. “I’d like to get some footage of the survivors on the station.”

“You’re welcome to join us,” he replied with a warm smile. “Alyssa, can you oversee the mine recovery operation?”

“I knew I’d get the short straw,” she replied with a playful pout. “By the way, you should change into your Mael’nerak outfit before you go. It wouldn’t hurt to make a good impression when you’re asking the Maliri if you can borrow their big guns.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” he admitted. “Bye for now ladies, I’ll be back soon.”

Everyone staying on the Bridge waved goodbye, except for Jehanna and Jade, who accompanied him up the ramp. They split up in the armoury, with the girls taking the express grav-tubes down to the Raptor, while John removed his Paragon armour. He then ascended in the other set of grav-tubes, so that he could change into his tailor-made suit.

By the time he joined his two companions in the gunship, Jade had powered up the engines and was ready for immediate departure. The Raptor lifted off the deck as soon as the airlock closed behind him, then roared out of the Invictus’ hangar and banked towards Genwynn. Jade skilfully weaved the nimble craft through the sea of debris, and quickly closed the distance on the gleaming white battlestation.

“Ah, the last member of J-squad makes his grand appearance,” the dusky reporter announced, as she filmed him entering the cockpit.

“J-squad?” he asked quizzically.

Their Nymph pilot called back over her shoulder, “John, Jade, and Jehanna!”

He chuckled at the new nickname, then took a seat beside their resident war correspondent.

“I’m fortunate to be joined by Lord Baen’thelas, whose clever ruse just averted what would have been a bloody battle at Genwynn station,” she said, adopting her formal interviewing voice. “How does it feel to have saved a million lives this morning?”

“I’m relieved more than anything,” he explained, meeting her encouraging gaze. “My main priority is always going to be protecting the Maliri, but I don’t want to have to slaughter thrall forces in the process. The Galkirans have been psychically indoctrinated by the Progenitor that claimed them, and if there’s any chance I can spare their lives, I want to take it.”

“If sparing those Galkiran fleets then led to the deaths of more Maliri in the future, would you still have made the same decision?” Jehanna asked pointedly.

John was caught off-guard by her probing question and paused to carefully consider his reply. “My answer’s still the same. I wouldn’t have spared those thrall fleets if there was any danger of them immediately launching an attack on a Maliri colony. But this far out on the border, it’ll be days before they can reach populated worlds. By that time we’ll have dealt with their Progenitor, and can decide how we handle the thrall forces he left behind.”

“So you’re feeling confident of victory?”

“I can see three probable outcomes from the upcoming battle at Kythshara. Number one: we immobilise as many thrall ships as possible, then force the Progenitor to retreat when he realises the battle is lost. Number two: I goad him into a duel on the planet’s surface, and manage to defeat him in personal combat. Number three: we fight a duel, but he defeats me. Whichever way the battle plays out, this invasion will be over.”

Jehanna raised an eyebrow and asked, “What if he does retreat from the battle, but then immediately joins the thrall fleets we duped at Genwynn. Won’t that put Maliri colonies in dire jeopardy?”

“No, because they aren’t his priority. His main objective is to obliterate Kythshara and destroy me,” John explained. “The scenario you raised is the most likely outcome, but by the time the second Galkiran armada could reach Kythshara, the next battle would play out very differently. The Maliri will have returned with at least a dozen Larathyran fleets, and many more are being boarded and captured as we speak. We’ve been fighting a delaying action for the last week to give the Maliri enough time to seize all those warships.”

“Won’t the Larathyrans have something to say about that?” she asked airily.

John was aware that the reporter already knew exactly what had happened to the Larathyran crew, but any potential audience for this interview would have no idea.

“No, because all the Larathyrans forces were slaughtered by the Progenitor that claimed them. They were fiercely loyal, and would have fought to the death for him, but he betrayed their loyalty and drained the life out of them to augment his psychic powers. The Larathyran fleets are mausoleums now, filled with the countless corpses of Larn’kelnar’s victims. That’s the kind of inhuman monsters we’re dealing with here.”

“That’s horrifying,” Jehanna said quietly. “I think I speak for all of us, when I wish you the best possible luck for the battle tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” he replied, matching her sombre tone. “I know exactly what’s at stake. I’ll do everything I can to protect the Maliri from the ruthless cruelty of the Progenitors.”

Jehanna gave him a thumbs up as she ended the video recording. “That was amazing! Well done!”

“A bit of warning would have been nice,” he said with a mock frown. “You weren’t pulling your punches with those questions.”

She quickly shook her head. “No, it was much better this way. The public really likes seeing authenticity in their leaders, and you could tell by your answers that you were being completely sincere. The Maliri will love getting an insight into this side of you.”

He shrugged. “You’re the expert. I’ll trust your judgement.”

Jehanna beamed at him in delight, then her expression shifted into a thoughtful frown. “We might have to rerecord one bit though. It might be sensible to use a different phrase than ‘inhuman’. Strictly speaking, the Maliri are inhuman too. Is ‘inmaliri’ a word? If not, could we start using it anyway?”

Turning in her seat, Jade called back over her shoulder, “John’s the only Progenitor allowed ‘in Maliri’. Isn’t that right, Master?”

He cracked a smile at her joke. “I think you have your answer.”

Jehanna laughed and nodded in agreement. “Alright, we’ll just leave it as it is.”

“We’ll be docking with Genwynn in thirty seconds,” Jade warned them. There was a teasing lilt to her voice as she added, “Oh my goodness, that’s a lot of people...”

Rising from his seat, John walked over to stand beside the Nymph. From there he had a much better view out of the cockpit, and sure enough, the docking bay was packed with an enormous crowd.

\*You knew they’d be waiting for me,\* he accused Alyssa. \*That’s why you told me to wear this suit.\*

\*Of course,\* she freely admitted. \*As soon as you decided to visit Genwynn, Jade told her sisters, then Neysa informed the Maliri elders. They’re all very excited to see you.\*

He groaned, then turned to squint accusingly at Jehanna. “I suppose you’re in on this too.”

“Hey, I was completely honest with you,” she said, holding her hands palm up to protest her innocence. “I’m here to get footage of the survivors... as they cheer for the hero of the hour.”

“I should have known. I keep forgetting you’re all as thick as thieves.”

Jehanna grinned at him, appearing quite unapologetic. “I do love chatting to the girls about fluffy kittens and pretty dresses.”

“It didn’t take you long to settle right in,” he grumbled.

“Ten seconds, Master,” Jade informed him. “I’ll reverse into the docking bay so that you can leave by the rear ramp.”

“Thanks, honey,” he said, patting her shoulder. “I better not keep them waiting.”

He strode out of the cockpit with Jehanna following close behind. They walked through to the cargo bay, and John gestured towards the ramp controls, activating the mechanism. He could actually hear the conversation in the crowd drop to an expectant hush, as the ramp began to lower, and the Maliri awaited his arrival.

John walked out onto the ramp as it descended the last few feet, and his appearance was met with a jubilant roar. He’d grown used to appearing before vast hordes of female Maliri, so the baritone cheers struck a very different chord. Unable to stop himself from being caught up in the infectious enthusiasm of the Maliri, John broke into a grin, and acknowledge the crowd with a friendly wave.

It took some time for the cheering to fade, as the men celebrated living through a bleak predicament that most of them never expected to survive. The trio of Maliri elders emerged from the crowd, accompanied by Jade’s two sisters, and the catgirls bounded over to greet him with a kiss on the cheek. That only rallied their audience for another round of applause, much to the amusement of the three elder Maliri.

“I must admit, you had us worried for a moment, Lord Baen’thelas,” Elder Aldorellan confided. “When your ship started shooting at Genwynn station, I didn’t know what to think.”

“Sorry about that,” John apologised, raising his voice to be heard over the cheers. “It was a spur of the moment decision, and I didn’t have time to warn you.”

“No apologies are necessary,” Elder Darthas said, giving him a wry smile. “These two lovely ladies explained what was happening.”

Elder Lordual nodded enthusiastically. “That was an ingenious plan! Hiding a battlestation in a debris field of your own making... I was holding my breath waiting for the Galkirans to discover our duplicity!”

“My main priority was always to protect everyone on Genwynn. The safest way was to avoid a battle entirely,” John explained.

Elder Aldorellan patted him on the shoulder. “You’ve done very well, young man. Some of the citizens here still harboured doubts about you, but I’m glad to say that I always believed you had our best interests at heart.”

John was quite moved by the Maliri elder’s warm words of praise. Aldorellan reminded him of his grandfather, but it was a long time since he’d heard that kind of encouragement, especially after their relationship had become strained.

“Thank you,” he said gruffly, before glancing back towards the gunship. “Can you three spare a few minutes to chat? There’s a couple of things I’d like to discuss with you in private.”

“We’re all in your debt, Lord Baen’thelas,” Lordual stated. “You may monopolise as much time as you require.”

With a final wave to the crowd, John led the three Maliri into the Raptor.

“It’s a pleasure to see you again, Jehanna,” Darthas said politely.

She looked at him in surprise. “I’m amazed you remembered my name. I don’t think I said a word when we last met, as I was too wrapped up in listening to the conversation. I can’t have made a very good first impression.”

“On the contrary, you all made a lasting impression,” Darthas disagreed. “The exalted company you keep speaks volumes about the remarkable person you clearly are.”

“Thank you,” she said, feeling uncharacteristically self-conscious.

John led them through to the cockpit, then gestured for the Maliri to make themselves comfortable on the curved row of seats. When they’d all sat down, he turned the co-pilot’s chair so that it was facing them, and sat down too.

“Now that Genwynn station isn’t in any immediate danger, we’ll be leaving soon and returning to the Maliri homeworlds to protect them from the invaders,” he patiently explained. “There’s a second Galkiran armada, about the same size as this one, but they’re led by the Progenitor in his dreadnought.”

