Three Square Meals Ch. 150.3

John panted for breath, feeling groggy after his senses had been overloaded by the incredible intensity of his climax. He glanced down at Auralei and saw her still kneeling before him, her slender green hands slowly caressing the rounded dome tenting her dress. She looked just as dazed as he felt, but he knew that in her case, Auralei had been overwhelmed by the telepathic contact with his mind.

They were psychically bonded now, he could sense it, a powerful active connection existing between them, with the catalyst filling her stomach to the brim. He reached out to gently stroke her cheek, feeling a surge of affection for the trusting young woman who had just pledged her life to being with him. He was determined to make sure she never regretted forging that alliance, and that Auralei would lead a life full of love and happiness under his protection.

After checking on one very good girl, he then turned his attention to a very naughty one.

“Oh, don’t be like that,” Alyssa said with a sigh, moving around to sit beside their newest recruit.

“Be like what exactly?” John asked, narrowing his eyes.

Alyssa met his level gaze and raised an eyebrow. “Before you tell me off for being naughty, just answer me this question: Did you, or did you not, just experience one of the most intense orgasms of your life, knowing that you’ve just claimed Larn’kelnar’s daughter?”

He shook his head in frustration and sat up straight. “That’s not the point, Alyssa! Why didn’t you warn me beforehand!”

“But where’s the fun in that?” she asked in genuine confusion.

“Don’t play games with me, I’m serious,” he replied, looking at her sternly.

“So am I,” Alyssa said, adopting an equally stern expression. “Very serious.”

“This isn’t a joke,” he said quietly. “Auralei trusted us, and now I feel like I abused that trust.”

Alyssa deflated and shook her head. “I wish you’d trust me for once.”

“Hey, don’t turn this around on me,” John protested. “You’re the one keeping important secrets!”

She gazed up at him, a deeply hurt look in her cerulean eyes. “Auralei never met her father. She knew that Larn’kelnar had slept with her mother thirty years ago, but she had no relationship with him. She’s been grieving over Seldanna’s death, but she never thought twice about Larn’kelnar. Her family is not like Calara’s... this is not the same as if you’d just killed Jack Fernandez.”

John’s face fell. “Oh...”

“The only people that know who Auralei’s father is, are you, me, Edraele, and Jade. Obviously, none of us are going to say anything, so I was planning on leaving it to you, to gently break the news about the part Larn’kelnar played in her mother’s death. I suspect she’ll be very grateful to you for executing that asshole and avenging Seldanna, but what do I know? I’m totally irresponsible, right?”

“Alyssa... I’m sorry,” John said, feeling like crap.

“I just wanted to give you a pleasurable experience, because I know how much you dislike the girls going into the trance. At least this way, instead of feeling guilty about it, you could feel elation at having rescued a kind-hearted young woman from a malevolent monster. If we’d fought Larn’kelnar just a few weeks later, Auralei would’ve turned thirty and taken her Ceremony of Allegiance. That means drinking a cup dosed with traces of Larn’kelnar’s cum... and she’d have been connected to his psychic network. Instead of finding this beautiful girl here, she’d be a shrivelled up husk. That’s how much of a shit Larn’kelnar gave about his daughter.”

“I didn’t know any of that,” he protested. “I really am sorry, honey.”

She nodded and let out a forlorn sigh. “I am too. I’m afraid it means that you’ve just invalidated the terms of our bet.”

“How exactly?” he asked, narrowing his eyes in suspicion.

Alyssa leaped to her feet and pointed at him in accusation. “The terms of the bet were that if I won, you’d owe me a favour and go along with whatever I wanted without any complaints or arguments. I’m dreadfully sorry, Mr. Blake, but accusing me of keeping important secrets from you, very much counts as ‘a complaint’ which subsequently led to ‘an argument’. Therefore, you’re in violation of our agreement... and you still owe me a favour!”

“Wait a minute!” John protested, holding his hand out towards the kneeling girl in question. “I went along with everything you wanted. We just recruited Auralei!”

She ignored him and started doing a victory dance. “You still owe me a fa-vour! You still owe me a fa-vour! You still owe me a fa-vour!”

He couldn’t help laughing at the absurdity of the situation. “Yeah, yeah, very mature.”

“You still owe me a fa-vour!” she sang, leaning down to give him a kiss. “Isn’t that better than me being deeply hurt by you not trusting your fiercely loyal matriarch?”

John sighed in defeat. “Alright, you win. I still owe you a favour... and I really am sorry for not trusting you like I should have.”

“No problem, you’re forgiven!” Alyssa replied with a beatific smile.

“I should’ve listened to Jehanna,” he muttered. “She tried to warn me that you’re way smarter than I give you credit for.”

She wiggled her eyebrows at him and whispered, “You still owe me a fa-vour!”

John groaned in protest, then stood up and refastened his trousers. “We need to move Auralei and let her sleep this off. She’ll be out of it for the next fourteen hours.”

Alyssa nodded and gently stroked her hair. “I asked Sakura to search the palace. She found Larn’kelnar’s bedroom... she can sleep it off there.”

He tried not to laugh and shook his head. “You’re incorrigible. Auralei’s first time is not going to be in her dead father’s bed.”

She raised an eyebrow and looked at him speculatively.

“I wouldn’t enjoy it that much,” he said, scooping up the comatose girl in his arms. “You’d be wasting your favour.”

“Fair enough,” she agreed, sashaying along at his side and humming a happy tune to herself.

John glanced down at Auralei and couldn’t help smiling at her fondly. “She does seem like a lovely girl. Is she really an orphan?”

Alyssa nodded. “Everything I told you was the honest truth. Auralei was devastated when her mother died; she’s been crying herself to sleep almost every night for the last two weeks. Along with all the stress of trying to take care of the survivors, with no training or leadership experience, the poor girl’s on the verge of a nervous breakdown.”

John shook his head in sympathy. “I had no idea. She seemed so happy.”

“She was just overwhelmed at meeting you for the first time and being instantly smitten. You really have rescued her just in the nick of time,” she said, leaning over to pat Auralei’s hand.

He nodded in understanding, his expression solemn. “Thanks for pushing me to recruit her. We definitely did the right thing.”

“I think so too,” Alyssa said softly.

As John had his hands full, Alyssa gestured towards the doors and they swung open before them. The armour-clad Lionesses were waiting outside, and they turned to smile at the new arrivals.

Calara was the first to stride towards them, her brown eyes sparkling with excitement. “Oh my god, she looks so beautiful!” the Latina gushed. “When I first saw Auralei dressed like that, it was like she’d just stepped out of a fantasy holo-movie.”

“Like an elven princess?” Jehanna suggested, enthusiastically nodding in agreement. “Yeah, I know exactly what you mean.”

“Oh? What holo-movie was that from?” Rachel asked, looking at her with interest.

Jehanna blushed furiously. “Um... I’ve forgotten the name.”

Rachel grinned in amusement. “Oh right... that kind of movie.”

When the laughter died down, Sakura said, “I take it that pulse of blue light was related to Auralei?”

“Yeah, Sakura was just telling us about that,” Calara said, looking intrigued. “She was the only one that saw it.”

“Can we continue this discussion on the move?” John requested, glancing down at the young woman in his arms. “I want to get Auralei settled in the Raptor.”

“Of course,” Alyssa agreed, setting off beside him.

Rachel glanced at Auralei, then up at John. “The pulse of light must have occurred at the precise moment you fed her for the first time. The fact that only Sakura could see it means that it was related to psychic connections, and the nature of that pulse must mean it spread out to cover a considerable area. It was blue, which is your signature colour... so that must mean you’ve psychically claimed the Larathyran race.”

John blinked in astonishment at her rapid leaps in logic.

Before he could say anything, Alyssa nodded in confirmation. “The two Larathyran engineers with Dana were both affected by the pulse a couple of seconds after it swept out of the palace. I thought something like this might happen.”

“Wait, you planned this?” John asked, looking at her in bewilderment.

“Of course,” she replied with an enigmatic smile. “Why do you think I asked Jade to teach me ancient Maliri? I love you very much, but it wasn’t just so that I could serenade you with tributes to mighty Baen’thelas. I knew we’d be travelling to Larn’kelnar’s homeworld eventually, and I wondered whether you’d be able to claim multiple thrall races. Apparently the answer is yes... you most definitely can.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” he protested.

“You’re wonderful in many different ways, John, but you do have a bit of a problem with recruitment,” Alyssa explained with sympathy. “I understand, I really do, but if I’d started talking about recruiting a Larathyran thrall, how would you have reacted?”

He glanced down at Auralei and frowned. “I’d have been worrying about it from the moment you mentioned the idea.”

“That’s why,” Alyssa said, leaning over to give him a gentle kiss. “There wasn’t anything malicious behind it. I just didn’t want you to start worrying about me cashing in my ‘favour’ when you already had far too much on your plate. There was the Brimorians to deal with, then your guide, the Maliri matriarchs, Kythshara, the thrall fleets... I couldn’t burden you with anything else. Besides... XO is in charge of recruitment.”

John chuckled at that and conceded the point with a nod.

“So you really learned ancient Maliri just to speak to the Larathyrans?” Calara asked her girlfriend in fascination.

Alyssa nodded. “Them and any other unclaimed thralls we might bump into. Jade taught me a lot of very useful phrases.”

“Like what?” Jehanna asked, looking intrigued.

“Ith bregnol, hast elair imenn’eier voluith,” the blonde replied, her dulcet tones making the exotic language sound like liquid honey.

John chuckled and shook his head in amusement.

“What did that mean?!” Calara asked, listening avidly.

Alyssa lovingly caressed the Latina’s stomach. “You’ll look beautiful with a baby bump.”

Calara blushed and the girls all laughed.

“I’ve had some good use out of that one already,” Alyssa said, with a meaningful glance at Auralei.

John gave her a pained look. “What have you been promising her?”

Alyssa held up her hands defensively. “Nothing! But she does know that eventually you’ll be the father of her children, just like the rest of us.”

“And how did she take that bombshell?” John asked with a wry smile.

“She cried tears of joy,” Alyssa said softly as she stroked Auralei’s hand. “She couldn’t believe her luck.”

They were all touched by the Larathyran’s heartfelt reaction, with the girls feeling a warm sense of empathy towards their newest recruit.

Rachel watched with interest as John looked down at the woman in his arms with genuine affection. “You don’t seem to have any of your usual qualms about recruiting Auralei.”

“She made the choice to be with me of her own free will, or as much as she was capable of while being affected by the genetic conditioning,” he explained, as their footsteps echoed along the grand corridors. “Edraele did a good job of convincing me that the way the Maliri react towards me is instinctive and it’s pointless to feel guilty about it. After meeting all those Larathyran women and seeing them react the exact same way, I realised the same applies here.”

The brunette looked thoughtful and nodded in agreement. “It certainly appears to be the case that women from an unclaimed seed species are instinctively drawn to a Progenitor.”

“And better that she’s connected to me, than some monster that wouldn’t hesitate to drain the life out of her,” John said, watching Auralei sleeping serenely.

“So how does this work exactly?” Sakura asked, as she strode along beside him. “Auralei’s one of us now and we’re assuming that means you’ve also claimed the Larathyran species. If a Progenitor were to load up another Larathyran, what would happen then? Would you have to fight with him over who has the rightful claim?”

John hesitated, then shook his head. “I don’t think they’d even try.”

“Why not?” Sakura asked, frowning in confusion. “How would they know the difference?”

“I doubt it’s ever come up before,” he explained. “My father told me that when a baby Progenitor is born, he’s sent to an unclaimed seed species and eventually claims them when he’s reached maturity. Adult Progenitors already have their own empire, so they would never try to claim another one... that’s just not how this works. Xar’aziuth is pulling all the strings, so he must arrange for a replacement Progenitor to be sent to a thrall species when their old one is killed.”

They reached the entrance to the palace and walked outside, to find the Raptor parked beside the long colonnade. Betrixa had been waiting for their arrival and she waved cheerfully at John before hitting an icon on her console to open the gunship’s airlock.

“So the only way to free a thrall species, is to kill the Progenitor who claimed them?” Sakura asked, as they walked down the marble steps into the courtyard.

John was about to confirm that she was correct, when Alyssa spoke up.

“That’s how the Maliri were freed from Mael’nerak, and the Larathyrans were freed from Larn’kelnar, but that’s not the only way,” the blonde explained, sounding very sure of herself. She glanced at John and added, “Don’t forget about what happened with your father...”

“Yeah... you’re right,” he conceded with a frown. “When Rahn was mortally wounded by Mael’nerak, he was forced to wipe out his entire network to save himself. My father seemed convinced that after draining the life from his matriarch and all his thralls, he no longer left a psychic beacon in the Ether, and Xar’aziuth would assume he was dead. By draining the life out of all his thralls in the Randarai Empire, Rahn must’ve ended his claim over their species.”

John boarded the Raptor through the airlock, led the group through to the cargo bay, then up to the living quarters in the grav-tubes. He carefully placed Auralei on top of the bed and laid her head gently on the pillow. While he was settling the slumbering girl, Sakura watched them both with a pensive frown.

“What’s wrong?” Jehanna asked the former assassin. “Why are you frowning?”

“I was just thinking that Auralei is our only connection to the Larathyrans,” Sakura explained. “So if anything ever happened to her, John would no longer have any claim over her species.”

