Three Square Meals Ch. 158

The thrall battleship was huge, carrying more tonnage than even a Trankaran capital ship of its size. Despite the vessel’s massive bulk, it’s profile was sleek and sinister, reminding John of a vicious aquatic predator like a barracuda. Instead of rows of teeth, this warship had rows of guns, all with very large barrels that possessed terrible firepower.

The black-hulled behemoth cruised over John’s head, completely oblivious to the even nastier hunter that lay in wait, concealed in the darkness.

“Do it,” John said, glancing at Alyssa.

She tapped the icon that triggered their trap, sending an activation signal to the two minefields placed in the path of the closest Galkiran fleets. Between them was a Gravity-Well Generator and when that cunning device was activated, all the vessels in range were fooled into thinking they were about to crash into a planet. Automated safety triggers kicked in, and nearly four-hundred warships were suddenly knocked straight out of hyper-warp.

“Setting a course for the far-end of their formation,” Alyssa calmly informed him, her nimble fingers gracefully darting over the console. “Jade, power up the engines and follow my nav points.”

“Belay that,” John suddenly ordered, as he was struck by sudden surge of inspiration. “Calara, open fire! Give them a full broadside!”

The Latina didn’t even blink and followed his command instantly. She was already aiming her Quantum Flux Cannons at four separate battleships, just in case the Invictus was spotted and they needed to return fire, so all she had to do was pull the trigger. The targeting beams seared into the sterns of the enormous war machines, as heavy slugs were charged in Quantum Flux chambers. The four massive cannons fired simultaneously, pounding a volley into the rear of each target.

Her shots were uncannily accurate, slamming into the unshielded targets as their stunned crew were still recovering from the shock of being abruptly dumped from hyper-warp. The first rounds punched deep into the closest engines, blowing them apart in massive blasts that exposed the inner hull. The second and third rounds took care of the central engine, leaving the fourth to strike the last propulsion system and detonate it from the inside.

At the same time as she was hamstringing those four capital ships, the Nymphs joined her fusillade with all the weapons Calara had assigned to them. Tachyon Lances thrummed with power, then sapphire beams of energy sliced into the rear of the closest four cruisers, scything through their engines one after the other in a chain of ferocious explosions. In a matter of seconds, all of those Galkiran ships were permanently knocked out of the war, leaving them helplessly marooned in space.

Alyssa looked at John questioningly for a moment, until she heard the reasoning behind his abrupt change of orders. “Very nice, Mr. Blake,” she said with open admiration. “Plotting a short-range hyper-warp jump.”

John rose from his chair and pointed at the closest cluster of warships. “Keep hitting those ships with everything we’ve got!”

“Everything?” Calara asked quizzically, noting that the Galkirans were staring to react to the ambush now and were raising their shields.

“Maximum firepower,” John ordered, making eye-contact with her. “Let’s give them a few surprises. Nova Lances, Singularity Drivers... the works.”

She grinned and flipped her targeting controls to the other set of big guns built into the Invictus, then began hunting for her next victim.

“Jade, evasive manoeuvres,” John said to his Nymph pilot. “Just keep us out of their line of fire for the next two minutes... then we’re leaving.”

“Got it!” she replied, throwing the throttle forward.

The six huge Progenitor-class engines went from idling at zero power to full throttle, making the white battlecruiser roar away at an incredible rate of acceleration. The reeling thrall fleets gradually began to respond, and retaliated with a surge of crackling beams and charged slugs, which poured into the location where the Invictus had sprung the ambush.

“Bring us around, Jade. Line us up with my primary target,” Calara requested, quickly marking a sensor contact on the tactical map. “Nymphs, I’m assigning the secondary target to you; strip those shields!”

Her team of gunners switched from picking off enemy cruisers, and began to focus their Tachyon Lance batteries on Calara’s designated target. Beam after beam slammed into one of the biggest ships in the fleet, with more adding their potent firepower to the barrage as they finished venting excess heat. While that ship was picked apart by precise slashes from those elegant guns, the second was hammered by a thundering blow from one of the Invictus’ least subtle weapons.

The glare from the Nova Lance blast was blinding, the colossal beam clobbering the thrall battleship like a fusion-powered battering ram. Despite the ferocious energy converging on those shields, it still wasn’t enough to knock them out in a single blast.

Calara grimaced and called out to the Nymphs, “I need some assistance on our Primary target. Help me drop those shields, ladies.”

They dutifully switched targets and began firing a forest of beams at the closest of the two battleships. The initial nova blast had been remarkably effective, almost knocking down the capital ship’s shields in one prolonged beam of immense power. That meant the subsequent onslaught with Tachyon Lances was able to quickly overcome the faltering protective field, leaving the Galkiran ship exposed to attacks on its hull.

As the Invictus banked around to begin its strafing run, the thralls shot back with everything they had. Purple beams lit up the battlefield, with hapless gunners firing blindly into space, hoping to hit the cloaked enemy that was tearing them apart. Shots streaked past the Invictus, narrowly avoiding the charging battlecruiser as Jade jinked from side-to-side. Calara ignored the dazzling array of Tachyon Lance beams and just concentrated on aiming the biggest guns on the battlefield at her target.

Slugs accelerated past the caged singularity, reaching hyper-warp velocity before they exited the four-hundred-metre barrel. The rounds rocketed across space and pounded into the rear of the huge capital ship, leaving vast impact craters across its hull. Unfortunately for the Galkiran battleship, this was only the opening salvo in a relentless stream, and Calara continued to pound the dented hull with unerring accuracy.

It was only a matter of time before the hull yielded before that onslaught, leaving the lighter armoured interior exposed to the barrage. The thrall helmswoman tried to turn the battleship to face its attacker, but the huge war machine was stationary and relying solely on manoeuvring thrusters. The black-hulled behemoth shuddered as the first engine exploded, almost as if it was flinching in pain. Calara was merciless though and kept pounding the stern of the listing capital ship, ripping apart the enormous propulsion systems that would keep it in the fight.

“Shields are down on the secondary target, Calara,” Neysa calmly informed her, as the beams from her Tachyon batteries seared into the hull of the last remaining battleship.

“Fire at will,” she ordered the Nymph gunners. “Take out as many destroyers as you can!”

Neysa and Marika were allocated to the aft and stern Tachyon lances on the topdeck, while Leylira and Betrixa were firing the Tachyon Lance batteries on the underbelly. They rapidly switched targets, working efficiently in pairs to catch individual thrall warships in a crossfire. All around the Invictus, more Galkiran vessels were savaged by those ferociously powerful guns, their shields wilting under the blazing intensity of a dozen sapphire beams.

The smaller warships had lighter shields and weaker armour, so they were cut to pieces at a shocking rate. As their shields collapsed, the volley of Tachyon Lance beams seared through the stern of each black vessel, neatly severing the entire engine array. It was fast and brutally efficient, leaving the Tormentor-Class destroyers floundering like a fish with its tail fin cut off.

“Short range Hyper-Warp jump calculated,” Alyssa said, poised over her console. “Just tell me when.”

John tore his gaze away from the destruction being unleashed on the invading armada, and stared at the starry sky behind the thrall forces. The ambush had been incredibly successful, having already crippled all the battleships in this closest fleet. Calara was now systematically neutralising the enemy cruisers with a brutal fusillade from the Quantum Flux Cannons, and it was very tempting to complete the elimination of the entire fleet. However, he knew the Progenitor must be lurking somewhere out there, his unstoppable dreadnought bearing down on the Invictus like an enraged Kodiak.

“That’s enough, Jade. Get us to the jump point,” he ordered the Nymph pilot.

She swung the flightstick to the right, then dialled back the throttle, bringing the Invictus about in a tight turn. “We’re on our way.”

Calara had started cycling her shots, just firing one cannon at a time while the flux heat-exchangers were venting excess heat from the others. It let her aim her shots more precisely, and switch targets mid volley, splitting the six-round salvo between multiple cruisers. She nodded with satisfaction as a pair of thrall cruisers were smashed aside, the shieldless, engineless warships now left adrift in the void.

Turning her attention to their next objective, she called out, “I’m prioritising targets in the next fleet. Help me take out the battleships first.”

John watched as the Invictus completed its turn and barrelled towards the nav point. He glanced and Alyssa and nodded. “Punch it.”

\*\*\*

“Where is he?! Show me!” Gahl’kalgor demanded, as he stormed onto the dreadnought’s bridge.

“There, my Lord,” Valeria replied, pointing towards the chaotic battlefield.

The Progenitor glared at the holographic map, snarling furiously at the sight of six more of his battleships with their engines blown to pieces. There was debris everywhere, the sea of wreckage scattered around dozens of severely damaged warships, which slowly pivoted in circles as they searched in vain for their cloaked attacker. Purple columns of energy streaked out into space, the Tachyon Lances fired out of blind hope that they might hit something in the darkness.

He noted that the dreadnought seemed to be taking forever to reach the outskirts of the battle. After a quick glance at the ship’s status, he snapped incredulously, “Why aren’t we in hyper-warp?!”

“They created an artificial gravity well as part of their ambush,” Valeria explained. “When it activated, the nearest fleets were knocked out of hyper-warp. Baen’thelas attacked before they could raise their shields, and-”

Gahl’kalgor’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “I told you the fleets should advance with raised shields!”

“But my Lord-”

“Don’t talk back to me!” he snarled, his face contorting with rage.

Valeria let out a startled gasp as Gahl’kalgor grabbed her and shoved her out of his way. She cartwheeled across the Command Deck and slammed into the wall, then cried out in agony as her wrist shattered with the bone-crunching impact.

“Why do I have to do everything myself?” he muttered, stalking over to his command chair. “Change course towards that Gravity Well Generator! Divert power to the Quantum Devastator!”

The Galkiran thralls rushed to obey his barked orders, bringing the massive bow of the black dreadnought around until it was facing away from the chaotic battlefield. The Progenitor vessel ploughed onwards through the artificial gravity well, closing the gap until the targeting grid was in range of the inhibiting device.

“Still charging, my Lord,” the Tactical officer informed him. “We’re at 87% power.”

Gahl’kalgor grunted in acknowledgement. “Don’t miss...” he replied, his voice an ominous rumble.

The thrall’s eyes widened and she nodded timidly.

As the Tactical Officer lined up her shot with great care, Valeria walked over to stand beside the Command Chair, her broken and bloody wrist cradled against her chest. The shattered bones grated against each other, sending sharp spikes of pain up her arm that set her teeth on edge, but the Galkiran matriarch had spent many centuries learning how to endure agony far worse than this. She watched the unfolding battle in silence, having no wish to provoke Gahl’kalgor’s ire again.

The Quantum Devastator was the largest and most potent weapon aboard the terrifyingly powerful Progenitor Dreadnought. Unleashing such an enormous cannon on the tiny gravity generator was obscene overkill, but Gahl’kalgor hadn’t chosen to use the weapon just because he wanted to atomise the irritating device. While the targeting grid for the dreadnought’s primary gun was comfortably overlapping its target, all the rest of the weapon batteries were still a long way from being in range.

Purple arcs of electricity surged along the barrel, getting brighter and more frenetic as vast amounts of energy were channelled into the huge cannon. The charge built up to a crescendo, then all that power was unleashed in a blistering beam of incredible destructive force. The column lanced through space and vaporised the gravity well generator, then throbbed for several more seconds as all that latent energy was discharged in a terrifying blast.

“Get us back into hyper-warp and intercept that dreadnought!” Gahl’kalgor snarled, his gaze cutting back to the besieged thrall forces.

