Three Square Meals Ch. 160

John watched the pink bands sweep lazily across the ceiling, Ailita’s contented purrs providing a musical accompaniment to the light show she was putting on for them. Her head lay on his left shoulder, with Jehanna resting on his right, the two girls snuggling in as close to him as their rounded stomachs would allow.

“I feel so happy, John,” Jehanna murmured with a breathy sigh. “Everything about this evening was amazing.”

He rubbed her back, trying to put his own feelings into words. There was an unfamiliar air of expectation in the bedroom, and he suspected that Jehanna was anticipating a proposal, but she hadn’t hinted at anything yet.

“Being with you tonight was very special,” he said earnestly. “But at the same time, everything felt relaxed and natural. It always does when I’m with you; I think that’s one of the reasons I was so attracted to you from the start.”

Jehanna placed her hand on his chest and lovingly caressed him. “You’re so right. Even though it was our first time together like that, we just clicked perfectly. I felt wild and sexy, but I also felt like you were there protecting me and keeping me safe. I loved it... and I love you.”

John was about to reply, but he couldn’t help chuckling as an amusing thought came to mind, and his chest vibrated with suppressed laughter.

“What is it?” Jehanna asked, turning slightly and propping herself up on an elbow. She looked down at him quizzically and added, “Did I say something funny?”

He shook his head. “No, everything you said was lovely, and I’m sorry for breaking the mood. It’s just that... I’m trying to be romantic with you, and I’ve got this snoozing, cum-filled catgirl draped over me.”

The mocha-hued beauty giggled and glanced at Ailita. “Aw, she looks so adorable snuggled up with her master. I’m glad Ailita’s here, she made the whole night even more special.”

John reached up to cup her face in his hand. “It is a special night, and I’m sure you’re well aware of the Lionesses’ tradition.”

She blushed and shyly nodded, holding her breath as she gazed down at him.

“For a while now, I’ve been uncomfortable with that tradition. I didn’t want to associate a lifetime pledge of commitment with taking you girls that way. It felt wrong... but with you, everything just feels right. It wouldn’t have even mattered if we hadn’t been adventurous in bed this evening, it didn’t change the way I feel about you, and have felt for a long time.”

Jehanna tilted her head, listening attentively to every word, but she made no attempt to interrupt.

“Before we met, I just thought of you as the beautiful and unattainable TFNN reporter from the holo-net,” John explained. “When I got to know the real you, I realised you were a very bright, charming, and genuinely caring woman... and I was even more attracted to you.”

“I had a crush on you for months,” she admitted, turning to kiss his fingertips. “After that first interview, I knew no one else would ever measure up. My biggest regret is taking so long to fully commit to sharing my life with you, and I’m sorry for wasting so much time when we could have been together. It was no reflection on you, just the indecisiveness of a silly little girl who was trying to grab everything she felt entitled to.”

“I never wanted to take your dreams away from you, honey,” John said, caressing her cheek with his thumb. “You’re mine now, and you will be forever, but there are still ways for you to have a fulfilling career.”

“I know, but I’ve come to realise what’s truly important now; it’s being with you and the girls, standing up for what’s right in the galaxy. I still want my career, but only to support you and Edraele in the war against the Progenitors. When we’ve defeated Xar’aziuth, all I want is to settle down with you and start a family.”

“I feel exactly the same way,” John agreed, gently pulling her down for a kiss.

While she was distracted, he beckoned towards his pile of clothes and the Crystal Alyssium ring floated up and across the bed towards him. Jehanna noticed the movement with her peripheral vision, and leaned back to see what it was. Her eyes widened when she saw the gleaming engagement ring, and her breath caught in a startled gasp.

“Jehanna, I love you, and I want us to be together for eternity,” John said, as he looked into her eyes. “Will you marry me?”

“Yes!” she gasped, holding out her trembling hand.

John slipped the engagement ring onto her finger, and Jehanna gazed at the sparkling pink diamond in awe. Just like the rest of the Lioness engagement rings, the band was made of Crystal Alyssium, with a pride of lionesses engraved around the curved surface.

“Oh, it’s so beautiful!” Jehanna gushed, before flinging her arms around John and showering him in kisses.

When she pulled back to grin at John in delight, Ailita said, “Congratulations! This one is so happy for you, Jehanna.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you, I was just so excited,” Jehanna apologised, then laughed when Ailita gave her a big hug.

“I’m excited too!” the catgirl said exuberantly. “Now you’re just like me; we both belong to Master now.”

Jehanna flashed a mischievous smile at John. “Is it alright if I celebrate with your property, Master?”

“I’d like to see that very much,” he agreed, running his hands up their toned backs.

John brushed his fingers through Ailita’s pink mane and Jehanna’s raven locks, then stroked them affectionately as they leaned in for a passionate kiss. The engagement had fundamentally changed the relationship between him and Jehanna, and Ailita sensed it too. Jehanna seemed calmer now, and more at ease with her place in all their lives, with her future as a permanent addition to the family now made official.

Both girls seemed even more in tune with each other than before, their kisses deeply sensual. Their eyes started to glow with a matching pink radiance, then Jehanna and Ailita both pulled back, looking at each other in astonishment.

“Is everything okay?” John asked, surprised by their unexpected pause.

“I can feel her mind opening up to me,” Ailita whispered, her feline eyes as wide as saucers.

“I felt it too,” Jehanna agreed, gazing lovingly at the Nymph. She turned to look at John with a hopeful smile. “Is this alright with you? You are Ailita’s master; I feel like I should ask permission.”

“First, I demand kisses,” he said playfully.

They giggled and leaned down to give him his due.

“Very good. Now, continue,” he ordered, stroking them encouragingly.

They turned to resume where they had left off earlier, the glow returning even brighter than before. As their kiss deepened, John was startled to see an undulating psychic connection form between them, the radiance steadily intensifying.

\*They’re bonding!\* Alyssa exclaimed. \*I can feel it!\*

\*I sense it too, Master,\* Jade marvelled, sounding more than a little shocked herself.

“They’re good girls,” he said, watching them in fascination. “I wanted them to get close... and they’re getting as close as they possibly can.”

\*\*\*

Edraele relaxed in the luxurious bed, with Luna draped over her left side, the former assassin already fast asleep. The Maliri Queen glanced down at her slumbering companion and placed an affectionate kiss on top of her head, Luna’s snowy white hair tickling her nose. Her dedicated bodyguard had worn herself out with her obsessive dedication to training, and while Edraele wasn’t feeling drowsy yet, she enjoyed being there to cuddle Luna while she dropped off to sleep.

A sudden burst of alarm lit up in her mind, like a flashing beacon on the Maliri psychic network. Edraele recognised at once that the distressed thrall in question was Kehlarissa, and with the Galkiran invasion steamrolling through House Venkalyn territory, she felt a matching stab of anxiety. Deftly extricating herself from Luna’s unconscious embrace, Edraele slid out of bed, and pulled on a silken robe.

Luna shifted on the mattress, her beautiful face furrowing into a frown at the unexpected vacancy beside her. She suddenly sat bolt upright, senses heightened in case of emergency. “Edraele? What’s wrong?!”

“Shh, my precious darling,” Edraele murmured, leaning down to give her a tender kiss. “I’m not in any danger. Go back to sleep.”

Luna nodded, her eyes growing heavy again, and she snuggled under the covers as Edraele pulled them over her shoulders. Edraele stroked her hair for a moment, lulling Luna back to sleep, and glanced over at the other side of the bed, where two more occupants lay intertwined together. One was fast asleep and the other awake, and Vestele made eye-contact with the Maliri Queen over her slumbering bedmate.

“Emandra was so sleepy,” Vestele whispered, glancing down at the other matriarch with a fond smile. “I think she dropped off as soon as her head touched the pillow.”

“She’s been having nightmares recently,” Edraele whispered back, her eyes lingering on the troubled matriarch. “Emandra deeply regrets some of the terrible things she’s done in the past.”

“That’s very sad,” Vestele said, watching the noblewoman with sympathy. Her face brightened as she added, “I can look after her. Then she won’t have any more bad dreams.”

“That’s very kind of you, Vestele,” Edraele said, giving her an appreciative smile. “Thank you.”

Luna was now asleep again, so Edraele quietly padded out of the bedroom and back towards her sitting room. She arrived moments before a flustered Kehlarissa, who hurried inside on the verge of panic.

“Oh, there you are, Edraele!” she gasped with relief. “I have some dreadful news!”

“Calm yourself, my dear,” Edraele said, walking over to embrace her. “Take a deep breath, then tell me what’s the latest update on the Galkirans.”

Kehlarissa looked at her Queen in surprise, then she took strength from Edraele’s regal demeanour, and some of the tension eased from her shoulders.

“The Galkirans have been spotted near the outer markers around my homeworld’s sector. That means they’re less than a day away from Venkalyn!” she quickly explained.

“Single ships, or entire fleets?” Edraele asked with concern.

“Single sensor contacts, but there are six of them in total.”

“I shall inform Baen’thelas at once,” the Maliri Queen said, giving her a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry, he’ll keep our people safe.”

\*\*\*

The door opened into Jehanna’s bedroom and Alyssa darted inside. “Hey, handsome. Did you get Edraele’s message?”

He nodded as he stepped out of the en suite bathroom, drying himself off after a quick shower. “Just give me a moment to get dressed. Is Calara on the Combat Bridge?”

“Yeah, she’s checking out the new sensor contacts,” Alyssa murmured distractedly, as her focus shifted to the two girls intertwined together on the bed. “I still can’t believe Jehanna and Ailita bonded.”

“It shouldn’t be that surprising. The twins managed to create a bond,” John reminded her, as he pulled on his jumpsuit.

“But they’ve known each other for decades and are incredibly close now. Ailita’s a Nymph and totally fixated on her master; I’m amazed that she was even capable of creating this kind of psychic connection with Jehanna.”

“Ailita’s grown very attached to Jehanna, and I know Jehanna is very fond of her too,” John said, walking over to stand beside the bed and look down at the two mesmerised girls. “I think they make a lovely couple.”

“You’ll get no argument from me about that,” Alyssa agreed, patting him on the back. “You did a nice thing bringing them together, Mr. Matchmaker, well done.”

He leaned down to give each of the bonding girls a kiss on the cheek, then pulled up the covers to keep them warm. “Come on, we better not keep Calara waiting.”

Alyssa slipped her hand into his, and they left Jehanna’s quarters, and made their way down the corridor to his old bedroom. After taking the express grav-tubes down to Deck Four, they walked down the ramp into the Combat Bridge, where the rest of the crew were waiting for him. The girls were all gathered in the centre of the room, where they’d been studying a holographic sector map.

“Here he is now,” Rachel said, greeting John with a wave. “Congratulations on your engagement!”

Her sentiments were echoed by the rest of the girls, who all looked equally delighted for him.

“I’m a very lucky man,” John said with a chivalrous bow. “The most beautiful and gifted girls in the galaxy keep dropping into my lap. I’d be a fool not to put a ring on their finger.”

His nine fiancées all glanced down at their own engagement rings, then he was rewarded by a circle of dazzling smiles.

“Very smooth, Mr.Blake,” Alyssa said, slipping her arm around his waist and leaning into him affectionately.

“Just being honest,” he said, giving her a sideways hug. “So what’s the news? Edraele told me that Kehlarissa had detected Galkiran scouts?”

Calara nodded and turned to look up at the Sector Map. “Yes, exactly that. House Venkalyn sensors picked up the Galkiran scouts on the outskirts of the Venkarys Sector, and it looks like they’re in the process of hacking one of the Maliri comms beacons. They’re about fourteen hours out from the House Venkalyn homeworld.”

John looked closer at one of the Galkiran sensor contacts, and saw that it was stationary next to a communications satellite. “Are these the same scouts that attacked Admiral Zelig’s fleet?”

“I think it’s safe to assume they are. Those thrall cruisers were scouting ahead of the Galkiran fleets and flew directly towards Maliri territory after leaving the T-Fed border with Kirrix Space.”

“How did they get so close without being spotted until now?” he asked with a puzzled frown.

The Latina let out a frustrated sigh. “I had a rough idea where the scouts might be, but it was just an educated guess. There are large sections of Maliri Space that aren’t covered by a sensor grid.”

John’s frown deepened. “I thought the Maliri had excellent sensors? They’ve been ferociously defending their borders for the entire time the Terran Federation has known them.”

“The outer border has always been vigilantly monitored, but the interior sensors were allowed to fall into disrepair over the millennia,” Irillith explained. “As the Maliri Regency became increasingly insular, the matriarchs became obsessed with squabbling with each other over territory. The internal House borders are watched like a hawk, but not the vast tracts of space in-between.”

“So we just need to make a wormhole jump there and deal with them,” John surmised, studying the map. “They’re not too far apart, so we could sweep through and eliminate them all before the Wormhole Generator is fully recharged. It’ll be annoying to lose twelve hours of harassing the invasion force, but we can’t let the Galkirans get detailed scouting information of Maliri territory.”