Alyssa sat down beside their newest recruit and lovingly stroked Auralei’s long dark hair. “We can keep her safe with us.”

Calara nodded in approval. “That’s an excellent idea. By protecting her, we’ll also deny a valuable asset to the enemy. As long as Auralei is alive, then Xar’aziuth can’t claim the Larathyrans with another Progenitor.”

“Hold on a second,” Jehanna said, glancing at each of them in turn. “I’m glad we’re bringing Auralei with us, but what about the rest of the Larathyrans? We’re taking all their fleets and leaving them defenceless! If they’re on our side now, won’t the Progenitors come here and slaughter them all?!”

John looked down at Auralei and said quietly, “When Xar’aziuth finds out that I’ve claimed the Larathyrans, it’ll just make him want to kill me even more. With me dead, my claim over their species would end and everything could go back to business as usual.”

\*Are you intending to establish a network of Larathyran wards under Auralei, John?\* Edraele asked, with an undercurrent of concern to her telepathic voice.

The Maliri Matriarch shared that question with everyone present and they all turned to look at him expectantly.

“Some more recruits could be very useful,” Alyssa suggested, an eager gleam in her eyes. “You know how well the Maliri respond to all the white-haired girls in Edraele’s network. Auralei’s wards would have a much easier time rebuilding their civilisation.”

“I haven’t really planned that far ahead,” John admitted. “You did spring recruiting Auralei on me out of nowhere.”

“Will her hair change colour like the Maliri?” Rachel asked, gazing down at the slumbering Empress in fascination.

“I don’t know. I suppose we’ll find out soon enough,” John replied, stroking Auralei’s hand. He rose from the bed, and continued, “Right now we need to focus on helping the Larathyrans as much as we can. Do you know what other problems they’re having, Alyssa?”

The blonde leaned over to kiss Auralei’s cheek, then she slowly rose from the bed. “Yes, she told me everything.”

John raised an eyebrow. “Okay... so what happened exactly?”

She let out a heavy sigh. “As I mentioned to you before, Larathyran women took the ‘Oath of Allegiance’ when they reached their thirtieth birthday. That’s how Larn’kelnar recruited them into his psychic network, by having them drink from a cup dosed with traces of his cum.”

“I always wondered how Progenitors managed to recruit such huge numbers of thralls for their armies,” Rachel mused aloud. “Each individual must only ingest a microscopic amount of semen during the allegiance ceremony. It’s no wonder that we’ve experienced such dramatic side-effects when we swallow a full load. You’ve been spoiling us, John.”

“You were worth it,” he said, giving her a sideways hug. Turning his attention back to Alyssa, he continued, “So how many women were affected on this planet?”

“Larn’kelnar didn’t just use the ceremony to recruit for his armies,” Alyssa replied quietly. “All the Larathyran women took the Oath of Allegiance when they became adults. When Larn’kelnar drained the life out of all the thralls in his psychic network, he killed over 80% of the planetary population.”

John stared at her in horror. “How many?”

“I don’t know a precise number, but the death toll is in the millions,” Alyssa replied, looking at him with sympathy. “The only survivors were the males and the girls that were too young to have taken the Oath of Allegiance. They’ve spent the last few weeks just trying to clear all the corpses from the streets...”

“Jesus...” he muttered, staggering backwards to slump heavily on the sofa.

“Their civilisation is starting to collapse because most of the vital services were operated by women... and they were completely wiped out.” she continued, her expression grim. “The oldest girls have tried to keep things going, but most of them were still in college and have no practical experience. Auralei loves plants and was training to become a botanist, then suddenly all the thralls died, and as one of the oldest living females, she was expected to lead the survivors. The poor girl was completely out of her depth and has been under an incredible amount of stress.”

“What about the men?” John asked in confusion. “If all the adult males survived, why aren’t they stepping up? Why are they expecting the girls to lead them?”

“It’s a very gynocentric society. The Larathyrans have the same gender imbalance as the Maliri, which means the males were outnumbered twenty-to-one. Nearly all the senior positions and professional roles were taken by women, so the men are just used to following orders.”

John took a moment to gather himself, then slowly rose from the sofa. “This wasn’t our fault, but I do feel at least partially responsible for this disaster. We need to help these people as much as we can.”

The girls were just as shocked as John at the horrifying death toll, and they all silently nodded in agreement.

“What’s the situation like on the other planets in Larn’kelnar’s empire?” John asked his matriarch.

“I asked Auralei, but she didn’t know. She’s been too busy trying to keep the survivors on Larathyra supplied with the essentials to worry about the rest of the planets,” Alyssa replied. “When things really started to fall apart here, they were going to ask other systems for help, but by that time the fusion plant had shut down, so they lost all power to their planetary comms arrays.”

“Have they got running water again now that Dana’s restored power?” John asked with concern.

The blonde nodded in confirmation. “She said that the city’s water purification facility and the network of pumping stations are all back online. After she’s finished at the fusion plant, Sparks wants to double-check the other utilities and make sure they’re all running okay.”

“And what about food?”

Alyssa grimaced and shook her head. “The water getting cut off was the most urgent problem, but that was actually an easy fix. The city residents have been using up all their food stocks over the last couple of weeks and there’s been no more coming in. All the supply chains are broken, and we’re going to need to train new replacements to handle everything from agriculture, industry, to distribution.”

John’s heart sank at the thought of the daunting scale of work ahead of them.

“Let me take charge of that,” Calara suddenly volunteered, her voice brimming with confidence. “I’ve been obsessing over interstellar logistics for the last few months, so this will be a breeze in comparison. I’ll just need help from a translator and access to Larathyran contacts who can give me a general overview of the planetary infrastructure.”

Alyssa glanced at John and suggested, “Irillith would be ideal for this. She’ll be able to access their data network and find out everything Calara needs to know.”

He nodded in agreement. “We need to check how the twins are going to react to meeting Larathyrans. If there’s no problem, they’ll be a big help as translators. Let’s head back to the Invictus, then we can land the ship outside the hospital; that can be our base of operations while we’re helping out the Larathyrans and it’ll free up the Raptor to ferry around Dana.”

\*Don’t worry about us, Master,\* Jade interjected. \*I can transport Dana anywhere she needs to go.\*

\*Okay, but try not to terrify the locals,\* John replied with a wry smile.

The girls laughed too as Alyssa told them how the Nymph was planning to travel around the city, the brief moment of levity helping to lighten the bleak mood.

John gestured towards the grav-tubes. “Alright, let’s get moving, ladies; we’ve got a lot of work ahead of us. Rachel, I’m going to need your help protecting Auralei.”

“Of course,” she agreed. “As soon as we’ve finished testing the twins, I’d like to start healing the Larathyran sick and injured. If I can clear the hospital in good time, then I’ll be able to assist Calara with logistics planning.”

“I’d like to help,” Sakura volunteered.

“Me too,” Jehanna chimed in.

“I’m sure Calara can put all of us to good use,” John said, slipping his arm around the Latina’s shoulders.

“No pressure then,” the brunette joked, but her confident composure never wavered.

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Admiral Zelig stared out of the long window that took up the entire wall of his Ready Room, gazing at the dazzling field of stars arrayed before him. He took a sip of his tea, his attention focusing on the bright star known as Eta Piscium, where the Fleet Admiral was trying to diffuse the tensions in the Outer Rim. He didn’t envy Lynette Devereux the task of trying to convince all those recalcitrant governors to put aside their thoughts of rebellion, not after seeing the horrors those colonists had endured at the hands of the Kirrix.

The insectoid species caused unspeakable suffering to their captives and an argument could be made that they were some of the most evil creatures this galaxy had known. However, Zelig knew that they took prisoners from many different species to facilitate their gruesome lifecycle. From the Kirrix point of view, cultivating their eggs was a simple necessity for the survival of their species, and wasn’t an act of malice.

He wondered if the Kirrix ever considered the wider morality of their actions, and realised that their outlook must be diametrically opposed to their victims. If humanity was forced to utilise another species in their lifecycle, he could just imagine the flimsy rationalisations that would be used to justify the practice. As alien as those creatures were, they probably had more in common with humanity than any Terran was willing to admit.

Nathan finished his tea and allowed himself a wry smile. It was fortunate that Devereux hadn’t asked him to act as intermediary with the rebellious governors. He highly doubted that those colonists would be interested in judging the Kirrix abductions from the aliens’ perspective, and even suggesting it wouldn’t have made him any friends. His smile faded into a frown as he remembered the tense discussion he’d had with Alyssa over the subject of galactic morality, and her uncompromising stance towards classifying people as good or evil, as well as judging their actions as right or wrong.

He still found it hard to fathom how she could be so absolutely convinced of the righteousness of her actions. Such a blunt approach to morality ignored any mitigating factors, as well as the varying shades of grey between “good” and “evil”. Nathan just hoped that he’d never fall foul of her wrath, as he’d seen for himself just how brutal her punishments could be. Shuddering as he remembered Admiral Weber’s tortured screams, Nathan placed his cup on the desk and left the Ready Room, seeking to distract himself from the disturbing memories.

“Good evening, Commodore,” he said, walking onto the Bridge of the Porphyrion.

Commodore Mikhailov turned to greet his commanding officer with a respectful salute. “Good evening, Admiral Zelig.”

“Any activity along the border, Dmitri?” Zelig asked as he took his seat in the Command Chair.

The holographic Sector map drew his attention and he studied the Terran Federation forces arrayed along the periphery of the Outer Rim. The bulk of the defensive fleet was gathered at the staging area near Menganus IV, with the Porphyion the command vessel of a formation of ten battleships. The augmented battlegroup also included six heavy carriers, with those mobile strike fighter bases protected by extensive formations of heavy cruisers and destroyers.

Many of the light carriers and cruisers had been dispatched as reinforced patrols, sweeping the border for any sign of Kirrix encroachment. The sensor grid gave the Federation forces plenty of advanced warning if the Kirrix did approach, but the aliens typically probed the border with hive ships, and those scouts needed to be interdicted as quickly as possible.

“There’s been no sign of them since their forces were repulsed,” the lantern-jawed officer replied. Mikhailov stared at the blank expanse on the Kirrix side of the border and added quietly, “But I keep thinking about something my grandmother always used to say; ‘В тихом омуте черти водятся’, or in English: In a quiet lagoon, devils dwell...”

Zelig looked at him with interest. “I thought that expression translated to ‘Still waters run deep’? That a calm person might be concealing a passionate character?”

“It does... but I was thinking more literally,” Mikhailov explained, before gesturing towards the endless void. “The Kirrix are out there somewhere. It might be quiet now, but those monsters are just biding their time until we show any sign of vulnerability.”

“Their forces took devastating casualties in the last invasion. I have it on good authority that it should take them decades to recover,” Zelig said confidently.

“They’ll be back,” the other officer said, narrowing his eyes as he studied the map.

Zelig considered his earlier thoughts about the alien lifecycle and reluctantly nodded in agreement. Not finding the bleak conversation with the grim Commodore particularly uplifting, he stared at the holographic depiction of his forces, his gaze sweeping over the massed ranks of warships. The firepower at their disposal was impressive indeed, and he hoped the huge fleet would be enough to deter the monsters lurking in the darkness.

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The Raptor glided into the Invictus’ hangar and Betrixa pointed towards the two women waiting for them by the landing pad. “Look over there! It’s Helene and Irillith!”

John glanced at her with concern. “Keep your eyes on the controls, honey. Landing in the Invictus can be tricky.”

“Nah, it’s easy!” the cheetah catgirl scoffed.

She gave him an impish grin, then deliberately closed her eyes and brought the gunship down to a perfect landing in the centre of the landing pad.

Before John could say a word of shocked protest, she beamed at him and explained, “I’ve spent hours practicing on holo-simulators while I was watching the Bridge. You were never in any danger, Master.”

\*She’s very good behind a flightstick, John,\* Jade interjected in her sister’s defence. \*I wouldn’t have let Betrixa fly solo if she hadn’t proved to me how capable she was. I put her through her paces after we dropped you at the palace and she proved she can handle the gunship nearly as well as I can.\*

He wagged a finger at the Nymph pilot in admonishment. “Naughty girl. You had me worried for a moment.”

Betrixa batted her eyelashes and kissed his fingertip, then giggled with delight when he laughed at her antics.

Alyssa rose from the padded bench behind the pilot’s chair. “I’ll head up to the Bridge and land the Invictus near the hospital... unless you want me to stay for the test?”

John walked out of the cockpit with Alyssa at his side, followed by Sakura, Jehanna, and Calara. “I think we’ll be fine. Between Rachel, Helene, Sakura, and me, we should be able to keep Auralei completely safe from any danger. Besides, the main reason we chose Irillith for this test instead of Tashana is because she should be much easier to stop if she reacts badly to seeing a Larathyran.”

The blonde hesitated, then said, “Maybe I’ll stick around... just in case.”

He looked at her in surprise, but Alyssa gave him an enigmatic smile and sauntered out of the airlock into the hangar.

“Lab rat reporting for duty,” Irillith said with a mock salute.

John walked over to the pair and hugged them both in greeting. “Hey, Helene. Hi, Irillith. Thanks for assisting with this test.”

“I was happy to help,” the empathic mermaid said cheerfully.

Irillith frowned and said, “I must admit, this was quite the surprise. I never expected you to recruit a Larathyran.”