The helmswoman had been waiting for his order with bated breath, so she quickly engaged the Hyper-warp drive and the dreadnought began to rapidly close on the battlefield. The crippled fleet was still flailing around, firing erratically in all directions as they tried to shoot their cloaked attacker. Gahl’kalgor leaned forward in anticipation, waiting impatiently for the next time his enemy’s dreadnought gave away its position when it opened fire. The seconds ticked by, but there was no sign of the hidden ambusher who was harassing his forces.

Valeria was also watching the holographic maps, but her attention was on the rest of the Galkiran armada. She was issuing telepathic orders to the fleet commanders, making sure that they were all converging on their position, when she sensed a wave of shock sweep through thousands of her thralls. Their surprise quickly turned to dismay, and the matriarch frowned in confusion as she tried to make sense of the rapid flurry of emotions from so many women at once.

She stared intently at the map, then gasped in surprise when she spotted the source of the disturbance. Over on the furthest edge of the scattered Galkiran armada, a new gravity well had sprung into existence, anchoring the four fleets at the rear and knocking them out of hyper-warp.

“Our fleets are under attack!” she called out in warning.

Gahl’kalgor’s head whipped around to glare at her. “What? Where?!”

“Over there, my Lord!” she replied, grimacing as she let go of her broken wrist and pointed towards the other side of the three-dimensional battlefield.

“Zoom in!” he barked impatiently. “It must be a coordinated ambush by his thralls!”

The holographic map re-orientated itself, so that it was now focused on the furthest elements of the Galkiran formation. As he watched, a forest of sapphire-hued beams lit up space, scything into the rear ranks of those warships. His gaze flicked back and forth as he searched for the source of those dazzling blue lances of energy, but there was no sign of any thrall vessels. Energy beams seemed to just appear out of nowhere, illuminating the map with their brilliant radiance.

He gaped at the map incredulously, his mouth falling open in stunned disbelief. “That’s impossible!” the Progenitor protested. “He was over here just a minute ago and the gravity well was still active!”

Valeria gave him a helpless shrug, just as shocked and bewildered as he was.

Gahl’kalgor glared at the map and muttered, “Change course. Intercept that ship.”

After giving out his curt orders, he settled back in his command chair and watched the ensuing battle in sullen silence. At one point, his eyes narrowed and he leaned forward, carefully studying the holographic battlefield. Tapping runes on the black armrest, he rewound the projected images and watched as the enemy savaged his thrall forces once again.

Tachyon Lances sent searing beams across space to cut through vulnerable ships, but there were also unfamiliar weapons being fired amongst those repeated salvos. It looked like there was some kind of broad-beamed energy weapon being unleashed on his battleships, as well as a rapid-firing solid projectile cannon that was very effective at crippling their engines. He had no explanation for why a dreadnought would carry a non-standard weapon loadout, but it wasn’t the strange guns that really drew his attention.

In the centre of the fleet, the cloaked attacker was trading broadsides with a battleship, with the thrall vessel suffering the brunt of the damage. A dozen Tachyon Lances slashed across its faltering shields, causing them to collapse under the brutal punishment. Both behemoths then opened fire with Quantum Flux Cannons, blasting each other at almost point blank range. The effect on the battleship was devastating, with the salvo of slugs blowing apart its engines in rapid succession.

Gahl’kalgor watched his thralls desperately return fire, the glowing shells from their Quantum Flux Cannons going just wide of the same gun barrels that had just hamstrung their battleship. Instead of scoring solid hits on the dreadnought’s shield, the shells sailed harmlessly off into space, leaving a glowing trail like a procession of shooting stars across a moonless night’s sky. He knew the size and shape of his dreadnought by heart and there was no way those shots could have missed. They were only wide of the muzzle flashes by less than two-hundred metres, which should’ve still struck the dreadnought somewhere, no matter how the vessel was orientated.

When his own dreadnought eventually neared the new battlefield, Gahl’kalgor wasn’t too surprised to find there was another artificial gravity well in place, ready to hinder his pursuit. When his flagship dropped out of hyper-warp to destroy the Gravity-Well Generator, he kept a close eye on the enemy dreadnought, watching carefully as it continued to harass his fleets. As soon as the stellar obstacle was obliterated by a blast from the Quantum devastator, those blue beams finally ceased fire, leaving the remnants of the two savaged thrall fleets firing helplessly off into space.

“What is it you see, my Lord?” Valeria asked quietly.

He grunted, shaking his head in astonishment. “It seems this Baen’thelas likes to play games... but he’s not taunting us just for fun.”

His matriarch listened with keen interest. “So why is he doing it then?”

Gahl’kalgor ignored her question. “Order the fleets back into formation and keep moving... with shields raised this time,” he added, with a menacing glare in her direction.

She winced at his disapproval, then whispered, “They can’t, my Lord. Their shields are nearly burnt out and need time to recover.”

He looked at her in surprise, then a quick cross-reference with the schematics embedded in his mind confirmed that she was telling the truth. His eyes dropped down to Valeria’s broken arm, which she cradled awkwardly against her chest, and he felt a surge of unfamiliar emotions as he stared at the shard of bone sticking out through her scarlet flesh.

“Order the fleets to cluster around my dreadnought, then shut down their shields,” he said, rising from his chair. “We will proceed in two hours.”

“Yes, my Lord,” she replied, nodding obediently.

Gahl’kalgor walked over to the exit and opened the reinforced doors. He then paused and turned to face his wounded matriarch. “Come along, Valeria... I must attend to that wrist.”

She looked at him in surprise, astonished by what almost sounded like a flicker of concern in his voice. The Galkiran matriarch hurried over to follow him out of the Bridge, and he led the way back to his quarters with long strides. Gahl’kalgor’s face was an unreadable mask as he opened the door into his suite, but when they were alone inside, his stoic demeanour cracked.

Valeria watched her Progenitor Master in stunned fascination, as he reached out to gently examine her broken wrist. She was used to seeing her thralls react with guilt and regret when she was about to execute them for their incompetence, but those were expressions she had never seen from Gahl’kalgor before.

“I was mistaken to punish you,” he said gruffly, unable to meet her captivated gaze.

“It wasn’t your fault, it was mine,” she said softly. “I shouldn’t have made you angry.”

He looked up at her and frowned, troubled by her response.

They stood together for a long moment in awkward silence, until Valeria cleared her throat and gestured towards his chair. “Perhaps you would like to take a seat as usual, my Lord? Then we can proceed...”

The reference to all the previous times he had brutally battered his matriarch, then healed her injuries afterwards made Gahl’kalgor flinch. It had happened so many times over the centuries, it had become a routine to them... a very cruel and sadistic routine.

He stared apprehensively at the chair, as he was assailed by a host of ugly memories. “Valeria... I don’t want to keep hurting you.”

She didn’t know how to respond, her Progenitor Lord’s declaration so wildly out of character that she couldn’t help wondering if this was the prelude to some new twisted punishment.

“Ah... thank you?” she replied haltingly.

Gahl’kalgor turned to look at her, then his attention was drawn to a thin trickle of blood that rolled down her forearm and dripped onto the floor. “Enough talk, let me heal your wound.”

Valeria could scarcely believe it, but his concern for her wellbeing actually seemed genuine. As they took their usual positions, she licked her lips in anticipation, and gazed up her master with pure adoration.

\*\*\*

“And... we’re clear,” Alyssa announced, watching the holographic map as the Invictus raced away from the pair of ravaged thrall fleets.

Calara reviewed the battlefield with a nod of satisfaction. “Between the damage inflicted by the spider mines, and our own contribution with the Invictus, we managed to completely eliminate the equivalent of three entire fleets.”

“Nice shooting, ladies,” John said, admiring the destruction they’d wreaked .

The Nymphs beamed back at him, delighted to have been able to assist.

Despite smiling at the praise, Calara looked at him quizzically. “What prompted the sudden change of plan?”

“Well, I figured if we actually attacked the first group, we’d obviously inflict a lot more damage than just the mines, plus it would lure the Progenitor after us. Then we’d know that his dreadnought was stuck in a gravity well on one side of the armada, while we hyper-warped to the other side. That would give us even more time to hit those last couple of fleets, and not be worrying about being ambushed by his dreadnought.” He paused and frowned with concern. “Why? Do you think it was a mistake?”

She shook her head in response. “No, it was remarkably effective. You maximised the damage we could inflict without exposing the Invictus to any undue risk. In fact, it was probably safer to lure his dreadnought into the first gravity well, while we repositioned to assault the thrall fleets at their rear.”

“I think we got the Progenitor mad,” Sakura noted with a grim smile. “Did you see him vaporise the Gravity Well Generators?”

“Those shots from the Quantum Devastator?” Calara asked, her eyes sparkling in amusement. “Yes, that was some gratuitous overkill.”

Jehanna stared up at the map, her eyes still wide from shock. “I can’t believe the Invictus actually survived being hit by a blast like that.”

“We didn’t really; it cut us in half,” John ruefully admitted. “I’m still not sure we’re tough enough to take a direct hit from one of those cannons.”

Calara hesitated, then shook her head. “A Devastator beam is powerful enough to cut through us even if we had full shields.”

“That must have been terrifying...” Jehanna murmured, unsettled at witnessing the full wrath of a Progenitor dreadnought first hand.

John walked over to her and put his arm around her shoulders. “Don’t worry. We’re not going to go near that thing until we’ve got a fighting chance against it.”

She gave him a brave smile in return. “So what’s the plan now?”

“It depends on what they do next,” John replied.

“I’ll keep an eye on them and let you know,” Calara said, her attention riveted to the holographic map. “If they keep going as they have been, we’ll have burnt out all their shield projectors long before they reach Kythshara.”

“Alright, let’s stand down for now,” John said, removing his helmet. “Assuming nothing changes, I think we should plan another ambush for this afternoon; perhaps in four hours time? That should give them enough time to start letting their guard down and we can launch another attack against an unshielded fleet.”

Calara gave him a thumbs up. “I was thinking the same thing.”

“I better go finish off the shield generator,” John said, as he retrieved his weapons and led the way back up the ramp to the Armoury. “We’ve got just enough time to install it before the next ambush.”

Jehanna, Sakura, Ailita, and Alyssa followed John up the ramp, leaving Calara in the company of the Nymphs. John could hear the Latina debriefing her feline gunnery crew after the battle, reviewing their performance and suggesting room for improvement. He smiled to himself as he listened to her supportive and encouraging words, recognising that the earnest Latina was emulating his own style of leadership, and even repeating some of the same praise he’d lavished on her in the past.

\*There’s nobody she admires and respects more than you,\* Alyssa said softly, catching his eye as they both stepped into armour-equipping frames.

\*She’s an amazing girl. I feel the same way about her,\* John said, as the robotic arms removed the interlocking plates from his body. \*We’d be totally screwed against this Progenitor if we didn’t have Calara planning strategies to beat him.\*

They stepped out of their Paragon boots together, then Alyssa glanced meaningfully at the ascending Xpress grav-tubes. \*Could I have a quick word with you... in private.\*

\*Sure,\* John agreed, curious what was on her mind.

He turned to speak to Ailita, but she was already walking towards the other set of grav-tubes.

\*Alyssa wants to speak to me privately, but I’ll let you all back in afterwards,\* he explained to the women he’d granted telepathic access to his thoughts, before temporarily blocking them out.

“I’ll wait for you in the Engineering Bay, Master!” Ailita announced with a cheerful wave.

“I’m heading to the Dojo,” Sakura informed them, before her lip curled up into a wry smile. “Maybe it would be easier to assume I’m always in there training, unless I say otherwise?”

John chuckled, then looked at her with sympathy. “You’re not going stir crazy are you?”