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Elder Aldorellan immediately volunteered.

John nodded in confirmation. “We’re setting up a trap around Mael’nerak’s old throne world, but we stripped several defensive turrets of their Quantum Flux Cannons to arm the Invictus. Is there any chance we could borrow some guns from Genwynn station? They’ll make a big difference in the battle, and I promise we’ll return them to you afterwards if we win.”

“And if you lose, we’re all doomed anyway?” the venerable Maliri concluded.

He hesitated for a moment, then nodded. “Basically, yes.”

Aldorellan let out a dry-humoured snort. “I appreciate your honesty, Lord Baen’thelas.”

John shrugged his shoulders with helpless resignation. “Sorry for being so blunt, but the clock’s ticking and we can’t afford to waste time with the usual diplomatic dance.”

“No, I do genuinely appreciate it. Far better to be concise and efficient; it gets us to the point much quicker,” Aldorellan clarified. He glanced at his two colleagues, who both nodded in approval. “We’d be fools to deny your request, my Lord. You have our permission to take whatever you require from Genwynn station.”

“That’s amazing, thank you.”

“You’re fighting to save the Maliri from extinction,” Elder Lordual said soberly. “We would like you to consider us your steadfast allies in this endeavour.”

“I’d like that too, and I hope you see me in the same light,” John said, rising from his chair to extend his hand in friendship to each of them in turn.

“We do,” Elder Darthas stated as he shook his hand. “And we wish you every success in the battle against this Progenitor.”

John was quiet for a moment, then admitted, “There’ll be more after him. This is just the beginning.”

“Then we’ll stand by your side to defeat them too,” Aldorellan declared.

“I really appreciate the unreserved support. It means a lot,” John said gratefully. He paused, and looked at each Maliri in turn. “There is one other thing I want to talk about. It’s not urgent, but I’d like you to give it some serious thought.”

“Name it,” Darthas said without hesitation.

“I’d like you to consider dropping the secrecy surrounding the planets you’ve colonised, and the fleets you’re maintaining,” John said, before pausing to watch their reaction.

The three men all grimaced, struggling to contain their instinctive aversion to unveiling a secret they’d helped maintain for centuries.

Aldorellan looked him in the eyes, and asked simply, “Why?”

“For a few reasons,” John began. “First and foremost, Queen Edraele already knows everything.”

That revelation certainly had a dramatic effect on the three Elder Maliri. Despite having seen the new and improved version of the House Valaden matriarch, Edraele had a terrifying reputation.

“You told her all our secrets?” Lordual asked, unable to keep the accusatory tone from his voice.

Seeing their distress, John gave them a rueful look. “I appreciate that it might feel like a betrayal of trust, but it really couldn’t be helped. I’m telepathically connected to Edraele; she can listen to all my thoughts, and is privy to every conversation I have. As she’s one of my most trusted advisors, I try not to keep any information from her.”

“What about the other matriarchs?” Darthas asked, staring at him in shock. “Do they know everything too?”

\*I haven’t informed them yet,\* Edraele confided. \*I thought it might be prudent to wait for your approval first.\*

“No, just Edraele for now,” John replied. “As well as all the Lionesses on my crew.”

Aldorellan’s shoulders slumped in defeat. “So it’s just a matter of time until word gets out then.”

“They won’t tell anyone, not unless I give them permission,” John said confidently. “But I’m partly asking this as a personal favour. I don’t like keeping secrets from the women in my life, and I’d like to share this information with the Council of Matriarchs.”

“What was your other reason for asking?” Darthas asked astutely.

“When all the males from your colonies return to the homeworlds, how long do you think it’ll be before they start sharing all their secrets with the women in their lives? I can tell you from experience that Maliri females can be very astute, and very persuasive. It won’t be long before rumours are flying around like wildfire... and wouldn’t it be better to start this new future for your people with open honesty?”

Aldorellan considered that for a moment, then let out a resigned chuckle. “You’re right. Trying to keep this secret now is like trying to carry water in your hands. Sooner or later trickles of truth are going to spill out until there’s nothing left to hold onto.”

Darthas nodded in agreement. “What exactly did you have in mind? How would you like to reveal our secrets to the females on the homeworld?”

“I just want to share this information with my matriarchs,” John explained. “I’m happy to let you discuss this with them, and decide between you what the best solution is for the Maliri.”

“I’m sure we can accommodate your wishes,” Darthas said, glancing back at his fellow elders, who both nodded. “Can you give us a few days to inform the other guild leaders, and obtain their consent? You’ve made some very convincing arguments, so I’m sure they’ll give their permission.”

“Of course,” John willingly agreed. “I don’t want this to be a bone of contention between us. I’d just like to be open and honest with the matriarchs.”

“You trust the matriarchs implicitly, don’t you?” Aldorellan asked, studying him perceptively.

“I’m still getting to know the recent replacements,” he admitted. “But I think you’ll be surprised at how different they are from their predecessors.”

“We saw. You showed us that video message from the homeworlds,” Lordual reminded him with a wry smile. “Nineteen matriarchs... you’re either the bravest man I’ve ever met, or-”

“The most foolish?” John interjected with a self-conscious grin. “Probably the latter.”

“You interrupted before I could finish. I would never dream of calling you a fool, Lord Baen’thelas,” Lordual said light-heartedly.

“I’m sure the thought never crossed your mind,” John joked. “But in any case, I won’t see the matriarchs until after the upcoming battle, and I’d like to tell them in person. That gives you at least a day to discuss this with your colleagues.”

“That’s more than enough time,” Aldorellan said magnanimously. “Besides, you discovered all our secrets by yourself, so we’re hardly in a position to swear you to silence. We do appreciate your openness with us however.”

“It’s the best way to be between friends and allies,” John declared. “Anyway, that’s everything I needed to talk to you about. Unless there’s anything else that you want to discuss, I better head back to the Invictus. We have a lot of work to do before we jump back to defend the homeworlds.”

The three elders all wished him good luck, then exchanged farewells with the girls before disembarking from the Raptor. After escorting them off the gunship, John returned to the cockpit and sprawled in the co-pilot’s chair.

“That went well,” he said, smiling with relief.

“They were very grateful to you, Master,” Marika stated, as she padded over to join him.

He opened his arms for the tabby striped catgirl and welcomed her onto his lap. “I didn’t do all that much. We were very lucky the Galkirans didn’t attempt to fly through the debris field. That would’ve been awkward if they clanged into Genwynn’s hull.”

Neysa smiled at him, but shook her head. “If we hadn’t intervened, Genwynn station would have been destroyed and every Maliri aboard would have been slain. They all know that you saved their lives, Master.”

“I’m glad we were able to make a difference,” John said, as he stroked Marika’s hair, making her purr with contentment. “I like the elders a lot. Aldorellan reminds me of my grandfather.”

“I would have liked to meet him,” Jehanna said softly.

John sighed and leaned back in the chair. “We were barely on speaking terms before my grandparents died. They both blamed me for running off to join the military instead of taking over the restaurant. They were forced to sell the place when it got too much for them by the end.”

“You made the right choice, Master,” Jade told him, taking a hand off the flightstick to lovingly caress his arm. “A chef wouldn’t have been able to save the galaxy.”

“But I could have offered to cook up a tasty Fettuccine if the Progenitors agreed to leave us alone,” John joked, to relieve the melancholy mood.

“It’s not too late to still give that a try; everything you make is delicious.” Jehanna looked at him with sympathy and added, “I’m sure your grandparents would have been very proud of you now.”

Marika tilted her head up and gazed at him with her expressive brown eyes. “But that’s not the same as actually hearing them say it. Right, Master?”

He kissed the tip of her nose. “I didn’t realise I’d made you as smart as Neysa.”

The catgirl snuggled into him, hugging John tight. “You have a new family now, and we’re all very proud of you.”

“You were right, it is nice to hear it,” he said, returning the hug.

They lapsed into comfortable silence for the rest of the flight back to the Invictus, where Jade guided the Raptor into the Secondary Hangar. John and the girls were ready to disembark as soon as it touched down, and when he opened the airlock, he found Alyssa and Calara waiting for him.

“Welcome back, handsome,” Alyssa said, greeting him with a warm kiss.

“Thanks, honey,” he replied. “That was good news about the Quantum Flux Cannons. I’ll go and get changed into my Lion armour, then I can help remove those guns.”

“About that,” Alyssa said, breaking into a teasing smile. “Calara had an interesting idea...”

“I’m all ears,” John said, turning to the brunette with interest.

“The elders gave us permission to take whatever we needed from Genwynn, correct?” Calara asked, her eyes sparkling with anticipation. “Do you think they’d object if we stripped *all* the guns from the battlestation?”

He looked at the Latina in surprise, then laughed at her brazen grin. “I better call them and check.”

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Tom walked down the quiet corridor towards the courtroom, escorted by a pair of stern guards who didn’t utter so much as a word to him. The bailiff opened the oak door ahead of them, and the excited chatter from the gallery made Tom wince, as his ears were assailed by the raucous din. When he emerged into public view, a deathly hush fell on the courtroom, with all eyes turning to stare at him. He wanted to turn around and run straight back out again, but he forced himself to stand tall and walk over to his counsel.

Not everyone in the audience was glaring at him with open hatred, and Tom was greatly relieved to see some friendly faces amongst the crowd. Sitting behind him were his parents, who both gave him supportive, if rather strained, nods of greeting. Sitting beside them was his fiancée, Annabelle Newmont, who met him with an affectionate wave and warm smile.

However, Tom’s joy at seeing Anna was considerably tempered by the presence of the man sitting next to her. Commander Archie Davenport made a comment to Anna, and shared a friendly smile with her, before turning to look at Tom. That was when his expression subtly shifted, the fake friendliness turning into a smug smirk that made Tom want to stride over there and punch him in the face.