“We could do,” Calara said hesitantly. “Unfortunately, there’s a problem.”

“There usually is,” John said with a sardonic smile. “Alright, what is it this time?”

Calara walked over to her Tactical Station, and leaned over to tap a couple of icons on the console. The Sector Map flickered in a shower of pixels, then realigned itself to show the current sector, with the Invictus at the centre. A short distance away was a flurry of sensor contacts, which John immediately recognised as the Galkiran invasion force. He was startled to see that the thrall fleets had been divided into two groups, following flight paths that were roughly perpendicular to each other.

“After our last attack, they split their forces,” Calara explained. “There are twelve fleets heading towards the centre of Maliri territory, on approximately the same attack vector as before. The other eleven fleets have been diverted to follow our escape route, and must be trying to track us down.”

“That’s a good thing isn’t it?” he asked, staring at the thrall warships. “Now they’ve split their forces, we should be able to whittle them down even faster.”

“In theory, yes. But we’re nearly out of spider mines and we’d need to resupply at Genthalas to stock up on warheads and Crystal Alyssium.”

“And we don’t want to draw their attention to Genthalas,” John said, grimacing at the thought. “So we’ll just have to keep hitting them with conventional ambushes?”

She nodded and gestured towards the largest of the two groups, “That fleet is the biggest immediate threat, because it’s heading towards the Maliri homeworlds. Ideally, we should keep up the harassment tactics until we manage to convince them to follow us on a diversion.”

“Ideally?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Calara looked increasingly tense as she replied, “If we keep ambushing that group and ignoring the other one, the Progenitor is bound to realise which group we’re most concerned about. If we ignore the second group and just leave them to continue on the same course, they’ll eventually reach Genwynn trade station.”

“Ah shit,” John cursed, his gaze flicking back to the second cluster of Galkiran fleets. “So we also need to keep hitting them with diversionary attacks to steer them clear of the station?”

She nodded, her expression fraught with concern.

“What about the scouts though?” he asked, starting to feel as worried as Calara. “If they manage to hack the comms beacon, they can access the sensor data from the Lianelis Saevath network. I don’t know how detailed that data is, but it must show the locations of all the homeworlds as well as the trade stations.”

“It does,” Calara said grimly.

“In which case, all the diversion tactics will be meaningless, because they’ll make a beeline for all the places we’re trying to avoid,” John summarised, blowing out his breath in a sigh of frustration. “So we’re back to the original plan: Take out the scouts ASAP, then hope the rest of the fleets don’t stop to try hacking any comms beacons.”

“Actually, you might just want to leave the scouts alone,” Irillith said with a smug grin. “And I doubt they’ve hacked any other comms beacons. The ones closest to the border are all hidden in nebula and asteroid belts.”

John turned to look at her curiously. “You look like you’ve done something sneaky. What have you been up to?”

“I overheard your conversation with Sakura, about giving the Progenitor a tempting target that he can’t resist. So I started thinking: what does this bad guy want more than anything?” she raised an eyebrow expectantly, waiting for an answer.

He gave her a helpless shrug. “I don’t know. I’ve been so busy recently, I haven’t had much time to think about it.”

“He wants to kill you,” she stated simply, answering the question for him. “All the previous Progenitors that came to the Shroud wanted to eliminate the current resident and claim it for themselves. Even if this Progenitor hasn’t realised the Shroud exists yet, we’ve been working on the assumption that Xar’aziuth sent him here to kill you... so the answer is still the same.”

“Yeah, that makes a lot of sense,” John agreed. “So if you are right about his motivations, how do we lure him out? Do we set up a broadcast, telling him where to find me?”

“We don’t need to set anything up. I’ve done it already,” she replied, her smug look returning.

John glanced up at the map in alarm. “So he could be jumping in at any time? Why didn’t you warn us first?!”

Irillith shook her head. “No, not here. Kythshara.”

He looked at the Maliri in confusion. “Alright, you’ve lost me. What did you do exactly?”

She walked over to her IntOps station and slid into her seat. Her fingers danced over the console, and Irillith activated the main holo-screen, then projected an image onto it. John had seen a similar image before and it reminded him of a graphical representation of communications signal traffic, broadcast through the Terran comms beacons.

“This is all the data we’re pushing through the Maliri comms network,” Irillith explained, gesturing towards the holo-screen. “There’s all the usual information, but can you see that thick block of bandwidth that dwarfs everything else?”

“That’s the sensor data from the cloak breaker network?” John asked, studying it in fascination.

She nodded, staring intently at the screen. “The data’s coded using Mael’nerak’s three-dimensional programming language, so I had to broadcast the raw data with an interpreter and wasn’t able to encrypt it. We have to assume the Galkiran thralls are fairly skilled at breaking digital security, so I’m sure they’ll have already hacked their way into that Maliri comms beacon.”

“So they do know where we are already?” John asked, darting a worried glance at Calara.

“Yes, the scouts probably do... but they’re still out of comms range of the Galkiran fleets,” Irillith replied. “Also, they might not actually trust that the sensor data is authentic.”

John gave her a puzzled frown. “Why wouldn’t they?”

“Precisely because it’s being broadcast unencrypted across the Maliri comms network,” she patiently explained. “So I gave them something juicy to sink their teeth into...”

Before he could ask what it was, Irillith had already highlighted a tight bandwidth of data that appeared to be hidden within the sensor data from the Lianelis Saevath network. “This data stream is heavily protected, with a form of encryption that would be too sophisticated for most Maliri to break. If the thralls do manage to hack their way in, they’ll be able to access a stream of sensor data that I’ve heavily manipulated. It shows Maliri thrall forces gathering around Kythshara, and whenever we’re not planning an attack for twelve hours, I’ll show the Invictus jumping there too.”

“But why would they believe your modified data instead of the real thing?” John asked with a frown of concern.

“Well, which would you trust more? The unencrypted sensor data that anyone can access, or the heavily protected version that took your hacking team hours to break the encryption?” Irillith asked, giving him a sly smile.

Calara started to laugh, her tense expression easing with relief.

“That is pretty clever,” John said, acknowledging her with a look of admiration. “So we’ve baited our trap for the Progenitor. Now we just have to steer his fleets in the right direction, until they figure out exactly where my throneworld is.”

“I suggest we ambush the smaller group first,” Calara said, indicating the invasion force of eleven fleets. “Then we turn and pursue the other group and hit them a number of times in a row.”

“That way they’ll assume the force we’re most worried about is the one heading towards the Brimorian border, just because we attacked them first,” John said, nodding in agreement. “Should we wait until the next time they power down their shields, then use up the spider mines?”

“I was going to suggest exactly the same thing,” the Latina replied, sharing a smile with him. “If they don’t change their tactics, that gives us about five hours until the next ambush.”

“Five hours...” John said, mulling that over. He glanced at Alyssa and continued, “I can help you build the rest of the spider mines while we’re waiting.”

The blonde firmly shook her head. “I’ve already made a good start, and I’ve got plenty of time to finish them on my own. You need to go back to bed and get a good night’s rest.”

John was about to argue, but conceded when he saw the determination in Alyssa’s eyes. “Alright, you win. Wake me up just before the ambush.”

“We’ve got this,” she said confidently. “We won’t take any risks, and Calara will make sure we’re as safe as possible. You’ve done a lot of psychic shaping today and you need to get enough sleep to fully recover.”

He paused, reluctantly admitting to himself that he was very tired. “Are you sure?”

She gave him a decisive nod. “We’ll see you in the morning.”

“Before you go, I wanted to ask a question about the scouts,” Sakura quickly interrupted.

“Go ahead,” John said, looking at her with interest.

Her eyes turned cold as she said, “Those Galkirans slaughtered hundreds of thousands of Federation personnel without mercy. They need to pay for what they did.”

Calara looked equally grim. “She’s right. They butchered Zelig’s fleet and need to be brought to justice as war criminals. We should immobilise their ships when we get the chance, and deal with them after the invasion is over.”

John was quiet for a long moment as he carefully considered her question. “I don’t disagree with you that they need to be held accountable, but what do we do exactly? Capture them and hand them over to the Terran Federation to be tried in a military court? Just imagine what they might reveal under questioning; they’d have no reason to hide the fact that there are dozens of Progenitor empires that are all itching to kill everyone. Maybe they’d reveal the Maliri’s true appearance? Or what about telling the Admiralty that I’m Baen’thelas and I’m now in charge of the Maliri.”

Sakura suddenly looked much less certain. “That’s true, but we can’t let them get away with it.”

“I’m not saying we should, but I think we should also bear something else in mind. In many ways, these thralls are this Progenitor’s victims. They’ve been bred to be merciless soldiers, in a society run by a psychopathic tyrant for thousands of years. It’s not like these women had any choice about being recruited into his armies, and any refusal to carry out orders would be met with instant and agonising death. Is it any surprise they turned out like this? And is it really their fault?”

Calara and Sakura exchanged a troubled glance.

“I don’t know,” Calara said quietly. “I can’t really answer any of those questions.”

“I don’t know either,” John admitted, his expression bleak. “For truly horrific crimes, those thralls probably do deserve the death penalty. But we’ve seen with the Larathyrans that thrall species aren’t inherently evil. Auralei is one of the sweetest and kindest women I know. Maybe all these Galkirans could have turned out just like her... if their civilisation wasn’t dominated by a cruel and vicious monster.”

“Let’s just focus on winning for now,” Alyssa reminded them. “We can decide how to handle the Galkirans once we’ve defeated their Progenitor.”

John put his arm around her shoulders and gave her an appreciative squeeze. “You’re right, there’s no point trying to figure out how culpable the thralls are, until we’re actually in a position where we can punish them. I have been thinking about it a lot, and I don’t think it’s as simple as them being either guilty or innocent. Thanks for raising it though, Sakura, It’s important point we need to discuss further.”

She nodded, appearing lost in thought herself.

He glanced around the Combat Bridge at the girls and said, “I don’t want the rest of you to stay up all night either. Most of you should try and get some sleep now, so you’re well-rested before the ambush.”

Calara blew out her breath and nodded. “You’re right. I’ll head off to bed now too.”

The girls followed him up to the Armoury, then they said their goodbyes as they parted ways.

\*\*\*

Leaning closer in her command chair, the Scout Captain gritted her teeth with pure loathing as she stared at the holo-image. Narzera had finally found a video of Baen’thelas with his thralls, and the mere sight of his hideously ugly face made her want to chop off his head and burn it to ashes.

“Captain! We’ve found something!”

Narzera dragged her hate-filled glare away from the grotesque images on the holo-screen. “What is it? Have you managed to authenticate the sensor data?”

The comms officer rushed over to the command chair. “There’s a secret signal embedded in the data feed! Look, it’s right there!”

She hurriedly tapped runes on her vambrace and the data signals they’d intercepted from the Comms Beacon appeared on the holo-screen.

Narzera opened up the data, relieved to be able to look at something that didn’t turn her stomach. She scrutinised the embedded signal, then raised an eyebrow. “It still appears to be encrypted. Why haven’t the auto-decrypters broken the encryption algorithm?”

“The signal is protected by a much more sophisticated form of encryption than the comms beacon,” the Galkiran officer explained.

“This must be the genuine sensor data; the rest is a pathetic attempt at subterfuge,” Narzera sneered with contempt. “Inform me immediately as soon as you’ve broken the encryption.”

“As you command, Captain!” the younger thrall replied, before hurrying back to her team.

\*\*\*

It was ominously quiet on the Bridge of the Progenitor dreadnought. The thrall crewmembers worked in subdued silence, knowing better than to do or say anything that might attract the ire of their brooding matriarch. Valeria drummed her gauntleted fingers on the armrest of the command throne, the staccato beat like the menacing rattle of a Khiiral pit viper’s tail.

Emotions raged behind her amber eyes, white-hot anger conflicting with gut-wrenching feelings of betrayal. This wasn’t the first time her Progenitor master had indulged in a physical dalliance with a thrall, but he usually lost interest quickly, and Valeria would end up escorting the bruised and battered young woman from his quarters. She never felt any sympathy for those sobbing girls when they were coldly dismissed, as every single one of them had been trying to usurp her rightful place as Gahl’kalgor’s matriarch.

For some reason, Gahl’kalgor’s fascination with Ashryn felt very different, and she knew this wasn’t just a passing fancy. Valeria had never seen him look at another woman the way he’d been captivated by the mature Fleet Commander, and for the first time in nearly a thousand years of servitude, she felt genuinely afraid that she might be replaced. That dreadful realisation made her want to lash out in fury, and burn the life out of Ashryn before the wizened old hag could sink her claws any deeper into Gahl’kalgor.

With a whimpering sigh, Valeria slumped back on the command throne. She dared not raise her hand against Ashryn, because she knew that her master’s immediate retribution would be prolonged and agonising. The Galkiran matriarch just had to pray that he would soon tire of this shameless thrall, and cast Ashryn aside like all the others before her.