John cupped her cheek and gently brushed her azure skin with his thumb. “How do you feel, knowing that Auralei’s aboard?”

The Maliri hacker glanced up at the Raptor’s crystal canopy, a conflicted expression on her beautiful face. “I’m not gripped by a murderous rage, if that’s what you’re asking...”

“I kind of guessed that,” John said with a wry smile. “Come here, honey. Tell me what you are feeling.”

She stepped closer, then clung to him tightly when John scooped her up in his arms.

Irillith’s violet orbs glittered with excitement and she ran her hand over his muscular chest. “Mmm, well this feels wonderful.”

John chuckled and rolled his eyes at her. “That’s not quite what I meant.”

“I’m ready, John,” Helene said, bathing them both in a soft teal aura.

“Thanks, honey,” he said, acknowledging her with a nod.

Turning his attention back to Irillith, he kept a close watch on her face as he tapped into his psychic abilities and levitated them both off the deck. They rose higher, floating above the crystal canopy, until they had a clear view into the bedroom on the gunship’s upper deck. Irillith looked down at the sleeping figure on the bed and her breath caught, her pupil’s widening in shock.

John felt the Maliri tense in his arms, but he was relieved that she didn’t try to hurl herself at their newest recruit. “Talk to me, Irillith. How does seeing Auralei make you feel?”

“It’s... hard to describe,” Irillith whispered, staring intently at the green-skinned thrall. Her brow furrowed and she glanced up at him with concern. “Are you sure about this, John? It feels... wrong.”

He landed on the canopy, then crouched down on one knee, so they could get a close look at the Larathyran as she slept serenely only metres away. “Auralei’s part of our psychic network now, so it’s a bit late to change my mind about recruiting her. You seem unsettled though; are you alright?”

Irillith paused as she considered her emotions. “I don’t feel any anger or resentment towards her, but I do feel... wary? I think that’s the best way to describe it.”

John nodded thoughtfully. “It must be another Progenitor’s psychic influence over a thrall species that triggers an adverse reaction.”

Tearing her eyes away from their slumbering guest, Irillith stared at him intently. “What would you have done if I had tried to kill her?”

“Well, Helene is keeping a close eye on you and she would’ve tried to calm you down if you’d gone into a rage. I was going to physically restrain you, stop you from attacking Auralei, then carry you out of the hangar so you couldn’t see her anymore. You seem to react by sight and proximity, so separating the two of you should’ve been enough for you to get yourself under control again.”

“No, I meant long term,” Irillith explained. “If we’d reacted badly, you wouldn’t have been able to keep me, Tashana, and Auralei all aboard the Invictus at the same time.”

John glanced down at the sleeping girl below them. “Yeah, that would’ve been a big problem.”

“Alyssa told us that you need to keep Auralei safe to maintain your claim over the Larathyrans,” Irillith said quietly. “You could have kept her with you, then left Tashana and me on Genthalas.”

He focused on Irillith again and saw that she looked very perturbed at the thought of being separated from him. “You and Shan aren’t going anywhere. If we couldn’t stop you from trying to kill Auralei, we would’ve had to leave her behind on Larathyra.”

“Really?” she asked, gazing into his eyes.

“Of course,” John replied, meeting her intense gaze. “After Alyssa went to all that effort to recruit a hot pair of twins, she’d never forgive me if I kicked you off the ship.”

Irillith laughed and relaxed in his arms. “That’s strangely reassuring. I know how persistent she is about getting her own way.”

“I’m just joking, honey,” John said with a fond smile. “You know how much I care about you and Tashana. I’d never agree to the three of us being separated.”

The Maliri leaned in and gave him a very passionate kiss in gratitude.

When they parted, she gave him a knowing look. “You care about Auralei too though, don’t you? I’ve seen that protective look in your eyes before.”

He glanced down at the Larathyran Empress. “You’re right. She’s a lovely girl and really needs our help. Auralei lost everything when Larn’kelnar wiped out his thrall network.”

Irillith laughed and kissed him on the tip of his nose. “Alyssa’s right, you are an old softie.”

“Hey, less of the old,” John retorted as he rose to his feet. “You’ve got twelve years on me, remember?”

“Oh, I haven’t forgotten a thing, my handsome boytoy,” Irillith smirked. “But speaking of older women, have you thought about how my mother is going to react to you bringing home a rival thrall? If seeing Auralei makes me feel unsettled, how do you think your Maliri Queen is going to react to you recruiting a new matriarch from another thrall species?”

John froze as he realised that the Maliri matriarch had been suspiciously quiet since he’d recruited Auralei. \*Edraele? Are you alright?\*

There was a stony silence before she replied in a frosty tone, \*Perhaps we should save this discussion until we meet in person... my Lord.\*

He grimaced and turned to look at Irillith, who could only wince in sympathy.

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Captain Shalia stepped away from the robotic arms, then watched as they retracted into the ceiling with her dismantled body armour. She ran a crimson hued hand through her long hair, fluffing out the jet-black tresses after a long shift on the Bridge, before flopping down on her bunk with a sigh of frustration. Her scout cruiser had spent the last three days exploring deep space, without finding the slightest sign of the thralls her master was seeking. While her search had proven to be a complete waste of time, she was forced to listen to animated reports from the other Scout Captains as they found scores of ancient wrecks and debris-strewn battlefields.

The most bitter pill to swallow was hearing that Narzera had discovered some mysterious thrall subspecies that possessed a multitude of skin-tones and freakish round ears. The smug rival captain had sent out an invitation to nearby scouts to join what promised to be an exhilarating hunt. Of course, Shalia’s exploration vector had been in the exact opposite direction, so there was no possible way she could reach the impending battle in time. Even more galling was the knowledge that if Narzera had discovered the correct pathway to their master’s foe, then Shalia would need to reverse course and would also be the very last vessel to join the invasion.

Folding her hands behind her head, she stared glumly at the ceiling, her mind seething with resentment at the thought of Narzera stealing all her rightful glory. A veteran of several campaigns, Shalia had spent many long decades serving Gahl’kalgor in his scout forces, and she’d grown sick of fumbling around aimlessly in the darkness. She wanted to see some proper action in his warfleets, perhaps as the captain of a mighty battleship.

Shalia’s green eyes glinted with excitement as she pictured herself in command of a Dominator class capital ship, raining down an endless hail of devastation on her master’s enemies. If she proved herself in battle, she might catch his eye for something even more thrilling; the chance to serve him as crew on his dreadnought. Her fingers slid down her toned stomach and slipped under the waistband of her trousers. She bit her lip as she imagined providing her impossibly handsome master with much more personal services, the erotic thoughts making her tummy flutter in response.

Judging by that humiliating scene in the Dralzash Colosseum, Valeria seemed to have fallen out of favour with Lord Gahl’kalgor. If that was the case, there was a good chance he might finally be looking to replace the venerable matriarch. A wanton smile spread across Shalia’s face as she felt her body respond to her favourite fantasy, nimble fingers quickly becoming slick with her arousal. Her breathing deepened as she sensuously pleasured herself, her back arching as she crested towards what promised to be a spectacular climax.

“Durrring! Durrring!”

The grating chime from the comms interface made Shalia jump, awkwardly jarring her out of the fantasy at the worst possible moment. Flushed and horny, the Galkiran captain snarled in frustration and rolled off the bed to dart over to her desk. She slapped her hand down on the rune to answer the incoming call from the Bridge and glared at the holographic image of the Tactical Officer.

“What is it?!” she snapped belligerently. “Why did you disturb my rest?!”

The Tactical Officer blinked in surprise, not expecting to be berated. “Please accept my humble apologies, Captain Shalia. I merely wanted to inform you that we have detected what appears to be a substantial fleet of ships.”

“Why didn’t you just say so?” Shalia growled. “I’ll be right there.”

As she abruptly ended the call, the Galkiran captain broke into an eager grin. She knew that Gahl’kalgor was searching for his enemy’s thrall forces, not a subspecies of bizarre genetic aberrations. Perhaps she still had a chance of beating Narzera and seeing her lofty aspirations fulfilled.

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Alyssa kept a close eye on the Nymph pilot as the tiger-striped catgirl guided the Invictus down towards the Larathyran city. “That’s very good, Leylira. Just give her a little nudge on the starboard retro-thrusters to counter that crosswind.”

Following the teenager’s instructions, Leylira tilted the throttle control a couple of millimetres, triggering a flare of thrust along the battlecruiser’s right flank. Her intervention corrected the spaceship’s drift from the blustery winds that were circulating above the metropolis, lining up the Invictus with the empty field directly below.

“Perfect. Now just take us down, nice and steady,” Alyssa said, her tone calm and reassuring. Trying not to let out an exasperated sigh, she then continued her telepathic conversation. \*I don’t get what the problem is, Edraele. You knew all along that I was planning to recruit a Larathyran thrall.\*

\*Yes, but I had no idea that John would make her into another matriarch!\* the Maliri queen replied, sounding distressed.

\*What’s the big deal? You didn’t have a problem with him turning Jade into a matriarch for the Nymphs,\* the blonde reasoned, leaning forward in her Executive Officer’s chair as she carefully monitored their descent.

\*It’s not the same thing, Alyssa!\* Edraele protested. \*Auralei’s from another thrall species; what if John decides he wants to focus all his attention on the Larathyrans from now on?!\*

\*Don’t be daft, Edraele. You know how much he cares about the Maliri,\* Alyssa said, trying to be as supportive as possible. She broke into a grin and added, \*Besides, you’ve got him wrapped around your little finger! Convincing John to knock up the Council of Matriarchs was inspired; he’s already promised to get Sarene pregnant, and we both know how much he likes Phelora, Kehlarissa, and Faranise. He won’t be able to resist those sexy blue vixens for long!\*

\*He is very fond of them,\* Edraele conceded, making no attempt to hide her satisfaction. She hesitated for a moment, then continued cautiously, \*Do you really think I’m worrying without just cause?\*

\*Definitely,\* her fellow matriarch agreed. \*The idea of focusing on the Larathyrans has never crossed John’s mind. They haven’t even got enough adult women left to crew all the fleets we’re swiping. The only reason you’re feeling this way, is because of some weird psychic reaction to John claiming multiple thrall species. Jade and I weren’t affected; we both think it’s hot that he bagged a gorgeous new babe.\*

There was another long pause, then Edraele asked quietly, \*Is Auralei prettier than me?\*

Alyssa rolled her eyes. \*I don’t know about prettier... but she’s got bigger tits.\*

\*Really?\* the Maliri matriarch asked, sounding worried.

\*No, of course not!\* the blonde said in exasperation. \*She’s a thrall! You’ve got identical bodies... just in different colours. Don’t forget that blue is always going to be John’s favourite; it is his signature colour after all.\*

\*That’s true,\* Edraele conceded, sounding greatly relieved.

\*You have nothing to worry about, I promise,\* Alyssa said, her voice warm and soothing. \*When it comes to matriarchs, you’re definitely John’s favourite... which is fair enough, as you actually obey him, whereas me and Jade have gone off-mission a bunch of times. Not only that, but you’ve got that reformed bad-girl thing going on, plus he listens to your advice like it’s gospel. Last of all, and this is the most important: you’re a smoking hot milf and he loves the idea of knocking you up, along with your gorgeous twin daughters. How is any woman ever going to top that?\*

Edraele’s laughter eased her tension. \*You’re right, that is very important.\*

\*Exactly! He’s totally in love with you as well, but you know that already, right?\* Alyssa asked airily.

\*I do,\* the Maliri matriarch said with certainty. \*I’m sorry, Alyssa. I don’t know why I’m being so irrational about this.\*

\*As I said before, all this uncertainty you’re feeling has to be tied to the psychic connection somehow,\* Alyssa said, pondering the same thing herself. \*Just hang in there for a few more days. When we get back to Genthalas, John will give you a full tummy and fix whatever it is that’s making you feel so unsettled about Auralei.\*

\*Thank you, Alyssa,\* Edraele said gratefully. \*I feel much better after discussing this with you.\*

\*You’re welcome,\* the blonde replied, before the soft edge to her voice suddenly hardened. \*But now you need to apologise to John for being so cold with him earlier. I was the one that convinced him to recruit Auralei, remember? You can be as mad at me as you like, but it’s not fair to give him a hard time about it. He’s really worried that he upset you.\*

\*I-I know...\* Edraele faltered. \*I’ll apologise at once, and reassure him that I feel fine now.\*

\*Great, thank you,\* Alyssa said, before rising from her chair as the Invictus settled on the planet’s surface. “That was a text-book landing, Leylira. Awesome job!”

The catgirl pilot turned her chair and gave her a satisfied smile. “Thank you. I’ve been practicing as much as possible to make sure I was capable of flying the Invictus without supervision. The next time we go into battle, both you and Jade will be able to join John on a ground mission.”

“If you’re trying to get on my good side, you’re going the right way about it,” Alyssa said with a grin. She glided over to the earnest tigress and kissed her on the cheek. “I know how much you want to fight at John’s side. I’ll do my best to make it happen, okay?”

Leylira’s ears quivered with excitement. “That would be wonderful. Thank you!”

“You’re welcome,” the blonde replied, before turning and heading for the grav-tubes.

Alyssa descended in the red anti-gravity field until she reached Deck Nine, where she strolled down the corridor to meet John, Irillith, Helene, Rachel, Jehanna, and Sakura. She was relieved to see a smile on his face, his amiable expression matching his lightened mood.