She immediately shook her head. “No, not at all. There’s nowhere more important for me to be at the moment. I need to plan our training sessions to be as efficient as possible, with your time being so precious.”

Jehanna shook out her hair as she stepped away from the equipping frame. “Would you mind some company? I’d like to test my abilities against an opponent and see how convincing they are.”

“That sounds intriguing,” the Asian girl said, holding out her hand in invitation. “Tell me more.”

They left together, with Jehanna eagerly outlining her training plans as they walked over to the grav-tubes. John watched them wistfully as they dropped out of sight, then joined Alyssa by the second set of anti-gravity fields, which whisked them up to their old bedroom.

“We really should replace the bed in here at some point,” he noted, as they walked through the barren quarters.

“It would be quite handy,” the blonde agreed, as she crooked a finger and beckoned him towards the exit. “We’ll just have to use Calara’s room instead.”

She gestured towards the button on the wall, and the door swished open before her, then she sashayed into her girlfriend’s quarters. John couldn’t help admiring Alyssa’s spectacular figure as she stood coquettishly beside the bed, and he wondered if she had lured him away for more than just a private chat.

“So... what prompted the sudden change of plan?” Alyssa asked, fixing him with a level gaze.

He blinked in surprise, caught off-guard by the abrupt change of topic. “Didn’t we just have this conversation with Calara?”

The blonde shook her head, not to be deterred. “You explained your reasoning for launching a pre-emptive attack on the first thrall fleet... which Calara confirmed was a tactically sound plan. That wasn’t what she was really asking though, but she decided not to question you further. So, why did you decide to abruptly deviate from her original strategy of keeping all our non-standard weapons and abilities a secret?”

“Well... it was just sudden inspiration really,” he explained cautiously. “You heard the reasons why. I thought we could destroy a lot more thrall ships without exposing ourselves to any serious danger.”

Alyssa raised an eyebrow, studying him with her perceptive gaze. “Are you sure it wasn’t because you were feeling stir crazy after being cooped up in the Workshop? Especially after missing out on preparing the minefield for the ambush? As soon as we got into battle, you saw a way you could contribute and leaped at the chance.”

John opened his mouth to deny it, then he deflated as he recognised the truth in her words.

“Shit,” he muttered, sinking down on to the edge of the bed, his expression fraught with worry.

Alyssa pushed him back onto the covers, then gracefully straddled his waist. She leaned down so that they were lying chest-to-chest, and she was gazing into his eyes.

“Did I really screw up? Is Calara worried?” he asked, looking up into those brilliant blue orbs.

“No, and no,” Alyssa replied, pursing her lips and giving him a reassuring kiss on the tip of his nose.

He frowned and looked up at her in confusion. “So why did you make a big deal about it then?”

“Because I want you to understand why you reacted that way,” she quietly explained. “You’re not cut out for a support role, handsome. Some of the girls, like Dana and Rachel, can spend hours staring at a holo-screen delving deep into esoteric research. You like to be active and involved, either physically exerting yourself with training, or finding creative ways to bolster your crew’s morale. You... struggle... when you feel like you’re not doing enough to contribute.”

He rolled his eyes and protested, “I’m not that bad.”

“Do you remember when we rescued the Valia Gate colonists, then you suddenly decided to invade Kirrix Space in the Raptor to get some payback?” she asked, giving him a knowing look.

“Alright, I’ll give you that one. I did feel helpless, and I hated not being able to do anything for those people,” he conceded. “But we desperately need a Progenitor Shield generator as soon as possible. I know there’s nothing else more useful I can be doing right now, than shaping components with the Soulforge.”

“Logically you know that, but it still means sitting in a chair twiddling your thumbs for eight hours.”

John was about to counter that he had Ailita for company now, but he paused and gave the blonde a pointed look. “Is this about Athena again?”

“Yes, partly,” she admitted. “But that doesn’t mean what I’m saying isn’t true.”

He encircled her with his arms, and stroked Alyssa’s back as he stared up at the ceiling. “I still don’t have any more ideas about how to save her.”

“Me either,” the blonde admitted. “But that’s just it... maybe we weren’t supposed to?”

“What do you mean?” he asked, with a frown. “After everything she’s done for us, I’m not going to just write Athena off with a shrug, and make a quip about not being able to save everyone!”

“Hey... I’m not accusing you of anything,” Alyssa said gently. “But you made Athena my guide to teach me how to use my psychic abilities. Did you really plan to also fall in love with her, and have her stay around forever?”

John hesitated, then shook his head. “No... obviously not.”

“I didn’t bring this up to push you into making a decision about Athena,” she patiently explained. “I just wanted to make you aware that you’re under a different kind of stress than normal, and warn you to be extra careful about making any impetuous decisions. That’s all.”

He chuckled with amusement. “That actually is part of an Executive Officer’s standard duties.”

“I know... bizarre right?” Alyssa said with a smirk. Her expression turned coy as she added, “Now, I seem to remember you checking me out earlier; did you want to turn this into a regular XO meeting? Or were you planning on rewarding Ailita for being such a doting assistant? Or perhaps we could do both?”

Letting his hands slide down her back, he cupped her cheeks and gave them a possessive squeeze, relishing the way the pliant flesh felt in his grip. “That’s a very tempting offer, XO.”

Alyssa gave him a look of understanding. “But Ailita will develop faster if you give her your full attention?”

“Do you mind?”

“Never,” she replied firmly.

He raised an eyebrow at her decisive response, especially as it was in the negative.

Now it was Alyssa’s turn to roll her eyes at him. “If you want to load me up, I’ll be delighted to waddle out of here stuffed full of cum. I also know how much of an incredible difference you can make to the girls when you’re intimate with them, so I’m never going to resent you for that. Ailita’s not going to be able to turn into a pink dragon just by sucking the cum out of my ass.”

“What a charming turn of phrase, Miss Marant,” he noted, playfully swatting her rear.

She winked at him. “I thought the best part was that it was all literally true, Mister Blake.”

John’s chest shook as he laughed. “Now I’m picturing Ailita as a bubblegum-pink dragon.”

“She’ll be absolutely terrifying,” Alyssa said, giggling along with him.

He looked up at Alyssa affectionately, then rolled her over so that she was on her back looking up at him. Before she could do or say anything to respond, he nuzzled close to her ear and whispered a heartfelt message that was so effusive in its endearments, it couldn’t be voiced aloud for fear of giving an eavesdropper diabetes.

Alyssa blushed at his glowing praise, and there was nothing insincere about her starry-eyed look of adoration. “You old softie,” she murmured, giving him a tender kiss.

“You love it,” he replied, climbing off the bed and offering her a hand.

“I do,” she admitted with a contented sigh.

“I should be done with building all the shield generator parts in a few hours,” John said as he opened the door. “Are you going to give me a hand installing it?”

“Yeah, of course,” she readily agreed.

“What are you up to now?” he enquired, pausing beside her in the corridor.

“Matriarch duties,” she replied with an enigmatic smile. “I need to turn somebody’s frown upside down.”

“Someone’s upset?” John asked, frowning with concern. “Who?”

\*\*\*

The comms interface emitted a melodic chime, warning that another high-priority message had just been received. Lynette groaned in protest and pulled the covers over her head, attempting to hide from the onerous task of responding to more frantic calls from the Admirals in High Command. Tugging the duvet like that dislodged the plate that she’d left lying precariously on the end of the bed, and it fell to the floor with a noisy clatter.

“Shit,” she muttered, flinging the covers back to survey the damage.

Peering down at the floor, she grimaced at the mess, as the plate had managed to land at such an angle as to catapult the remains of her lasagne across the decking. With a despondent sigh, Lynette climbed out of bed and did her best to clean up the sticky streaks of tomato sauce that seemed to have splattered everywhere. She finally disposed of the wreckage of last night’s dinner, then grabbed a new bottle of wine from the fridge, and reached for a fresh glass from the cupboard.

\*Isn’t it a bit early to be drowning your sorrows?\* Alyssa asked, her telepathic voice whispering through Lynette’s mind.

\*I thought I’d make an early start,\* Lynette said with faux-cheerfulness.

\*Getting wasted isn’t going to help the situation, Lynette,\* the blonde gently chastised her. \*You’ll be arriving back at Olympus in a couple of days and you need to start preparing for a lot of meetings.\*

Lynette grunted and poured some of the crimson liquid into her crystal goblet. \*Don’t remind me. I’m going to have to stand in front of High Command, and inform them that the Outer Rim is going to demand its independence, and there’s nothing we can do to stop it. I’ve only been Fleet Admiral for a couple of weeks, and I’ve already managed to lose nearly a third of our empire! That really is an impressive level of incompetence. I’ll be known as the worst Fleet Admiral in Terran Federation history... and that’s saying a lot considering the fierce competition for the title.\*

\*Well you could go that route, but might I suggest something a little more optimistic?\*

\*What is there to be optimistic about?!\* Lynette asked indignantly, as she slumped on the sofa. \*There’s a hostile alien invasion force rampaging through our territory and we’re powerless to stop it. I can’t imagine how this could get much worse!\*

\*Oh, it could get a lot worse than this, trust me,\* Alyssa said with a jovial tone, despite the ominous prediction. \*But it’s pointless you worrying about thrall invasions. Just leave us to deal with the Galkirans, because if we lose, you’re screwed anyway. You need to focus on the events you are able to influence.\*

\*You mean the Outer Rim rebellion?\* she asked, frowning dubiously. \*What makes you think I still have any influence over Stefan Vaughn or the other governors now? There’s no chance any of them will want to stay in the Terran Federation, not after we abandoned them... again. They’re all long gone and never coming back.\*

\*I agree, the Outer Rim is a lost cause, but you still have a huge influence over the Admiralty,\* Alyssa patiently explained. \*You’re no stranger to public relations and putting a positive spin on a story; breaking this news to High Command isn’t any different.\*

Lynette was about to take a sip from her glass, but she paused, an incredulous look on her face. \*What can I say that’s positive about sixty systems declaring their independence?!\*

\*It’s simple, Lynette. You just need to appeal to the admirals’ sense of self-interest, and convince them that this is actually the best result for the Terran Federation.\*

The older brunette shook her head in disbelief. \*I just might be able to persuade them that this isn’t a total disaster, but despite what you may think, those admirals are not stupid. What could they possibly gain from us losing that many systems?”

\*Well, if I was in your position, this is what I’d say to them...\*

As Alyssa elaborated on her audacious plan, Lynette’s scowl faded away, to be replaced by a look of incredulity. The Fleet Admiral placed her wine glass on the coffee table, having lost any interest in getting drunk, and listened intently as the young woman spun a captivating narrative. By the time Alyssa had finished describing how she would break the news to High Command, Lynette was actually feeling cautiously optimistic herself.

\*You really think that would work?\* she asked, feeling a flicker of hope bloom in her chest.

\*You’d be appealing to their basic human instincts,\* Alyssa explained to the captivated officer. \*The upper echelons of the Federation might believe they’ve evolved to the peak of sophistication, but we’re all still tribal animals at heart.\*

Lynette rose from the chair and tipped her glass of wine down the sink. \*You’re right. I’ve got a lot of preparations to make before we get back to Olympus. Thank you, Alyssa.\*

\*You’re welcome,\* her matriarch replied.

The reinvigorated Fleet Admiral was too distracted to notice, but there was a faint undercurrent of sadness to Alyssa’s voice.

\*\*\*

John entered the Workshop and exchanged a friendly wave with Ailita, who was waiting obediently for him beside the Soulforge. The other two occupants of the room were still engrossed in their work, so much so that they hadn’t even noticed his arrival. He was curious to see what held their avid attention, so he walked over to the Engineering Podium to take a closer look.