Feeling morose as she wallowed in self-pity, Valeria glared resentfully at the holographic Tactical Map. The Galkiran dreadnought had come to a halt in some random location in this backwater ghetto, and all the thrall fleets were gathered around the black behemoth as close as they could get. They reminded her of fearful cattle, huddling for protection against a roaming predator, and the pitiful weakness on display turned her stomach. Fortunately for her waning patience, they only needed to waste ten more minutes, then the thrall vessels would be able to run their shields for another eight hours.

The black hulled ships were suddenly silhouetted against the darkness by a succession of ferocious detonations. One vessel after another was rocked by the blasts, their engines blown to pieces in violent showers of debris. The entire area around the dreadnought was festooned with billowing orange eruptions, the fiery glow banishing the gloomy shadows from the Bridge.

As Valeria winced against the glare, she was startled to see the enemy’s miniscule flagship appear on the map as if from nowhere. The white-hulled cruiser had dropped its cloak and was now fully shielded, as it proceeded to unload a broadside on the closest pair of Galkiran battleships. The two hulking vessels seemed to wilt under a hail of dazzling Tachyon beams and Quantum Flux charged slugs, the rear of each warship torn apart by that savage assault.

She stabbed her finger down on the comms interface, while broadcasting a telepathic message to every captain in those fleets. \*Get your shields up! Return fire!\*

Valeria selected her master’s shuttle from the list of contacts, then quickly made the call, following his orders to only disturb him if they located the enemy Progenitor. The comms interface rang and rang, until Ashryn’s dishevelled face appeared on the holo-screen.

“Yes? What is it?” she asked drowsily, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

Gritting her teeth in fury, Valeria was incensed at the casual tone the Fleet Commander was taking with her now. It was almost as if this thrall considered them to be peers.

“Where is Lord Gahl’kalgor?” she demanded curtly. “I need to speak with him at once.”

Ashryn’s expression softened and she stepped aside, letting Valeria view her master’s suite. Gahl’kalgor was fast asleep on the bed, all the usual tension gone from his handsome face, as he rested in a deep and peaceful slumber. The Galkiran Matriarch had never seen him look so serene and contented before, and it galled her that she was never able to make him feel that way.

“You need to wake him up,” Valeria muttered spitefully.

Ashryn reappeared on the holo-screen, blocking her view of the Progenitor.

“Absolutely not,” she declared, open defiance in her answering glare. “I’d wager this is the best sleep he’s had in a millennia, and there’s nothing you can say that would make me disturb him.”

The retort cut Valeria to the bone, as she knew the thrall was almost certainly correct. Just because the other woman happened to be right didn’t abate the matriarch’s fury at being disobeyed and disrespected like that. She opened her mouth, a viciously barbed threat on the tip of her tongue, when Ashryn abruptly ended the call.

Valera stared at the blank screen in stunned disbelief, then she rushed to locate the defiant fleet commander in her psychic network, vengeful retribution forefront in her mind. She found Ashryn almost instantly, the spark of her life force burning brightly amongst millions of dull, flickering embers. It would be so easy to exterminate the insubordinate hag, to burn the life out of her and make her writhe in agony...

Slumping back in her command throne once again, Valeria knew there was nothing she could do to Ashryn, not while she was so obviously in Gahl’kalgor’s favour. She watched the unfolding firefight with a sullen glare, feeling more dejected than ever before in her unnaturally long life. When the enemy Progenitor finally fled, leaving scores of wrecked thrall warships in its wake, Valeria was too depressed to even care.

\*\*\*

John stirred awake after one of the best night’s sleeps he’d had in weeks. He glanced down at the comforting weight of the two luscious female forms draped over him, and smiled with satisfaction. Jehanna and Ailita had awoken him in the middle of the night, the two passionate girls hungry for more of his attention. They’d drifted off to sleep an hour later, tummies full after getting exactly what they desired, both murmuring how much they adored him.

He smiled as he admitted to himself that he’d become hopelessly addicted to all these lovely girls, who had blazed into his life with the dazzling light of a super nova. They were all unique and special in their own right, and he was determined to make sure he lived up to the unquestioning love and trust they placed in him. As he marvelled at his spectacular good fortune, John’s mind drifted back into the past, to his life as a trader living alone on the Fool’s Gold.

It was becoming increasingly difficult for him to understand how he could’ve coped for so long without any company, and he knew he’d never be able to return to that life of solitude now. He wondered how his father could have ever survived on Arcadia, marooned on his own for thousands of years, after being doted on by legions of thralls. John’s smile faded as the bleak answer came unbidden to his mind. Rahn’hagon had never cared an iota for any of those women, who selflessly gave all their love and devotion to a man with a heart of stone.

Thinking about black-hearted Progenitors was depressing, but it abruptly reminded John of the ambush he’d slept through the previous evening. \*Alyssa, are you awake? Were there any problems last night?\*

\*Morning, handsome,\* she replied, sounding sleepy. \*The ambush went flawlessly. We laid a minefield around the shieldless thrall ships, then activated them all remotely. While the spider mines were blowing up their engines, we raised shields and opened fire on the fleets outside the minefield. It was a turkey shoot; we managed to immobilise an entire fleet before we were forced to retreat.\*

\*That’s fantastic, well done!\* he said, feeling greatly relieved.

\*Thank you. After we safely ran away from the dreadnought, we did a wormhole jump ahead of the second fleet. Calara’s been making plans for our next ambush, which should be in about two hours. This group of thralls will need to drop their shields soon, and then we can strike.\*

\*It sounds like you handled everything perfectly,\* John said, feeling a pang of guilt for not being there for the battle.

\*You’ve got nothing to feel guilty about,\* Alyssa said, her voice warm and reassuring. \*You’ve been handling all the repairs and refits on your own, and it’s important you get lots of rest after so much psychic shaping. Now that you’ve moved into a support role, I’m happy to take over command.\*

John’s chest shook as he tried not to disturb the sleeping girls with his rumbling laughter. \*I wondered why you were so eager to pack me off to bed. Who came up with this latest tactic? You or Athena?\*

\*I have no idea what you’re talking about,\* Alyssa protested innocently. \*I just figured that as I can’t help you with psychic shaping, I might as well be in charge of the ship... it gives me something useful to do.\*

\*Nice try, beautiful,\* John said with amusement. \*We’ll join you in the Observatory and discuss the plans for the next ambush.\*

\*Take your time,\* she replied, stifling a yawn. \*The rest of the girls are still fast asleep here.\*

He had the impressions that Alyssa was hinting at something, then two shifting bodies made him realise what it was. His bedmates turned over and propped themselves up, so they could look down at him where he lay between them.

“Good morning, my darling fiancé,” Jehanna cooed, greeting him with a tender kiss.

With his mouth already occupied, Ailita kissed his chest instead, her lips deliciously soft as they worshipped his muscles. Her warm hand slid down his abdomen and gently cupped his quad, testing their weight.

“You feel full again, Master,” the Nymph purred. “Would you like us to relieve the pressure?”

John brushed his fingers through their hair and smiled at them fondly. “You haven’t seen the girls since I proposed. We should go down to see them, so Jehanna can show off her ring.”

Ailita giggled as she listened to his thoughts. “You’re right, Master! We should celebrate over breakfast!”

Jehanna got the hint very quickly. “Which one of us is bringing them breakfast?” she asked, with a seductive gleam in her eyes.

“It’s definitely a two-girl job,” John said, guiding Ailita down to his stiffening cock, and pulling Jehanna in for another kiss.

\*\*\*

Gahl’kalgor slowly stirred, as if his mind was reluctant to give up the blissful oblivion of sleep. For a thousand years his dreams had been corrupted into terrifying nightmares, as he’d been pulled into his master’s twisted realm of horrors. Just thinking about some of the unspeakable things he’d seen in that dreadful place made him shudder involuntarily, and he vowed that he’d never let himself be subjected to such torments again.

“Are you cold, Kal?” a soft voice asked, full of warmth and affection. “Let me pull up the covers...”

He opened his eyes as he felt the bed shift, the sheets now draped over his arm. He saw Ashryn was laying on the bed beside him, her caring face only inches from his. He watched her silently, feeling a surge of gratitude to the thrall for what she did for him the previous evening, but lacking the words to say it.

“Kal?” she asked him quietly. “Who was Delsanra?”

Flushing with embarrassment, he turned away, not wanting to have this conversation with her. He felt awkward and uncomfortable admitting the truth, especially with a thrall. They always wanted carnal pleasure with him, before clumsily broaching the possibility of becoming his matriarch. As if rutting together like mindless beasts would somehow endear herself to him.

What was more, he didn’t want to shatter the blissful illusion he had created for himself the previous night. He closed his eyes, desperately hoping that she would take the hint and remain silent. Simply ordering her to stop talking would be more effective, but he felt a strange hesitance to treat this woman with such callous disregard.

He felt her shift on the bed, and dreaded the moment of confrontation that would inevitably occur. It therefore came as a surprise when she stroked his hair, and began singing to him in that lovely soothing voice once again. Cracking an eye open, he looked up at her warily, unsure how to react. The thrall simply gave him a warm smile, then finished singing The Fisherman’s Toil to the end.

There was a long moment of awkward silence, then she murmured, “I want to be Delsanra for you... and the more you tell me, the more like her I can be.”

Her earnest request startled him so much, it overcame his previous reluctance. It felt strange to trust someone again, but he could tell she was completely sincere. “She was my mother,” he quietly replied.

Ashryn nodded in understanding as his aversion to her attempts at intimacy suddenly made sense. She reached for his hand, then patted it gently. “Thank you for trusting me, Kal. Would you tell me what she was like?”

He gazed at her with renewed fascination, and slowly nodded. \*Valeria, promote another thrall to command Ashryn’s battleship. She’s staying here with me.\*

\*\*\*

The jury of Federation officers watched Commodore Bromidus, as he rose from his chair and stood in front of the court.

“As all of you will be aware, Commander Walker was the only living survivor of the Callopean Shoals massacre,” he said, his voice sombre. “The only survivor when 347,189 souls perished to Brimorian barbarity.”

Tom quickly scribbled with his digital stylus on the data pad in front of him and slid it over to his lawyer. “And the traitor!”

Kincaid glanced at it, then shook his head, unwilling to make an objection. “Who? There’s no evidence.” he wrote back.

Tom sighed in frustration and slumped in his seat.

“Commander Walker was retrieved from his fighter after the battle, as evidenced by this image taken by the recovery vessel.”

Bromidus clicked a remote and a holo-screen lit up in front of the court. The picture was of his Claymore, and the image drew shocked gasps from the gallery. There was no doubt that the state of the wreckage was horrifying, the gunship absolutely savaged by particle bolts, with both wings shot off and impact burns all over the fuselage.

“Impressive isn’t it? The wreck makes one wonder how the pilot could have possibly survived such destruction. Perhaps it was a modern day miracle,” Bromidus noted with a hint of sarcasm. “Or perhaps not.”

The prosecution lawyer turned towards the bailiff and nodded. He guided a marine over to the stand, where he was promptly sworn in.

“Please introduce yourself to the court,” Bromidus requested of his uniformed witness.

“I’m Gunnery Sergeant Doug Shelvey, retired,” he said in a gruff voice.

“And what is your area of expertise?”

“Energy particle scoring. Specifically from Brimorian weaponry,” the marine replied. “I worked for R&D Ballistics research, analysing battle damage to materiel for over twenty-five years.”

“And what can you tell us about this image, Gunnery Sergeant?”

The marine turned to look at the wrecked Claymore. “At first glance, you can see the gunship suffered unusually severe particle damage.”

“Unusual?” Bromidus prompted him. “How so?”

“Brimorian particle weapons drop in lethality at long range, as the bolt loses cohesion. If you view the other examples the recovery teams provided, you can see the wreckage of fighters that were retrieved from the Callopean Shoals. The particle bolt damage they each sustained was enough to destroy the fighter, but the initial impact is reduced and associated burns are at least 47% less extensive.”

Bromidus repeatedly clicked the button on his remote and a series of images scrolled past, each one showing the grim sight of badly burned Terran Federation starfighters. The crowd fell silent as he kept on clicking, showing an endless procession of devastated ships.

“Objection,” Kincaid said, his voice sombre. “There’s no need to show the court the wreckage of every fighter recovered from the fleet. The defence accepts the expert’s opinion that the particle damage is different.”

“Sustained,” Judge Kincarrow agreed, before glancing at Bromidus. “You’ve made your point, counsellor.”

Smoothly continuing, Bromidus focused on his witness again. “And how would you account for these differences, Gunnery Sergeant?”

“The damage sustained by HCJ-C-1482 looks very similar to that suffered by vehicles and fighters destroyed by Brimorian forces during the assault on our colonies in the Callopean Shoals,” Shelvey explained.

Bromidus cleared his throat and stated, “For the record, HCJ-C-1482 is the tail code of Commander Walker’s gunship. It stands for: Heavy Carrier Janus – Claymore – number 1482. Please continue, Gunnery Sergeant.”