“Hey, handsome,” Alyssa purred as she crossed her arms behind his neck and gave him a sultry kiss.

He returned it enthusiastically, then gave her a grateful hug. “I just spoke to Edraele. She said that she had a chat with you and is feeling much better now. Thanks, beautiful, I owe you one.”

“Wow! Another favour?” she teased him.

“Hmm, not quite that much,” John replied. “How about a ‘get out of being tickled’ card?”

“I’ll take it!” she blurted out, before miming tucking an imaginary card in her jacket pocket and patting it for safe-keeping. John’s ensuing laughter made the whole endeavour worthwhile.

He turned to Irillith and said, “Thanks for helping with the test earlier. I think it’s safe to say that you and Tashana aren’t going to be a danger to the Larathyrans.”

“I’m glad there’s no risk of us going berserk,” Irillith said, looking relieved.

“Until we’re sure that the Larathyrans aren’t going to attack *you* on sight, would you mind staying on the ship?” he asked, clasping her hand.

“I don’t mind. It’s a sensible precaution,” she agreed. “We can assist Calara with her logistics planning.”

“You’ll be a big help,” he said gratefully.

The Maliri waved goodbye and strode towards the grav-tubes.

John walked over to the airlock and placed his hand on the DNA reader. “What was the name of Auralei’s friend again?”

“Her name’s Kylantha,” Alyssa replied. “Auralei was her mentor at the Botanical Institute they both attended. When all the men starting deferring to Auralei to lead them, Kylantha became her unofficial assistant. She’ll be a good liaison until the newly crowned Empress wakes up.”

The airlock door spiralled open when it recognised John’s genetic code and he stepped inside. “I hope she didn’t decide to get an early night.”

Alyssa gave him a wry smile and shook her head. “Trust me... she’ll be there.”

When John opened the outer airlock, he saw a huge crowd of Larathyrans had gathered near the field, their green faces staring wide-eyed at the sparkling white battlecruiser.

“Good evening, everyone,” John greeted them, projecting his voice with a little psychic assistance. “I’m sure you have a great many questions that you’d like answered. As Alyssa announced earlier, we’re here to help you in any way that we can, and restoring power to the city was just the first step. I’ll be happy to assist with any other problems you’re experiencing, but before we do anything else, I’d like to prioritise healing the wounded in the hospital.”

His announcement was met with shocked silence, making John pause. He couldn’t tell if the Larathyrans were stunned by his declaration to heal the injured, or were just reacting to his presence.

\*I think it’s a little bit of both,\* Alyssa advised him. \*I spotted Kylantha by the way. She’s the blue-eyed cutie standing to the left of that tree over there... at your two o’clock.\*

John glanced in that direction and saw the young woman his matriarch was referring to. As he walked towards Kylantha, her eyes widened in disbelief when she realised he was seeking her out in the crowd.

“Hello, Kylantha,” he said with a warm smile. “My name’s John. Auralei told us that you’ve been doing a wonderful job of helping her fix all the recent problems.”

“She did?!” Kylantha squeaked.

He nodded solemnly. “Would you be able to help guide us around the hospital please?”

Her eyes seemed to get even wider as she bobbed her head in mute agreement. Kylantha’s brow suddenly furrowed and she asked hesitantly, “Is Auralei alright?”

“She was exhausted and fell asleep, but she’ll be just fine after some rest,” John explained.

“Auralei said that you’ve both been working very long hours at the hospital,” Alyssa interjected.

Kylantha nodded, her face a picture of concern. “I’ve been telling her that she needed to rest... but we’ve been dealing with one disaster after another. She was under so much pressure, with everybody expecting her to help fix all their problems.”

“Well, we’re here now,” John said with a reassuring smile. “With your help, we’ll be able to fix everything in no time.”

“Thank you, so much!” she gushed, clasping her hands together in gratitude.

“You’re very welcome,” John said warmly, before gesturing towards the hospital. “Shall we get started?”

The young Larathyran nodded eagerly and they set off towards the impressive medical facility, with Kylantha darting awed glances at John at every opportunity.

“I love their language,” Jehanna whispered to Rachel, as they fell into step behind them. “It’s so different from anything I’ve heard on Terra.”

“It sounds beautiful,” the brunette agreed. “I find it fascinating that Ancient Maliri and the Larathyran language are still so similar after all this time. I would’ve expected there to be so many regional differences in dialect after diverging for millennia, that they’d be incomprehensible to each other, but John and Kylantha don’t seem to be having any problems communicating.”

“I just wish I could understand what they’re saying,” the reporter said wistfully.

\*We can soon fix that,\* Alyssa interjected, her telepathic voice flitting through Jehanna’s mind. \*As Edraele’s spokeswoman for the Maliri Protectorate you really should learn to speak their language.\*

\*Oh, I’d love to learn Maliri!\* Jehanna enthused, her brown eyes flashing with excitement.

\*Sin’haien ith lehan’maer,\* Alyssa said to them both.

\*What does that mean?\* Rachel asked, listening avidly.

\*There’s no time like the present...\* the blonde replied, slipping her arms around their waists and giving them an affectionate squeeze. \*Now let’s start with the basics. This is how you say: ‘Thanks for the full tummy, that was delicious!’...\*

As John accompanied Kylantha towards the hospital, he heard the sound of furtive giggling behind him. He glanced over his shoulder at the trio of Terran girls and realised they were engrossed in a telepathic conversation with each other. Alyssa saw him watching them and gave him a playful wink, which left him wondering what his mischievous matriarch was up to now.

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The diplomatic shuttle cleared the upper atmosphere of Brecken’s World, then made a smooth turn towards the fleet of Terran Federation warships in high orbit above the planet. It flew past the destroyer screen and weaved around the squadrons of cruisers, then shifted course towards the three capital ships at the rear of the formation. Each of the huge vessels was a kilometre in length, but the two heavy carriers were broad and bulky, a sharp contrast in design to the sleek battleship leading the diplomatic mission.

The battleship was one of the most advanced warships in the Terran Federation navy, bristling with deadly batteries of heavy cannons and beam lasers. Despite its benign name, anyone that laid eyes on the Aphrodite would be under no illusions about its true nature, as it possessed enough firepower to devastate a capital city. Lynette Devereux stared up at the yawning barrels of the Mass Drivers built into the battleship’s armoured hull and felt a surge of relief that the rebellion had not had a chance to escalate into hostilities. She had seen the horrors of an orbital bombardment before and it was something she hoped to never witness again in her lifetime.

A broad portal opened up in the hull near the battleship’s stern, admitting the shuttle into the hangar. By the time the small craft had touched down on the landing pad, Lynette was waiting by the airlock, eager to disembark from the transport. Despite the shuttle’s opulent comforts, Lynette longed to escape from the luxurious suite, having spent long days there in endless back-to-back meetings. She wanted nothing more than to have a relaxing soak in the shower, then to change into comfortable nightwear and call her fiancé.

“Welcome aboard, Fleet Admiral,” Tamar Kahale greeted her as soon as the airlock spiralled open.

Squelching her irritation at having to make more small talk, Lynette returned the Rear Admiral’s greeting with a friendly smile. “Good evening. I hope I haven’t kept you waiting again?”

The Aphrodite’s commander shook her head. “Not at all. I adjusted my shifts to match your pattern of working hours.”

Lynette disembarked the shuttle and walked towards the exit, with the Rear Admiral falling into step beside her. “Did you have something urgent you wished to discuss with me, Tamar?” she asked, seeking to expedite the conversation.

“I just wondered how you were progressing with your mission, Fleet Admiral?” the other officer enquired politely. “Is there any way I can be of assistance?”

Realising that Tamar was likely bored out of her mind waiting in orbit for days at a time, Lynette felt a flicker of sympathy for her subordinate. “Thank you for the offer, but everything is well in-hand. The governors have all been very receptive to the aid packages I offered them, and negotiations should be concluded by tomorrow.”

“They’ve all backed down already?” Tamar asked, looking astounded.

Lynette stopped by the elevator and nodded gratefully to her fellow officer when Tamar hit the button to open the doors. She waited until they were both inside, and relaxed when they had more privacy and could speak freely.

“I only need to meet with six more of the governors to get their official signatures. They’ve already given me a verbal agreement, but wish to discuss the fine print with their advisors. At this point, I think we can safely say that Stefan Vaughn’s attempt to stir up a secessionist movement has been safely pacified. Even he reluctantly agreed to accept financial aid for Brecken’s World.”

“That’s incredible,” Tamar marvelled. “Congratulations!”

“Thank you,” Lynette replied, finally allowing herself a big smile of relief. “I’d like to stay in the system for a couple more days, just to spend some time with the colonists and address their grievances personally. After that, I think we should visit the border fleet to congratulate them on liberating these worlds from the Kirrix invasion.”

“I’m sure a surprise victory tour from the Fleet Admiral will be very well received,” Tamar said, sharing her enthusiasm and breaking into a grin.

“Well, I don’t know about that,” Lynette said with a wry smile. “I remember how stressful Fleet Admiral Sutton’s surprise inspection tours were, back when I was a Lieutenant Commander. We had to get everything spit-shined with about six hours notice.”

“With all due respect, ma’am, you’re nothing like Sutton,” the Rear Admiral said with conviction. “I never met him personally, but he had a terrible reputation.”

Lynette gazed into the distance, lost in dark memories. “It’s because of self-serving sociopaths like him that the Outer Rim is in this mess. Even if I don’t achieve anything else during my term as Fleet Admiral, I want to make sure that the Admiralty remembers that we’re here to serve the good of the Terran Federation, not abuse the office for our own personal gain.”

“You’re already making a real difference, Lynette,” Tamar said, looking at her respectfully. “You’ve helped a lot of people in these colonies... and they won’t forget it.”

The elevator chimed, alerting them that they’d reached Deck Three.

“Thank you,” Lynette said, accepting the compliment with a modest smile. She walked through the elevator doors, then turned back to the Aphrodite’s commander. “I really appreciated your unwavering support on this mission, Tamar. I’ll make sure that’s reflected in your service record.”

The Rear Admiral gave her a sharp salute. “It’s been an honour, Fleet Admiral.”

Lynette returned the salute, then walked away down the corridor to her quarters. She entered the suite and activated the signal jamming device, then turned off her holo-disguise and stripped off her uniform. The youthful beauty then flopped back on the bed, where she unclipped her bra and sighed with relief as she massaged the tenderness under her breasts. It had been a gruelling few days of intense diplomacy, but now it was nearly over.

\*Congratulations, Lynette,\* Alyssa said, her telepathic voice as soft as velvet.

\*Thank you.\* The brunette broke into a wry smile. \*I’m sorry it wasn’t the result you were hoping for.\*

\*Oh, I wouldn’t say that. I only ever wanted the best for those people, and I think you’ve bent over backwards to give them the kind of financial support that was long overdue and desperately needed.\*

Lynette frowned as she stared up at the ceiling, feeling a sudden flicker of apprehension. She’d just committed over a hundred billion credits to the Outer Rim, an eye-watering sum that would put a noticeable dent in the Federation’s finances for years to come. She couldn’t help wondering if this had been the enigmatic matriarch’s true goal right from the beginning.

\*Go ahead and ask, Lynette,\* Alyssa said with amusement. \*If you don’t get this off your chest, you’ll be stewing about it for days.\*

The Fleet Admiral hesitated for a moment, then asked quietly, \*Was this your plan all along? Did you stir up the governors to the brink of rebellion, knowing that I’d give them almost anything they wanted to stop them leaving the Terran Federation?\*

The blonde’s melodic laughter echoed through her mind. \*I think you’ve been in the Admiralty too long, Lynette, it’s made you paranoid. You’re a secret Lioness, remember? That means you’re on our team and I’d never manipulate you or betray your trust like that.\*

\*But you supported the Outer Rim before when they were talking about independence,\* Lynette said in confusion. \*How was that not betraying my trust?\*

\*Because you might be the Fleet Admiral, but you’re not the entire Terran Federation,\* Alyssa said gently. \*Stefan Vaughn was right about some of the things he said. You might want the best for the colonies in the Outer Rim, but most of the admirals are only interested in the Core Worlds. Answer me this honestly: If you quit your job tomorrow, do you think your replacement would honour all the financial agreements you’ve just made with these governors?\*

It didn’t take long for Lynette to realise the answer to that question. \*No. Even Charles would try to find loopholes to minimise some of the payments and divert more assets to fleet construction. I can’t think of a single admiral that would honour them to the letter.\*

\*I agree... except for John of course, but he has no interest in becoming Fleet Admiral.\*

\*And if he was interested?\* Lynette blurted out. \*What then?\*

\*Then I would’ve made him Fleet Admiral epaulets to go along with his white Lion uniform,\* Alyssa said whimsically.

Lynette raised herself up and sat cross-legged on the bed. \*I’m serious, Alyssa. If we’re having a frank discussion about loyalty, I think I should know exactly where I stand.\*

\*You really want an honest, straight-forward answer?\* the teenager asked, a harder edge to her voice.