He had more than enough to worry about already though, and stifling his temper, he took a seat next to his lawyer.

“Good to see you, Tom,” Caspian Kincaid said, patting him lightly on the back. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m a bag of nerves,” Tom admitted. “Why the long delay? I’ve been waiting all morning to take the stand.”

Caspian frowned and darted a stern look at the Bailiff. “They should have told you that we wouldn’t be starting until after lunch. When I informed the prosecution that you wanted to take the stand, Bromidus requested that the court be adjourned for the morning, to allow them more time to prepare for a cross examination. Half a day was actually pretty fast; he could have asked for a lot more than that.”

“I’m sure he’s under orders to get the trial wrapped up as quickly as possible,” Tom said, glancing over at the prosecution lawyer.

The Commodore was in the middle of a hushed conversation with the other members of the prosecution team, but he seemed confident and self-assured. Tom had been extensively briefed about the questions Bromidus was likely to use to trip him up, but he wished he knew exactly what the prosecution lawyer was going to throw at him. He was under no illusions how important his own testimony was going to be, and the tremendous impact it could have on the jury, convincing them of his innocence... or his guilt.

At that moment the jury filed into the court, the military officers looking stern and authoritative in their dress uniforms. When they had moved into position on the jury benches, the Bailiff stepped forward to announce the recommencement of the trial.

“All rise for Judge Nancarrow,” he called out in his booming voice, quieting any last chatter in the room.

The Judge entered and took his seat, then gestured for everyone to sit down. “Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen,” he said in his crisp no-nonsense voice. “We will be hearing from the accused today, and recounting his version of events. While I appreciate that this might be traumatic for the families of the personnel who died in the Callopean Shoals, I will not stand for any disruption to court proceedings. Am I understood?”

He waited for the audience in the gallery to acknowledge his instructions, then turned to look at the defence lawyer. “Mr. Kincaid, your client may begin giving his testimony.”

“Thank you, your honour,” Caspian replied, before patting Tom on the shoulder, then gesturing towards the stand.

The court watched in silence as Tom was sworn in, without so much as a murmur from the crowd.

When he was finished, Caspian walked forward with a friendly smile. “Please can you give your name and occupation to the court.”

“My name is Commander Thomas Walker, serving in the Terran Federation Navy,” he replied without pause.

Caspian leaned against the podium, his posture relaxed and disarming. “So far, we’ve heard a lot of questionable evidence from a variety of confused experts-”

“Objection, supposition,” Bromidus declared, interrupting him mid-sentence.

“I was merely stating facts, your honour,” Caspian quickly interjected before the judge could give a ruling. “The prosecution presented evidence, which we questioned. The expert witnesses have all given contradictory evidence when pressed.”

“Objection overruled,” Nancarrow grunted. “But please don’t waste the court’s time with a lot of flowery narration.”

Bromidus shot the flashy lawyer a frustrated glare, but made no further comment.

Clearing his throat, Caspian began addressing the courtroom again. “As I was saying, we’ve heard a lot of questionable opinions from dubious prosecution experts. However, there is one piece of vitally important evidence submitted by the prosecution that I’d like for us to examine in detail: the combat footage of the Callopean Shoals Massacre.”

There was a disquieted murmur from the crowd, and even Prosecutor Bromidus looked surprised that Kincaid would want the court to view the damning evidence a second time.

Caspian glanced at the Judge. “Out of consideration for the families of those servicemen and women that lost their lives, my team has edited the video to focus solely on my client’s Claymore gunship. With your permission, your honour, I’d like to submit this footage as evidence for the defence.”

This time, Bromidus leapt up from his chair, sending it clattering backwards. “Objection! He can’t submit video footage that’s been modified! That’s tampering with evidence!”

“All my team has done is obscure the ships fighting in the background, your honour,” Caspian was quick to interject. “Surely the purpose of this trial is to ascertain if my client is guilty or innocent? Therefore, we should be studying his personal actions in the battle, not the terrible events occurring around him.”

Judge Nancarrow fidgeted with his gavel as he mulled over the decision.

“I can provide you a copy that shows both versions side-by-side,” Caspain offered helpfully. “You can review them for yourself, and you’ll see that none of the footage pertaining to my client’s gunship has been altered in any way.”

“Show me,” Nancarrow grunted, gesturing towards the console built into the grand wooden desk he sat behind.

There was silence in the courtroom as the Judge watched the parallel footage, until the combat reel finished and he leaned back in his chair.

“The court accepts the evidence from the defence,” he finally stated, before nodding towards the lawyer. “You may proceed.”

Tom let out a breath he didn’t realise he’d been holding, then fought hard not to grin at the furious expression on Prosecutor Bromidus’ face.

After waiting for a moment to allow the audience in the gallery to settle down, Caspian activated a remote he now held in his hand, starting the restored combat footage. The video showed the view from the Janus’ launch tubes, but this time all the Terran Federation ships that were being savaged by the Brimorians had been removed.

“Now Tom, I’d like you to walk us through each of these images and explain to the court exactly what actions you’re taking,” Caspian said, his tone quiet and supportive.

Tom took a deep breath, then focused on the holoscreen. “Our fleet was attacked by a much larger group of Brimorians and we were forced to retreat. They chased us into a minefield, so the battle was already underway when we launched,” he said, his expression bleak. “As soon as we left the launch tubes, we had to dodge ship debris. You can see my wing making evasive manoeuvres.”

The camera footage changed, and showed the Claymores from the Janus turning to face the approaching wings of Brimorian strike craft.

“There were hundreds of fighters rushing the fleet, so we moved to engage them,” he explained, watching his ship bank around with his wingmates. “I lined up my guns as we closed the distance.”

“Note that the Claymore’s guns are pointing directly at that Brimorian fighter,” Caspian interjected, tapping a button on the remote that highlighted the firing angle with a bright green line. “Just as Commander Walker stated.”

Another wing of Brimorian fighters swept past, with bright streaks of yellow particle bolts strafing across the Federation gunships. Centred in the screen, it was easy to see that none of the particle bursts hit Tom’s craft.

“I was so fixated on getting a perfect shot, I wasn’t paying attention to the other enemy wings,” Tom ruefully admitted. “I was very lucky that none of them were aiming at me.”

“Luck?” Bromidus interrupted. “Luck wasn’t necessary when the Brimorians were under orders not to fire on a Federation traitor.”

Caspian nodded in agreement. “The Prosecution makes an excellent point. We’ll address that in a moment.”

Bromidus frowned in confusion at the unexpected praise, his eyes narrowing with suspicion. After Caspian gestured for Tom to proceed, he continued his narration.

“We closed to weapon range, and opened fire,” Tom explained, as the wing of Claymores tore into the Brimorian fighters with orange streams of laser bolts. Except no shots were fired from HCJ-C-1482. “But when I pulled the trigger, nothing happened. I got a warning message that my guns had been deactivated.”

The courtroom fell into hushed silence as they listened to Tom’s grim retelling of events.

“I tried to manually reactivate my guns, and started jinking my ship to avoid any incoming fire. The Gatling Lasers and Gauss Cannons were all in maintenance lockdown... and I couldn’t clear it.”

Caspian turned to the jury of senior officers and rewound the video. “Watch this section again. You can clearly see my client’s gunship weaving erratically from side-to-side as he desperately tries to re-arm his weapons. He was concentrating on the systems menu, and too distracted to make proper evasive manoeuvres.”

“Objection, supposition,” Bromidus stated. “That could just as easily be explained by a novice pilot’s ineptitude behind the flightstick.”

“Sustained,” Judge Nancarrow ruled. “Please allow your client to describe the battle, Mr. Kincaid. No leading the witness.”

Caspian conceded the point with a nod, then turned back to his client. “What happened next, Tom?”

His face shadowing with grief, Tom quietly described the next section of footage. “We were heavily outnumbered... there were enemy fighters everywhere. My wingman asked me for help; Anvil had a wing of Brimorians on his tail. I tried to contact my wingleader, and warn him that my guns weren’t working... but my comms system was broken too.”

Claymore HCJ-C-1482 banked around, until it was pointing directly at the four Brimorian fighters chasing after the Claymore. The gunship then followed the path of the enemy as they made a turn.

“I swear I tried to shoot them... but my lasers wouldn’t fire,” Tom said, his expression twisting in anguish as Anvil’s Claymore was hit multiple times by particle bolts.

HCJ-C-1482 then made an abrupt turn, until it was heading directly away from the frantic pursuit. Tom fell silent as he watched his gunship withdraw, a haunted look in his eyes.

“What are you doing here, Tom?” Caspian gently prompted him.

“I had to go back to the Janus... try to get my Claymore fixed so I could fight. Nothing was working, I was useless out there. I couldn’t even warn my wingmates there was a problem,” he replied, his voice catching. “They cursed me and called me a coward. They thought I was running away from the battle.”

Bromidus gave him a predatory smile, but made no further comment, letting Tom’s words linger in the silent courtroom.

The final piece of footage was taken from the Janus itself, and showed Tom’s Claymore approaching, before the camera feed was abruptly cut off. Tom stared at the screen, lost in the horrific memories of watching his carrier break apart under Brimorian fire, and witnessing the deaths of his friends and colleagues.

Caspian looked at him with sympathy, before turning to address the court. “The video quite clearly supports my client’s version of events. Commander Walker attempted to dodge incoming fire, manoeuvred to shoot at Brimorian fighters, then withdrew to his carrier for emergency repairs when he realised his Claymore was combat ineffective. The prosecution’s own evidence proves his innocence.”

“Objection,” Bromidus stated, firmly shaking his head. “The combat footage just proves that the Brimorians deliberately avoided shooting at Commander Walker. He was-“

Before he could label Tom a traitor again, Caspian quickly interrupted the prosecutor. “You’re absolutely correct, Commodore. We concur that the Brimorians didn’t target my client in that battle, because he was the unwitting fall guy. The real traitor needed him to survive, so that Commander Walker would be blamed for the massacre.”