“So as I was saying, you can tell the difference, because energy particles will heat the metal and burn it in an oxygen rich atmosphere, while it would just melt in the vacuum of space. I was able to recreate these damage patterns by using a tripod mounted particle gun fired at ten metres from the target. This causes more severe impact damage from being shot at close range, and extensive scorch patterning from the extended burn time.”

Bromidus clicked his remote again, and more images appeared, showing particle burns on sheets of titanium armour plating in a firing range, with each one compared to Tom’s Claymore. Even Tom could see that they were identical, with the Gunnery Sergeant cleverly managing to match the impact patterns from dozens of hits on the gunship.

“And what is your professional opinion on how Commander Walker’s Claymore sustained this level of damage,” Bromidus asked.

“It had to have been done within an atmosphere, probably inside a hangar,” Shelvey replied. “You cannot recreate those damage patterns with particle bolt hits in space. This battle damage was quite clearly simulated within atmospheric conditions.”

“So the damage was cleverly faked, and made to look critical, when it was all a sham. Thank you, Gunnery Sergeant,” the lawyer said respectfully. “The Prosecution has no further questions for this expert witness, your honour.”

Kincaid rose from his chair and approached the stand. “According to Commander Walker’s testimony, the last thing he can remember is returning to the Janus because his Claymore was suffering mechanical difficulties. Isn’t it possible that his Claymore was being chased by enemy fighters, took severe damage, then he lost control and crashed inside the Janus’ hangar?”

“Objection!” Bromidus protested. “The witness is not an expert in strike fighter combat, nor is he in a position to comment on Commander Walker’s piloting skills or lack thereof.”

“Sustained. Please rephrase the question, Mr. Kincaid.”

“My apologies, your honour,” Caspian replied, before turning back to the witness. “If Commander Walker’s Claymore had crashed inside the Janus’ hangar, then was strafed at close range by a Brimorian fighter, would the particle bolt damage look similar to that sustained by HCJ-C-1482?”

Shelvey screwed his face up into a sceptical frown, “The chances of that happening are-”

Caspian held up his hand and interrupted in a firm voice, “As the good Commodore has just stated, you are not an expert in strike fighter combat, and therefore not in a position to give us an expert opinion on the likelihood of such a scenario occurring. As we all know, many strange things can happen in the chaos of war. So, would the damage from a short range strafing, on a fighter that had crashed inside a hangar, match the damage we see on Commander Walker’s Claymore?”

“Yes, it would match,” Shelvey grudgingly conceded.

“No further questions, your honour,” Caspian declared brightly, before returning to his seat.

Tom gave him a brief nod of respect, amazed that his lawyer had managed to introduce an element of doubt to evidence that even he thought was damning.

\*\*\*

John walked arm-in-arm with Jehanna and Ailita as they entered the Lagoon, the two girls chattering excitedly together.

\*Good morning, Baen’thelas,\* Edraele greeted him, sounding sleepy.

\*Good morning. Did you have a late night, honey? You sound tired,\* he replied with concern.

\*Yes, I was up quite late. I spent several hours with Kehlarissa going over her evacuation plans and coordinating with the planetary administration on Venkarys,\* the Maliri Queen explained.

\*That’s very sensible. It’s important we help them prepare for the worst, just in case.\*

\*We’ve done as much as we can,\* Edraele agreed. \*I also wanted to inform you that the captured Brimorian transport fleet has arrived at Genirath station. They spent all night loading huge numbers of males aboard those ships and will be due to depart for the homeworlds by midday. A skeleton crew made up of some of the older, more experienced males has volunteered to stay behind to man the station.\*

\*We need to get some more personnel transferred over there to support them when we get the chance,\* John suggested, as he walked over the bridge.

\*I thought so too. It can be arranged as soon as we have ships available to transport them there,\* Edraele agreed. \*I also wanted to inform you of a pre-emptive action I took several days ago. As you might recall, Amlaril returned to Genthalas recently. She is in command of House Valaden’s second fleet.\*

\*Ah yes, the fleet we sent to be upgraded by the Ashanath?\*

\*That’s correct. I was intending to have Amlaril stay with me on Genthalas and attempt to bond with her, but then the Galkiran invasion occurred. Her fleet was too late to assist with the capture of Larathyran warships, so I dispatched her forces to defend Genwynn trade station, which was the most likely to come under attack by thralls invading from the Kirrix border. Amlaril is scheduled to arrive there tomorrow.\*

\*You’re a genius, Edraele!\* John marvelled, gesturing towards the control panel next to the Observatory door. \*That’s amazing news.\*

\*In light of the Galkiran forces diverting in that direction, Amlaril’s fleet could be of considerable use to Calara in planning the station’s defence,\* Edraele said with satisfaction.

\*I’m sure she’s thrilled,\* he said, knowing that the Latina most definitely would be. \*Well done, that was an excellent use of Amlaril’s fleet.\*

\*I’m glad that I was able to assist, my Lord. Oh, and congratulations on your latest engagement; Jehanna is an exceptional young woman.\*

\*She certainly is,\* John agreed, releasing his two companions so that they could hurry through the door ahead of him.

Jehanna’s arrival was met by excited squeals, and when he followed her into the Observatory, the former TFNN reporter was surrounded by the other girls. They were all taking turns in hugging her, before demanding to see her engagement ring. He watched them with a fond smile for a couple of minutes, before Alyssa peeled away from the group.

“Hey, handsome,” she said, greeting him with a lovely smile.

“Hi, Captain Alyssa,” he replied, before grabbing the giggling blonde and wrestling her to the bed.

She shrieked with laughter as he tickled her, writhing in his arms until she finally begged for mercy.

“I give up!” she pleaded. “You can stay in charge!”

John brushed aside her tousled golden locks, then leaned down to give her a loving kiss. “And don’t you forget it.”

“You brought snacks?!” Dana exclaimed in delight, her voice carrying from the cluster of girls.

The mood in the Observatory subtly shifted, and John could sense the excitement in the air as they all moved onto the bed. Jehanna and Ailita were the centre of attention, each of them receiving lots of kisses as they disrobed and lay down on the covers.

John placed his hand on Alyssa slim stomach, his fingers tracing a circle around her navel. “Make sure you get a turn too. I want to be connected to all of you.”

She leaned up to give him a smouldering kiss of gratitude, then she crawled over to join the rest of the girls in doting on John’s newest fiancée and her bonded Nymph companion. While they were occupied, John gathered some pillows and got comfy in his usual spot on the bed, then he waited as the entire crew lit up in his mind. Betrixa and Marika excused themselves after getting their share, then a minute later, Neysa and Leylira appeared after their sisters took over on the Bridge.

Calara joined him shortly after they started, and she gave him a big hug as feminine moans echoed around the bedroom. “Hey, John!”

“You look much happier,” he said, giving her an affectionate squeeze. “I heard the ambush went very well last night.”

“We caused a lot of damage,” she agreed, pulling back and grinning. “Laying a minefield around the stationary thrall fleet was incredibly effective. The dreadnought was there as well, which was an unpleasant surprise, but we still managed to immobilise a dozen more cruisers before we had to retreat.”

“It’s a real shame we’ve run out of supplies to make more of those mines. Oh, I presume you heard about Amlaril’s fleet heading to Genwynn station?”

Her face lit up as she nodded exuberantly. “That was some incredible news! A fully upgraded Maliri fleet arriving at Genwynn opens up a lot of options.”

Dana was next to join them, giving John a cheeky wave as she licked her lips. She was soon followed by Rachel, then Sakura, until each of the girls filled out their usual places around the semi-circle. A rather flustered Jehanna was last to join them, and Ailita helped her to sit on shaky legs, the Nymph giving everyone a broad smile.

John closed his eyes and let out a contented sigh. “I can sense all of you. It feels amazing.”

Calara and Alyssa leaned in to hug him from both sides, and he happily returned their spontaneous display of affection. “I thought it’d be nice to get together and celebrate my latest engagement,” he said, smiling at his blushing fiancée. “It seems you all had fun.”

“I could start every day like this,” Dana said, as she idly stroked her stomach.

“The breakfast of champions,” Rachel noted, giving John a playful grin.

The rest of the girls echoed their agreement, light laughter echoing around the bedroom.

“It’s also been a while since we’ve gathered for a team briefing like this,” John continued. “Is everyone up to speed on our current status?”

Alyssa spoke up for the girls. “I’ve been keeping everyone informed. We ambushed the invasion force heading towards Genwynn last night, and now we’re going to hit the second group that’s heading towards the homeworlds.”

“That’s right,” John said with a nod. “Unfortunately, we’ve run out of spider mines, so I think we should escalate our next ambush by letting Irillith have some fun with the thralls. Inflicting as much damage as possible on their ships is more important than keeping your abilities concealed. Is that alright with you, honey?”

The Maliri hacker nodded eagerly. “I can’t wait! I’ve been itching to cause some mayhem!”

Tashana gave her sister a congratulatory pat on the back, then turned to look quizzically at John. “Now Rill’s baited our trap for Kythshara, why don’t we just jump back to Genthalas for more supplies? Those spider mines are incredibly effective, and we could cripple hundreds more thrall ships before they get close to the homeworlds.”

John considered it for a moment, then reluctantly shook his head. “We just can’t take the chance. If the Progenitor is tracking us, and sees that we’ve jumped to Genthalas, he might follow us there. Or even worse, jump there after we jump back to the front lines. The amount of destruction a Progenitor dreadnought could inflict on Genthalas doesn’t bare thinking about, and we wouldn’t be able to do anything to stop him. He could obliterate the entire station in less than an hour.”

“You’re right,” Tashana reluctantly agreed. “It’s too big a risk.”

“To make up for the lack of mines, I think we should upgrade the Raptor and Valkyrie, and get them ready for combat,” John said, looking around at the group. “We need to make every ambush count from now on, which means maximising our firepower.”

“Sounds good to me,” Dana said, hanging on his every word. “What’ve you got in mind?”

“I want to focus on protection first, so I’ll build new shield generators and power cores for them both,” he replied. “The Valkyrie’s quad Tachyon Lances will do for now, but we could do with upgrading the rotary punisher cannon. Have you got any ideas?”

The redhead nodded eagerly. “Yeah, loads!”

“Remember that we’re limited to small parts with the Soulforge at the moment,” he reminded her. “That means no long barrels.”

“Ah, shit... I forgot about that,” she admitted, her face falling. Dana perked up a moment later and continued, “Still, it won’t be hard to design a better cannon than the mech’s using at the moment. Leave it with me and I’ll come up with something awesome!”

“Fantastic,” he said, giving her an encouraging smile.

“Master, I have a question,” Jade said, getting his attention. “What weapons are we going to install in the new Raptor? It’s still missing its two main guns.”

“Dana? Got any suggestions?” John asked, focusing on his Chief Engineering once again.

She frowned and rubbed her chin. “Well... we’re kinda screwed if we can’t make long guns. The barrels tend to generate the most heat, so ideally we want to make them out of the most durable material we’ve got available.”

“I could just make us a couple more Tachyon Lances as a temporary measure,” Alyssa offered. “They’re not very exciting, but they’ll fill the weapon mounts until you can build something better.”

“That’ll have to do I guess,” Dana said with a rueful shrug. “If I don’t have to think about upgrading the Raptor, it means I’ll have more time to design the new gun for the Valkyrie, so that’s a bonus.”

“Every cloud has a silver lining,” Rachel said, bumping shoulders with her girlfriend.

Calara looked at John quizzically. “We were planning to ambush this invasion group the next time they stop and lower their shields, which should be in about an hour. Do you want to postpone that attack until we’ve had a chance to upgrade the Raptor and Valkyrie?”

He shook his head. “I don’t think so, not unless you really think it’s worth it. I just wanted to capitalise on the downtime before the thralls are vulnerable again to really upgrade our firepower. It’s important we keep up the campaign of continued harassment, as the more frustrated we make those thralls, the more likely they are to start chasing after us. Diverting both of those invasion groups is our number one priority.”

“I agree 100%,” she said, breaking into a wry smile. “I was just going to make the same argument.”

“Alright then,” John said, looking around at his crew. “I think that covers my plan for the day. Do any of you want to discuss anything?”

“What are we going to do about Genwynn?” Tashana asked, with a worried frown. “We can’t let the Galkiran thralls destroy that station; a quarter of all the Maliri males live there.”

“For now we’re going to try to distract the thralls into changing course again,” John explained. “Edraele sent one of her fleets to Genwynn, so that gives us some more options. We could evacuate the station on that fleet, or they could help us to defend the station.”

The Maliri looked even more concerned, and said, “There’s too many males there. You won’t be able to evacuate everybody on Amlaril’s fleet... she doesn’t have enough ships.”

Calara nodded, her expression grim. “I know. As John said, her fleet gives us options... but those options are not ideal, not by a long shot.”