The brunette swallowed nervously. \*I think I deserve the truth. What would you have done, if John had always wanted to become the Fleet Admiral?\*

\*Alright, I’ll tell you, but you probably won’t like the answer. If that’s what John wanted, then your political ambitions would’ve made you an obstacle to be dealt with. I would’ve advised him to have Rachel heal you instead, which would’ve meant you weren’t part of our family. Then I would’ve asked Irillith to dig up all the nasty little secrets the Admirals in High Command were hiding, yourself included, then had a frank conversation with everyone about the most deserving candidate to replace Buckingham. Of course, if we discovered any really nasty bad guys, they’d have to be dealt with permanently.\*

\*You’d really replace me, just like that?\* Lynette asked, shocked at her frank honesty.

Lynette glanced in the mirror at her immaculate, youthful features, and realised that all the wonderful gifts she’d been given could’ve been taken away on John’s whim.

\*No, of course I wouldn’t now! But that wasn’t what you asked,\* Alyssa insisted.

 The brunette flopped back on the bed and rubbed her temples. \*I’m confused...\*

\*It’s quite straight forward really,\* Alyssa said blithely. \*I’m loyal to John and the Lionesses. He will always take precedence, but I’ll try to accommodate whatever you girls want as well. John’s never had any aspirations to become the Fleet Admiral. It was hard enough to get him to lead the Maliri and he’s got absolutely zero interest in ever ruling the Terran Federation. When John made you a Lioness, you became a part of our family. Being Fleet Admiral meant the world to you, so we all did whatever was necessary to make that happen.\*

\*What if he changes his mind though?\* Lynette asked, dreading the answer.

\*He won’t.\*

\*But what if he did?\* the brunette persisted.

Alyssa let out an exasperated telepathic sigh. \*John just claimed another thrall species, Lynette. He’s now the de facto Emperor of the Larathyran Empire as well as the undisputed leader of the Maliri Protectorate. Trust me, replacing you as the Fleet Admiral of the Terran Federation has never once crossed his mind; we’ve got much bigger problems to deal with. Your job is perfectly safe for as long as you want it.\*

\*But if John suddenly decided he does want to become Fleet Admiral, then you’d fully support him in replacing me?\* Lynette asked with trepidation, before holding her breath as she awaited an answer.

\*That’s never going to happen. We’re all on your side, Lynette,\* Alyssa said gently. \*John thinks you’ve been doing a fantastic job as Fleet Admiral and I agree with him 100%. The last thing he’d ever want is the headache of dealing with all the admirals in High Command. Having someone sensible in charge of the Terran Federation is a huge weight off John’s shoulders, and we’ll all do whatever we can to keep you there.\*

Lynette smiled, feeling secure in her position once again. \*Thanks for clarifying, Alyssa. I’m glad we had this discussion.\*

\*No problem. You’re an incredibly valuable ally, Lynette, and someone we all really care about. I don’t want you to waste any time worrying that we’re going to stab you in the back. You’re family now and we’ll never betray you.\*

\*I’m sorry that I’ve been hard work this evening,\* Lynette said, rolling over and resting her head on the pillow. \*I’ve been dealing with so many suspicious people recently, and with everyone constantly doubting my motives... it started to rub off.\*

\*I understand,\* Alyssa said with genuine sympathy. \*You’ve been working long hours and you’re tired out. Don’t stay up late and get some sleep.\*

\*Yes, mommy,\* the older woman joked, as she curled up under the covers. \*I just need to call Charles, then I’ll call it a night.\*

\*Goodnight, Fleet Admiral. Sleep well.\*

Lynette laughed, then reached for her jacket, so she could activate her holo-disguise before calling her fiancé.

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John heard another round of shocked gasps and smiled as he glanced over at the swelling crowd that was following Rachel around the ward. He could see her grey healing aura above the sea of awed Larathyrans as she healed broken bones and regenerated missing limbs. Turning back to the window, he gazed out over the majestic city, the twinkling lights illuminating the impressive baroque architecture.

\*We’re on our way back to the hospital, Master,\* Jade informed him.

\*Were there any problems at the water filtration plant?\* he asked his Nymph matriarch.

\*It took our guests a few minutes to recover from the flight over there,\* Jade informed him, making no attempt to disguise the amusement in her voice. \*But Dana said that everything was working correctly.\*

\*I thought I said not to terrify the locals?\* he replied, leaning against the wall as he stared outside at the picturesque city.

\*They’re fine, Master,\* she replied soothingly. \*Solana and Riniya trust me like I’m their sister. They took a little longer to warm up to Dana, but she won them over with her engineering expertise.\*

\*That makes sense. I suppose out of all of us, you look the most like a native Larathyran,\* John said, glancing back over his shoulder at the crowd of dark-haired, green-skinned people.

The Nymph’s laughter reverberated over their telepathic connection. \*Not right now I don’t, Master.\*

\*Yeah, I bet,\* John said, chuckling to himself as he looked out of the window again and waited for her arrival.

A minute later, he heard someone clear their throat from behind him.

“May I speak with you a moment, John?” Kylantha asked nervously.

He turned and gave her a reassuring smile. “Of course. How can I help?”

“Alyssa asked me to tell you that Rachel has nearly finished healing everybody here,” the Larathyran maiden informed him.

John glanced across the packed ward and caught sight of Alyssa’s blonde locks, shining like a golden beacon amidst the throng of dark-haired onlookers. He knew that she could have just as easily told him herself via telepathy, so there had to be some alternate reason for sending Kylantha to speak with him in person.

\*Everybody’s so suspicious all of a sudden,\* Alyssa protested in mock indignation.

\*Everybody? Who else has got wise to your tricks?\*

\*Lynette accused me of duping her into throwing mountains of credits at the Outer Rim colonists,\* she replied, her explanation prompting a plethora of questions.

He hesitated, then decided it was better not to ask. “What did you think of Rachel’s healing abilities, Kylantha?” he enquired of the young woman beside him.

She’d been staring at him in fascination and blinked in surprise when she realised he’d just asked her a question.

“Oh... she’s absolutely amazing!” Kylantha gushed, her eyes lighting up in wonder. “I never knew such things were even possible! I think the only people more shocked than me are the medical staff!”

“Yeah, Rachel’s a miracle alright,” John said affectionately.

The young woman hesitated, glancing briefly over her shoulder at the captivated crowd, before focusing on John again. “Didn’t you want to watch Rachel too? I don’t think I could ever get tired of seeing her bring such profound joy to people who have been suffering so badly.”

“You’re right, it’s always moving to see Rachel heal people,” he replied. “But if I was there watching, then I’d be a big distraction for the crowds. I didn’t want to steal her thunder.”

“Her thunder?” Kylantha asked him in confusion. “Are you expecting a storm?”

“I’m sorry... it’s an expression where I come from. It means: I didn’t want to take any attention away from her. This is Rachel’s moment to shine... not mine.”

“Oh...” she murmured, mulling that over. “Oh! Now I see what you mean. That was really nice of you.”

Kylantha’s expression softened and John could practically see the hearts in her eyes as she gazed at him adoringly. He suddenly had a pretty good idea what Alyssa’s ulterior motive was in sending Kylantha over to speak with him.

\*Well.... a new matriarch does need at least a couple of thralls,\* she suggested innocently.

\*It’s not the recruitment I’m worried about this time,\* he replied, returning Kylantha’s ardent gaze with a speculative one of his own, and making her blush a verdant shade of dark-green. \*Any girls we leave behind could be in terrible danger if another Progenitor does visit Larathyra to find out what happened here.\*

\*We could always bring her with us as well.\*

\*Let me think about it,\* John said, turning back towards the window. \*I don’t want to make any decisions like that until Auralei’s woken up and I’ve had a chance to have a long chat with her.\*

\*Fair enough. I won’t mention it again until after you’ve had that conversation.\*

\*That’s very considerate of you, Miss Marant.\*

\*I’m a very accommodating girl, Mr. Blake,\* she replied. \*As I’m sure you know by now.\*

John smiled at their banter, then a flicker of movement across the night sky caught his attention. “It looks like Jade’s back with your two engineers,” he said to Kylantha.

“Oh really? Where are they?” she asked, standing by his side and peering out the window.

There was no missing the magnificent green dragon that glided down on massive wings and trotted to a halt on the field outside, her huge claws leaving long furrows in the ground.

Kylantha’s shocked gasp was quickly followed by her glancing at him wide-eyed in fright. She only relaxed after seeing how nonchalant John was about the immense draconic presence looming outside the hospital. However, by the terrified screams coming from outside the building, it seemed the rest of the Larathyrans in the vicinity weren’t so reassured.

\*Oops,\* Jade murmured, sounding contrite for the wave of panic her arrival had triggered.

The dragon looked up at him through the second floor window, and gave John a guilty shrug of apology.

John held out his hand to Kylantha. “Come on. Let’s go and calm everyone down. Jade might look terrifying like that, but she’s as gentle as a kitten. She won’t hurt anyone, I promise.”

She bit her lip and clasped his outstretched fingers, then made a visible effort not to swoon when his strong hand enveloped hers.

“John? What’s a kitten?” she asked inquisitively, as she accompanied him out of the ward.

“I’ll ask Jade to show you,” he replied, giving her an indulgent smile.

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The reinforced doors split apart, peeling open like a black-fanged maw, and Gahl’kalgor strode inside. He was wearing his full battle armour except his helmet, which was hooked over one of the axe hilts protruding up above his shoulders. Valeria turned to watch his arrival and her heart skipped a beat to see him in his wargear, her Progenitor master looking as magnificent as he was deadly.

“Is the Wormhole Generator charged?” he demanded as he lowered himself onto the Command Throne. “If so, activate it immediately. We’ve wasted enough time and I’m itching to kill something.”

He flexed his gauntleted fingers and grimaced, as if the anticipation was almost painful.

“It will be ready in seventeen minutes, my Lord,” Valeria informed him. She hesitated, then continued, “We’ve received a report from another scout captain; they’ve detected a second fleet. I was just reviewing the data, but I didn’t think it warranted bringing to your attention.”

“Show me,” he rumbled, leaning forward on his throne.

Valeria nodded to the comms officer, who displayed the transmitted data as a rotating hologram.

“Captain Shalia has been tracking the fleet through hyper-warp for the last two hours,” the matriarch explained, gesturing towards the scores of vessels identified by the Galkiran scout. “They appear to be from a species of insectoid vermin; you can tell by the nauseating design of their vile ships.”

Gahl’kalgor rose from his throne and approached the rotating holograph. “That one... make it bigger.”

He pointed to what was clearly the flagship of the alien flotilla, the huge insectoid vessel larger than a Dominator-class battleship. The view expanded as the thrall obeyed his orders and the bulbous alien craft lurked over the Bridge crew’s heads like a scuttling predator about to strike. It’s design was hideously ugly to Valeria’s eyes, reflecting the disgusting abominations that were no doubt crewing the interstellar monstrosity. Long vanes spread out from the ship near the bow, mirroring strange wing-like structures that jutted from the segmented flanks of the hull.

The Progenitor snapped a glance at the dreadnought’s navigator. “Alter our jump coordinates. Set our arrival point to block that fleet’s flight path.”

Valeria gaped at him in astonishment. “But... my Lord... they’re just insectoid vermin,” she protested incredulously. “The scouts have not reported any comms traffic; we have no way of communicating with them.”

Gahl’kalgor turned and sneered at her with contempt. “Imbecile.”

She flushed at the insult and looked down in shame and confusion. “I-I’m sorry, my Lord.”

He walked over to Valeria and gripped her chin, forcing her to look up at the holographic ship. “Those are psychic amplification vanes. There’s no comms traffic because they don’t use regular communication channels to speak to each other.”

Her amber eyes widened in understanding, then flicked to her Progenitor Master with newfound admiration.

Gahl’kalgor snorted and released her. “Order Narzera to interrogate the Terrans. If we can’t get any answers from these insects, perhaps she’ll have better luck.”

Valeria nodded obediently. “I’ll relay your order personally, my Lord.”

Turning to the tactical crew manning the dreadnought’s weapons, Gahl’kalgor barked, “When we engage, immobilise the flagship! Obliterate everything else.”

They nodded eagerly, the anticipation of the impending slaughter bringing cruel smiles to their faces.

Glancing back at Valeria, he continued, “Order the troops to the boarding craft. I’ll lead the assault personally.”

“At once, my Lord,” she replied, before looking at him with a hungry gleam in her amber eyes. “May I join you in the boarding action?”

“No,” he replied bluntly, swaggering past her.

Valeria tried to mask her disappointment, but couldn’t keep her face from falling as she realised he was punishing her for the earlier mistake.

“Oh... and Valeria?” he muttered, glancing back at his matriarch and smiling at her dejected expression.

“Yes, my Lord?” she asked, hoping he might offer some way to redeem herself.

Gahl’kalgor’s fist slammed into her stomach, knocking the wind out of her as she collapsed to the floor. Valeria gasped for breath, clutching at her bruised abdomen and writhing in pain.

“Don’t ever question my orders again,” he snarled, vibrating with barely-suppressed fury.

She tried to gasp out an apology, but he turned on his heel and stalked away, leaving her sprawled on the deck of the deathly silent Bridge.

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Admiral Zelig propped his elbow up on the armrest of his Command Chair and cupped his chin as he reviewed the holographic panel displaying his fleet’s logistics. After the resupply on Carolus III, his forces were fully stocked on rations and water, but critically low on several drugs that had been used to treat the traumatised colonists. He reviewed the list from the senior medic aboard the Porphyrion, then authorised the requisition order to dispatch replacements in the next delivery of supplies.