He placed his hands on the smalls of their backs, and asked, “Hey, what’re you two working on?”

They both jumped in surprise, then turned to face him.

“Hey, John,” Rachel greeted him warmly. “I didn’t hear you come in; I was miles away.”

Dana stuck out her bottom lip in an indignant pout. “You scared the crap out of me!”

“Sorry about that,” he apologised, pulling them both into a hug and gently stroking their backs. “I just wanted to see what had you both so distracted.”

The two girls relaxed and melted into his embrace.

“Mmm, that feels lovely,” Rachel purred, letting out a breathy sigh. “My back was stiffening up after being in that position for so long. I must have really lost track of time.”

“You’re forgiven. Just... rub a little bit higher?” Dana pleaded, kissing his cheek gratefully.

John held them close and eased out the tension in their sore muscles, then smiled with satisfaction as they both groaned with relief. Looking at the holo-screens over their shoulders, he stared at the images in fascination. Rachel had been working on an incredibly intricate model, which looked like a curved dome comprised of millions of different coloured lights. A glance at Dana’s holo-screen showed a cross-section of the Invictus, but having taken the ship apart for repairs on numerous occasions, he knew that the huge pair of gun barrels built into the hull were definitely a new edition.

Lowering his hands, he filled his palms with taut cheeks and gave them both a playful squeeze. “Alright, that’s enough; I’m too curious about these schematics to wait any longer. What are they showing?”

The girls laughed, then exchanged a silent glance.

“It’s okay. You go first,” Dana offered, gesturing at the holographic image.

Rachel wrinkled her nose at her affectionately, then turned towards the console. “This is a neural map of Faye’s organic brain,” she explained, zooming into the pinpoints of light.

John watched as the image expanded, revealing that each bright dot was a tiny cluster of neurons, the synapses spreading out like branches of a tree. The amount of detail was astounding, clearly the result of hours of painstaking work.

“How did you create all this in just one afternoon?” he marvelled.

The gifted geneticist shook her head and gave him an indulgent smile. “I didn’t do it all by hand. I used the scanners in the medbay to create a digital rendition of my own neural pathways. Once I had a base model to work with, I started making adjustments to more accurately model Faye.”

“What makes the two models different?”

Rachel paused to consider her reply. “It’s very complicated, but I’ll try to simplify it as much as I can. Basically, each short-term memory is processed by the pre-frontal lobe. From there, it’s translated into long-term memories by the hippocampus, but the really clever part is the way the hippocampus associates similar memories together. For example, just think about your training sessions in the Dojo.”

John remembered a flood of different memories, of him sparring with Sakura and Calara, recalling who won each bout and the overall result. When he glanced down at Rachel he saw that her eyes were shrouded in a soft grey light as she watched him in fascination.

“All those neurons are sparking,” she murmured, gently caressing his temple. “Reminding you of the sights, sounds, and smells... and how you felt about each fight.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “Yeah, I remember.”

“Now what about the post-training sessions?” she suggested with a knowing grin.

John’s thoughts took a dramatically different turn, remembering the sensuous Latina and adoring Asian girl in various throes of passion. Their soft gasps of pleasure, the beautiful way their backs arched as they climaxed, then their throaty moans as he filled their bellies with huge loads of cum.

“Oh my goodness, this part of your brain is very extensively developed,” Rachel said airily, her eyes sparkling with amusement. “What are you thinking about right now, John?”

He chuckled and leaned down to give her a kiss. “I think you have a pretty good idea.”

She nodded in agreement. “I do. But the way you recall those events will be quite different to how Calara or Sakura perceive their own memories of being in bed with you. It’s the associations and perceptions of each event that helps make each of us unique... and predictable in our behaviour to a certain degree.”

“I can’t even imagine how complicated it must be trying to remodel your entire neural map to reflect the way Faye thought about things,” he said, looking at the holographic brain with newfound astonishment.

Rachel tilted her head to one side. “It’s actually not as daunting as it sounds. Faye led a fairly insular life that was dominated by her love and loyalty for her family. Jehanna is very close to her parents, which gave me lots of very useful data to study. Dana offered to be my muse when it came to feelings about you... so don’t be surprised if Faye ends up fanatical obsessed with getting a full tummy.”

He glanced at the redhead, who blushed with embarrassment. “It’s not my fault! I’m just... trying to learn new schematics.”

“What a team player,” Rachel teased her. She looked up at John and added, “Don’t worry, I’m only kidding about Faye... unless you want her to be as greedy as Dana?”

“I think I’d struggle to meet demand,” John joked. He placed his hands on her hips and used his thumbs to caress her stomach. “Let’s go with the stand package and use you as the model.”

“So she’ll be willing to share, but could happily survive on a diet of John,” she replied with a decisive nod. “Consider it done.”

“Really?” he asked, looking at her in surprise.

“I have fond memories of following you around for two weeks like a lost little kitten,” the tawny-haired doctor said with a wistful smile.

“Isn’t the expression ‘like a lost puppy’?”John asked, while continuing to stroke her.

“Probably, but maybe Jade’s been rubbing off on me,” Rachel replied. “Anyway, I certainly wouldn’t turn down a repeat, and I’m sure Faye will feel just the same way.”

John hesitated, his brow furrowing with concern. “Isn’t this being a bit... presumptive?”

Rachel and Dana promptly burst into laughter.

“What?” he protested.

Rachel wiped away a tear and stifled another guffaw. “Have you actually looked at Faye’s data archives? She was obsessed with you. Faye was like your cyber-stalker for the last few months.”

“Actually Faye was more like an adoring fan club,” Dana interjected. “Remember she had twelve processing streams?”

“The chance of her turning down an offer to join us, is minus 273 degrees Celsius,” Rachel said with conviction.

“What?” John asked in confusion.

“Absolute zero,” Dana clarified, rolling her eyes. “Rachel’s just geeking out because she’s excited.”

“I am, I freely admit it,” Rachel said, beaming at him happily. “I had a few doubts myself that we’d ever get Faye back, but now she feels so close.”

“You’ve done amazing work,” John said, encircling her in his arms. “If we can actually pull this off, I’ll owe you at least a dozen favours.”

“And I’ll thoroughly enjoy cashing each of them in,” Rachel said with delight. When she noticed his slightly worried look, the brunette added, “I’m not Alyssa; I won’t be strong-arming you into a recruitment drive. Let’s add the caveat that each favour involves filling up Dana and me in creative ways?”

“Deal,” John quickly agreed.

“Wow! Awesome!” Dana exclaimed, looking thrilled.

He turned his attention to Dana next. “Alright, let’s hear all about your latest and greatest invention.”

“Can I earn favours too?” she asked, giving him a cheeky grin.

“It depends how awed I am by your creative genius,” John countered. “Go for it. I’m ready to be impressed.”

Dana bit her lip with anticipation, then whirled around to face her console. “After you stuffed me full of cum, I had a sudden bout of inspiration...”

“I strongly suspected you might,” he said, with a wry smile. “So what are those new guns?”

“Okay, so you know how the existing Nova Lances are thirty metres long and can swivel in a forty-five degree axis to the front?” Dana asked.

“Yeah, I remember fitting them,” John said, before jutting his chin towards the schematic. “But those barrels are huge. What are they? A hundred metres long?”

“A hundred-and-fifty.”

“You super-sized the Nova Lances?” he exclaimed, his eyes widening.

“Actually, it would be more accurate to say that I made a sawed-off version of a Quantum Devastator,” she admitted. “We’ll lose maybe half the range and a lot of the precision, but I used the same principle the Maliri did when they copied the Tachyon Lances and came up with their Nova Lance design. Trust me, you don’t want to be in front of this bad boy when Calara opens up with it.”

John stared at the massive weapon, trying to picture the kind of devastation she was describing. “Have we actually got enough power for this thing?”

Dana gave him a rueful frown. “Kinda. We can’t add any more Power Cores, as they generate harmonic interference if you build too many of them close together, and we’re already at our limit. We’ll need to strip out all our existing Power Cores and upgrade them to the Progenitor versions, which should just give us enough juice to keep the lights on while we fire this thing.”

He raised an eyebrow and Dana gave him a wicked grin.

“Alright that was a bit of an exaggeration,” she admitted. “The power requirements are extremely high, but we shouldn’t need to shunt around power to subsystems to run everything at the same time.”

“That does sound amazing,” John said, suitably impressed. “But there is one major problem, though. Actually, make that two.”

“Like what?” Dana asked defensively.

“Well, first of all, have you discussed this design with Calara? It looks like those guns are built directly into the hull, so they can only fire directly forward. She usually strafes a Nova Lance blast over a couple of big targets to knock out multiple shields in one shot.”

“Not a problem,” the redhead declared confidently. “We’ve currently got Calara’s fire controls hooked up to the Invictus’ retro-thrusters, so when she’s firing the Singularity Drivers, she can adjust her aim on the target. The Invictus is so manoeuvrable now, we can connect these new guns using the same system, and she’ll actually get a sixty degree coverage during the firing window.”

“Okay, that is very impressive. But what about making evasive manoeuvres if we come under fire?”

“The current system allows Jade to override Calara’s thruster control in an emergency. Normally, she just lines up the Invictus and lets Calara blaze away with the Singularity Drivers, so it hasn’t been an issue so far,” Dana patiently explained. “So what’s this second big problem?”

“Big is the right word. There’s no way we can build those barrels using the Soulforge. Not only would it take me forever, the barrel length is about fifty times bigger than anything we’re capable of forging right now.”

“That is a good point,” she conceded. “Which is why we need to use the Trankaran Starforge to make them. Mael’nerak’s next generation Soulforge should be badass enough to fully shape thrall battleships in one go, so it should have no problem with forging a 150-metre barrel.”

“Do you think the Starforge is still going to be fully operational after all this time?” he asked dubiously.

Dana shrugged. “If it isn’t we’ll just have to build our own.”

John nodded, lost in thought.

“So what do you reckon?” she asked, nudging him with an elbow. “Do I earn any favours for this?”

“It is very impressive,” John said admiring her work. “The only problem is we can’t built it yet... but when we’ve got this up and running, you get the same deal as Rachel.”

“Yesss!” Dana exclaimed, pumping her fist.

He smiled as she started a victory dance. “Have you decided what you’re going to call it?”

Dana froze and her face fell into a scowl. “I’ve been trying to come up with a decent name all afternoon.”

“I suppose you’ve thought about the obvious ones?”

“Like what?” she asked, perking up.

“How about Nova Devastator?” John suggested. “Or Quantum Lance?”

She gave him a half-hearted shrug. “Those aren’t bad. I thought of them myself, but they aren’t very exciting.”

“Not awesome enough for your new super gun?” John asked with a wry chuckle. “Have you tried asking Alyssa if the girls have got any ideas?”

“It’s worth a shot,” she agreed.

\*Give me a moment, I’ll ask for some suggestions,\* Alyssa responded.

John pulled Dana into his arms and gave her an affectionate squeeze. “You did an amazing job on the weapon schematic, Dana. It’s really great to see you being so innovative with creating new variants of existing Progenitor technology. Do you feel like you’re developing a new level of understanding of the science behind these weapons?”

She nodded enthusiastically. “I was a bit intimidated at first, because all their ship components are so much more advanced than anything we were using before. As I’m getting more familiar with their tech, it feels like everything’s kind of clicking into place, and it’s not so scary anymore. I’ve actually had a few ideas for some new areas I could research, and I’m looking forward to seeing how far I can take their tech. Being able to push beyond anything the Kyth’faren could create would be an awesome rush!”

He brushed his fingers through her hair, then gave Dana a tender kiss. “I love seeing you when you’re excited like this. You get this sparkle in your eyes and you look so full of life... you’re totally gorgeous.”