“Which is why getting the thralls to change course is so important,” John said emphatically. “Was there anything else you wanted to discuss about Genwynn?”

Tashana nibbled anxiously at her lip, but shook her head.

“Anybody else?”

“Do you finally want to hear the results of my DNA comparison between Maliri and Larathyrans?” Rachel asked, giving him a self-conscious smile.

“Sure, go ahead,” John agreed, gesturing for her to proceed.

“Better late than never!” Dana teased her girlfriend.

Rachel blushed, but ignored the teasing and padded over to the holo-interface beside the bed. She tapped several icons and searched for her research files, then activated the holo projector. Two sets of DNA appeared above the bed, the triple helix rotating slowly in perfect synchronisation. To John’s untrained eye, they looked exactly the same in every way.

“If you’re thinking they look identical, you’d be correct,” Rachel began, looking up at the two images. “The only difference I’ve been able to find after an extensive DNA analysis, is the pigmentation of their skin varies dramatically between the two species. Terran races usually have distinctive facial traits as well as varying amounts of melanin, but the Maliri and Larathyrans are functionally identical in every way. The thrall subspecies are really just a single species, which have been modified to have distinctive skin tones.”

“You said that they’ve been modified? Are the thralls a bio-engineered species?”

The tawny-haired doctor considered that for a moment before carefully replying, “I originally attributed these DNA modifications to Mael’nerak, but it’s highly unlikely that he tampered with Larathyran genetics. I think the only logical conclusion is that Xar’aziuth designed and modified the root thrall species, then created these different coloured sub species for his Progenitors, so they could command different coloured armies. If the Galkirans are also genetically identical except for having red skin, then we’ll know this hypothesis is correct.”

“Interesting,” John murmured, lost in thought.

“So if they’re the same species, could females from one thrall species breed with males from another?” Jehanna asked, looking intrigued.

“Biologically, there would be nothing impeding a healthy pregnancy,” Rachel replied. “However one of the modifications built into their DNA is an instinctive aversion between thrall species. They’d make each other so uncomfortable, I doubt conception would even be a possibility.”

“But if a Maliri male knocked up a Larathyran female, would their child have a similar skin tone to Helene?” the dusky reporter persisted.

Tashana was sitting next to Helene, and brushed her fingers along the aquatic girl’s teal-hued forearm. “That baby would be seriously cute... just like you.”

Helene gave her an affectionate hug.

“It’s certainly possible,” Rachel said cautiously. “But my prediction would be that the infant would closely follow the maternal colouration. In other words, their child would be indistinguishable from any other Larathyran baby.”

“What makes you say that?” Irillith asked. “You sound very certain.”

“Well, you and your sister are proof that when a Progenitor breeds with a thrall, their children identically match the colouration of the mother; in this case, your great grandmother, Valada. Auralei is a direct descendent of Larn’kelnar, but she has exactly the same skin tone as all the other Larathyrans. My theory is that thrall maternal DNA is dominant in the formation of a child, probably so that any thrall progeny with a Progenitor fit seamlessly into their society.”

“That does make sense,” Sakura agreed, her expression grim. “If you could distinguish between them, then you’d probably end up with an elite social caste who could trace their ancestry back to a Progenitor. That doesn’t fit with Xar’aziuth’s philosophy of interchangeable thralls who are all meat for the grinder.”

Alyssa nodded thoughtfully. “I’m pretty sure Rachel’s right, and there’s something else that I think proves it.” She looked around at the girls, and continued, “You’ve all had the dream, haven’t you? The one where you’re holding John’s baby?”

They all looked at him and smiled as they nodded.

She focused on Sakura and asked, “In your dream, did your baby look just like you? With gorgeous golden brown skin, and beautiful almond-shaped eyes?”

The Asian girl nodded, her expression softening into doe-eyed yearning.

“How about the rest of you?” she asked, looking around at each other girls.

Dana frowned and shook her head. “No. My dream baby didn’t look like Sakura.”

She broke into an impish grin, and Alyssa rolled her eyes at the joke but laughed along with everyone else.

“Why were you so interested in the possibility of cross breeding between thralls?” John asked Jehanna. “Was it to do with helping the Maliri rebuild their population?”

Jehanna blushed and shook her head. “I just thought it was hot. I think your fascination with contrasting skin tones is starting to rub off on me.”

“You and every girl here,” Alyssa confided with a wink. “Why else do you think I seduced Calara?”

“Hey! I thought I seduced you with my damsel in distress routine?” the Latina retorted, as the two girls shared a smile.

As the laughter died down, John glanced around the semi-circle at the girls. “Is that everything then?”

They all nodded in agreement. Before John could say anything else, his stomach grumbled noisily.

“You poor thing, you must be starving,” Helene said with sympathy. “I’ll go make us some breakfast. Would anyone else like to help?”

All the girls immediately volunteered, so the whole group got up and headed for the shower, to get ready for another action packed day.

\*\*\*

Captain Keylessae rubbed her tired eyes as she walked along the corridor, and stifled a yawn. For the first time in days, she’d been enjoying an uninterrupted night’s sleep, until her overzealous subordinate called to inform her that the other invasion force was under attack.

“Better them than us,” she muttered under her breath, glad that she was no longer on the receiving end of the relentless ambushes.

The Galkiran Fleet Commander had been a serving officer for many years, winning countless battles against the Waelentir Empire. However, nothing in that gruelling campaign of attrition could have prepared her for these savage hit-and-run attacks. It was nerve racking having to sail along under constant threat of attack, with this new Progenitor skulking in the shadows and striking whenever the Galkirans were at their most vulnerable.

She approached the reinforced doors that protected the Command Deck, then tapped the glowing runes beside the frame. The portal split open, and for the first time in fifty years, she recoiled at the sight. The serrated teeth reminded her of a hungry maw, ready to chew up Galkiran thralls in this savage conflict, and she couldn’t help wondering when her battleship would be targeted for elimination.

Of course, the casualties in this war weren’t dead yet, but they might as well have been, with hundreds of immobilised warships abandoned in their wake. Keylessae doubted that Gahl’kalgor would make any special effort to recover those marooned personnel, so if this initial invasion failed, he would return to Galkira and amass a new invasion force. Meanwhile all those crippled vessels could then be hunted down and dispatched at their enemy’s leisure.

Keylessae crossed the bridge and settled down in her command chair with a shiver of fear. This new Progenitor they were facing must be a particularly cruel and sadistic monster, to only wound his enemy without finishing them like this. It was obvious that he must revel in their protracted terror, dragging out their suffering for days, as those women waited for their inevitable execution.

Her second-in-command approached, and bowed to her respectfully. “We deployed another comms beacon an hour ago. Other than that, nothing new to report, Captain. What are your orders?”

“Don’t wake me up unless we’re actually being attacked,” Keylessae muttered sourly.

Aelanis sensed her foul mood, and acknowledged the order with an obedient nod. “As you command.”

Keylessae ignored the other woman and stared at the holographic map, wondering which one of those glowing stars harboured their enemy’s base of operations. She had heard dark tales from her predecessors, who had shared terrifying stories from the old campaigns they had fought. Unlike her noble Lord, some of the other Progenitors they had faced were twisted, psychotic fiends, their throneworlds places of sickening madness. Keylessae could only imagine the grotesque horrors that might await them on this monster’s home planet.

Glancing fearfully at the status display for her Dominator class battleship, she saw that the mighty vessel’s shields were still down. “How much longer?!” she barked impatiently at her Chief Engineer.

“Ten more minutes,” the engineering officer replied.

“Can’t we speed this up?” Keylessae muttered. “We’re practically begging to be attacked sitting here like this.”

“It can’t be helped, Captain. We’re already risking damage to the shield projectors by running them for such long periods of time. Unless we give them enough time to recover, they won’t last another day.”

She sighed with frustration. “Fine. Let me know the instant they’re ready.”

The Bridge was suddenly ablaze with light, as searing sapphire beams lit up the darkness of space. A split-second later, glowing bolts thundered into the stern of one of the battleships in her fleet, shredding the engines in a trio of massive explosions.

“Shields up!” Keylessae barked, her heart hammering in her chest.

All around her battleship, the rest of the Galkiran fleets responded just as quickly, as if their crew had their hands hovering nervously over the shield controls. The thralls began to fire back, purple beams lashing out in the direction of the previous attack. This time, the enemy Progenitor didn’t waste time sniping at them from the shadows. It approached boldly in full sight, charging into the teeth of the Galkiran guns, and exchanging salvos as it roared through their ranks.

Keylessae glanced at her battleship’s shield status and was startled to see they were already down to 86%, despite not yet coming under fire. “What happened to our shields? Why aren’t they at maximum?!” she demanded. “We haven’t even taken a hit yet!”

“The focusing crystals are fracturing,” the Chief Engineer explained, grimacing as she glanced at the status display. “They were never designed to take this much strain.”

The Captain cursed vehemently, then glanced back at the Tactical map to look for their opponent.

“They’re going for Carthynna’s fleet!” she warned her crew. “Turn us around and get us back in the fight!”

The bridge crew scrambled to follow her orders, the battleship banking around with surprising agility for such an enormous vessel. When the turn was complete, her flagship joined the rest of the Galkirans in her fleet in chasing after the enemy ship. Keylessae watched as the white cruiser made a smooth turn, then soared between a pair of battleships, one of which was Carthynna’s own vessel.

The Galkirans opened fire at almost point blank range, but there was something very peculiar about their ferocious broadsides. As fast as the enemy ship was, at least some of that terrifying crossfire should have landed on target, but in an outrageous display of good luck, not a single Tachyon Lance seemed to hit. Purple beams criss-crossed each other, slashing into the two flanking battleships, and they continued to exchange salvos long after the white cruiser had raced away. It was as if their gunnery crews were too sluggish to realise the enemy had already departed, and were brainlessly blasting at the closest ship in range.

Keylessae’s lip curled in disgust at the shocking incompetence on display, and rapidly tagged both battleships in her comms interface. “Cease fire, you fools! Cease fire!”

Carthynna’s terrified face loomed in front of the holo-screen. “They won’t stop!”

“What’s the matter with you?!” Keylessae balked incredulously. “Order your gunnery crew to cease fire!”

“They aren’t even touching the controls! The guns won’t stop shooting!” Carthynna wailed. “Nothing’s working! It’s like the ship is possessed!”

Keylessae felt the hair on the back of her neck start to rise, and a shiver of fear ran down her spine. She watched in horror as the two Galkiran battleships continued to pulverise each other’s shields at point blank range. The spinal mounted Quantum Flux Cannons slowly turned, their barrels swinging around with an ominous sense of purpose. When they were lined up on the rear of the other capital ship, the guns began to crackle with mounting power... and both sets of weakened shields deactivated with a feeble flicker.

“No!” Carthynna shrieked, her voice shrill with terror. “No!”

Frozen to her chair, Keylessae could only stare in disbelief as both battleships began to open fire, pounding their sisters-in-arms with merciless brutality. One engine after another was blown to pieces, each capital ship rocked by explosions as they proceeded to cripple each other without remorse. It was the most senseless display of friendly fire that Keylessae had ever witnessed, made all the more terrifying by the fact that the crews had nothing to do with it.

There was deathly silence on the bridge of Keylessae’s ship, as the rest of her crew stared at the two doomed battleships in shock. The only sound that interrupted that stunned silence, was Carthynna’s broken sobbing.

\*\*\*

John chuckled as he watched the invading battleships turn on one another. He glanced at Irillith, who gave him a predatory grin, and the two huge warships proceeded to knock each other out of the battle with ruthless efficiency.

“You liked that?” Irillith asked him playfully.

“You are one wicked Lioness,” he replied, looking at her with open admiration. “Those crews must be wondering what the hell is going on. I almost feel sorry for them.”

“Hey, I’m being good,” she protested. “It’s not like I vented them, or engaged in any Psy-Ops.”

That wasn’t the end of the mayhem and the Maliri hacker proceeded to sow chaos through the Galkiran ranks as the Invictus sailed through the destruction. The pair of battleships weren’t the last to fire on each other, and a number of destroyers were crippled when they were rammed in the rear by much larger vessels.

Eventually, the Invictus’ shields reached the red line, as they took a hammering from Galkiran guns. Jade banked the battlecruiser around, then made another jaunty weave, waggling their rear to taunt the invaders before the Invictus raced away. As soon as they were a safe distance from the enemy fleets, she engaged hyper-warp and they rocketed into space.

“Nice work, ladies,” John said, massaging Jade’s shoulders, while giving Calara and her gunnery crews a respectful nod. “How many ships did we take out?”

Calara closed her eyes as she recalled the battle, counting the Galkiran ships that were too maimed to enter hyper-warp and continue the invasion.

“Seventy-six... so approximately three-quarters of a fleet,” she replied, opening her eyes to meet his gaze. “They’re getting jumpier about reactivating their shields and responding very fast to our ambushes.”

“It’s to be expected,” John said with a rueful frown. “We’ve been hitting them repeatedly when their shields are down, so they must know it’s coming. Any sign of pursuit?”