With his face scrunched up in exaggerated confusion, Caspian turned to address the gallery. “If my client really was the traitor, why go to all the risk of pretending to fight in the battle? You saw how dangerous it was, with gunfire and explosions going off all around him. It makes no sense.”

Bromidus appeared confident as he replied, “Walker was just being careful. It was a ruse to deceive any Federation officers that survived the battle.”

“Not true, and the prosecution doesn’t believe that either!” Caspian declared, with a ring of triumph. “My client has been accused of conspiracy to murder: 347,189 counts. If Tom was the traitor, for that despicable plan to succeed, every Federation officer would need to be killed. He wouldn’t be able to risk someone in an escape pod seeing his gunship landing aboard a Brimorian vessel... as the prosecution maintains was his plan. So if my client had made a deal with the Brimorians to execute all the T-Fed personnel... then why all the combat manoeuvres in the battle? Why not just fly out of the battlefield and wait in safety? Can you explain that contradiction, Commodore?”

There was a stony silence, with Bromidus unable to provide an explanation.

Judge Nancarrow interrupted, “Prosecutor Bromidus is not on trial, Mr. Kincaid.”

Holding his hands up in contrition, Caspian gave him a rueful smile. “My apologies, your honour. However, I would like the prosecution to acknowledge that all the video evidence really shows is my client starting to engage the Brimorians in combat, then withdrawing to his carrier. Even if we all agree that the Brimorians deliberately avoided targeting Commander Walker’s gunship, that is still not evidence of my client’s guilt.”

The Judge glanced at the prosecutor and raised an eyebrow. “Commodore?”

Bromidus hesitated for a long moment, then was forced to grudgingly nod in agreement.

With that decisive point scored, Caspian turned back to Tom, who was staring away into the distance, oblivious to the court proceedings. He studied him for a second, then approached the Judge.

“Could we have a quick break, your Honour?” he requested quietly. “Reliving the battle was traumatic for my client.”

“Agreed. The court will take a brief recess,” Judge Nancarrow stated, before banging his gavel.

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\*The next batch are done, handsome.\*

\*Great timing,\* John replied, while walking backwards across the Invictus’ topdeck, stretching out a metallic cable until it grew taut. \*We’re just using up the last set.\*

The cable was connected to a huge mushroom-shaped turretwell that now lay rested on its side, the long barrel of a Quantum Flux Cannon pointing upwards at an odd angle. He dropped to one knee, and placed the magnetic clamp onto the battlecruiser’s hull, before giving the control mechanism a firm twist to secure it in place. Glancing to his left, John saw a white-armoured figure kneel to attach another clamp, the holograph lioness on her shoulderpad flashing bright red as she worked.

“Done!” Dana announced over the comms, as she turned to give him a thumbs up.

She was echoed a moment later by Calara and Rachel, the two brunettes helping to safely stow away the massive guns for travel.

“Nice work, ladies,” John said, as he rose to his feet. “Six down, eighteen more to go.”

“I can’t believe Darthas gave us permission to take all of them!” Dana exclaimed, as she bounded over to join him.

“The elders know what’s at stake. If we lose, then it’s all over for them too,” John replied, before looking back at Genwynn station. “How’s it going, Sakura?”

On the surface of the ancient Progenitor battlestation, the Valkyrie braced itself against the hull, with a secure grip on the top of the next turret. Retro-thrusters flared brightly on its arms, as the mech slowly pulled the entire turretwell out of the orbital base.

The Asian girl’s face appeared in the holo-display, her brow furrowed in concentration. “No problems here. The turrets are sliding out nice and easy.”

\*We’re making good progress on the rest of the locking mechanisms, Master,\* Jade cheerfully informed them from inside the station. \*We should be done with the last ones in a couple of minutes. Are you absolutely sure you don’t want to take the Quantum Devastators? We should be able to unlock them as well without too much trouble.\*

Calara had walked over to stand with John, and he could see her face light up through the crystal faceplate, as she listened to the shared telepathic conversation.

Before the Latina could beg him to take the ferociously powerful weapons with them, Dana laughed and shook her head. “Forget it. I know how much you want them, but they’re just way too big. We’re already at the limit with all these turrets lashed to the hull. Anything bigger, and we won’t be able to initiate the Wormhole Generator.”

“They would’ve come in very handy,” Calara murmured, with a wistful look up at the immense guns.

“You’ll just have to make do with twenty-four Quantum Flux Cannons,” Rachel joked, giving her a conciliatory pat on the shoulder.

The brunette blushed and darted a guilty look at John. “Sorry... I didn’t mean to sound ungrateful. These guns will make a massive difference.”

“I know. I remember the plan,” John said, smiling at her reassuringly. “I’ll just go and get the next batch of cables from Alyssa, then we can finish requisitioning the rest of these turrets.”

“Hold on a second,” Rachel said with a puzzled frown. “I thought ‘requisitioning’ was our euphemism for stealing?”

Dana nodded enthusiastically. “Yep!”

“But since John has claimed the Maliri, doesn’t that mean all these turrets belong to him already?” Rachel asked, her hazel eyes sparkling. “I think we need an official ruling from Lord Baen’thelas. Is it really stealing when you own everything in the Protectorate?”

He rolled his eyes at the laughing trio, then activated the flight mode on his Lion armour. “Yeah, yeah, very funny,” he chuckled, breaking into a self-conscious grin. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

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“Time to take the stand again, Tom,” Caspian Kincaid said, rising from his chair.

Tom Walker nodded in assent, mentally bracing himself for the next set of questions.

“Love you,” Annabelle whispered, reaching over to stroke Tom’s back as he got up.

He shared a smile with her, enjoying the visible flicker of anger that triggered on Archie’s face, then crossed the courtroom to retake the chair for further cross-examination.

While Tom was getting comfortable, Caspian turned to address the court. “We’ve proven that my client was innocent of any wrongdoing during the Battle of the Callopean Shoals. Now, I’d like to address motive. The prosecution claims that his motive was greed; that my client suddenly decided one day to betray his closest friends and colleagues, and everything he’d spent his life working towards for a few credits.”

Bromidus couldn’t help snorting indignantly. “A few credits? 350 million might be a paltry sum to a high-priced defence attorney, but to most normal people that’s a colossal amount of money.”

“That’s an excellent point, Commodore,” Caspian declared magnanimously. “But as we shall soon see, Tom Walker is not an ordinary man.”

The Prosecutor bristled at his opponent’s cheerful tone, knowing that the cunning lawyer was about to undermine his next biggest piece of evidence. A brief flicker of concern crossed the Commodore’s usually stern features, then Bromidus darted a glance over his shoulder. From his vantage point in the stand, Tom saw the prosecutor make eye contact with a female Admiral, quickly followed by a curt nod. She rose from her seat in the gallery, and made her way towards the exit, without so much as a backwards glance.

“Tom, would you please tell us what this is?” Caspian prompted him politely.

He whipped his head around to look at the holographic image floating before the jury. It was a picture of an elegant six-bedroom house surrounded by perfectly manicured lawns.

“That’s where I grew up,” he explained. “It’s my parents’ home on Terra.”

“A grace-and-favour property owned by the Admiralty, and leased free-of-charge to senior officers,” Caspian explained to the court. He clicked a remote in his hand. “And this?”

The next image showed a significantly grander and more imposing piece of real estate.

“That’s the family estate in New Berkshire on Novus Britannia,” Tom replied, naming one of the Gaia-class worlds within the Terran Federation.

“Do you happen to know the current valuation of that property, Tom?”

“Sorry, I don’t. But I’m sure my father would know,” he said, glancing apologetically at Admiral Laurence Walker.

“The law prohibits me from calling a serving Admiral to the stand,” Caspian said, with a respectful nod towards the senior officer. “Although I’m quite certain your father would be happy to volunteer that information for the court, it’s sufficient to state that the Walker family has significant inherited wealth.” He turned his attention back to the stand again, and continued, “Your grandfather served in the Admiralty too, didn’t he Tom?”

“Objection, leading the witness,” Bromidus seethed.

“Sustained.”

Caspian conceded the point with a nod, then reframed the question. “Have any of your family served in the military?”

“My grandfather was an Admiral, and the previous three generations before him also served in the Admiralty,” Tom replied, answering the lawyer’s original question. “My Uncle was a Commodore serving aboard the Demeter, but he was killed in battle during the Kintark War.”

“My condolences,” Caspian said, his voice tinged with genuine sympathy. “I’m glad you mentioned your uncle. Did you have a good relationship with Daniel Walker?”

“I did. We were very close,” Tom said, his eyes shadowing with grief. “I chose to serve in the border fleets instead of taking a safe administrative role in the Home Worlds, because I wanted my Uncle to be proud of me.”

Caspian paused for a long moment, then clicked the remote. “Tom, please could you identify this property?”

Tom glanced at the holographic image of an ultra-modern and very sleek penthouse. “That’s my uncle’s apartment in Unity City. It was damaged in the bombing, but it’s currently being rebuilt.”

“And this one?”

The image changed again to a beautiful rustic looking building, with a majestic range of snow-capped mountains in the background.

“That’s my uncle’s ski lodge in Aspen, here on Terra,” Tom explained, with a sad smile. “He taught me and my fiancée to snowboard there.”

“According to public records, your Uncle never married or had any children,” Caspian stated. “Tom, who currently owns those properties?”

“I do,” Tom replied, before glancing self-consciously at the gallery. “He left everything to me.”

“After inheriting the accumulated assets from four generations of long-serving admirals, what is your current net worth?” Caspian asked, looking meaningfully at the officers on the jury.