Dana blushed furiously, then crossed her wrists behind his neck and gave him a passion-fuelled kiss. They lost track of time for a couple of minutes, with Rachel watching in amusement, until John dragged her into the clinch as well.

“Maybe we should cash in all those favours back-to-back,” he muttered, stroking them encouragingly as the beautiful teenagers sucked each other’s tongues. “A week feeding you two could be a lot of fun.”

They moaned at the enticing thought, writhing with arousal in his protective embrace.

\*I’ve got some suggestions for you from the girls,\* Alyssa cheerfully announced. \*I would say I’m sorry to interrupt, but you don’t have enough time to screw these two senseless, not if we’re going to upgrade the shield generator before the next battle.\*

Dana and Rachel reluctantly parted with a groan of protest.

\*Alright, let’s hear what you’ve got,\* John said, giving the horny pair a sympathetic smile.

\*Okay, here we go: Honed Quantum Piledriver, Novafury Mega-Cannon, or Star Lance Obliterator.

The Herald of Righteous Justice, The Promise of Annihilation, The Harbinger of Destruction, The Legacy of Baen’thelas, and finally, The Eternal Retribution of the Kyth’faren.\*

“Holy crap...” Dana muttered, staring at John in wide-eyed awe.

He cleared his throat, then pointed across an imaginary Bridge, and sternly declared, “Unleash the Harbinger of Retribution!”

“That does sound terrifying,” Rachel said with a wry smile.

“Those are some great suggestions,” John noted. “Who thought up those names?”

\*Can you guess?\* Alyssa asked playfully.

He considered them for a moment, and it didn’t take him long to work out who. “I think those first three were from Calara; they’re similar to our existing naming conventions, but you can tell she really likes big guns.”

\*Very good... and the others?\*

“It was Tashana,” he said with certainty. “She came up with my Maliri name, and she renamed her Enshunu ship the Infernal Retribution. They all have the same imaginative ring to them.”

\*You know your girls, Mr. Blake. Consider me impressed,\* Alyssa replied.

“Are you alright, babes?” Rachel asked her girlfriend with concern. “Don’t you like any of those suggestions? I thought they were all very good.”

Dana had turned and was looking at her schematics with a troubled frown.

“What’s wrong, honey?” John asked, just as bewildered by her strange reaction as Rachel.

“It’s just not good enough,” she muttered with grim resolve. “I want to design a cannon worthy of being called The Herald of Righteous Annihilation.”

John chuckled with relief. “Don’t worry, I’m sure you’ll get there eventually.”

“Yeah... I’ve got a lot of research to do,” she murmured, lost in her thoughts.

Rachel rolled her eyes and smiled at John. “We better get back to work. Thanks for saying hello.”

“It was fun,” he agreed, giving each of them a kiss goodbye.

He left the engineering podium, and strolled across the deck plates towards Ailita. “Hey, honey. You should’ve come over to join us.”

“This one didn’t want to intrude. It was an intimate moment between you and your beloved mates,” she said, gazing longingly into his eyes.

John initially thought that the Nymph was wishing she could be like the Terran girls, until he felt a light fluttering telepathic contact against his mind. He remembered that he’d blocked her out earlier, and quickly readmitted Ailita and his matriarchs through his mental barrier.

\*Sorry for the wait, I got distracted by Dana’s and Rachel’s research update.\*

They all responded with gratitude, happy to be able to listen to his thoughts once again.

Ailita’s long eyelashes fluttered, and she shivered with delight as she basked in John’s telepathic presence. Her eyes suddenly snapped open and she gave him a hasty kiss. \*You’re thirsty, Master! I’ll be right back with refreshments!\*

She was gone in the blink of an eye, so John picked up the control circlet for the Soulforge, then slipped it on his head as he retook his seat. He began carefully shaping the remaining components they needed for the new Shield Generator, adding them to the growing pile awaiting assembly. Ailita reappeared shortly after with a colourful glass of fruit juice, a bead of condensation rolling down the chilled crystal goblet. He took a sip, savouring the delicious taste of Liakas berries, and fondly remembered the brilliant Maliri matriarch who was determined to make a good impression.

\*This is perfect, Ailita. Thank you,\* he said gratefully, resuming their conversation via telepathy after welcoming her back onto his lap.

\*Faranise is a lovely girl, Master,\* she murmured, nuzzling into him. \*I can understand why Garinia is infatuated with her. It’s so unfortunate that she reminds Faranise of her sisters.\*

\*Garinia isn’t cruel like they were,\* John quickly stated, feeling compelled to defend the House Quisayne Matriarch.

\*This one knows, Master. She’s just not as gifted intellectually as your beautiful mate from House Eshenestria.\*

\*Hey, wait a second,\* John said, pulling back to study Ailita curiously. \*How do you know all that?\*

This time it was Edraele who replied telepathically. \*We all take a keen interest in the women who are next in line to bear you a child, my Lord.\*

\*Garinia?\* he asked with a puzzled frown. \*I’ve made promises to Sarene, and I freely admit I really like Faranise... but why Garinia?\*

He stroked Ailita’s silky mane as he listened to Edraele make a compelling case for Garinia, while taking occasional sips of chilled fruit juice. When the long conversation about doe-eyed Maliri with swollen bellies got too much for him to endure, the Nymph slid to her knees and gave him some loving relief. Afterwards, as Ailita dozed on his lap, bathing him in a soft pink radiance, John absent-mindedly caressed her curved tummy. Maybe operating the Soulforge wasn’t that much of a chore after all, he reasoned, while relaxing in the comfort of the high-backed chair.

\*\*\*

Commodore Bromidus gestured towards the holo-screen. “As you can quite clearly see from the highlighted entries in the comms log, Walker contacted his commanding officer on no less than forty-seven occasions during a two week period, all regarding his request for emergency leave. His harassment of Captain Bexley became so excessive, he was even warned in writing to ‘stop pestering’ the man.”

Tom leaned over to his defence lawyer and whispered, “This is all being taken out of context; he’s counting each reply as a separate conversation! And Bexley was only joking when he said that, and he told me I just needed to be patient.”

“I know, Tom, I’ve read the email chains,” Kincaid whispered back, giving him a reassuring smile.

Bromidus faced the jury and continued, “Are these the actions of a concerned man, wanting to support his betrothed as she grieved for her father? Or does Thomas Walker’s compulsive fixation on returning to Terra hint at a dangerous obsession with his fiancée, which would ultimately spiral into murderous psychosis?”

Kincaid cleared his throat. “Objection, speculation.”

“Sustained,” Judge Nancarrow said, narrowing his eyes as he stared at the pontificating lawyer. “Please focus on the facts of the case, Commodore.”

Inclining his head respectfully, Bromidus said, “Prosecution wishes to call the next witness. Please bring Lieutenant Commander Kyle McDaniel to the stand.”

Tom twisted in his seat to watch his friend being lead through the court by the bailiff. The marine officer was wearing his full dress uniform, which made Kyle’s stony-faced expression seem all the more imposing. They made brief eye contact as Kyle sat, and his friend’s stern mask slipped for a second, revealing a flicker of sympathy and regret.

“Please give your name and rank,” Bromidus intoned.

“I’m Lt Commander Kyle McDaniel, TFNN marine corps,” the auburn haired man replied.

“And what is the nature of your association with Commander Walker?”

“We met in basic training, then went through the Academy together. He’s been an honest and loyal friend for the last eight years,” Kyle replied.

“Your honour, I’d like to request that everything after ‘the Academy together’ be stricken from the record, as it’s irrelevant to the question,” Bromidus asked.

Before Kincaid could object, Judge Nancarrow shook his head. “Denied. You asked him how he knew Thomas Walker, and asked him about the nature of their association. It is entirely up to Lt Commander McDaniel how he chooses to define their friendship.”

Kyle couldn’t help smirking at the prosecuting lawyer, but that was wiped from his face by the next question.

“According to the comms log, Thomas Walker contacted you shortly before the Callopean Shoals massacre. Please can you inform the court what the two of you discussed in those communications.”

“We reminisced about being in the Academy,” Kyle replied guardedly.

“Ah yes. Thomas Walker reminded you about a favour you owed him, and that he intended to collect... is that right?”

Kyle grimaced and nodded. “Yes.”

“And what service did he request from you, in exchange for that favour?” Bromidus asked, looking smugly satisfied with himself.

Kyle darted a remorseful glance at Tom before replying, “He wanted me to check up on Anna and make sure she was okay.”

Bromidus raised an eyebrow. “I believe the call was about more than Miss Newmont’s wellbeing. Didn’t Thomas Walker raise his concerns that his fiancée was being unfaithful with Commander Archibald Davenport? After which you offered to physically assault her supposed paramour, on nothing more than Walker’s baseless suspicions?”

The auburn-haired Scotsman reddened with embarrassment and gruffly replied, “Yeah, alright. I offered to fuck him up.”

Judge Nancarrow frowned in disapproval. “Please refrain from the use of unnecessary profanities, Lt Commander McDaniel.”

“That was a direct quote, your honour,” Kyle replied, keeping a straight face.

The Judge grunted and glanced at Bromidus. “Continue.”

The prosecution lawyer faced his witness again and said, “Please inform the court what transpired after you invaded Miss Newmont’s privacy and spent the next few days stalking her.”

“I tailed Anna, and found out she was spending a lot of time with Archie... Commander Archibald Davenport,” Kyle clarified. “I eventually discovered that she was staying at his place and recorded them leaving the apartment early in the morning after spending the night together.”

Tom glanced back at his fiancée and she looked absolutely mortified at the picture Kyle’s testimony was painting of her.

“After gathering evidence of Miss Newmont’s purported infidelity, you then called Thomas Walker,” Bromidus stated. “Please can you describe what happened on that call... and I’d like to remind you that you’re under oath.”

Kyle grit his teeth, then replied, “I told Tom what I’d seen, and showed him the recording of Anna and Archie at his apartment. He was obviously upset.”

Bromidus glanced at his notes and said, “When you were interviewed as part of this investigation, I believe you described Mr Walker’s reaction in much more eloquent terms. Did you in fact say: ‘When I told Tom about Anna cheating on him, he was devastated... he looked like a man **who had nothing left to lose**.’?”

Kincaid immediately rose from his chair. “Objection, speculation. Lt Commander McDaniel is not a trained psychologist and is therefore unqualified to accurately gauge my client’s mental state over a holo-call.”

Nancarrow studied Tom for a long moment. “Sustained.”

“No more questions, your honour,” Bromidus formally stated.

“Do you wish to cross-examine the witness, Mr. Kincaid?”

“I do indeed, your honour,” Caspian Kincaid replied, taking his place behind the lectern.

Tom’s lawyer proceeded to ask Kyle a series of questions about their time together during the academy, focusing on the details of their friendship. As Kincaid proceeded to use him as a positive character witness, Tom glanced at the jury to try to gauge their reaction, and he could tell that the mood had shifted with the military officers. While they didn’t visibly show any disdain towards Tom, he knew they had been influenced by the prosecution’s narrative, that he was obsessed with his fiancée and blamed her subsequent infidelity on not being granted emergency leave.

As motives went, Tom thought it was an absurd justification for betraying the entire fleet, but so far that was the only motive that had been suggested. Caspian Kincaid had studiously avoided any attempt to provide an alternate theory for who was the real traitor behind the Callopean Shoals massacre, and in that void, the prosecution lawyer was free to paint his own picture of what had happened.

\*\*\*

“We’re picking up sensor contacts, Fleet Commander!” the excited Maliri tactical officer exclaimed. “There’s hundreds of them!”