“Sir? We have a contact inbound,” Commodore Mikhailov warned him quietly.

“A contact?” Zelig remarked in surprise, immediately shutting down the Command Chair’s holo-interface. “Where?”

He rose from his seat and stood beside the commodore, who was staring intently at the holographic Sector Map. Their battleship’s sensors were connected to the border Sensor Grid, greatly extending their range into Kirrix Space. In the far distance, a yellow icon was closing rapidly on their position.

“That’s not a Kirrix ship,” muttered Mikhailov.

Zelig glanced at him curiously. “It must be... it’s flying directly out of Kirrix Space.”

Mikhailov shook his head. “It’s too fast... much too fast. I’ve only ever seen one ship capable of that kind of speed.”

The Admiral frowned and studied the ship more carefully this time, then his eyes widened as he saw the Navigation Computer’s estimation for how quickly it was travelling in hyper-warp.

“That can’t be the Invictus,” Zelig said, frowning in confusion. “I was informed that Admiral Blake was nowhere near the border.”

Mikhailov glanced at his communications officer and ordered curtly, “Hail them.”

The woman pressed her fingers to her headset and tried to open a comms channel, but despite repeated attempts, there was no answer. She shook her head and the commodore prompted her to continue trying.

Zelig watched the sensor contact draw closer to the position, counting down the seconds until it would be in range for their Sensor Array to make a visual depiction. When the yellow sensor contact was finally replaced by a ship, there was a collective intake of breath as the Bridge Crew laid eyes on the mysterious vessel for the first time.

“Have you ever seen anything like that before?” Zelig asked his colleague in a hushed voice.

Mikhailov grimaced and slowly shook his head. “Only in my nightmares.”

The black vessel was slightly larger than a Federation cruiser, but other than size they had nothing else in common. It was sleek and angular, with the vicious profile of a deadly warship. The black hull glistened menacingly in the starlight, reminding Nathan of the shiny carapace of a black widow spider. Seemingly undeterred by the massed ranks of Terran Federation warships arrayed along the border, the mysterious ship raced towards them, making a beeline towards the centre of their formation.

“Contact the fleet, put them on amber alert until we can identify that ship,” Admiral Zelig ordered the comms officer.

She nodded and sent out the warning to raise their alert level.

The unknown craft showed no sign of stopping and for a moment, Zelig began to worry that it would plough straight through the fleet and crash into one of the Terran vessels. It suddenly dropped out of hyper-warp, ending its rapid journey well out of range of his battleship’s beam lasers.

“We’re being hailed!” the communications officer exclaimed, looking at him in surprise. “Video and audio comms!”

With a nod from the admiral, a comms channel was opened, and he was able to see the occupants of the unknown ship for the first time. He was astonished to see that the bridge crew were all female, their form-fitting black armour making their gender abundantly clear. In the centre of the crimson-lit bridge was a chair not dissimilar to his own, and the woman seated there removed her helmet, revealing an enigmatic smile.

She was, without a doubt, one of the most exotically beautiful women he’d ever seen in his life. The alien female had delicate, refined features, and her angular green eyes gleamed with the spark of intelligence. The most shocking thing about her though, was her vivid scarlet skin, which contrasted sharply with her luxurious mane of coal-black hair.

He cleared his throat and said, “My name is Admiral Nathan Zelig, from the Terran Federation navy. Please identify yourself.”

She tilted her head to one side, as if listening intently to his response. After a brief pause, she responded in a lilting accent, “My name is Captain Narzera, from the Galkiran Empire.”

Zelig listened in fascination, and watched her move with fluid grace as she shifted on her chair. “Welcome to Terran Federation territory, Captain Narzera. I’ve never heard of your species before, but I offer you pleasant greetings in the spirit of future friendship.”

Narzera continued to listen to him, but as the admiral spoke, her expression subtly shifted and there was no warmth to her sardonic smile.

“Where the Baen’thelas, can I find?” she asked, leaning forward and staring at him intently.

Zelig frowned in confusion. “The Bayen-thel-as?” he replied, struggling with the unfamiliar pronunciation. “What is that?”

“Not ‘what’. Is ‘he’...” Narzera crooned, her tone eerily seductive. “Tell me now. Where can I find?”

He glanced at Mikhailov, who responded with a blank shrug of incomprehension.

“We don’t know this Bayen-thel-as,” Zelig said, carefully repeating the name. “Is he someone from the Galkiran Empire?”

Narzera shook her head, eyes narrowing with irritation. “You know of him. Tell me now!” she demanded.

“I’ve never heard of him before,” Zelig protested. “I’m happy to help you... but we need more information. Perhaps you have a picture... or even just a description?”

The Galkiran captain leaned back in her chair. “Perhaps you need... incentive... to talk.”

She glanced at the woman piloting her cruiser and its engines flared to life. Nathan could see the sinister black vessel creeping closer, its weapon barrels swivelling to track targets as it approached.

He raised a hand and said sternly, “I order you to stop, Captain Narzera. You are encroaching on Terran Federation territory and you will be fired upon if you engage my forces in hostilities.”

“You will tell me,” Narzera purred. “Or... you will die.”

She ended the conversation, leaving the Federation officers staring at a blank screen. Zelig was shocked at how quickly the discussion had escalated into a violent confrontation and he darted a worried glance at the holographic map to track the cruiser’s progress. The black ship stalked towards them, but it was still well outside his battleship’s maximum range.

Suddenly the bridge was illuminated by a searing flash of purple light and eight beams lanced out towards the defensive screen of destroyers. The dazzling columns of energy locked onto the stationary vessels and overwhelmed their shields in a matter of seconds, the protective barriers undulating like a churning sea before shattering. The Tachyon Lances ploughed on, coring through the Federation warships and carving them open, triggering a chain of explosions that devastated the destroyers. Of the few vessels that weren’t instantly obliterated, the savage rents through their hulls exposed the survivors to the harsh vacuum of space.

Stunned for a moment by the scale of the unprovoked devastation, Zelig quickly recovered and barked, “Battle stations! Cruiser squadrons, advance and open fire!”

The score of Terran Federation cruisers ramped up power to their engines and advanced towards the solitary black ship. They were still well out of range and could only watch helplessly as Narzera’s cruiser continued to eviscerate the destroyers, despite their frantic efforts at evasive manoeuvres.

“The firepower on that ship...” Mikhailov muttered, staring at the marauding cruiser. “Who the hell are the Galkirans and why haven’t we ever encountered them before?!”

Zelig shook his head in helpless frustration. “I’ve never heard of them, or this Bayen-thel-as they’re searching for.”

His attention was drawn to the holo-screen as the leading trio of Terran cruisers finally closed within range and opened fire. The beam laser volleys lashed over the enemy warship’s shields, but despite repeated strikes, the field showed no sign of destabilising. Narzera’s cruiser performed a sweeping turn and the bank of engines blazed with heightened intensity, catapulting the Galkiran warship forwards.

Moving parallel to the approaching ranks of Terran cruisers, it quickly began to outpace them, pulling away until the Federation forces were out of range once again. While it executed those manoeuvres, the turrets rotated around to strafe the incoming squadron with a dazzling broadside. Tilted on its axis, Narzera’s cruiser was able to fire all eight lances off the topdeck, the volley hitting with devastating effect.

Two of the beams missed, but the rest were right on target, slicing through shields and raking over the broad engines at the rear of the Terran cruisers. Explosions consumed the propulsion systems, the beams slashing back and forth as they detonated every one of the engines without slicing into the hull. It was quite obvious that the ships had been deliberately immobilized, as the trio drifted helplessly through space, leaving a hazardous trail of debris behind them.

“That cruiser has enough speed and range to make sure we can’t strike back!” Mikhailov snarled, clenching his fists in anger.

Zelig turned to his comms officer. “Contact the heavy carriers. Tell them to launch their strike craft!”

“Shall I request fighters or bombers, Admiral?” the female officer asked, darting a fearful glance at the elusive alien craft.

“Launch everything we’ve got!” he demanded. “Take that ship down!”

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The glowing ring of the wormhole swept along the dreadnought’s hull, bending space and hurtling the warship across a hundred light years of space in the blink of an eye. Valeria clung to the Command Throne, her stomach roiling as she was assaulted by waves of nausea. Fighting back her rising gorge, she focused on the holographic map as it was updated to reflect their new surroundings.

Gahl’kalgor’s dreadnought was now positioned directly in front of the insectoid forces, which blundered onwards, completely oblivious to the terrible danger in their path. Valeria could see a trio of Galkiran scouts to the rear of their prey, pursuing the alien force at a cautious distance to avoid alerting them to the impending ambush. As the insectoid ships drew closer, the vast bulk of the Progenitor dreadnought acted as a gravity well, triggering safety protocols that automatically disengaged faster-than-light travel.

It was like watching the fleet slam into a brick wall as they were dumped unceremoniously from hyper-warp. The ochre-coloured ships scrambled to avoid ramming into each other, making desperate manoeuvres to avoid the crush of vessels in that congested section of space. As the alien fleet reeled in surprise, the gunners aboard the dreadnought took advantage of the confusion, and took aim at the targets allocated to them by Valeria.

Six of the forward-facing Quantum Flux Cannons tracked individual drone carriers, each Kirrix ship like a long termite with layers of segmented hull sections. Power coursed through those dreadful weapons, channelling into the charging chambers and quickly building to a crescendo. The first cannon opened fire, marking its target with a precision beam that effortlessly tracked the lumbering carrier. Its shields rippled violently when scorched by that energy incision, only to be pounded by a catastrophic blast that overloaded them in an instant.

Unfortunately for the Kirrix aboard that drone carrier, five more rounds followed the first in rapid succession. The next hit square on the bow, shattering resin armour plating and defacing the vessel’s prow with a massive crater. It struck with such colossal force that the Kirrix craft was smashed backwards, reversing its course even faster with each subsequent impact. Round after round blasted through the hull, ripping out huge chunks in a succession of explosions.

Two hive ships tried to avoid the doomed carrier, their retro-thrusters blazing furiously to push them out of its path. Despite their best efforts, it tumbled backwards into them, crushing their lighter armour and breaching hull sections across several decks. The Kirrix didn’t have a chance to mitigate the collision with damage control, as the final shot from the Quantum Flux Cannon ruptured the drone carrier’s reactor core. The battered ship was ripped apart in a massive explosion, which consumed the two hive ships in an instant.

All around the Kirrix dreadnought, the destruction was mirrored on the accompanying drone carriers. The other five Quantum Flux Cannons proved that the initial salvo was no mere fluke, and not one of the massive carriers they targeted managed to survive the onslaught. While the bigger ships in the Kirrix fleets were facing devastation, the hive ships scattered in all directions, taking advantage of the distracted gunners to try to scramble to safety.

Any that lumbered past the black dreadnought’s flanks were disembowelled from bow to stern by purple tachyon beams, but those directly in front of the Progenitor’s mighty warship were untouched. That was because those gunnery teams were focusing their Tachyon Lances on the Kirrix dreadnought, repeatedly scything into its shields until they collapsed under the strain. The moment the protective barrier had been breached, the gunners targeted the engines of the banking flagship, skewering the propulsion systems with a relentless succession of incredibly powerful beams.

\*The dreadnought has been crippled and we are sweeping the system of its escort craft,\* Valeria informed him. \*You may begin the assault at your convenience, my Lord.\*

She watched the three Galkiran scout cruisers drop out of hyper-warp at the rear of the shattered Kirrix formation. They wasted no time in powering up their engines, then they raced into the fray, gleefully hunting down the hive ships that were desperately attempting to escape the slaughter.

\*Perhaps you aren’t completely useless after all,\* Gahl’kalgor replied, but the gleeful edge to his voice took the sting out of his backhanded compliment. \*Launch the boarding craft.\*

\*As you command, my Lord,\* she replied, issuing the orders to her thralls.

Valeria watched as the nimble black shuttles roared away from the dreadnought towards the marooned ochre flagship and wished she could be there with him.

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The first wave of Rapier fighters bore down on the evading Galkiran ship, the pilots easily dodging the barrage of purple beams being hurled at the pursuing Terran cruisers. The strike craft closed within range and opened fire, their Gatling Lasers pouring a storm of laser bolts into the cruiser’s shields.

Commodore Mikhailov let out a grim chuckle and nodded his approval. “There’s no escaping from all those fighters. I bet that bitch isn’t smirking now!”

The heavy carriers had emptied their launch bays of strike craft and waves of Rapiers were now in hot pursuit of the mysterious black ship. The Galkiran invader was now outnumbered at least several hundred to one, dramatically reducing its odds of surviving Narzera’s bizarre decision to engage the massive fleet alone. Fighters approached from several different vectors, boxing in the cruiser and cutting off its avenues of escape.

Despite reaching an apparent turning point in the battle, Admiral Zelig didn’t share his colleague’s elation at an impending victory. He watched the engagement with a sense of mounting dread, instinctively knowing that the intelligent woman they had spoken to only moments ago, was far too cunning to make such an obvious blunder. The long trail of crippled and destroyed Terran warships was testimony to the firepower her cruiser possessed.

There was a bright flare of light in between the periodic volleys from the Tachyon Lances, and a hail of pulsed fire scythed through the pursuing fighters. Mikhailov looked on in shock as the cruiser ripped apart the first wave of fighters, a single hit from a Tachyon Cannon enough to burn through their flimsy armour. The accurate fire from the cruiser’s defence grid didn’t stop there and reached out way beyond Gatling Laser range to devastate the wings of fighters closing in on them.