“I... don’t know exactly,” Tom admitted, flushing with embarrassment. “Most of it’s in trust, or tied up in shares and property. I think it’s over 400 million credits.”

There were startled gasps in the gallery, which turned into a flurry of murmurs and gossiping.

“Order in the Court,” Judge Nancarrow growled, stifling the noise from the chattering crowd.

“I have no wish to embarrass Admiral Laurence Walker with a request to disclose his current net worth... but my client is the sole heir to his father’s estate as well,” Caspian said, drawing everyone’s rapt attention to him again. “Now you might resent my client for being one of the overly-privileged elite, or feel jealous that a man in his twenties should have so much unearned wealth. But being rich isn’t a crime. However, the fact that Tom Walker already has access to ‘colossal’ amounts of money, casts huge doubt on the prosecution’s motive of greed.”

Irritated at being mockingly paraphrased, Bromidus interjected, “Surely the defence isn’t attempting to claim that rich men can’t be guilty of committing appalling crimes? Have you forgotten the Fairisles Exchange fraud? Or the Conwyn Consortium’s exposure as a pyramid scheme? Obscenely rich men indulge in the worst excesses of financial crime.”

“But my client isn’t a corrupt financier,” Caspian was quick to retort. “Commander Thomas Walker comes from a long family legacy of military service. Why would he risk everything he’s worked so hard to achieve with his career, for a sum of money that doesn’t even match his potential net worth? The prosecution’s motive makes no sense at all.”

He waited for a long moment for that to sink in, then continued, “What does make sense is that the real traitor who framed my client, had no idea how wealthy Tom really is. He has no history of extravagant spending, so there was never any indication that he comes from enough family money to make a 350 million credit bribe seem like chump change.”

Tom glanced around at all the shocked faces in the gallery, and was relieved to see similar expressions on the military jurors too. Although his lawyer had been using a bit of hyperbole to make his point, it had clearly been very effective.

With a smile of satisfaction, Caspian glanced back at the Judge. “No further questions, your Honour.”

Judge Nancarrow nodded thoughtfully. “The court will take a brief recess, then the prosecution may begin their cross-examination.”

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Ashryn slowly stirred from sleep, stretching languidly as she awoke. Her body felt amazing, like it was tingling with energy, and she knew instinctively that Gahl’kalgor had rejuvenated her as promised. Thoughts of her Progenitor Master filled the thrall with joy, and Ashryn couldn’t wait to show him how much more convincingly she could mimic his mother. She knew that he would never part with her, now that she looked so much like Delsanra; the bond between them was too strong to be broken again.

Her eyes fluttered open, and Ashryn wasn’t surprised to see Gahl’kalgor sitting on a chair nearby, watching her intently. She modestly gathered the silken sheets to her chest as she sat up, then gave him her most loving maternal smile.

“Kal, my beloved son,” she gushed, putting her heart and soul into the performance. “I fear I must have overslept... let me get up and make you some-”

“Stop,” he stated firmly, holding up his hand.

Ashryn froze and stared at him wide-eyed, not expecting this kind of stern reaction for one moment.

Gahl’kalgor rose from his chair and offered the red-skinned thrall his hand. “Come with me.”

She wrapped the sheet around her, tucking it securely into her cleavage to make an impromptu dress, then took his hand and slid out of the bed. Still unsure if she had permission to speak, Ashryn remained silent, and followed him meekly into the adjoining bathroom. Her gaze was fixed on his impossibly handsome face, as she tried to guess what she’d done to displease him.

He glanced at her, then frowned with impatience. “Look,” he commanded, gesturing at the mirror on the wall beside her.

Ashryn obediently turned to look at her reflection, wondering if her master had accidentally stripped away too many years, making her look too young to imitate his mother. The last thing she expected to see was her almost blindingly bright shock of hair. She gasped in horror, then stared in disbelief at the youthful white-maned stranger gaping back at her.

“I’m so sorry!” she babbled, frantic now and on the verge of tears. “I swear I didn’t do this on purpose, my Lord!”

“Calm yourself, Ashryn,” Gahl’kalgor muttered gruffly, unused to consoling distraught women. He hesitated, then with an awkward catch to his voice, he admitted, “I... like it.”

She froze, and gazed at him hopefully. “You do?”

He nodded, his eyes flicking back to study her reflection in fascination.

Ashryn looked in the mirror again, then slowly turned her head back and forth to examine the brilliantly white locks that had transformed her whole appearance. Now that the initial shock had worn off, she found herself captivated by the new look, especially as it had Gahl’kalgor’s seal of approval. She also noted that her rejuvenated face been subtly altered, with a slightly-broader bridge to her nose, and fuller lips.

“Do I look more like her now?” she murmured, fingers tracing the curve of her lip.

“Yes,” he replied, his tone softening. Then he raised a hand to brush through her hair. “And No.”

Ashryn locked eyes with him in the mirror and saw the conflict in his piercing gaze. There was a sense of profound vulnerability there, which was a familiar sight whenever she masqueraded as Delsanra, but now there was something else there too. A burning intensity that made her stomach flutter with excitement.

She bit her lip as she watched him, then her eyes widened with inspiration. “Did Delsanra ever wear a headscarf?”

“If there was a cold breeze coming in off the sea... yes,” he replied, lost in memories.

Working deftly with quick fingers, Delsanra pulled back her hair into a ponytail, then wrapped her head in one of the nearby towels. “The wind is biting this time of year, Kal,” she said, smiling at him fondly. “Make sure you wrap up warm.”

Gahl’kalgor reached out to caress her cheek, his voice thick with emotion. “Mother...”

She kissed his trembling fingers. “You’re such a good boy. I’m very proud of you, Kal.”

He gathered her in his arms, holding her close. “Don’t leave me again. I want you to be with me forever.”

Ashryn’s heart pounded in her chest, and she drank in his heady scent, revelling at being in his arms. “I’ll never leave you. I promise.”

The tensions seemed to ease from his body, with Gahl’kalgor feeling a sense of peace that had been denied him for over a thousand years.

As wonderful as this felt for the giddy thrall, she still wanted more. She turned to press her lips against his pointed ear. “Do you trust me, Kal?”

He nodded emphatically. “With my life.”

“Will you wait here for a moment... until I call you?” she requested, doing her very best to keep the desire from her voice.

“Of course,” he agreed, releasing his hold on her.

Ashryn gave him a maternal pat on the cheek, then slipped out of the bathroom, glancing back to make sure the door shut firmly behind her. She took a deep breath, knowing this was a very dangerous move, but the reward was too tempting for her to resist. The towel dropped at her feet as she glided across the bedroom, her fingers then releasing the sheet folded across her bosom. Shaking out her tousled mane of thick white hair, she let it tumble across her shoulders, then posed alluringly by the bed.

“My Lord?” she called back to him, her voice strong and confident. “Fleet Commander Ashryn reporting as requested.”

She heard the door open behind her, and could almost sense Gahl’kalgor’s anger radiating off him as he barged into the bathroom, enraged at the abrupt change from Delsanra. His footsteps suddenly stopped, and she knew he was staring at her nubile crimson form, and the snowy-white locks that had so thoroughly captivated him earlier.

“I want to serve all your needs, my Lord...” she purred, turning her head slightly, but keeping her altered face obscured by a curtain of hair.

Time seemed to slow, and Ashryn held her breath as she awaited his response. The only warning was a low growl, and then she gasped in surprise as she was flung onto the bed. She had barely landed when he was suddenly on top of her, the thick heat of his cock demanding entry to her body. It was fortunate that she was already so aroused, her soaked passage forced wide open to accept his huge girth.

Then he was pounding her into the mattress, his hands holding her down as he stroked deep into her belly. Ashryn climaxed over and over again, the thrall squealing and gasping with pleasure as she drowned in euphoric bliss. She felt him nuzzle into her hair, then Gahl’kalgor let out a deep groan as he reached his climax. Her eyes rolled back as she felt him hose down her womb, her toned belly swelling underneath them with each heavy spurt.

Ashryn let out an ecstatic cry, then collapsed insensate, her luscious lips curled into a triumphant smile.

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The Terran Federation battleship dropped out of hyper-warp at the outer edge of the system’s gravity well, tachyon particles dispersing off the hull in a flurry of blue motes. The triple stars of Alpha Centauri cast their gleaming radiance across the mighty warship, highlighting the name Aphrodite, which was emblazoned along its bow. Moments later, the rest of the diplomatic fleet dropped into the system, then they ramped up power to their engines and set a course for their home base.

Aboard the Bridge of the Terran flagship, Lynette Devereux watched the final leg of their journey with a despondent sigh. She’d been fervently hoping to return triumphant, having convinced the Outer Rim colonies to set aside any plans of secession, and give the Terran Federation one last chance. Instead, due to the catastrophic timing of the Galkiran invasion, her diplomatic mission had been left in tatters. The colonists felt abandoned by the Core Worlds yet again, and now seemed resolute in their decision to leave the Terran Federation.

“It wasn’t your fault, Lynette,” Rear Admiral Tamar Kahale said quietly, seeing the look of bitter regret on her commander’s face. “You were so close to convincing all of them to trust you.”

Lynette stared morosely at the holographic depiction of Olympus Shipyard. The construction crews had been busy while she was away, and now an intricate lattice of construction scaffolding had been erected beneath the massive six-armed starbase. Work on the expansion of the shipbuilding facility had begun in earnest, and the superstructure was now being built on a secondary layer to support all the new drydocks and cargo bays.

She knew that the senior admirals serving on High Command would be waiting for her on Olympus, and dreaded their next meeting. Lynette doubted that the admiralty would be as forgiving as Tamar, especially when the full scale of the impending rebellion became known. It wouldn’t surprise her in the least if they declared a vote of no-confidence in her tenure as Fleet Admiral, and had her ignominiously ejected from the role she’d fought so hard to attain.