“Right where they said they’d be,” Emalyne murmured, uncrossing her legs and rising from her command chair. She gazed up at the holographic image that loomed over the Bridge of the House Loraleth flagship, her eyes flicking from one sensor contact to the other. “Any movement?”

There was a hushed silence amongst the crew as they waited in breathless anticipation. If those vessels were the doomed fleet that Baen’thelas had dispatched them to recover, they would soon be acquiring thousands of radically advanced warships to defend the Protectorate. However, if there were active vessels amongst the starship graveyard, the entire Maliri fleet could be doomed to extinction.

After a painstakingly long wait, the Tactical Officer announced, “There’s no sign of active shipping there, Fleet Commander.”

“Inform the other fleet commanders that we are about to begin salvage operations,” she ordered her Communications Officer. “Tell them that they are welcome to wait and observe our efforts to safely recover those ships, but I would urge them to begin commandeering the Larathyran fleets as quickly as possible. We must return to Kythshara with the greatest of haste.”

As that message was broadcast to the other Maliri fleets that had jumped through the Hyper-warp gate to the Larathyran Empire, the House Loraleth flagship bore down on the marooned vessels. Emalyne watched intently as they closed the distance, and more detailed images of the thrall spacecraft began to appear. The Larathyran fleet was without exception, the most terrifying collection of warships that the veteran Maliri officer had ever seen.

Angular black ships seemed to drink in the light from the surrounding stars, giving their glistening hulls a sinister and menacing feel. The silence on the Bridge of the Maliri battleships seemed to subtly shift, with everyone’s feelings of anticipation and excitement, quickly turning to fear and dread. Emalyne’s attention was drawn to a massive capital ship in the centre of the Larathyran formation, the hulking behemoth dwarfing the pride of House Loraleth’s navy.

“That one,” she said quietly, pointing to the Dominator-class battleship.

The helmswoman nodded and altered their course, steering directly towards this imposing new target. When they were almost within firing range of their weapons, the enormous mass of the thrall battleship was enough to trigger the emergency shutdown of their hyper-warp drive. The golden-hulled flagship dropped out of hyper-warp to a juddering halt, then their engines blazed to life, taking them even closer to the predatory craft.

Emalyne walked over to the IntOps station and stared at the holo-screen that floated over her console. “Is the programme finished?”

The young Maliri hacker nodded, a nervous glimmer of excitement in her eyes. “I followed the instructions to the letter. There are no mistakes, Fleet Admiral.”

“Are we in range?” Emalyne asked. When she was answered with a quick nod, she turned back to look at the monstrous alien capital ship. “Transmit the commands.”

The Maliri battleship glided to a halt, its golden hull now overshadowed by the immense tonnage of the thrall capital ship. The seconds ticked by in tense silence, until Emalyne turned back to check with the IntOps.

“We’re through their firewall,” the hacker informed her. “Everything appears to be working as it should.”

“We have movement!” the Tactical Officer called out in warning.

“Enemy ships?” Emalyne asked curtly.

The Maliri shook her head. “No... its the airlocks. They’re opening!”

“Zoom in, give me an enhanced image!” the Fleet Commander barked, her fear giving her voice a sharper edge.

The main holo-screen zoomed in on the black hull of the battleship, and a door that looked like serrated jaws split apart, the fanged mouth preparing to take a savage bite. Instead of tearing away a chunk of flesh, this mouth began to regurgitate its contents, and a stream of bloated corpses began to tumble out into space. Air whistled outside of the battleship as it was depressurised, flinging the dead crew out in a grotesque jumble of cadavers.

“There’s so many of them... thousands of bodies,” the hacker whispered, her azure complexion turning a sicklier shade of teal.

Nobody said another word as the former occupants of the Larathyran battleship were jettisoned into space, the explosive decompression forcibly clearing the corridors of the fallen crew. Eventually the morbid stream petered out, leaving the sea of dead to drift away for eternity.

“Prepare to launch the boarding teams,” Emalyne ordered. “When we have that battleship secured, begin the transfer of all personnel except the designated skeleton crew.”

The Bridge crew rushed to follow her orders, and all along the border, these actions were repeated many times over by vanguard of the Maliri salvage fleets.

\*\*\*

“Yep, grab those ones over there!” Dana called out, pointing to the forest of foot-tall Eternity Crystals which had formed in the crystalline solution. “They’re a perfect fit for the Shield Projectors.”

The four maintenance bots began to carefully gather the delicate materials with their six-fingered hands, each of the beautiful crystals sparkling brightly as they refracted the light.

She turned back towards the Soulforge and saw that the rotating white rings were now slowing to a halt. “Have you finished?!” she asked, bounding across the Engineering Bay to check on John’s progress.

“Here you go: one frequency modulator,” he replied, levitating the gleaming white cylinder into the redhead’s open arms.

“Awesome!” she gushed, cradling it like a baby. Dana looked up at John and saw him remove the control circlet and rub his temple. “Hey... are you alright?”

“Just a bit tired,” he replied, giving her a wan smile. “Concentrating on psychic shaping for that long catches up with you after a while.”

She walked over to his chair, then leaned down over Ailita to give him a comforting hug. “You should get some rest. Me and the boys can put this together, no problem.”

“It’s okay. Give me a minute and I’ll be fine,” he replied, returning her hug, then patting Ailita’s thigh.

The Nymph slid from his lap, then watched John attentively as he rose from the chair and stretched. “Can I be of any assistance, Master? Jade has instructed me in her massage techniques.”

John was very tempted, but before he could respond, he was interrupted by a telepathic voice.

\*Hey, handsome,\* Alyssa greeted him. \*Before you get too comfortable, could you come up to the Combat Bridge? Calara wants to show you something.\*

“Duty calls,” he said to Dana with a wry smile. “I’ll be down to join you as quick as I can.”

“No worries,” she replied, giving him a cheerful grin. “We’ll get cracking anyway.”

She scampered off to join the procession of maintenance bots, who were transferring all the components for the Progenitor Shield Generator over to the Engineering Lift.

As John left the Workshop, Ailita hurried after him, then fell into step at his side. He glanced at the Nymph and said, “You can take a break if you want, honey.”

“I love being your adjutant, Master,” Ailita admitted. “Is it alright if this one stays with you?”

He held out his hand. “Of course.”

She beamed at him as they interlaced fingers, the happy Nymph savouring every moment in his company as they traversed the Invictus’ corridors. When they eventually reached the Combat Bridge, John strode down the ramp and found quite the committee waiting for him.

“Attention!” Alyssa barked with a mischievous grin. “Admiral on Deck!”

Calara, Jade, and her four feline sisters all snapped to attention.

“It’s like I can hear the mocking insincerity dripping off every word,” he joked, rolling his eyes at the blonde. “Hey, Calara. Have you got an update on the Galkiran fleets?”

She nodded, her expression tinged with concern. “I do, and it’s not good news, I’m afraid.”

“Why don’t you take a seat and we’ll debrief you,” Alyssa suggested.

“Sure,” he agreed, and walked towards his command chair.

As he approached, the Nymphs sprang into action, with Jade sliding into the chair before he could.

“Sit right here, Master!” she said, patting the edge of the seat in front of her.

“What are you up to?” he asked, narrowing his eyes as he looked around at her kneeling sisters.

“Trust us, Master,” Ailita said softly. “We just want to take care of you.”

John cautiously sat where his green-skinned matriarch was pointing, then watched Ailita as she knelt between his thighs. The other Nymphs shuffled closer, then he felt six sets of very strong, but very gentle hands begin to work. He could only groan in rapture, as dozens of nimble fingers began to massage away the soreness in his muscles.

“This was Ailita’s idea,” Jade purred in his ear, as she rubbed his temples. “She said you’ve been working very diligently and needed to be refreshed.”

“She’s an angel...” he moaned appreciatively, melting into Jade’s embrace as they all worked their magic on him.

Two minutes later and John felt like a new man, his every ache eased away by their skilled fingertips.

“Damn... I needed that,” he marvelled, clasping Ailita’s offered hand and letting her pull him to his feet. “Thank you!”

The Nymphs all got up and gave him parting kisses, each of them looking serenely happy.

“Anytime, Master,” Jade said, her emerald eyes shining with delight.

“Are you feeling better now?” Alyssa asked, watching him with genuine concern.

He nodded and gave her a self-conscious smile. “Yeah, that really was amazing.”

“Good,” she said with relief. “Okay, go ahead, Calara.”

The Latina held a remote in her hand and she pressed a button. A holographic map appeared of the local sector and John could see the lines of Galkiran fleets advancing through Maliri territory.

“They’ve all got their shields up,” John noted, seeing the telltale icons next to each of the enemy warships. “I thought they would have started burning out by now?”

“They would have, but the Progenitor decided to change his tactics,” Calara explained with a rueful frown. “After our last ambush, I was expecting them to follow a similar pattern as before: abandon the crippled fleets and continue the invasion as quickly as possible. Instead, they did this.”

She pressed another icon on the remote and the holographic projection shifted, then showed all the thrall fleets tightly huddled together in a spherical formation.

“What are the odds that the Progenitor’s dreadnought was right in the centre?” John muttered as he stared at the invasion force.

“High enough that no sane person would be ever bet against it,” Calara agreed. “He was there alright, I’m certain of it.”

John had a puzzled frown on his face as he studied the Galkiran ships. “So he went from callous disregard for his forces to carefully watching over them like a mother hen?”

“For two hours,” Calara said with emphasis. “I would have alerted you and suggested a possible attack against unshielded thrall ships, but it would’ve been extremely dangerous.”

“No, you were right to scratch that. It would’ve been a suicide mission,” John agreed, waving away any doubt on her behalf. “You did the right thing just observing them, especially if the Progenitor’s trying to conserve his forces now. Did they attempt to repair any of the damaged ships?”

“No, and they didn’t even bother to rescue any of the marooned crews,” Calara replied, shaking her head in disapproval. “They only set off again an hour ago... all fully shielded.”

“Ah, shit,” John cursed, feeling a sharp pang of guilt. “This is all because I intervened in the ambush and we caused too much damage last time. I completely wrecked your strategy, Calara... I’m so sorry.”

This time it was her turn to wave away his concern. “We don’t know that for certain.”

He looked at her with a pained expression. “You don’t need to sugar coat my mistake.”

She gave him a reassuring smile and shook her head. “I’m not, I promise. The real catalyst for this change in tactics by the Progenitor could simply be because the thrall shields were almost at breaking point. The Galkiran forces might have done the exact same thing regardless of how many casualties we inflicted in the last ambush. If that’s the case, you helped significantly, because we crippled twice as many ships while we still had the opportunity.”

“Okay, I see what you mean,” John said with visible relief. “It’s just a shame that we couldn’t force them to burn their shields out though.”

“We still put their shields under a huge amount of strain. They should see a considerable performance drop in combat using crystals with stress fractures,” Calara said with satisfaction. “And if they continue with this behaviour, this will actually be an even better result for us in the long run.”

“Because we’re still causing big delays if they keep having to repeatedly stop like this,” John said with a chuckle.

“Exactly,” Calara agreed. “I suggest we focus on upgrading our shield generator now, then we can consider another ambush this evening. We won’t be able to attack in conjunction with spider mines, but we should be able to cause a lot of chaos and cripple a decent number of ships before we have to withdraw.”

John considered the plan for a moment. “That sounds sensible to me, although we’re still heading a bit too close towards the centre of Maliri territory. Do you have any plans to alter their attack vector?”

Calara zoomed out the map, then displayed the invasion path as it snaked around the star systems on the periphery of the Protectorate.