“She’s just toying with us...” Zelig muttered, a shiver running down his spine.

His words proved prophetic as the Galkiran cruiser performed an impossibly tight turn for a vessel that size, then rushed headlong towards the pursuing squadrons of Terran warships. The Federation cruisers opened fire, their crews relieved to finally be in range to fight back. However, despite being lashed by over two-dozen beams, the shields protecting Narzera’s lethal warship showed no signs of failing.

Mikhailov let out a grim curse under his breath. “That ship’s tearing us apart out there!”

“Pull them all back, we need to regroup,” Zelig commanded.

He wondered if he could lure the cocky Galkiran into range of his ten battleships, then hit her with a formidable broadside that would end the battle in an instant. Before the comms officer could execute his orders, a startled cry echoed around the bridge.

“Admiral Zelig!” the Tactical officer blurted out in warning, his voice trembling with fear. “More sensor contacts!”

Zelig looked up at the map and his eyes widened in shock when he saw there were five more vessels rapidly approaching his location. Each new contact was moving far faster than any ship in his fleet was capable of, and his heart sank when he realised their hyper-warp speed was an exact match to Captain Narzera’s deadly cruiser. If the incoming ships were Galkiran reinforcements, then his fleet was in dire jeopardy.

“Pull back all our forces to a defensive position,” Zelig ordered Commodore Mikhailov, before turning to the comms officer and continuing, “Contact Fleet Admiral Devereux on an ultra-secure comms channel and put her through to my Ready Room.”

They acknowledged his orders and Zelig turned on his heel, hurrying towards the adjoining office. He knew that the Lion had made extensive diplomatic moves towards deepening his friendship with the Maliri and if anyone might know anything about the Galkiran Empire, it would be them. The Fleet Admiral was his best chance of getting a message through to Admiral Blake or the Maliri and hopefully finding a diplomatic solution to de-escalate this confrontation before it was too late.

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There was a muffled clang from beyond the airlock, then the serrated black doors spiralled open. Gahl’kalgor stepped through the hole bored in the side of the alien vessel, and casually kicked aside the huge glowing chunk of hull that had been cored out.

He drew his twin axes and rolled his wrists, making them whistle as they spun through the air. “Spread out. Kill everything,” he ordered the phalanx of thrall marines that stormed the Kirrix ship behind him.

The Galkiran troopers hurried to follow his orders, fanning out along the corridors and quickly engaging the alien forces. The sound of tachyon pulses echoed through the ship, followed by eerie insectoid screeches as the defending forces were systematically exterminated.

Gahl’kalgor strolled after them, then focused his will inwards to use his psychic abilities. He only needed to scan this ship for the leader of these insects, then they could be done with the hideous abominations and could pursue Baen’thelas wherever he was hiding. To his consternation, what should have been an effortless task felt like fumbling around in the darkness, as if his mind was draped in a blanket.

He stood there open-mouthed in shock, suddenly deprived of his abilities for the first time in his very long life. The Progenitor fought down a rising surge of panic, as he faced the terrifying thought of being permanently stripped of his innate psychic talents. In a frightened rush, he focused inward again, pushing harder than ever before to seize the flickering flame that burned within.

To his immense relief, he felt an exhilarating rush of eldritch power coursing through his veins and realised that his abilities were not lost to him, they merely required more focus to activate. He swept his enhanced gaze over the interior layout of the Kirrix dreadnought, a sinister black aura engulfing his sight as he stared through the walls and floor.

“There you are,” he muttered, narrowing his eyes as he stared at the objective of his boarding action.

The hulking creature seemed to detect his presence, and shrank away in terror, rapidly erecting a psychic barrier to protect itself from further intrusion. Gahl’kalgor shut down his ability, then began experimenting to see if all his psychic abilities had been affected in the same way. He walked along the corridors, idly experimenting with summoning each of the elements, fascinated by the sudden change of circumstances that made accessing his powers more difficult.

Reaching a crossroads, he strode past thralls on either side, the gloomy corridors ablaze with flashes of light as they strafed tachyon pulses through the defending forces. His thralls had already cut down a squad of Kirrix troops that had attempted to storm the crossroads, leaving a carpet of dismembered corpses in front of him, each one riddled with smoking holes. Gahl’kalgor saw more of the scuttling insectoid forces approaching and grinned with anticipation.

He suddenly leapt forward in a burst of psychic speed, while sweeping his right axe around in a broad cut. A blastwave of telekinetic force roared down the corridor and slammed into the squad of Kirrix troops, knocking them sprawling with the impact. Such was the power of his attack, the aliens detonated in a shower of limbs, suffering a death so brutal and instantaneous that they had no time to react, much less screech in agony.

Gahl’kalgor nodded with satisfaction, then let out a conflicted sigh, not having many more answers than before he started his experimentation. That meant he was left with no other choice than to seek such knowledge elsewhere. Suppressing a shudder of fear, he closed his eyes and reached out with his mind to Xar’aziuth...

And sensed nothing.

He tried again and again, but the titanic ethereal presence that had dominated his existence for over a millennia was nowhere to be found. Gahl’kalgor’s eyes widened in shocked understanding, as he suddenly realised why he’d been kept on such a short leash. He’d been ordered to return to his homeworld every forty-eight hours, the infuriating restriction imposed upon him ever since first being diverted to this backwater quadrant of the galaxy.

A snort burst from his lips, followed by a heaving guffaw, which quickly developed into side-splitting laughter.

The thralls at the crossroads paused their slaughter to stare at one another in shock, then they peered down the corridor after their master. They could see him leaning against one wall, his chest heaving as he threw his head back and howled with unabashed glee.

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Lynette had just drifted off into a very welcome sleep, when the grating chime of a high-priority message jarred her awake. She lurched from the bed and grabbed her jacket, then slipped it on over her shoulders and activated her holo-disguise. With a final check in the mirror to make sure her true appearance was hidden, she frowned at her dishevelled state, then answered the call on the holo-interface.

“This is Fleet Admiral Devereux,” she mumbled, stifling a yawn. “Oh! Hello, Nathan, what can I do for-”

“We’re under attack!” he interrupted, his eyes wide with fear.

To see the normally unruffled admiral in such a state of distress was like having a bucket of cold water dumped over her head. Lynette was suddenly wide awake as adrenalin coursed through her veins.

“What happened?” she asked intently.

“A black cruiser... it just came out of nowhere... from deep in Kirrix Space,” Nathan explained in a rush. “Lynette, they’ve got tech way beyond our own... maybe on the same level as the Maliri? I don’t know for sure.”

Alarms started ringing inside her head. “A black cruiser?! What did it look like? Be specific, Nathan!”

“Sending you a still from the Sensor Array,” he replied, his hands darting over the interface. “The captain said she was from the Galkiran Empire. Her name’s Narzera... she was looking for someone called Bayen-thel-as.”

Lynette froze when she heard Admiral Zelig’s careful pronunciation of John’s Maliri name.

“We’ve lost over a dozen cruisers and a score of destroyers already... and we haven’t even knocked down her shields yet!” Nathan exclaimed, rubbing nervously at his cheek. “That was against just one ship, but there are more inbound... five more!”

The image appeared on the holo-screen, the design so eerily similar to the Tormentor Class destroyer she’d seen in Tartarus. A ship that Nexus had assembled from the Thrall blueprints stored in his fragmented memory cores. It was quickly followed by a still taken from the conversation with Captain Narzera. Lynette stared at the red-skinned thrall in horrified fascination, the woman so eerily similar to the Maliri twins... but the menacing sneer so very different.

“Fall back, Nathan!” Lynette said urgently. “Full retreat! Get your people the hell out of there, you don’t stand a chance against them! Those cruisers are nearly as powerful as the Invictus!”

He gaped at her in shock, then blurted out, “You know who they are! What the hell’s going on, Lynette?!”

“Not now, Nathan, we don’t have time!” the Fleet Admiral insisted. “Scatter the fleet and run... it’s your only chance of saving some of your forces!”

Her horrified reaction and instant recognition of the mysterious alien attackers were like two big pieces of the puzzle that neatly slotted into place. Lynette mentioning the Invictus was the last remaining piece, and it painted a perfectly clear picture of the man Captain Narzera was seeking.

Nathan’s eyes widened even more. “They’re after the Lion! This Baen’thelas she’s hunting... that’s what the Maliri call John, isn’t it?!”

“I’ll explain everything later, I promise!” Lynette pleaded with him. “Just run before it’s too late!”

He gave her a curt nod and abruptly ended the call, leaving Lynette staring at a blank screen.

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Jade scampered around the floor of the reception area as a fluffy green kitten, rubbing up against the Larathyrans who cooed over her adorable appearance. She bounded over to Kylantha and licked her hand, making the young woman giggle as she stroked her soft fur.

“I think we’re in good shape for now,” Dana said, leaning against the sweeping reception desk as she watched Jade being fawned over by her new friend. “I checked out the essentials and everything looks good at the fusion plant and the water purification facility. I explained how to keep things ticking over to Solana and Riniya, so they should be fine for years as long as they follow my instructions.”

“What happened exactly?” John asked the redhead.

“The fusion plant basically went into a standby mode. It’s scheduled to have routine maintenance done every couple of weeks, but if the basic steps aren’t followed, the plant shuts down.”

“I wonder if that failsafe is designed specifically in case this scenario happens,” Rachel suggested, tipping her head towards the Larathyrans. “I doubt Xar’aziuth would want an unattended fusion reactor to go critical and wipe out an unclaimed seed species.”

“Yeah, makes sense,” Dana said with a shrug.

John pulled her into a grateful hug. “Nice work, Sparks.”

She grinned and enthusiastically returned the embrace. “No problem! So what’s the plan now?”

“We’re just waiting for Calara,” John explained. “As soon as she finishes plotting out the supply chain, I guess we’ll step in to help train the new people needed to keep things running.”

Rachel stretched and smiled in satisfaction. “I’m finished here as well. I’ll head back to the Invictus and help Calara.”

“You were your usual angelic self,” John said, tipping his hat to the brunette. “Spectacular work as always, Rachel.”

“Have healing powers, will travel,” she replied with a modest curtsy.

“It must be nearly midnight already,” John said, glancing out the window at the darkened streets beyond. “Maybe we should all call it a night and get a fresh start in the morning?”

“Mmm... bedtime,” Dana agreed, giving John a suggestive look. She then frowned and glanced at Jehanna. “Are you still hogging him to yourself?”

Sakura laughed and rolled her eyes. “You’re a fine one to talk! Leave the poor girl alone to enjoy some one-to-one time with John.”

“Two-to-one,” Jehanna interjected, nudging him playfully with an elbow. “For some reason I seem to be sharing with Irillith.”

“You don’t mind, do you?” he asked, slipping his arm around her shoulder. “We can alternate if you want us to have some time alone.”

“Don’t be silly, I love sharing,” she replied, giving him a fond hug. “And sharing with a feisty alien princess ticks lots of my naughty boxes!”

“I bet it does,” Dana said with an impish grin.

John squatted down beside Kylantha and joined her in stroking Jade, which ratcheted up the cute feline’s appreciative purrs by several notches. “It’s getting late, so we’re going to head off to bed. We’re planning to start bright and early tomorrow, and make a big dent in your to-do list.”

“Thank you so much for everything you’ve done already!” Kylantha gushed, looking up at him in awe. Her eyes welled up as she added, “Before you came here, it was just so awful... then you arrived and I actually feel like everything will be okay again.”

He pulled her into a hug. “We’ll take care of you, Kylantha. I don’t want you to ever have to worry like that again.”

Quite overwhelmed, her shoulders trembled as she wept tears of relief, leaning into him and taking great comfort from his support.

John felt a surge of affection for the earnest young Larathyran, and glanced up at the sea of smiling faces, expecting to find Alyssa watching him with a triumphant grin. He quickly spotted her golden hair, but her expression was far from happy. Instead she looked ashen with dread.

\*What is it?!\* John asked in alarm.

\*Zelig’s border fleet; Lynette says he’s under attack... by thrall warships!\*

\*Oh fuck!\* John exclaimed, his heart sinking like a lead weight in his chest.

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Nathan Zelig strode out onto the Bridge of the Porphyrion, his expression bleak. “Contact every Federation ship in the system,” he ordered the comms officer. “I want to address the fleet.”

She gave him a hasty salute, then her hands danced over her console, preparing to broadcast to all the Terran warships. When her preparations were complete, she alerted the admiral with a nod.

He took a deep breath, then looked directly at the holo-projector. “All Terran forces, this is Admiral Nathan Zelig. I am calling for an immediate withdrawal from this position. Do not engage the enemy, do not attempt to maintain formation, just evacuate the system at maximum velocity. As soon as you get clear of the gravity well, engage hyper-warp and retreat to the rallying point at Menganus IV. If you are being actively pursued, do not attempt to rally, and continue to retreat until you reach safety. This order comes directly from the Fleet Admiral. God speed, and good luck to you all.”

Commodore Mikhailov stared at him in disbelief, unsure if he’d heard his commanding officer correctly. “We’re just giving up and running?” he blurted out. “Not even a tactical withdrawal? It’s every man for himself?”