“Thank you, Tamar,” she replied, giving her fellow officer a grateful smile. “I might soon be the shortest-serving Fleet Admiral in Terran Federation history, but I’m glad I still have your support.”

“They’d be making a terrible mistake to remove you, Lynette. There’s nobody better to serve as Fleet Admiral,” the round-faced officer said with conviction. “I believe that even more now than at the start of this mission.”

“I hope I have as much luck convincing the Admiralty,” Lynette said with a rueful frown.

Tamar shook her head. “Luck didn’t have anything to do with it.”

Lynette turned her attention back to the holographic System Map, and watched as the Aphrodite approached Olympus Shipyard. The battleship was granted priority clearance, and cruised past the long queues of military and civilian traffic all waiting to dock at the space station. As the deadly warship followed a flight path to the docking bays at the rear of the facility, Lynette couldn’t help feeling like they were slinking back home with their tail tucked between their legs.

“Well, time to face the music,” Lynette stated, before turning and brushing past Tamar where she sat in the command chair. Their hands briefly touched, her subtle caress going unnoticed by everyone aboard the Bridge. “I’ll be in contact about that assignment we discussed.”

Tamar gave her a furtive nod, a gleam of anticipation in her eyes. “Thank you, Fleet Admiral.”

Exiting the Bridge and returning to her cabin, Lynette retrieved her luggage, which she’d already packed in anticipation of their imminent arrival at Olympus Shipyard. With the case floating along beside her, she made her way down in the elevators to the airlock at ground level. By the time she arrived, the grey titanium walls of the docking bay filled the view through the armoured porthole, until the battleship touched down on the deck.

As soon as the atmospheric pressure had been equalised, Lynette opened the airlock to a quiet hiss, then stepped outside. The docking bay was deserted, so she was able to disembark without ceremony, and quickly made her way to the exit. The Fleet Admiral’s return to the shipyard had been kept a closely guarded secret, so the personnel did a double-take when they saw her, then smartly snapped to attention. Lynette returned their salutes, but didn’t tarry on her way to the Officers’ Deck.

The door to her quarters seemed to open in slow motion, and took even longer to close behind her. When she finally had some privacy at long last, Lynette deactivated her holo-disguise, and stripped off her uniform jacket.

“Charles?!” she called out with mounting excitement, striding quickly through the foyer.

“Welcome home, Lynette!” he cheerfully replied as he rose from the sofa, delighted to see his fiancée. “I wish you’d let me greet you when you landed... mmph!”

He was cut off mid-sentence as Lynette jumped into his arms and gave him a sizzling kiss. “Bed now, talk later!”

True to her word, there wasn’t time for conversation, as the nubile young woman showed Charles just how much she’d missed him. By the time Lynette was finally sated, they’d been in bed for hours, until she’d enthusiastically drained him dry.

“I missed you so much,” she purred, snuggling into him contentedly.

Charles was left panting for breath, a starry-eyed look of wonder on his face.

Lynette gave him a loving kiss, then bounded out of bed. “You just rest, I’ll get us some drinks!”

By the time she returned with some chilled beverages, Charles had recovered from their exertions and propped himself up on one elbow to accept the frosty bottle. “Thanks, sweetheart,” he said, welcoming her back into bed.

“How’s it been here while I was away?” Lynette asked, sitting cross-legged beside him.

“I really missed you,” he freely admitted. “I threw myself into work to keep myself distracted.”

“Yeah, I saw. I noticed all the building work on Olympus when we docked. I was surprised at how much progress you and Lina have already made on the shipyard extension,” Lynette explained. She gave him a coy smile and added, “Have you two been getting together for lots of intimate ‘business meetings’ to compare notes?”

Charles leaned back against the pillow. “I haven’t had any time for socialising. I’ve been too busy with organising building contractors, and I expect Lina’s snowed under with logistics as well.”

“But I thought you really liked her?” Lynette asked with a confused frown. “You know I wouldn’t have minded if she kept you company.”

He took a long swig from the bottle, but his fiancée was waiting expectantly for an answer.

“I’ve had a lot of time to think while you were away,” he said cautiously.

“That sounds ominous.”

Charles took her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “It’s not, I promise. I love you, Lynette, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Only you.”

Despite his reassuring words, her frown deepened. “I don’t understand. Lina was just going to be the first; you deserve to have your own harem.”

He was taking another sip from the bottle, then snorted and the drink came out his nose. “What?!”

Lynette nodded enthusiastically. “Lina’s perfect! Then you’d have a brunette and a redhead, and I think I might’ve found a good candidate for someone a bit more exotic. Now I just need to find you a stunning blonde...”

Charles shook his head as he wiped his face, and gave the eager girl a rueful frown. “I’m not a young man anymore, Lynette. Even after Rachel gave me that check up, I can still barely keep up with one horny young woman, let alone two... or heaven forbid... four.”

“But you’re amazing in bed,” she gushed, beaming at him appreciatively. “You could handle us no problem.”

“I’m fifty-two, and getting older every day,” Charles said, caressing her cheek. “The only reason I even considered going ahead with this craziness with Lina, was so that you’d have someone your own age to care for you... when I’m gone.”

“Oh, Charles,” Lynette murmured, her eyes welling up as she leaned in to hug him.

They held each other for a long time, just enjoying the closeness and intimacy after being reunited.

“I’m sorry for being so pushy,” Lynette apologised when she pulled away from him. “I just thought you were being shy, but that you really did want this.”

“You’re more than enough for me,” he said sincerely. “But am I enough for you?”

Lynette immediately nodded in confirmation. “Absolutely.” After giving him a deep kiss, she leaned back, lost in thought.

“Is everything okay?” he asked with concern.

“Yeah... just thinking about what to do with the Lina situation,” she mused aloud. “I guess it’s just one more problem to add to the growing pile.”

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to make your life more difficult.”

“It’s fine,” Lynette said, shrugging nonchalantly. “Compared to everything else going on, this is just a mild distraction. What’s the mood like amongst the other admirals at the moment? Are they all conspiring to have me thrown out of office after the Outer Rim debacle?”

“I’m a bit out of the loop nowadays,” Charles said with a dry chuckle, his moustache twitching with amusement. “Now that I’m the Fleet Admiral’s fiancé, I’ve been kicked out of all the best gossip circles.”

She pouted and gave him a pleading look. “Come on, you must have heard something? What’s the general atmosphere been like on the station?”

“Well... as you’d expect, everyone was stunned by the Galkiran attack on Zelig’s fleet. The sudden appearance of a hostile unidentified alien warfleet on our border was bound to send shockwaves through the Federation. Truthfully, I think that’s overshadowed any worry people might have had about an impending rebellion in the Outer Rim.”

“Really? That’s great news!” Lynette replied, sagging with relief. She flinched as she heard how callous that sounded, and quickly corrected herself. “Obviously the Galkiran invasion isn’t great news, and it was horrific what happened to all those personnel on Zelig’s fleet! I just meant-”

Charles gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. “Relax. I know exactly what you meant.”

After thanking him with a grateful smile, Lynette continued, “I was expecting to be raked over the coals by High Command. At least that’s one less thing to worry about.”

Moustache twitching, Charles gave her a dubious frown.

“What?” she pressed him.

“The Galkirans attacked nearly a week ago, and then they abruptly disappeared. The initial panic has worn off, and now I’ve even seen news discussions questioning the existence of mysterious new alien invaders. Just yesterday, I saw an article on the Holonet trying to claim the attack was a psyops by the Maliri.”

“That’s just conspiracy theory crackpots,” Lynette said with a dismissive snort. “You should know better than to pay any attention to that nonsense.”

“I didn’t. Because I know what really happened out there,” Charles replied. “But I wouldn’t get too complacent just yet. There’s been a big spike in transfer requests to ships and bases in the Outer Rim. If I’ve noticed them, you can guarantee the other admirals have too. Do you think the colonies are preparing for armed insurrection?”

She grimaced at the disquieting news. “If they’ve got any sense they’ll be desperate to avoiding escalating this to an actual war. Dammit! I though Stefan Vaughn was smarter than that.”

“The Galkiran attack might have forced his hand,” Charles suggested. “The Outer Rim colonies must be panicking about an imminent alien invasion, and the border is completely exposed. Any personnel from the Outer Rim that are serving in the Core Worlds could have warned their families that we haven’t dispatched any replacement fleets to protect the border yet.”

“You’re right... this is still a ticking time bomb,” Lynette admitted, holding her head in her hands. “I was so close, Charles. I’d convinced every single governor to give the Federation another chance, and then the Galkirans went and fucked everything up!”

“I haven’t heard anything from John since he left,” Charles said quietly. “What’s happening out there? Have the Maliri been able to stop the invasion?”

Lynette shook her head. “The Galkirans have pushed deep into Maliri territory. John and the Lionesses are preparing to fight the final battle tonight.”

Charles’ eyes widened in alarm. “How bad is it, Lynette? You’re making it sound like they’re getting ready for a final stand!”

“They’re heavily outnumbered and outgunned,” she explained grimly. “Alyssa said they’re rigging the battlefield to help even the odds... but they’ll still be facing terrible danger.”

“I wish there was something we could do to help them,” Charles said, a look of helpless frustration on his face.

“I know,” Lynette agreed, putting aside her drink. “I’m scared, Charles. Hold me.”

He opened his arms for her, and Lynette cuddled into him, trying to fight back the feeling of impending disaster that had her stomach twisted up in knots.