Calara focused the Tactical Map on the floundering Galkiran forces, which still seemed to be reeling from the shocking ambush. “It doesn’t look like it.”

“Are we hammering them too hard?” he mused aloud. “Or maybe we’re making it too obvious that they have no chance of catching us?”

“Sorry, Master,” Jade replied remorsefully. “I just wanted to get you all to safety.”

“No, don’t apologise, you did nothing wrong,” he said, removing his Paragon helmet, then leaning down to give their Nymph pilot a reassuring kiss. “I’m just wondering how to get them to chase after us like before?”

“We might have overdone it with the minefields,” Calara admitted. “To be fair, we’ve given them very good reason to be scared of pursuing us.”

As the Invictus moved further away from the battlefield, travelling perpendicular to the invasion force’s attack vector, Marika pointed at the holo-map. “Master, what’s that?”

“What, honey?” he asked, turning to see where she was pointing.

“Over there, far in the distance,” the sharp-eyed catgirl replied.

“Some unknown sensor contact,” Calara noted, highlighting the icon. “Shall we investigate?”

“Sure, let’s take a look,” John agreed. “Alyssa, would you do the honours.”

His blonde XO leaned over her console and set a new course for the Invictus, which would get them there as quickly as possible.

Dana pushed back from her Engineering Station, then turned to face John. “So, the clock’s started ticking. I reckon we’ve got about another eight hours before they’ll be forced to drop their shields and let them recover, or lose them completely.”

“Does that give me enough time to build all the components we need?” he asked, leaning against the Pilot’s station.

“Let’s see,” she murmured, ticking off the list with her fingers. “We need a couple of Progenitor Shield Generators as well as the shield projectors. We also need two new Power Cores, and we’ll need all the parts for the Valkyrie’s new gun... all built using the Soulforge.”

“Damn, it’s too much, isn’t it?” he asked, frowning with disappointment. “The Invictus’ Shield Generator took most of the day to finish.”

“Not necessarily,” she replied, shaking her head. “That bad boy was nearly as big as the entire Valkyrie, and the strike craft versions will be much smaller. You should have enough time to build everything, but you’re going to be chained to the Soulforge for most of the day.”

“It’s worth it,” he said with conviction. “What about the rest of you? Have you got any plans for the next eight hours?”

“Training,” Sakura said with a wry smile.

“Training,” Jehanna said a moment later.

Irillith was eager to join in too. “Training.”

Dana grinned at him. “Designing.”

“Planning,” Calara volunteered with a wry smile.

Alyssa glanced at Irillith. “Mentoring.”

“Cooking,” Helene declared happily.

Tashana raised an eyebrow. “Begging.”

He laughed at her unexpected answer. “What?”

She turned to Dana and clasped her hands together as she pleaded, “Can I have new pistols please?”

“Ah shit!” the redhead cursed. “Yeah, I’m really sorry. I totally forgot about them.”

“You might as well work on them first,” John suggested. “I won’t get around to the Valkyrie’s guns until after the shields are all built.”

“Sure thing,” Dana agreed.

“In that case... training,” Tashana said, revising her answer.

“Napping,” Jade replied, before glancing at Helene. “And swimming?”

The mermaid nodded enthusiastically.

Calara looked at the nymph and shook her head. “Napping? Really?”

Jade stretched and gave her a languid smile. “I’d prefer to be teaching my sisters how to shapeshift into dragons, but John needs to keep them stuffed to the brim before I can do that. I would offer to help with the refits, but the Collective get sad if they don’t feel like they’re being useful.”

“Hold on a second, go back a bit,” John said, looking at the Nymph curiously. “Are any of your sisters actually close to being that powerful?”

She tilted her head to one side as she studied her shapeshifting siblings, who all listened with avid interest. “Ailita’s still new, but you’ve been giving her lots of attention recently. It won’t be long before she can shapeshift more aggressively. You’ve done a remarkable job of being fair with my sisters, who are all at approximately the same stage of development. There’s nothing to stop any of them from catching up to me, they just need more of your loving care.”

John stroked her hair, and she nuzzled into his hand. “I fed you for months, honey. It’ll take a lot longer to do the same for four Nymphs.”

“For four Nymphs, yes, for one... not quite so long,” she purred, enjoying his attention.

He glanced back at Leylira, who he knew longed to fight at his side. Her amber eyes sparkled with hopeful anticipation as she met his curious gaze.

“Let’s just focus on the invasion for now,” he finally said. “I think it’s an interesting idea, but I’m already enhancing Jehanna, Irillith, and Ailita. When Jehanna and Irillith are confident with their psychic abilities, and Ailita can shrug off hits from a thrall’s Tachyon rifle, then it’s definitely worth considering.”

“You know best, Master,” Jade agreed.

“I guess that just leaves me,” Rachel said. “Researching.”

“Anything interesting?”

“Faye,” she replied. “I want to make sure everything is perfect with my neural map of Faye’s organic brain, so that Irillith can prepare a digital upload for the prototype. If anyone needs me for anything else though, just let me know.”

“No, you focus on bringing back Faye,” he said with conviction. “She’s always going to be a high priority.”

“We’re getting close to that sensor contact,” Alyssa informed them. “The sensors should start picking up more detail soon.”

Calara returned her attention to the map, then studied the sensor profile. “It’s a comms beacon,” she said, looking at it with interest. “The Galkirans must be using them to maintain contact between the two invasion groups.”

“Should we destroy it?” John asked, walking over to take a closer look. “Isolating the fleets from each other would make it much harder for them to coordinate their invasion.”

The Latina paused for a moment, then shook her head. “We want them to stay in contact, at least until they’ve figured out where to find Kythshara. Once they’ve taken the bait, we can knock out their comms beacons and disrupt their communications.”

“Makes sense,” he agreed, before replacing his Paragon helmet on his head. “I’m going to stow away my gear, then make a start on that psychic shaping. Don’t hesitate to come and see me if you need me for anything, or even if you just want a chat.”

“I’ll make sure you have plenty of company,” Alyssa said with a fond smile, as the girls waved him goodbye.

\*\*\*

“There they are, Captain!”

Narzera looked up from the holo-interface on her command chair, and stared at the highlighted portion of the Sector Map. The vanguard of the invasion fleet was moving closer into her cruiser’s sensor range, advancing like an inexorable tide. She watched them for a few minutes, then frowned in confusion when the onrushing tide seemed to be considerably smaller than she was expecting.

“Are they in range of our comms beacon?” she asked, the communications officer.

The thrall acknowledged her with a firm nod. “You should have a strong signal now, Captain.”

Narzera studying the approaching Galkiran fleets again and counted only eleven fleet formations, making her wonder what had happened to the other eighteen. Seeking some answers, she sent out a broadcast, intending to make contact with her Progenitor master’s dreadnought. The call took considerably longer than she was expecting to reach its target, indicating that the dreadnought was not with this small invasion force.

Her matriarch answered, staring listlessly back at her through the holo-screen. “What?”

“This is Captain Narzera,” she said cautiously. “My ship is at the forefront-”

“I know who you are,” Valeria muttered sullenly, cutting her off. “What do you want?”

The Scout Captain took a deep breath, then began again. “I have a vitally important message I wish to relay to Lord Gahl’kalgor.”

Valeria’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “Yes... I’m sure you do. Trying to gain his favour are you, Captain Narzera?”

The captain hesitated, seeing the murderous rage smouldering behind that amber-eyed glare. She could feel her life hanging by a thread, and instinctively knew that if she pushed her matriarch now, she’d end up a withered corpse.

“Perhaps I could just tell you instead, if you can spare a moment of your valuable time, matriarch?” she asked obsequiously.

The fierce tension in Valeria’s eyes faded away, to be replaced by vague disinterest. “Tell me, then.”

Narzera carefully explained about the sensor data they had discovered being routed through the Maliri Comms Beacon, and the embedded signal hidden within.

“Have you hacked this hidden signal yet?” Valeria asked, suddenly looking intrigued.

“Not yet, Matriarch,” Narzera explained. “The encryption is complex and proving to be a challenge. We should break the code soon, but we require more time.”

Valeria slumped back in her sear. “Call me when you’ve hacked it.”

Narzera opened her mouth to reply, then fell silent when she realised she was staring at a blank holo-screen. Her own temper flared at being dismissed with such thinly-veiled contempt, but there was nothing she could do against the powerful matriarch, other than sit there and take the insults.

\*\*\*

The bailiff led the prosecution’s next witness to the stand, the older man greying at the temples, but possessing sharp, piercing eyes.

“This is outrageous!” Laurence Walker hissed, leaning forward to speak with Tom and his lawyer. “Do you have any idea how many credits I paid that man to take your case?! And now they’re calling him as a witness to testify against you?!”

Tom Walker glanced back at his father, who bristled with indignant fury.

His mother patted her husband on the arm to placate him. “Don’t make a scene, Laurence,” she murmured, trying to be discreet. “Please just sit back and trust in Mr. Kincaid.”

Laurence waved her off, then looked at the lawyer expectantly. “Well?”

“There’s nothing we can do, Admiral,” Caspian Kincaid patiently explained in a hushed whisper. “The Prosecution is able to call anyone they choose as a witness, other than a serving member of the Admiralty.”

Tom’s father snorted and sat back in his chair with a huff.

Commodore turned towards the stand, and said politely, “Please could you introduce yourself to the court, and tell us your area of expertise.”

“My name is Senior Consultant Fitzroy-Ferguson,” the witness replied in his well-spoke accent. “I work at the Unity City Medical Institute, and handle many of their more... exotic cases.”

“I would go into your extensive medical background in the fields of neural regeneration, neuropathy, and toxicology, but I think it’s sufficient for the court for me to say that you are considered to be Terra’s leading expert in all three fields. Is that correct?”

Fitzroy-Ferguson leaned forward towards the microphone. “Yes, among several others.”

His answer might have been considered arrogant, but his tone was simply matter-of-fact. The man’s towering self-confidence had a notable effect on the jury and the people in the gallery, who all listened to him more carefully.

“And you treated Commander Walker as a patient at the Institute?”

“Yes.”

“Please could you elaborate on his condition, Mr. Fitzroy-Ferguson?” the prosecutor requested.

“Objection,” Kincaid said. “This is a clear breach of doctor patient confidentiality.”

“Overruled,” the Judge replied with a frown. “Mr. Kincaid, you must be well aware that in cases of this magnitude, any rights to patient confidentiality are rendered null and void.”

“I withdraw my objection then, your honour,” he said politely.

Judge Nancarrow ignored him and gestured to the prosecution lawyer. “You may proceed.”

Bromidus nodded, then said, “Commander Walker was brought to you in a coma. Please could you tell the court what was the cause of that coma.”

“Thomas Walker was delivered to the Institute with some moderate lacerations to his scalp. However the injuries were not the cause of his coma, and Mr. Walker was actually impaired by an exceptionally rare protein-based neurotoxin,” the doctor explained. “What makes this particular neurotoxin so interesting, is that it renders the subject unconscious and unresponsive, without any long-term side-effects.”

“And how did you awaken Commander Walker from his coma?” Bromidus asked next.

“Our intervention was unnecessary, as the neurotoxin was degrading at a cellular level.” The doctor darted his gaze towards Admiral Walker, his lip curling into a hint of a smile. “That means the toxin was slowly breaking down, and was eventually passed harmlessly from my patient’s bloodstream. At which point, Thomas Walker regained consciousness.”

“Was this a synthetic poison, designed to put Commander Walker into an artificially induced coma?” Bromidus enquired.

“No, it’s organic in origin,” Fitzroy-Ferguson replied. “The neurotoxin was harvested on Brimor, from an aquatic predator that uses its venom to incapacitate its prey. This was the genus for its name: Subphyum Brimorchordata Hypertoxin.”

“And I believe the toxin lowers the recipient’s breathing rate, which would have also had the benefit of extending Commander Walkers’s life support until he was rescued by Federation forces?”

“Objection, leading the witness,” Kincaid interjected.

“Sustained,” Judge Nancarrow ruled. “Please rephrase your question, Commodore.”

“Mr. Fitzroy-Ferguson, would this neurotoxin have been an ideal choice to fake a coma?” Bromidus asked.

“Yes, for the reasons you just outlined,” the doctor replied. “It mimics the superficial appearance of a coma caused by head injury. If Thomas Walker had been subjected to this neurotoxin just six months ago, the true cause of his coma would have remained undetected.”

“Why is that? What happened six months ago?”

“I released a research paper on alien neurotoxins and this particular variant was identified and its symptoms catalogued. As a result of my work, the identifiers for this neurotoxin were added to the battery of tests conducted in a standard military tox-screening. Those field tests were sufficient to identify that the patient was poisoned.”

“It appears Commander Walker was quite unfortunate with his timing. Thank you Mr. Fitzroy-Ferguson,” Bromidus said, before turning to the Judge. “No more questions, your honour.”