“Not every man,” Admiral Zelig said, slowly shaking his head.

He walked over to his command chair and activated the comms interface as he sat down, then opened a broadcast that could be heard throughout the battleship.

“This is Admiral Zelig. I intend to provide covering fire for the rest of our forces as they retreat. There will be no dishonour if you choose to evacuate this ship, but you must do so now if you are to have any chance of survival. It’s been an honour to serve with you all.”

He ended the broadcast, then looked up at the stunned faces on the Bridge.

“There’s no need for any of you to go down with the ship,” he said quietly. “I can distract them on my own for long enough to give everyone a chance to escape.”

The bridge crew glanced at each other, their expressions turning to grim resolve. Nobody left their seats.

Nathan nodded to them respectfully, then looked up at the holograph. “Give me full power to the engines and intercept that cruiser! We’ll give that witch something to think about.”

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“He rowed his boat, oh, ho, ho – ho!” Gahl’kalgor sang, as he gleefully slammed his axe into a Kirrix juggernaut.

The telekinetically enhanced blow cleaved the massive creature apart in a grisly spray of blood and gore.

“Out on the lake, oh, ho, ho – ho!”

The Progenitor spun around and lashed out with a geyser of water that blasted a squad of Kirrix troopers into the air. As they came tumbling down, he surged forward at incredible speed, his twin axes moving in a blur as they sliced and diced them into tiny pieces.

“He caught a fish, oh, ho, ho – ho!”

Gahl’kalgor released his grip on one of the axe handles and let it float in the air, then reached out towards one of the lumbering juggernauts and lifted the frantically scrabbling creature off the floor with a telekinetic hand.

“And reeled it in, oh, ho, ho – ho!”

Clenching his gauntleted hand into a fist, he grinned in malevolent delight as the creature’s exoskeleton cracked under the pressure, before it imploded in a shower of green blood.

“Then he brought it home... to cook for his wife, oh, ho, ho – ho!”

Gahl’kalgor’s jubilant song died on his lips and he stood frozen amidst the scene of brutality and carnage. He’d learned that tune as a child, when his mother, Delsanra, had sung it to him at night. She was a fisherman’s wife and they’d taken him in when they’d found him as a babe, his crashed ship washed up on the shore... as she told him lovingly, so many times when he was young.

It had been over a thousand years since he last thought of Delsanra. Over a thousand years since he’d last felt the same sense of joy that had prompted him to sing that childhood rhyme. Then he remembered what had happened to Delsanra and her beloved husband, and tears rolled down his cheeks...

Bitter tears of shame and regret.

He let out a howl of anguish, the inarticulate cry of rage and despair echoing down the corridors of the alien dreadnought. It was the agonised cry of a wounded beast, a creature whose ancient wounds had split open again, festering and raw... and burning with the salt of betrayal.

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The Porphyrion shuddered violently and Admiral Zelig clung onto his command chair to avoid being thrown to the floor. He glanced at the damage status display and watched in morbid fascination as the enemy’s Tachyon Lances carved through the prow of his battleship, and turned a dozen icons scarlet.

“We’ve lost the second beam battery!” his senior tactical officer called out in warning.

“Heave to port!” Commodore Mikhailov yelled as he staggered upright, blood streaming from the jagged cut on his scalp. “Ready a broadside!”

Nathan glanced up at the flickering holo-map and saw that his forces had followed his orders to the letter, the Federation fleet scattering to the wind as they fled the battle. However they weren’t all able to escape unscathed.

The battleship Achlys was being hounded by two cruisers and raked with enemy fire. They struck repeatedly to the stern, the purple beams ripping apart the engines in billowing explosions. One of the blasts triggered a chain of secondary detonations, the fuel lines rupturing and setting multiple decks ablaze. The fiery hulk joined the battleships Hemera and Nesoi, which had already fallen to the merciless Galkirans.

“We’re being hailed, Admiral!” the comms officer cried out, her face pale and scared.

He gritted his teeth and nodded.

“Ah, Nathan Zelig,” Narzera purred, her eyes sparkling with malevolent joy. “Have you remembered yet? Where I might find the Baen’thelas?”

“Go to hell, you sadistic bitch,” Nathan snarled, before he spat on the floor. “Open fire!”

The beam lasers along the port flank of the battleship lined up on the coasting cruiser and seared into its shields at almost point blank range. The Galkiran vessel finally lost its protective barrier, then the Federation beams raked across its hull... and didn’t leave so much as a dent.

Narzera’s eyes briefly flared with anger, then she narrowed them and stared at him intently.

“You are... different,” Narzera murmured, before breaking into a feral grin. “You do know of the Baen’thelas! Tell me where he is, and I give you my word, I shall spare what’s left of your pitiful fleet.”

“You’re wrong, I have no idea who you’re talking about,” Nathan lied, looking at her with contempt. “Even if I did, I wouldn’t be foolish enough to tell you. You attacked us unprovoked and killed thousands of innocent people. You’re a monster and your word means nothing.”

“A monster am I?” she taunted him, relaxing in her command chair. “Yes, I can be a monster.”

She glanced towards her tactical officer and the thrall warship’s turrets rotated, to point at the trio of disabled Terran cruisers.

“No, don’t do it!” Nathan pleaded with her. “Leave them alone... please.”

Narzera laughed as her cruiser opened fire, eight beams punching through the hull of the crippled Federation warship. Miraculously, the ship didn’t explode, but drilling beams through multiple decks caused an explosive decompression that spaced most of the crew. Nathan could only look on in horror as the Galkiran captain mercilessly executed several hundred Federation personnel.

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Gahl’kalgor marched up to the huge set of double doors, and lashed out with both axes, the dual strike unleashing matching arcs of telekinetic power. They roared outwards, slamming both doors wide open with enough force to rip them from their hinges. Despite weighing several tons, they tumbled backwards like leaves caught on an autumn breeze.

He was done with this cursed ship, his heart feeling heavy in his chest after experiencing that surge of unfamiliar and unwanted emotional pain. The Progenitor growled in anger and took out his angst on the blade-armed Kirrix that were attempting to defend their nest. They were no match for his unrelenting fury and he left their twitching corpses, or what was left of them, dashed all over the walls.

As blood dripped off the blades of his axes, he panted for breath and glared off into the darkness. He was weary of hunting this monstrosity down... it was time to drive it from its nest. Sheathing the gore-streaked weapons across his back, Gahl’kalgor raised both hands, and an ominous crackling sound echoed around the huge chamber. Out in the distance, flares of light shone brighter and banished the darkness, the growing flames blackening the ochre walls.

There was a tortured shriek from one of the gloomy recesses in the nest chamber, then a hulking creature scrabbled out of the darkness as it tried to escape the flames. Gahl’kalgor shook his head in revulsion at the sight of the hideously ugly Hive Queen, then strode towards the insectoid creature, rapidly growing in height as he approached. He could see the primal fear in her compound eyes when she saw him, but she still lowered her head and charged, scythe-like blades whipping out in an attempt to impale him through the chest.

With his patience long-expired, he moved in a blur, grabbing and breaking her arms like dried twigs. He tossed aside the severed limbs as he ripped them from her body, literally disarming the Hive Queen of her natural weaponry. With those bladed claws removed, he lunged forward and grabbed her throat, then lifted her segmented body from the floor and slammed her into the wall. She screeched and flailed at him with her remaining limbs, the chitinous legs thumping ineffectually into biceps that might as well have been chiselled from granite. Her bony head smashed into the wall again and again as he pummelled her, disorientating the massive insectoid, until she turned limp and feeble in his implacable grip.

“Let’s see what secrets you’re hiding in there...” he muttered, placing his other hand on the cracked exoskeleton protecting her head.

It took more effort than usual to push into the Astral Plane, but it was so worth the additional exertion. Gahl’kalgor turned away from the alien creature that was bleeding in his grip, and stared in wonder across the featureless expanse that seemed to continue on forever. For the first time in that mystical place, he wasn’t overwhelmed by Xar’aziuth’s terrifying presence, and was able to gaze out across the Astral, feeling free and unencumbered.

He felt the oddest sensation that there was something intriguing out there that he needed to see. A tantalising lure that compelled him to experience the wonders of the Astral for himself, and uncover ancient secrets that had laid hidden for millennia. Gahl’kalgor shook his head and ignored the confusing sensation, then turned his shadowed gaze back on the wriggling Kirrix psychic.

As he pressed against her mind, he sensed that her name was Ciaxxaw, and she desperately wanted to keep him from entering her subconscious. He paid no heed to her desires and drilled his way inside, using brute force to batter his way through her weakened psychic defences. The Hive Queen’s mind was very alien to his own, but the bizarre mental architecture actually ended up in his favour. There was no messy tangle of relationships to distract him and he could easily locate and dissect the memories that were of interest.

The first secret to tumble out of Ciaxxaw’s mind was the one she was guarding most fervently. Gahl’kalgor had no idea why she was so protective of her knowledge of interstellar geography, but he broke asunder all the barriers she had placed around it. The location of her infested homeworld was of no interest to him, but he quickly learned the topography of all the populated worlds that bordered Kirrix territory. Ciaxxaw was on a voyage to one of those borders, to collect a shipment of captive hosts from an aquatic species called the Brimorians.

He sieved through her memories, studying the surprising variety of alien species that resided in this quadrant of space. The Terrans interested him the most out of all the bizarre creatures, for their eerie similarity to his own appearance, but they were no thrall species and were weak prey for the insectoid parasites. However, one look at the Maliri females in their golden armour brought a knowing smile to his face. Gahl’kalgor instinctively knew the shape and form of a thrall, and there was no mistaking their true nature, even with their faces obscured.

Ciaxxaw’s recollections of the Maliri were connected to a separate cluster of memories, most of which were somewhat hazy and indistinct. He studied them in fascination, revelling in the echoes of terror she felt towards the ‘Progenitor Beast’ that had existed long before she was hatched. Gahl’kalgor finally understood that these were inherited memories, shared with the Hive Queen via a connection to something called the Kirrix Hive Mind.

Amongst those shared thoughts, he found exactly what he was looking for: the Kirrix’s bruising encounters with Baen’thelas. He grinned to himself with satisfaction at tracking down his prey, then delved through Ciaxxaw’s shadowy memories of recent events. The Hive Queen was residing on Kirr-Inax during the recent harvest of hosts, which had started with overwhelming success before it went so catastrophically wrong. She experienced many encounters second-hand through the other Hive Queens but one in particular stood out and piqued his curiosity.

“What are you?!” he murmured, staring in astonishment at the flickering image of the glowing thrall as she effortlessly dominated the Hive Mind.

The Kirrix were frightened of Baen’thelas, but they were absolutely terrified of this... ‘Alyssa’.

Gahl’kalgor wanted to know more... and the best way of finding that out was by interrogating the Hive Mind itself. Ciaxxaw shuddered in anguish as he idly sifted through her most private recollections, but the dazed Hive Queen was powerless to prevent him from triggering her psychic connection to the Hive Mind.

He piggybacked her eldritch cord, soaring across the endless expanse until he reached an ochre fortress, the Hive Mind’s astral stronghold only protected by partially-built walls. Gahl’kalgor dragged Ciaxxaw’s twitching body with him and kicked open the gate, announcing his presence with a dull boom that rolled through the Kirrix citadel. Inhuman faces whirled around to face this brazen intruder, but they quailed in fear when they saw him... and realised what he was.

\*Please have mercy... we have no quarrel with you,\* the Hive Mind begged, the Hive Queens rooted to the spot in fear.

\*Show me what you know... of Baen’thelas and his matriarch,\* he rumbled, projecting their image for the Hive Mind to see.

The Hive Queens bowed their heads in supplication and carefully presented the collection of memories he sought. Gahl’kalgor watched the sharper recollections in fascination, entranced by the psychic feats the radiant thrall was capable of. As interesting as he found those memories, they were completely eclipsed by the Hive Mind’s frank conversation with Alyssa about the existence of the Shroud.

Now he knew precisely why his imminent victory over Wael’rakash had been interrupted, and why he’d been dispatched to deal with the growing threat in this part of the galaxy. It was the one place Xar’aziuth couldn’t reach with his insidious touch.

\*We have acquiesced to your demands,\* the Hive Mind said, its collective attention turning to the battered Hive Queen that he had dragged into the palace. \*Why have you violated the terms of our treaty?\*

\*Consider it... broken,\* he sneered, before savagely snapping Ciaxxaw’s neck.

Her head lolled back lifelessly and he tossed aside her shattered body, causing a chittering cry of distress from the dozen Hive Queens in attendance. Gahl’kalgor’s mocking laughter rumbled around the foundations of their fortress, before he released his hold over his astral cord, and let himself be drawn back across the grey expanse to his physical form.

Gahl’kalgor wasn’t done with the Kirrix, not by a long shot. There was no way he would tolerate the continued existence of the hideously ugly insectoids in this quadrant of the galaxy. However, he had to deal with Baen’thelas first... but not as Xar’aziuth’s witless pawn. He intended to slay his adversary, annihilate the Maliri, and claim this precious refuge for himself.

Turning his back on Ciaxxaw’s corpse, he strolled out of her chamber with an extra spring in his step, revelling in his new sense of purpose.

“He rowed his boat, oh, ho, ho – ho!” he boomed, the jaunty tune echoing along the blood-spattered corridors of the Kirrix dreadnought.