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\*Are you sure, Master?\* Jade asked. \*It wouldn’t take us long to detach the Tachyon Lance batteries if you want to take them as well. There’s still some free space where we could pack in the smaller turrets.\*

\*We’ve run out of time. The Wormhole Generator is nearly fully charged and I want to jump out of here as soon as we can,\* John replied, as he locked down the last magnetic clamp to the hull. \*We’ve still got a lot of work ahead of us when we get back to Kythshara.\*

\*As you wish,\* the Nymph amiably agreed. \*We’re on our way back.\*

John set off across the topdeck and exchanged a wave with the Valkyrie as Sakura returned to the mech bay. The rest of the Paragon-suited girls began to appear from around the huge turrets that lay lashed against the Invcitus’ hull, before they dropped down to enter the Secondary Hangar. That just left Jade and her sisters, so John turned to wait for their arrival.

A huge reptilian head emerged from one of the empty pits that now pockmarked Genwynn station. It was quickly followed by a long serpentine neck as the dragon pulled itself clear of the turretwell, then Jade kicked off from the Maliri base and soared towards the waiting battlecruiser with wings fully outstretched. She landed gracefully on the topdeck, with startling agility for a creature her size, and bounded over to nuzzle him with her huge scaly muzzle.

\*I missed you too,\* John said affectionally, patting her jaw that was now big enough to effortlessly snap him in two with a single bite.

He stepped off the topdeck, then used the inbuilt thrusters on his Lion armour to manoeuvre back inside the Invictus. Jade glided into the hangar in his wake, then began to shimmer a verdant green as she started to shapeshift back to her normal form.

“Master!” Betrixa called out as she tumbled across the deck plates, before springing up and running into his arms. “Did you miss me as well?”

She was quickly followed by her three feline sisters, and as soon as John removed his Paragon helmet, he was promptly showered in kisses.

“Of course,” he chuckled, while hugging the four happy Nymphs. “You girls did an amazing job over there. Thanks for all your help with detaching the turrets; we couldn’t have done it in time without your help.”

The catgirls beamed at him in delight, then waved goodbye as they departed with Jade.

Alyssa had been watching them with amusement, and when John was no longer surrounded by fawning Nymphs, she walked over to greet him with a kiss. “We’re all ready to go, handsome. I’ve made all the necessary adjustments to the gravitic stabilisers, and widened the wormhole aperture enough to clear all the Flux Cannon turrets. As soon as we get some distance from Genwynn, we can jump back to Kythshara.”

“Perfect,” he said, nodding with satisfaction. “I should probably thank the Elders before we leave.”

“No need; Calara spoke to them already and was very appreciative. They all wished us good luck for the battle.”

“I’m glad we got to meet them in person,” he said, as they set off towards the express grav-tubes. “Hopefully we helped put their mind a bit more at ease about returning to the homeworlds.”

“You definitely made a good impression,” Alyssa agreed. “As did the twins on Elder Darthas. I have a feeling the white-haired Maliri are going to be very popular with the males.”

John chuckled as he recalled Darthas’ starstruck expression. “I think you’re right.”

They stepped into the blue anti-gravity field, then soared up through the decks to the Armoury.

Alyssa watched as the equipping frame efficiently stripped John of his Paragon suit. “Helene and Ailita have made us a late lunch.”

The mention of food made John’s stomach rumble loudly in protest. “That’s the best news I’ve heard all day,” he said enthusiastically. “I’m famished.”

“I’m not surprised. We skipped breakfast and it’s nearly 4 pm,” his executive officer informed him. “Do you want to plan our battle preparations over lunch?”

“That’d save time,” he agreed, before the pair entered the second set of grav-tubes. “We’ve got a hell of a lot to do, and not much time to do it. Have you got an ETA for the Galkiran fleet arriving at Kythshara?”

“Just after eleven,” she replied grimly, as they floated up in the blue particle field. “If they launch an immediate ground assault on Mael’nerak’s palace, it’ll be dark on that hemisphere of the planet. We’ll be fighting a night battle.”

“Wonderful,” John muttered as he crossed their old bedroom to enter the en suite bathroom. “That’ll help make the battle extra chaotic. Just what we need.”

As he unzipped his jumpsuit he noticed Alyssa unbuttoning her shirt. “You’re coming in too?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“You didn’t think I was going to let you shower alone, did you?” she exclaimed, looking at him with mock indignation.

“Alright, but no seducing me, you temptress. We don’t have time for that.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Alyssa purred, as she stripped off the last of her clothes. The blonde sashayed into the shower, then turned to give him a coy look over her deliciously nude shoulder. “But if you are feeling frisky, Jade just had an intriguing idea what to do with a tummy full of cum...”

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Lynette cinched her silken robe tight around her waist, then leaned over to plant a tender kiss on Charles’ cheek. “Sleep well, my love,” she whispered, before padding silently out of the bedroom.

She was still quite certain that her handsome fiancé would have no trouble satisfying at least one more secret Lioness in bed, but Charles had been quite insistent. As much as she longed to see him tame that flirtatious redhead, he’d made his decision, and that would have to be the end of it. With a wistful sigh, Lynette sat down at her desk, and idly caressed her trim stomach. As exciting as it was to think that Charles might have already got her pregnant, it would’ve been so much fun to have a matching baby bump with Lina... and Tamar... and maybe that sultry Latina in charge of ISD.

Some more allies in High Command would make her life a lot easier, and her position much more secure. It seemed strange to Lynette now, why she’d previously had such strong objections to recruiting more Lionesses in the Admiralty. She really needed some people she could trust, and who could be more trustworthy that fanatically loyal Lionesses? They would all be working together for the greater good of humanity, so where was the harm?

With a bewildered shake of her beautiful head, Lynette studied the comms interface to catch up on the long list of recent messages from members of the Admiralty. There were several rather terse requests from different officers, all asking for more updates about the Galkiran invaders. She picked up the unspoken question behind those messages; implying that the Fleet Admiral had advance warning about the existence of a hostile new alien species, and knew much more than she had revealed so far.

Lynette considered that for a long moment. John had informed Fleet Admiral Buckingham and his inner circle about the existence of Progenitors, but that information was still not widely known throughout the Admiralty. She concluded that it wouldn’t do any harm to give High Command some kind of general insight into the existence of thrall empires, without going into specifics.

Then there was a request from Admiral Caldwell, asking for a High Command meeting to discuss the current status of the Outer Rim colonies. That message confirmed all of Lynette’s earlier worries, and she knew that meeting could prove to be a potential minefield of recriminations. It looked like there was no escaping the shadow of the Outer Rim rebellion, and she might have to take some proactive measures to avoid being backed into a perilous predicament.

There were also queries about the current status of Fleet refits, which she promptly forwarded on to Charles. Admiral Connor Malone was asking for clarification of the official Federation position towards the Brimorian Enclave... and a timeline for a campaign to retake the Callopean Shoals. Lynette toyed with a stray tendril of hair as she considered that last message, wondering when the opportune time would be to strike.

She had planned on launching a campaign of retribution against the Brimorians as soon as the damage sustained to the fleets in the Battle of Terra had been repaired. Unfortunately, the Galkiran attack had destabilised the entire Kirrix border, leaving the Federation horribly vulnerable to raids by the insectoid menace. Lynette knew that the Kirrix has taken horrific losses in the Lion’s counterattack, but was the tenuous peace Alyssa had forced upon them, enough to keep the parasitical species at bay?

The final decision on whether to delay war with the Brimorians in order to reinforce the Kirrix border might soon be taken out of her hands regardless. If Stefan Vaughn and his band of conspirators did manage to organise a mass defection of ships to the Outer Rim, their highest priority would be to protect their own border, no matter if it crippled the Federation’s ability to attack the Brimorians. That really would be a disaster for her legacy as Fleet Admiral. She’d be held responsible for not crushing the biggest insurrection in Federation history, as well as be seen as pathetically weak for not avenging a massacre perpetrated by the Brimorians.

Lynette glumly scrolled through the last of the messages and was relieved to see that there was a ray of good news amongst all the gathering clouds. Admiral Sofia Esposito was very confident that the trial of the Callopean Shoals traitor would be concluded no later than tomorrow, with a guilty verdict all but guaranteed. The quick and righteous dispensation of justice would bring a very welcome uplift in the approval ratings for High Command, something that Lynette desperately needed at that moment.

She brought up the current approval statistics, and winced at the slump triggered by the Galkiran invasion, almost plunging the satisfaction ratings down to Buckingham’s levels. Although her clandestine diplomatic expedition to the Outer Rim had seemed like the quickest and easiest way of neutralising the rebellion, the subsequent failure of the mission, and her fortnight absence from the reins of power, had left Lynette very vulnerable.

After retrieving the holo-projector and activating her disguise, Lynette composed a message of gratitude to Admiral Esposito, thanking the chief of ISD for her diligence. Sofia Esposito was quickly proving herself to be a very capable officer, with a bright future ahead of her. Lynette mentally patted herself on the back for promoting the ambitious woman, and toyed once again with the possibility of recruiting her as another secret Lioness.

With a smile of anticipation on her face, she then wrote a letter of commendation for Vice Admiral Tamar Kahale, approving her immediate promotion to Admiral. Lynette was confident that nobody would question the validity of that promotion. Tamar was a veteran of the Battle of Terra, and with the deaths of so many officers in the Kintark war, the Brimorian massacre, and then the Galkiran invasion, there were a number of vacancies to be filled in the senior ranks of the Admiralty.

With her promotion to admiral, Tamar would now be eligible to serve in High Command. That decision would raise far more eyebrows, but such an elevation of position for a promising younger officer was certainly not unheard of. If Lynette could establish a core group of loyalists within High Command, then she wouldn’t need to waste so much time with internal politics, and trying to maintain everyone’s favour. That would free her from distractions, and allow Lynette to pursue her larger goals for the Terran Federation and humanity as a whole.

She leaned back in her chair and smiled with anticipation. The Terran Federation might be more divided than at any time in its turbulent history, but she was determined to forge a strong and stable empire, one that would be a worthy ally to John and the Maliri. If his campaign against the Progenitors dragged out for decades, or even centuries, then he would need all the help he could get.