Kincaid rose from his chair and walked over to the doctor. “Mr. Fitzroy-Ferguson, may I pose a hypothetical question for you?”

“You may,” the senior consultant replied.

“If you wanted to frame a man, by inducing an artificial coma, that you knew would then be detected by Federation tox screenings, what neurotoxin would you use?”

The doctor only paused to consider his answer for a second. “I would use Subphyum Brimorchordata Hypertoxin. The fact that it has only just been made detectable by Federation toxicology screenings would add credence to the supposition that the toxin was only discovered by fortunate timing... or unfortunate timing in the victim’s case.”

“How interesting,” Kincaid said, nodding thoughtfully. He flashed a smile at Bromidus, who fumed silently at his desk. “No more questions, your honour.”

\*\*\*

John watched as the last piece in a steady procession of components floated out of the Soulforge, and over to the parts placed neatly on the deck. He’d had to build several Power Cores before out of Crystal Alyssium, so this was nothing new, but the material he was building these devices out of was many times stronger. With that increase in durability, the pressure and temperature inside the core could be maintained at much higher levels, massively increasing the amount of energy created by the fusion reaction.

Despite the Power Core’s relatively small size, the ancient Progenitor technology was capable of producing a huge amount of power. Just one of those devices was able to generate enough energy to power a Terran Federation battleship on its own, surpassing several of the Federation’s existing Power Cores which dwarfed this one in size. The thought of using something so incredibly potent inside a tiny strike craft seemed almost absurd, and John smiled as he started the process of building it.

He gestured towards the parts and began assembling them into the spherical Power Core. The components rose obediently off the floor, then began to interlock together, building up the incredibly advanced device from the inside outwards. Satisfied that construction was proceeding correctly, according to the schematics he’d memorised, John then turned his attention to the next item on the list. Crystal Alyssium streamed inside the Soulforge, and he began to form the first of the parts needed for the Raptor’s new Shield Generator.

“Can I get you a drink... John?”

Turning to look at Ailita in surprise, he smiled at her affectionately. “That sounded like it was really hard to say.”

The Nymph was frowning in concentration, and she nodded in reply. “It feels so unnatural, Master.”

“I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable,” he said, reaching out to stroke her hand.

Ailita dropped the two big cushions she was carrying, then interlaced their fingers. “This one knows that you prefer it if we address you by name.”

“Only because it lets me know you’re overcoming the rules that restrict your behaviour,” he explained. “Jade’s been with me for much longer than any of you, and she’s lapsed back to referring to me as ‘Master’ most of the time. It feels much more natural for her, so why try to force something that would make her uncomfortable? I’ve come to terms with the fact that I am your master, so I might as well just embrace it.”

“You are as wise as you are kind, Master,” Ailita said, raising his fingers to her lips for a grateful kiss.

“I don’t know about that,” he said with a modest smile. “I do care about you and your sisters very much, and I want you to be relaxed and happy here with me.”

“I think you already have your wish,” she noted happily. “Oh, and you didn’t answer my question, Master?”

“I’d love a drink, thank you. Just a glass of chilled water would be great.”

Ailita slipped her hand from his, then bounded towards the exit. “Dana, would you care for any refreshments?”

“Nah, I’m good,” the redhead replied, giving the nymph an appreciative wave without turning away from her holo-screen.

After Ailita left, John continued his psychic shaping on the Soulforge, staying quiet to avoid disturbing his Chief Engineer as she worked.

“Yessss!” Dana crowed to herself, pumping her fist in the air.

John couldn’t ignore an outburst like that, so he called over to the excited teenager, “Are you making good progress, honey?”

She flashed him a broad grin. “I’ve finished!”

“You’re done with Tashana’s pistols?” John asked in surprise. “Can I see the design?”

Dana grabbed her holo-reader, then quickly uploaded the newly completed schematic. She skipped down the steps from the Engineering Podium and jogged over to hand him the device.

Plopping down on one of the cushions, she leaned against his thigh. “Check it out for yourself. What do you think?”

John activated the display, and his eyes widened in shock. “Holy shit! That’s one mean looking gun!”

The redhead giggled and nodded. “I know, right?”

“And it’s based on Quantum Flux Cannon tech?!” he muttered, shaking his head as he studied the schematics in awe.

“Yep!” she confirmed, her grin broadening. Looking up at him with a puppy-dog expression, she continued, “Any chance you could build one now?”

He laughed and nodded, setting aside the piece of Shield Generator he was working on. “I’ll get cracking right away.”

\*\*\*

Tom retook his seat next to his lawyer behind the defendant’s desk, as the rest of the court filed in for the afternoon session.

“You’ve been doing an incredible job, Caspian,” he whispered to his defence counsel. “I thought we were in big trouble with all of the witnesses and evidence they’ve presented, but you’ve managed to turn it all around. I’m sorry I doubted you before; you were right that I should trust you.”

“You don’t need to apologise, Tom,” the lawyer said with a confident smile. “I’ve been doing this for a long time, and I wouldn’t have taken your case if I didn’t believe you were innocent.”

“This isn’t your first rodeo,” Tom said, quoting Caspian himself.

The lawyer smiled in response. “Exactly.”

Tom glanced back at the row directly behind, where his fiancée and parents were sitting to support him. His father was still angry at the doctor’s testimony, and from weary experience, Tom knew the stubborn admiral would be stewing over that for days. His mother sat poised and elegant, looking every part an admiral’s trophy wife, especially when the cameras were pointed their way. Anna looked more relaxed than she had in weeks, and she flashed him a smile when they made eye-contact.

She leaned forward and lightly touched his arm. “It’s going really well, Tom. This will all be over soon. Everyone is starting to realise you’re innocent, just like I always knew you were.”

“Thanks, baby,” he said, placing his hand on hers.

“All rise for Judge Nancarrow,” the bailiff announced.

Tom reluctantly released his fiancée’s hand, and rose from his chair. The Judge took his place behind the Judge’s bench, then gestured for them all to sit.

“Please proceed, Commodore.”

Bromidus approached the podium. “If it pleases your honour, I would like to submit a new piece of evidence. The prosecution would like to submit combat footage of Commander Walker’s Claymore from the Callopean Shoals Massacre.”

There was a shocked gasp through the gallery, and everyone fell into a hushed silence.

All except Caspian Kincaid, who immediately rose to his feet. “Objection, your honour! The black box recording we were given from HCJ-C-1482 was supposedly corrupted! Even though that is meant to be impossible! If the prosecution has been able to restore that footage, the defence has a right to review this evidence in advance!”

The Judge glanced at Bromidus. “Commodore, do you have an explanation for why this evidence was not provided to the defence?”

“This is not black box data from Commander Walker’s Claymore gunship,” the lawyer replied. “We have pieced together this evidence from a collection of gun cameras, and externally mounted hull cameras. It was a laborious and painstaking task, which was only completed less than an hour ago.”

Kincaid cleared his throat to get the Judge’s attention. “Your honour, the defence requests a recess, so that we can review this combat footage before it’s shown to the court.”

Judge Nancarrow fidgeted with his gavel, spinning the small handle between his fingers. “Denied. If this is authentic combat footage from the battle, you should need no time to prepare, the evidence will speak for itself. You may proceed, Commodore.”

The prosecution lawyer turned towards the gallery, and announced, “This combat footage is shocking to see, especially for those without prior military experience. If you are of a delicate disposition, I would strongly advise you to exit the court before we present this evidence.”

Of course nobody moved, and the people watching in the gallery leaned forward in their seats.

Bromidus pointed his remote at the big holo-screen and clicked a button, starting the playback. In the corner of the image was a small text description, that read: “Janus, external cam. Launch tubes.” There was no sound, but none was needed, the visual images were shocking enough.

All around the heavy carrier, Terran Federation ships were being savaged by Brimorian forces, yellow particle beams carving through grey titanium plating without mercy. Directly in front of the screen, a Federation destroyer veered past in a death roll, the rear half a burning ruin. Tom’s wing rocketed out of the Janus’ launch tubes, and the video paused for a second, highlighting the tail code on one of the Claymores.

A huge swarm of Brimorian fighters descended on Tom’s wing, as well as the wings of Rapiers and Claymores being launched from the other carriers. There were shocked gasps from the gallery as the two squadrons opened fire on each other with a storm of lasers and particle bolts. There were explosions on both sides as Brimorian fighters and Federation gunships were cut to pieces.

The footage shifted, as did the text at the bottom. “Themis, external cam. Fire control tower.” This view was taken from a Federation battleship, and it showed a trio of heavy cruisers being mauled by three times as many Brimorian cruisers. Fighters swirled around the big warships as they exchanged broadsides, then the image paused, identifying HCJ-C-1482 by its tail code. The rest of Tom’s wing of Claymores were firing non stop, but not so much as a single orange laser bolt appeared from his gunship.

There was another shift to another camera: “HCJ-R-15912.” This footage was taken from inside a sprawling dogfight, with shots flying past like a hellish rain storm. The image paused as Tom’s wing banked to starboard, just ahead of the rapier fighter, identifying him by his tail code. The other gunships flanking Tom were being struck multiple times, their shields flashing with each impact, but his Claymore had managed to avoid all incoming fire.

The next change was to a carrier, near the rear of the besieged formation, the camera reading: “Thalassa, external cam. Port Topdeck.” Directly ahead, a battleship shuddered as it was raked by salvos of particle beams, a trio of Brimorian battleships systematically cutting the grey vessel to pieces. As it listed to one side, the name ‘Momus’ appeared along its scarred hull. The image paused for a moment to highlight HCJ-C-1482 as Tom’s Claymore appeared in the distance. The other member of his gunship wing continued to blast away at the Brimorians, but Tom’s guns remained still.

As the appalled audience watched, the Momus began to break apart in a series of devastating explosions. There was a shocked silence as Admiral Morgan’s flagship was severed through its spine, with scores of escape pods desperately ejecting from the doomed vessel.

The camera view shifted again, this time back to one of the previous vessels: “Themis, external cam. Fire control tower.” Now the battleship was ablaze, with several of its main turrets twisted and broken, or completely destroyed. Tom’s wing flew past, hounded by a dozen enemy fighters, and it was clear to see that his Claymore was the only one still unscathed.

He peeled away, abandoning his wingmates, and was promptly ignored by the rampaging horde of alien fighters. They continued to pour their fire into Tom’s wingmates, and as the cameras shifted again and again, their Claymores were all destroyed, one after the other.

The final change was back to the first camera: “Janus, external cam. Launch tubes.” This time the camera shook violently, the screen vibrating as the heavy carrier shuddered with internal explosions. Tom’s Claymore sailed into view, still untouched despite flying through that horrific maelstrom of carnage. It glided to a halt, then sat there in space, as all around it, Admiral Morgan’s fleet died.

There were sobs coming from the gallery now, as family members witnessed their loved ones being brutally murdered by alien invaders. Cruisers, fighters, battleships, and carriers... they were all torn apart by Brimorian forces, and then particle beams began to fire at smaller targets, as they hunted down the helpless escape pods. The Janus camera suddenly jerked violently, then went black, as the heavy carrier met the same fate as the rest of the warships in that doomed fleet.

Tom sunk down in his chair, cringing from the horror he’d just witnessed. He could feel hate-filled eyes glaring at him, as almost every man and woman in the courtroom condemned him as the traitor responsible for the Callopean Shoals Massacre.

\*\*\*

#

\*Dana’s waiting for you in the Firing Range,\* Alyssa informed John, as he finished assembling the newly crafted pistol.

He inserted the tiny charging chamber into the gunframe, then slotted the other half of the external casing into place and sealed it closed. Holding out his hand, the gleaming white pistol floated over to him obediently, where it waited to be plucked out of the air. He turned it in his hand, admiring the sleek look to the double-barrelled firearm, which reminded him of a duellist’s pistol with its elongated barrel. John was surprised at the weapon’s weight, and as he took experimental aim across the Workshop, he wondered if Tashana would struggle with how hefty it was, especially dual-wielding a pair in an extended gunfight.

“I’m just going to take a quick break to see what Tashana thinks of her new pistol,” John said to his Nymph adjutant. “I’ve still got a lot of shaping to do on the Soulforge, so I won’t be too long.”

“I’ll speak to Helene about preparing some dinner for you, Master,” Ailita said, as she followed him out of the Engineering Bay.

“That would be amazing, thank you,” he said gratefully, giving her an appreciative hug as they walked out into the corridor.

“You’re welcome,” she replied, before giving him a cheerful wave goodbye.

“John!” Tashana called out, as she stepped away from the grav-tube. “Is that my new pistol?”

“Just finished the prototype a minute ago,” He replied, holding the weapon up for her to see.

The Maliri gunfighter’s eyes gleamed with anticipation as she hurried over to join him. “It looks really powerful! Can I have a closer look?”

John handed the pistol over to her as they walked towards the Firing Range, and he immediately noticed Tashana’s frown of concern as she felt the extra weight. “I noticed that too. Maybe Dana went a bit overboard.”