“I think our best chance of getting them to change path is by attacking uncloaked, then repeatedly retreating in this direction.” She pointed towards an area of the map that was at an oblique angle to the Valaden homeworld. “If we place minefields angled this way, it’ll also reinforce the idea that we’re trying to protect something in that direction.”

“Very sneaky,” he said, patting her on the back. “Although it might be a bit obvious if we suddenly stop using the cloak when it’s been very effective so far.”

She nodded in agreement. “It’s a shame we know so little about this Progenitor, because it’s making it very hard to predict how he’s going to respond. If I knew he was a complete buffoon, we could forgo any subtlety and lead him around by the nose. However, if he’s been deliberately playing dumb to make us overconfident, we could be in for some very nasty surprises.”

“It’s probably best not to second guess yourself too much at this stage,” John said, rubbing his chin as he studied the invading forces. “We do know for sure that battles between Progenitors are usually a real meat grinder, with the only real objective for either side to inflict maximum casualties. I think it’s extremely unlikely that wars like that are going to produce a gifted strategist... but let’s not get too cocky.”

Alyssa raised an eyebrow, then when they both looked at her, she protested, “What? I didn’t say anything!”

“I could feel you fighting the urge to make a lewd joke,” John said, grabbing her in a hug and giving her a pre-emptive tickle.

She laughed and held her hands up in surrender. “Come on, you can’t blame me for that.”

Calara watched them in amusement, then said, “Well that was all my updates. I’ll keep monitoring the situation here and let you know if anything changes.”

“Oh, show him the refit site,” Alyssa prompted her.

Calara gave her a grateful smile, then used the remote to move the focus of the holographic map to a sweeping asteroid belt. “I thought it might be sensible to stop here to upgrade our shield generator. It’s at a point further along their current invasion path, and if we are ambushed by the dreadnought, we can use the asteroids as cover while we escape.”

“This looks perfect, well done,” John said, nodding his approval. “And the refit should take us about thirty minutes?”

“With both of us assisting, and Sakura in the Valkyrie,” Alyssa replied. “I’ve discussed it with Daphne; we’ll handle the shield generator, and the Collective will replace all the shield projectors.”

“Alright, let’s get it done,” John said, sharing a smile with both girls.

\*\*\*

Valeria raised her arm and studied her forearm, rotating it back and forth to check for any sign of her recent injury. Her scarlet flesh was smooth, supple, and unblemished, giving her the outward appearance of a nubile thirty-year-old, despite having nearly reached her first millennia. She lowered the healed limb and lightly caressed her stomach, feeling the defined muscle tone again after her body had absorbed another delicious serving of her master’s cum.

Despite the horrific indignities she’d been forced to endure over the centuries, these moments made it all worthwhile. She studied her reflection in the mirror, and saw a stunningly beautiful woman gaze back, her full lips curved up into a languid smile. The euphoria of carrying a tummy full of Gahl’kalgor’s seed was unrivalled, with even the thrill of battle paling into dull monotony by comparison.

In the past thousand years, her Progenitor Master had sired many children with the undeserving breeding stock aboard their dreadnought. However, she was his matriarch, and the only one that he personally and regularly blessed with a rounded stomach full of his virile load. Valeria had always been convinced that they shared a special connection, and it seemed like Gahl’kalgor was now finally ready to reward her tireless patience.

“Matriarch, we are ready for you,” Camine said, her voice quiet and respectful.

Valeria fought back the urge to blush at being caught gazing doe-eyed at her reflection. She shifted smoothly into a vanity pose, making the taut muscles in her athletic body ripple under the scarlet gloom of the wall lights. There was no denying that Gahl’kalgor kept her at the peak of physical perfection, with gifts of speed, strength, and endurance that were far beyond any of her mortal peers.

“I shall be out in moments,” she stated curtly, before striding over to the wardrobe and retrieving a jumpsuit. “I will face all of you today, Camine.”

“As you command, Matriarch,” the Galkiran warrior replied, an edge of anticipation creeping into her voice.

The figure-hugging jumpsuit slid over her body like a second skin, snugly cupping her rounded bust with the supportive fabric. After fastening it closed, she stood beneath the armour-equipping frame and waited as robotic limbs arced down from the ceiling to clad her in a robust suit of glistening black armour. Although she’d worn this kind of body armour for most of her life, for the first time, Valeria felt a shiver run down her spine when she was sealed inside.

She paused in confusion, tamping down an irrational urge to frantically strip the armour from her body. With a sharp reminder to herself to stop being ridiculous and that she was running late, Valeria hurried over to the wall of training weapons and grabbed a pair of matched Vensys blades. She rotated her wrists, watching as the glimmering edges swished through the air, a keening whistle following in their wake.

Now that she was suitably attired for battle, Valeria left the prepatorium and strode purposefully into the sparring arena. A dozen thralls waited for her there, each of them wielding personalised weapons that they had trained exclusively with for decades. These were her hand-picked elite, her Selan’kethari, who kept her skills sharp and followed her into war.

“Three minutes to best you all!” she called out in challenge.

The Galkirans responded to the excitement in her voice, and glanced at each other with feral grins, before tightening their grip on their weapons.

“A fatal wound in less than a minute!” Camine yelled back defiantly.

Valeria felt an unfamiliar surge of emotion, and suddenly laughed, still riding the euphoric high of her recent moment of intimacy with Gahl’kalgor. The thralls gaped at her in shock, having never seen their matriarch act this way before. She twirled the twin blades around her wrists, in a flashy ostentatious display, then cut sharply to the left. The abrupt shift caught them all off-guard, and then the Gladiatora was upon them, reminding her cohort why she was the undefeated champion of a thousand battles.

\*\*\*

Sakura landed lightly on the Invictus’ topdeck, making the thirty-metre tall Valkyrie move with the grace and poise of an Olympic gymnast. She steered the huge ship component into place, so that it was floating above the gaping hole that had previously been occupied by the Brimorian Shield Generator they had acquired from Deep Lord Athgiloi.

“Whoa! Stop there!” John called out over the intercom in his Paragon Suit HUD.

“We just need to line it up with those grooves,” Dana said, pointing towards the indentations that descended into the cavity. “Then we slide it in, lock it down, and hook up all the Power Couplings. Easy.”

The mech crouched down beside John and Alyssa. “Shall I push down and you two make sure it’s correctly aligned with some telekinetic nudges?”

John was about to agree, then he abruptly changed his mind. “Hold on a second. I know a much easier way.”

He stepped backwards a few paces to give himself some room, then concentrated his will inwards, focusing on expanding his size to massive proportions. He grew up and up, his body swelling until his head was level with that of the Valkyrie.

“You take one side, I’ll take the other,” he ordered, moving around the hole in the topdeck plating until he was facing Sakura.

She poked the mech’s head around the floating Shield Generator, then gave him a thumbs’ up. “Ready when you are.”

The two armoured titans carefully held the priceless ship component between them, and began to lower it down.

“To you,” John said, pushing gently when he noticed the edge of the generator was too close to the cavity wall.

It took a few more slight readjustments, then the generator slid neatly into place, floating down until it made contact with the inner hull.

“Nice Job!” Dana said with a broad grin.

She hopped onto the top of the generator, then began sliding the mag locks into place.

John rose from his crouch and offered his hand palm up to the Valkyrie. The big mech raised its own hand, then super-sized gauntlet met robotic fist in a resounding high-five.

Alyssa smiled indulgently at the herculean figures. “Why don’t you two go burn off some energy? It’ll take us a few minutes to hook up the Shield Generator, so you’ll just be waiting around before you can replate the hull.”

“What do you mean?” John asked, tilting his huge Paragon helmet down to look at his tiny blonde matriarch in confusion.

Sakura laughed and jogged across the topdeck, then turned the Valkyrie to face him. She held out the mech’s hand and beckoned him forwards. “Round 1... fight!”

He looked at her in surprise, then broke into a broad grin. “Challenge accepted!”

Dana gazed up at the two giants in wonder, watching as John and the Valkyrie traded incredibly fast punches and kicks. Alyssa made a few gestures behind her back, then stood beside the redhead to watch the gigantic sparring match.

John leaped into the air to avoid the deadly sweep of a ten-metre leg, but the zero gravity left him floating helplessly for a second until he could engage his suit’s thrusters. The Valkyrie crouched down, then kicked off the hull, bringing up its huge clenched fist.

“Tigress Uppercut!” she called out, a split second before the blow landed on his chest with a crunch.

The impact sent John spinning out into space and he laughed as he tumbled head over heels before regaining control over the spin.

“Whoa... that was fucking awesome!” Dana gushed, bouncing up and down with excitement.

She suddenly remembered that they were supposed to be securing the Shield Generator and reluctantly turned back to the mag-locks and power cables.

\*Don’t worry about it. They’re already done,\* Alyssa said, nudging her playfully with an elbow. \*Just relax and watch the show.\*

\*\*\*

Calara waited patiently by her Tactical Station, keeping a close eye on the shield status display. As she watched, the image of the Invictus was surrounded by a grey line, indicating that the shield generator was currently offline. It abruptly went dark, the silhouette of the white battlecruiser now edged in black, which she knew meant that the shield generator had power, but the shields were not currently activated.

\*The shields are in a ready state,\* she informed Alyssa. \*Should I activate them to test they’re functional?\*

\*Not unless you want to maroon John in this asteroid belt,\* came the blonde’s flippant reply. \*Check the external cameras.\*

The Latina did as she was asked, then leaned closer and stared at the holo-screens in fascination as John brawled with the Valkyrie. Sakura was a quick and deadly opponent, but John had many years of martial arts experience over her, and he was soon able to grapple the warmachine down to the Invictus’ topdeck. She watched in amazement as John proved to be strong enough to overpower the huge mech and keep it restrained, forcing Sakura to concede defeat.

It seemed surreal to Calara to think of her loving fiancé being capable of grappling a thirty-metre mech into submission. However, she saw no reason to disbelieve the shocking images in front of her eyes, and enjoyed a thrill of excitement at knowing just how strong and powerful John could actually be. Her gigantic fiancé helped the Valkyrie to stand, then he turned back to the open section of the hull to close up the Shield Generator well.

\*Okay, you can turn them on now,\* Alyssa said, giving her the all clear.

Calara activated the Invictus’ primary defences and the warship was then shrouded in a protective barrier that blazed bright green on the status display. She whistled appreciatively when she saw the massive performance increase over the Brimorian predecessors, which didn’t even include the hard shielding, or the improved dampening effect which lessened the effectiveness of energy weapons.

\*Everything looks good here,\* she informed her friend. \*Tell Dana they worked like a charm.\*

\*\*\*

John had shrunk back to normal size as he closed the hole in the armour plating, and also fixed the jagged scars left behind by a salvo of Galkiran Tachyon Lances. With the refit and repairs completed, he accompanied Dana and Alyssa back through the airlock into the Invictus.

Sakura was there waiting for them, bouncing up and down with excitement. “That was so much fun!”

“Maybe we could start a new combat sport: Mech wrestling,” John suggested with a grin.

The Asian girl frowned and shook her head. “I hate grappling. Let’s make it punches and kicks only!”

She shadow boxed a flurry of quick punches, then whirled around to unleash a roundhouse kick.

“You’ll get a lot more viewers if you listen to Sakura,” Jehanna said, as she strode out of the grav-tube to join them. “I’d pay to watch that.”

“Hey, honey,” John said, removing his Paragon helmet and greeting her with a kiss. “We’re just heading up to the Combat Bridge. Are you coming too?”

She nodded in confirmation. “Alyssa said we might be planning another ambush.”

He glanced at the blonde and she simply shrugged. “Most of us are already geared up. If the new shield generator is working fine, why not give it a proper test run?”