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“You all look magnificent!” Auralei gushed, casting her admiring gaze over the nineteen matriarchs who had gathered together in Edraele’s suite.

They were all attired in formal matriarchal gowns, which were modest by Maliri standards, lacking the usual slits in the fabric designed to reveal tantalising glimpses of azure flesh. Instead their dresses were tasteful and elegant, adorned with priceless jewels that drew the eye to their alluring curves, which sparkled with every sway of a curvaceous hip. Everything about their attire emphasised their wealth and prestige, the previous generation of matriarchs being fiercely competitive over who was the most resplendent in their finery.

“Thank you, Empress,” Edraele said graciously, inclining her head at the compliment.

The Larathyran gazed in awe at the spectacular dresses. “I wish I was coming with you to see their reaction.”

“I’m sorry. I wish you could join us,” the Maliri Queen replied, squeezing her hand in sympathy. “But you will be able to watch everything from my study. I’m having the meeting recorded for posterity.”

“I’ll watch with you,” Luna offered, sharing a friendly smile with their guest. “Considering my dreadful reputation, I wouldn’t be very welcome either.”

While the former assassin did have a definite notoriety for her skill at the deadly craft, the real reason Luna was staying with Auralei was for her protection. Edraele was certainly not expecting any trouble from the males should they come in contact with their Larathyran guest, but as her unofficial bodyguard, Luna wouldn’t hesitate to cut down anyone that dared to threaten the beautiful Empress.

The comms interface built into the closest chaise longue began to chime, and Edraele glided over to answer the call. “Are they here?”

“The fleets have arrived, my Queen,” the commander of Genthalas starbase dutifully informed her. “They are heading in-system, and will be docking in ten minutes.”

“Thank you, Makaela,” Edraele said politely. She ended the call, then turned to the gathered noblewomen. “Shall we depart, ladies?”

Accompanied by their House bodyguards, the matriarchs began to leave Edraele’s royal suite. They walked in pairs, naturally drawn to the other noblewoman that had shared precious time with Lord Baen’thelas. Some of those couples were much closer than others, with Nakiasha Torcyne and Iynessa Elyon chattering away like they’d been best friends for decades. Lyvia Amarille and Marsendra Helewynn walked together hand-in-hand, murmuring quiet words as they made lingering eye contact with each other.

On the other extreme, Faranise Eshenestria was having an animated conversation with Kali Loraleth and Sarene Baelora, while Garinia Quisayne trailed along quietly beside her like a loyal puppy. Edraele felt a pang of sympathy for the House Quisayne matriarch, who was completely infatuated with her House Baelora counterpart. Unfortunately for Quisayne, they were light years apart intellectually, and while Faranise was friendly towards her, it was quite apparent that there was zero attraction... quite the opposite in fact.

The other problematic pairing was Emandra Holaris and Vestele Waephyra, the last remaining matriarchs from the previous generation. While Vestele was very friendly, and delighted to chat to her previous rival, Emandra was fighting hard not to scream in frustration at the effervescent woman and demand she cease her useless prattle. Edraele could feel the tension radiating off Emandra as she suffered in silence, and decided to intervene.

“Vestele, I believe Tsarra wanted to ask you a question about your lovely gown,” she said, deftly interjecting herself into the one-sided conversation.

Tsarra immediately turned and smiled at the older noblewoman. “Leena and I were just discussing the exquisite sapphires on your dress. Where did you find such an enchanting shade of blue?”

“You really must tell us where,” Leena gushed, beckoning her to join them.

\*Thank you, darling girls,\* Edraele said gratefully, as she fell into step beside Emandra.

Emandra visibly sighed with relief as Vestele hurried over to join the Young Matriarchs, who happily engaged in fresh conversation with her. She glanced at the Maliri Queen with sincere gratitude.

“Thank you,” Emandra whispered. “If I had to listen to her a moment longer, I would’ve snapped.”

\*You’re welcome,\* Edraele replied, slipping her hand into Emandra’s and giving it a friendly squeeze. \*I know this is difficult for you, and I appreciate you’re trying your best.\*

Emandra glanced down at their interlaced fingers in surprise.

\*Would you like me to release your hand?\* Edraele asked, studying her carefully. \*I have no wish to make you uncomfortable.\*

The other Maliri hesitated, then slowly shook her head.

\*I’m glad,\* Edraele said, giving her a relieved smile. \*It feels nice for me too.\*

Emandra blushed, but seemed unsure how to respond.

\*Everything will get easier for you with time,\* the Maliri Queen said with genuine sympathy. \*You’ve spent the last 150 years protecting yourself from the spitefulness and cruelty of others. But you no longer need those defences, not with any of us.\*

“It’s hard... to trust,” Emandra whispered, her eyes shadowed with painful memories.

\*I know exactly what you mean,\* Edraele said earnestly.

They walked along in companionable silence for the next few minutes, as their entourage followed Genthalas’ golden halls towards the docking bays. They soon neared their final destination, the largest hangar in the entire facility, big enough to fully accommodate one of the massive Maliri heavy carriers.

\*We’re likely to draw much more scrutiny than the others,\* Edraele warned the eldest noblewoman in the group. \*As the last survivors of the previous generation of matriarchs, you and I have ugly reputations that precede us. Don’t be under any illusions that the males are unaware of our... excesses... over the past century.\*

“What about Vestele?” Emandra hissed indignantly under her breath, narrowing her eyes at the House Waephyra matriarch. “I can tell you stories about her that would make your toes curl!”

Edraele turned and gave her a wry smile. \*Just look at her, Emandra. If you told me she’d said a bad word to anyone, I’d be shocked.\*

Emandra glared at her old rival, who was giggling adorably at a lewd joke told by Nyrelle.

Shoulders slumping in defeat, Emandra conceded the point with a grimace. “This is all so effortless for her. It’s not fair.”

\*The old Vestele died,\* Edraele said bluntly. \*She will never get the chance to truly earn Lord Baen’thelas’ respect. You’re right, it’s not fair. You have an opportunity at redemption that will always be unattainable to her.\*

Emandra froze, then turned to give the Maliri Queen an awkward and embarrassed laugh. “Can’t you just let me be a bitch for once, without making me realise how ridiculous I’m being?”

\*No. I see too much promise in you, to let you sabotage your own progress.\*

With a sigh of resignation, Emandra asked contritely, “What do you want me to do?”

\*Emulate the others. I want to see you greet the males with genuine warmth and a friendly smile. Remember that Lord Baen’thelas has gone to a lot of effort to encourage the males to return, and he’ll be very interested to see how well they’re received back at the homeworlds. This is a prime opportunity to impress him, Emandra. Don’t waste it.\*

Emandra bit her lip, closed her eyes for a long moment, then gave Edraele a genuine smile.

\*Beautiful,\* Edraele murmured, gently caressing Emandra’s cheek. \*If I was Lord Baen’thelas, I’d definitely want to put a baby in you.\*

That shattered Emandra’s composure, and she blushed furiously.

Edraele laughed and hugged her. \*We all want to see you doe-eyed and pregnant, Emandra. The only person who could stop that happening is you.\*

Emandra returned the embrace. “I understand. Thank you for helping me, Edraele.”

The Maliri Queen acknowledged her with a sympathetic smile, then pulled away to address the others. “Are you ready, ladies? Let’s make a good impression.”

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Aadya watched the glowing runes impatiently as the lift descended through the decks of the House Perfaren flagship. She’d had to ensure the Ettrian Keyrie was docking at the correct hangar, having received specific telepathic instructions from Queen Edraele. The lift reached deck twelve and the crystal portal spiralled up into the ceiling, allowing her to hurry along the corridor to her esteemed passengers.

“I’m so sorry to keep you waiting without an escort,” she said, while smoothing out her dress uniform. “I was needed on the Bridge.”

“No apology is necessary, Fleet Commander,” Elder Othorion replied. “You’ve been a wonderful host. My colleagues all agree that whoever is lucky enough to catch your eye will be a fortune man indeed.”

The other males coughed awkwardly and looked mortified as Aadya blushed at the compliment.

“You’re impossible, you old rogue,” a Maliri male with a goatee said gruffly.

“Nonsense,” Othorion declared. “One of the few privileges of aging is the freedom to embarrass the younger generations. Don’t you agree, my dear?”

“I agree with Elder Barathael. You are an old rogue,” Aadya snorted, before offering her arm. “Now hold on tight. I’ll be in big trouble with my matriarch if you fall flat on your face, no matter how funny you look going for a tumble.”

The other elders from Genirath station chuckled at their banter as Othorion held onto her gratefully for support.

“The heart of an angel,” he said, patting her arm affectionately. “What a magnificent woman.”

Aadya rolled her eyes, but she placed her other hand on top of his, and gently stroked his wrinkled fingers.

There was a slight tremor beneath their feet, then a chime from the comms interface on Aadya’s wrist interrupted the playful exchange.

“We’ve landed,” she informed the assembled elders, reaching up to touch the runic seal on the airlock.

The portal spiralled up into the ceiling, admitting them to the gleaming golden hangar. The vast room was packed with Maliri personnel, and as Aadya emerged with her passengers, a great swell of applause rose to meet them. The males had been enthusiastically welcomed onto the House Perfaren battleship for their journey, but to be jubilantly cheered by a hundred-thousand euphoric females left them all reeling.

More of the emigrating males had disembarked from the shuttle bay at the rear of the battleship, and they gathered behind the elders in silence, stunned by their reception. The waiting crowds moved no closer, having been warned not to overwhelm their long-awaited guests. The exception was the supernaturally beautiful Maliri Queen and her cohort of radiant matriarchs, who glided over to greet the shocked elders.

“Welcome home,” Edraele said, her gentle voice full of sincerity and warmth. “We’ve missed you.”