She held her arm outstretched and drew a bead on an imaginary target. “It must be at least 50% heavier than the last pistol she designed. All that weight is going to make them cumbersome to use, especially when I’m aiming a pair of them at agile targets.”

He tapped the button to open the door, then waited for Tashana to enter first. “Just let her know. We’ve probably got enough time to make some changes.”

“Change what?” Dana asked, frowning as she overheard them doubting her expertise.

Tashana gave her a rueful frown. “This new pistol looks incredible, but it’s a bit bigger and much heavier than I’m used to. I’m just worried it won’t be practical to use two of them in a protracted firefight.”

“Well, duh,” Dana replied, rolling her eyes. “You haven’t switched it on yet.”

“Huh?” the Maliri asked, looking down at the pistol. “What difference does that make?”

The redhead skipped over to them, then flipped a switch and locked it in place with a click. “Try now.”

“Holy crap!” Tashana marvelled, as her sagging hands practically bounced upward. “Now it feels practically weightless!”

She spun the pistol around her finger using the trigger guard, then caught it by the grip and rapidly pointed the weapon at several imaginary targets.

“How’s that?” Dana asked, looking smug.

Tashana laughed, and glanced down at the pistol with a beaming smile. “Sorry, John, I think I’m falling in love. How did you do that, Dana?”

“Do you remember we built anti-gravity suspensors into the Reaper Cannons?” the gifted gunsmith explained. “Well they worked fine for a big, mostly stable weapon platform like that, but I figured you’d be waving these pistols all over the place. So I incorporated the omni-directional stabiliser from a Null-Inertia Gyroscope, and ta-da!”

“May I?” John asked, holding his hand out.

Tashana passed him the firearm and John could immediately feel a massive difference in its handling. He aimed down the range and nodded appreciatively. “She’s right, this feels amazing. You could shoot a pair of these pistols for hours and never get tired.”

He handed the new pistol back to Tashana, who looked at Dana expectantly. “Okay, what else can it do? Tell me everything!”

The redhead grinned at her newfound enthusiasm. “Well it’s a similar idea to the old pistols, with the same double-barrel design. The lower barrel is an energy weapon based off Tachyon Lance technology. I slightly lowered the power output, which lets you fire it almost instantly, instead of having to wait a second for the beam to fully focus.”

“Nice,” the Maliri said, heartily approving of the change. “I tend to be constantly on the move when we’re fighting, so having to pause to aim each shot would’ve really hampered my mobility.”

“I know,” Dana said with an indulgent smile. “That’s why I modified it.”

Tashana blushed. “Of course you already knew. Sorry, I’m just excited.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s nice to see you appreciating fine quality craftsmanship,” Dana said, before tapping a finger on the upper barrel. “And that’s a miniaturised Quantum Flux Cannon.”

The Maliri looked at her with wonder. “Wait... are you serious?”

“Mmm hmm,” Dana agreed, her eyes sparkling with professional pride. “I made a bunch of tweaks, but that bad boy is based on Progenitor technology. You might not be able to shoot a battleship out of orbit with that pistol, but it should still pack a hell of a punch.”

“How does it work?” Tashana asked, turning the gun to look at it from various angles.

“Hand it over, and I’ll run you through the basics.”

Tashana eagerly passed her the firearm. “Here you go!”

Dana held it in one hand, then tapped her finger on the pistol grip. “You load the magazine in here. This also doubles as the Quantum Flux Chamber.”

“Inside the grip?!” Tashana marvelled, staring at it in awe.

“Like I said, I had to make a number of modifications. You don’t exactly have a lot of room to work with inside a pistol, at least not compared to a forty metre cannon!”

“Yeah, I bet,” John said with a chuckled. “So how does it work exactly?”

“Well the ship-based ones load six rounds into the flux chamber, then charge them up, which takes about ten seconds. While the rounds are being charged, power is pumped into the flux stabilisers and acceleration tracks built into the barrel. A targeting beam lets the gunner lock onto the target, then all six rounds are fired in a volley.”

“And firing off six-round volleys with a pistol would be highly-impractical,” John guessed, seeing the problem she’d been forced to address.

“Exactly. By using containment fields to keep the flux chamber under tight control, I was able to incorporate it into the pistol grip. So that means as soon as you load a fresh magazine, it starts charging the new rounds. I also massively scaled back the power load needed to energise the barrel, so you can keep that constantly charged, instead of ramping it up for each salvo.”

“So it fires single rounds?” Tashana asked, looking at the pistol in fascination.

Dana nodded, then touched the lower barrel. “Strip shields off a thrall using tachyon beams.” She then tapped the upper barrel. “And finish them with this.”

“Can I try it out?”

Reaching behind her to the gun table, Dana retrieved a loaded pistol magazine. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Tashana slotted the magazine into place, then glanced down at the soft blue glow emanating from the grip. “Is that coming from the quantum flux chamber?”

“Yeah, but the radiation isn’t too bad. John feeds you all the time, so it’s not like you’re going to get cancer or anything,” Dana said with a shrug.

The Maliri exchanged a shocked glance with John, until the teenager’s giggles made her blush. “Alright, you got me that time,” Tashana bashfully admitted.

“Sorry, I couldn’t resist,” the redhead said, before reaching over to tap a small icon. The lights flicked on and off. “It’s just cosmetic. You’ll have a round counter hooked up to your Paragon helmet, but the blue light just lets you know at a glance that you’re still loaded with charged rounds.”

She handed out ear protection, and after slipping them over her head, Tashana stepped up to the range. “I assume the pistol will have a smart linked targeting reticle for a Paragon helmet too?”

“Yep,” Dana replied, before her gaze flicked back to Tashana, wondering why she was standing there expectantly. “Oops, my bad. Here’s a pair of range glasses; they work the same way as the helmet.”

“I know,” Tashana replied, winking at her. “We’ve used them before.”

Now it was Dana’s turn to blush as she handed them over.

Tashana deftly slipped on the glasses, then aimed downrange. She moved the barrel from side to side, and noticed there was a twin pair of targeting reticles, one on top of the other.

“Let me give you something more interesting to shoot at,” Dana said, before tapping the control panel to deploy a targeting dummy.

It raised out of the ground, constructed from the usual polycarbonate material, which was designed to simulate the resistance of an organic body to round penetration. However this targeting dummy was wearing a thrall’s black breastplate, the body armour complete with feminine curves.

“Is that authentic?” John asked in surprise. “Where did you get that from?”

“I swiped it off one of the robots on Kythshara,” Dana replied. “Which reminds me... we need to have a chat about them.”

A protective shield flickered into existence, the purple field offering the target dummy the same level of protection as a regular thrall in combat.

Tashana took careful aim, then squeezed the trigger, loosing off a burst of sapphire tachyon beams at the dummy. The energy from the impacts sent ripples around the surface of the shield, making the curved surface much more visible to the naked eye.

“Shields down to 57%,” Dana noted from the firing range interface.

The Maliri nodded and fired again for a split second longer, neatly stripping the shields from her target. “That’s so much faster than my old pistols.”

“Yeah, it just takes a couple of decent bursts to knock their shields out,” Dana agreed. “Or you can just light them up and do it one go, if you manage to catch them out of cover.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” Tashana murmured, lining up the crosshairs on the centre of the dummy’s torso.

She squeezed the trigger for the second weapon system incorporated into the pistol, sending a round rocketing down the crackling barrel. The charged slug punched into the target and blasted the dummy clean off the stand, sending it tumbling away in a blizzard of polycarbonate flakes. There was a crash as the round kept on going, slamming into the reinforced plates at the end of the range.

“Let’s go check out the damage,” Dana suggested, jerking her thumb towards the flurry of plastic chips.

Tashana unloaded the pistol and left it on the firing bench, then the trio walked downrange to search for the armoured dummy.

“There it is,” Dana said, pointing towards a hint of black amongst the piles of grey polycarbonate flakes.

The Maliri let out a low whistle when she saw the shattered remains of the breastplate, and the practically non-existent remnants of the dummy. Her gaze flicked to the back of the firing range, and the smoking crater in the centre of the rear wall. The round had punched deep into the Crystal Alyssium plating, even after piercing through a set of thrall power armour.

“Not bad, Dana, not bad at all,” she said, while studying the impressive degree of armour penetration. “I could probably take out two unshielded thralls with a single shot.”

“Yep! You’re really going to fuck them up!” the redhead exclaimed, before offering her a high-five.

Tashana slapped her hand against Dana’s. “All thanks to you.”

“I reckon we should just call them Quantum pistols, instead of coming up with some fancy name,” Dana tentatively suggested. “What do you think?”

“I love my new Quantum Pistol!” the Maliri gushed. “Thanks for making such an incredible weapon.”

“You deserve it,” Dana said, giving her a quick hug. “Plus, I’m really sorry it took me so long to get around to upgrading your guns.”

“It’s my own fault for not following the template, and just using a Tachyon rifle like everyone else.”

Dana laughed. “One size fits all, right John?”

He didn’t respond straight away, and both girls turned to see him squatting down beside the shattered target dummy with a pensive look on his face.

John brushed his fingers over the jagged rim of the gaping hole blasted through the black breastplate. There was barely anything left of the body armour, which now consisted of two battered pauldrons connected to the remains of a cracked gorget, and a few twisted scraps that held together the plating around the waist. The blizzard of polycarbonate chips actually represented the shredded internal organs of a thrall unfortunate enough to be shot by that lethal pistol, which meant the end of the firing range should actually look like a bloody charnel house.

He couldn’t help wondering if their guns had actually reached a stage of excessive overkill, as it would be almost impossible to survive a torso hit from a Quantum round. The thralls were their enemy, but he dreaded to think of the carnage the Lionesses would unleash when he sent them to fight a thrall army. After the recent discussion about the culpability of a Progenitor’s thralls, and how much they were truly responsible for their actions, this level of destruction made him uneasy.

“Is everything okay?” Dana asked, looking down at John with a worried frown.

He nodded and rose to his feet, putting aside his concerns, so that he didn’t undermine her personal achievement in designing the Quantum Pistol. “That’s an awesome weapon, Dana. You’ve really outdone yourself.”

“Did you like how I’ve been heavily modifying existing Progenitor tech?” she asked, eagerly seeking his approval.

The tension eased from John, and he patted her on the shoulder. “I did. It’s fantastic to see you making so many adaptations and improvements to their technology. It shows how much you understand it all now.”

“I do feel like I’ve turned a big corner,” she confided, beaming at his praise. “Finding out that they fucked up the Progenitor version of the Wormhole Generator, has definitely made me look at their tech differently. I used to be in awe of how advanced it all was, but if they can screw something up that badly, I realised it was stupid to be intimidated.”

“Exactly,” he said, nodding in agreement. “You’re already innovating and pushing new limits.”

“John? Where are you?” Irillith called out to him as she entered the firing range.

“We’re over here,” he yelled back, returning her friendly wave.

It took a few moments for her to jog down the firing range to reach the trio. When Irillith arrived, she glanced around at the obvious signs of destruction, and looked suitably impressed.

“My new pistol has a Quantum Flux Cannon strapped to it,” Tashana bragged to her sister.

Irillith did a double take. “Are you serious?”

Dana giggled at the hacker’s startled response. “That’s what she said.”

“I want one!” Irillith declared imperiously, faking a haughty look of entitlement. “When are you going to upgrade the Tachyon rifles?”

“Altering the schematics shouldn’t be too hard,” Dana replied. “But we’ve got a backlog of stuff waiting to be forged. Maybe John could churn out some new rifles this evening?”

“Sure, once all the Raptor and Valkyrie refits are done,” he agreed. “So what brings you down here, anyway, Irillith? Any new developments with Faye’s digital personality?”

Irillith shook her head and gave him a smouldering look. “Alyssa said to remind you that you’ve got hungry mouths to feed.”

“Right, I was a bit distracted,” he admitted, clasping her proffered hand.

The Maliri then beckoned to her sister. “Are you coming, Shan?”

Tashana had been watching her flirtatious sibling with amusement, then blinked in surprise as the unexpected offer sunk in. “Is that alright, John? I’d love to show you some gratitude for building my new pistol.”

“Like I’m ever going to turn down a gorgeous pair of appreciative twins,” he joked, slipping his arm around her shoulders. “How about you, Dana? The more the merrier...”

She considered his offer for a moment, then reluctantly shook her head. “I can’t believe I’m actually going to turn you down, but we’re running out of time, and I really need to design the Valkyrie’s new gun. I’ve actually got an awesome idea for it and can’t wait to start working on the schematics.”

“Are you sure you’re feeling alright?” John joked, looking at her with concern. “I’d offer to take your temperature, but I don’t think the twins are going to let go of my hands.”

The Maliri laughed and playfully dragged him away, while waving goodbye to Dana. She watched them leave, then realised she was heading the same way, and hurried back along the firing range, eager to return to her workshop and start on the next exciting new blueprint.