“Hey! Of course it works properly!” Dana said with an indignant snort.

“I know. I wasn’t doubting you, Sparks,” Alyssa said gently, aware of how sensitive her friend was about her inventions at that moment.

“It wouldn’t hurt to keep the Galkirans on their toes,” John agreed, as they walked across the Secondary Hangar towards the express grav-tubes.

They rose up to Deck Four, then walked down the ramp into the Combat Bridge. Calara and the Nymphs were waiting there, along with Rachel and the twins.

“Check out these readouts, Dana!” Calara exclaimed, excitedly beckoning her over. “The new shield generator is incredible!”

“See, I told you,” Dana said, sticking her tongue out defiantly at the blonde.

“So, are we thinking about a field test?” John asked the Latina.

Before she could reply, Alyssa cleared her throat. “Hold on. There’s something important we need to discuss first.”

Everyone looked at her in surprise.

John gestured for her to proceed. “Go ahead, XO. You have our attention.”

Alyssa placed her Paragon helmet on her seat, then flicked her fingers towards the console. “I completed my analysis of the Wormhole Generator.”

“Just now? When we were outside the ship?” Dana asked in amazement.

“No,” she said quietly. “A few hours ago.”

“Why didn’t you tell me earlier?” Dana asked, frowning at her quizzically.

Alyssa studied her for a moment, then replied, “The schematics are flawed. You built the device correctly, but there are fundamental errors in the gravimetric calculations used to harness and control an active wormhole.”

Dana’s jaw dropped in shock. “What the fuck?!”

“The nausea we’ve been experiencing is a symptom of those errors. Either Xar’aziuth didn’t fully understand the science behind the Wormhole generators, or he deliberately supplied Progenitors with a schematic for a substandard version. It wasn’t your fault, Sparks,” Alyssa said gently.

Dana’s eyes welled up and she promptly burst into tears, then ran unsteadily back up the ramp.

“Hey, wait!” John called after her, stunned by her outburst. “Come back, Dana!”

Rachel bolted for the ramp. “Let me. I’ll go after her.”

John turned to Alyssa for an explanation. “What just happened?”

Alyssa let out a ragged sigh and ran her gauntleted hand through her hair. “She was just overwhelmed with relief. All her life, Dana has always just ‘got’ machines, and everything she’s built has always worked like a charm. This is the first time she constructed something with a serious flaw, and it really knocked her confidence.”

“I didn’t realise this had affected her so badly,” John said, glancing back up the ramp with concern. “Is she going to be alright?”

“Yeah, she’s okay,” Alyssa replied with a reassuring smile. “I didn’t want to tell Dana earlier because she was engrossed in her latest weapon research and I knew she’d get upset.”

Calara looked as bewildered as John felt. “Why would Xar’aziuth deliberately give his Progenitors flawed schematics?”

The blonde gave her a helpless shrug. “I don’t know. I think it’s highly likely that it was deliberate though.”

“How hard is it to fix?” John asked.

“When I explain the problem to her, Dana should be able to modify the schematics in just a few minutes. We’ll probably need to replace a couple of components in the Wormhole Generator, but as soon as those are fixed, a wormhole jump should be as smooth as silk.”

“Damn,” John said, shaking his head in amazement. “I think we should give Dana some time to recover, then prioritise fixing our Wormhole Generator. I’ve nearly got used to the nausea side-effects, but I certainly won’t object to correcting that, especially if it gives Dana a big confidence boost.”

Alyssa gave him a tender kiss. “You’re very sweet. Thank you.”

“Any objections, Calara?” John asked.

She held her hands up and quickly shook her head. “None from me.”

“Me either,” Jehanna agreed. “I didn’t want to say anything before, but I hate being sick, and those jumps were awful!”

“My only question, is do we do a field test after fixing it?” John asked, looking around the group. “Bearing in mind that we’ll have a twelve hour cooldown until we can use it again.”

“Will Dana take a lack of a field test as a testament to our trust in her skills and capabilities as an engineer?”Irillith asked. “If so, then I suggest we forego any testing and assume that it work without error.”

Tashana leaned over and hugged her twin. “I agree with my kind and considerate sister.”

Irillith blushed and gave her a wry smile. “I bet you never thought you’d ever say that.”

“Not before... but now I think that all the time,” the Maliri archaeologist said fondly.

John adjusted the helmet under his arm. “Let me go talk to Dana and check she’s okay. Then we’ll go ahead with everything we’ve discussed.”

“Hey... I’m back,” Dana said, cringing with embarrassment as she stood beside Rachel at the top of the ramp.

“Dana!” he exclaimed, striding up to give her a hug. “We were all worried about you.”

“I know,” she murmured, hiding her face in his chest. “I’m really sorry about that. When I found out I’d spent all that time worrying over nothing... it all got too much.”

“There’s no need to apologise, we understand,” John said with sympathy. “Now, do you want to go and have a chat with Alyssa and figure out how to fix it?”

She bit her lip, then bobbed her head enthusiastically.

“Good girl,” he said with approval. “Apparently nobody likes feeling as if they’re going to be violently sick, so we need this shoddy Progenitor tech fixed asap.”

Dana laughed and broke into a confident grin. “Don’t worry, I’ll fix their useless shit, no problem!”

“Thanks, honey,” he said gratefully. “Alright, I’m going to take off this armour, then I’ll help out with shaping new parts on the Soulforge. As soon as we’ve finished upgrading the Wormhole Generator, then we can start planning our next ambush.”

“Leave that with me,” Calara offered. “How about we all reconvene in an hour? If that’s not enough time, just let me know.”

“No, that sounds great,” John said, walking into the armoury. “See you then.”

#

He followed Dana and Alyssa over to the armour-equipping frames, with his blonde matriarch launching into a detailed explanation of precisely what was wrong with the Wormhole-Generator. There was a temporary lull in her monologue as they replaced their Paragon helmets on their heads, then the robotic arms safely stowed the armour away for later use. The two Terran girls immediately renewed their conversation as they stepped out of their Paragon boots, then John descended in the express-grav tubes after them, and accompanied the pair as they crossed the hangar.

Dana listened attentively as Alyssa continued her treatise on folding space time, and delved into the principle of a wormhole being a mere projection of a fourth spatial dimension. The discussion on quantum mechanics was way beyond John’s rudimentary level of understanding, but it was reassuring to hear Alyssa’s unshakeable confidence as she spoke about the subject. He watched her in fascination as her usual facade slipped, revealing a rare glimpse of the absolutely brilliant mind beneath.

It was normally only natural to assume that Rachel was the most intelligent member of the crew, as at John’s request, she no longer made any effort to hide her imposing intellect. However listening to Alyssa now, sparked a memory of a conversation they’d had several months ago, where the enigmatic blonde had casually admitted that she was capable of mastering any subject she turned her mind to. It was now quite obvious that he might have to re-evaluate his preconceived notions about who really was the smartest Lioness aboard the Invictus.

Alyssa glanced over her shoulder at John as they walked over to the engineering lift, her perceptive cerulean gaze reading him like a book. He thought she was going to make a comment about this startling revelation, but she just gave him a coy smile, then turned her attention back to Dana’s latest question. When they reached the Engineering Bay, he watched the pair make their way towards the podium on the far side of the Workshop. Rather than following after them, John made a detour and walked towards the Soulforge instead.

“Hello, Master,” Ailita said cheerfully, bounding over to greet him with a kiss.

“Hey, honey,” he said distractedly, putting his arm around the Nymph as he studied the concentric white rings, each edged in gleaming gold.

John realised that Alyssa had been right earlier; he did subconsciously resent missing out on any action, and the thought of spending hours labouring over the Soulforge was an anathema to him. In a sudden flash of terrible epiphany, he knew that the Progenitors had a similar mindset. By being disassociated from the forging process, it freed them to focus all their attention on war and destruction.

“You’re not like them, Master,” Ailita said decisively, looking up at him with concern.

He turned to give her a reassuring smile. “You’re right. I’m not.”

John gestured with one hand towards an open crate of Crystal Alyssium, and with the other, gratefully accepted the control circlet that was handed to him by the wide-eyed Nymph. A stream of white metal arced across from the open crate, then congealed into a sphere inside the Soulforge. The white discs began to rotate, the spinning circles surging into motion with what seemed like a new sense of purpose, the innate resistance nowhere to be seen.

The lump of Crystal Alyssium formed into a dodecahedron, solidified for a second, then melted into a sphere. He watched it shift from solid to liquid, liquid to solid, back and forth, over and over again as the spinning discs of the Soulforge whirled past. The soft whir of each rotation was in sync with those transformations, counting each shaping like a metronome as John hardened the psychic metal.

He relaxed as he focused on the steady beat, his heart rate slowing as John felt himself being drawn into a familiar Zen state. In front of him, the orb of liquid metal abruptly split into two, then elongated and flattened, forming two parallel bars. Closing his eyes, John focused his will inward, delving deep into the murky depths of his subconscious.

For what seemed like a brief moment, time felt like it had slowed, dragging out the process of creation for an eternity within the single rotation of a Soulforge ring. He felt like he’d tapped into something ancient, that stretched out through the eons to reach this brief instance in the present. The connection yawed open, like a gaping portal, as secrets from a bygone era poured forth.

Completely immersed in the forging process, John didn’t hear Ailita’s startled gasp. He was also blissfully unaware that the overhead lights began to flicker, as he tapped into a phenomenal amount of psychic power. Nor did he realise Alyssa and Dana had jogged over to find out what was happening, the two teenagers staring at him in awe. He didn’t even notice the sudden precipitous drop in temperature, or the groaning crack of a glacier under thousands of tons of pressure.

“John,” Alyssa called to him softly, her fingers gently cupping his face. “It’s done... come back to us.”

There was the briefest flicker of familiarity, then John reluctantly released his tight mental control, and the passage of time renewed with a disorientating snap. He swayed for a moment, caught off balance until Alyssa steadied him.

“Are you alright?” she asked with concern, studying him intently.

John blinked a few times as he tried to concentrate on his matriarch, her blurry face slowly coming back into sharp focus.

“I’m good,” he replied, feeling a shiver run down his spine. “And I’m not like them at all.”

Alyssa’s face lit up into a beautiful smile. “I’m so proud of you,” she whispered, before leaning in to give him a tender kiss.

There was a sudden jarring clang, the grating metallic note disrupting the serene moment.

“Holy fuck!” Dana blurted out.

John glanced over at the redhead and saw her staring in shock at a sizeable chunk of metal she had just lopped off the nearest Mass fabricator. In her hands she held two matching swords, the slightly curved blades an unusual design, yet at the same time achingly familiar. The chill of the grave was pouring from the razor-sharp weapons, and each blade was adorned by a procession of glowing Kyth’faren runes.

“Oops.” Dana gave him a guilty look. “I couldn’t resist having a quick go... and I hit the mass fabricator by accident. It sliced through it like butter!”

“So I see,” John noted with a wry smile.

Alyssa gestured towards her friend and carefully confiscated the deadly melee weapons with two sets of telekinetic hands. “Sakura’s on her way.”

“Aww...” Dana pouted in protest, as she reluctantly handed over the newly forged runeswords. “When do I get my own cool magic weapons?!”

John studied the swords himself, just as curious about the gleaming blades. “I’ll add you to the list.”

Dana pumped her fist in celebration. “Oh yeah!”

\*\*\*

Sakura jogged down the corridor, summoned by an intriguing request from her matriarch.

\*Hello Sakura,\* Alyssa had said, a playful lilt to her telepathic voice. \*If you can spare a minute, would you like to come down to the Engineering Bay? John has something for you.\*

The Asian girl smirked and rolled her eyes at the blonde’s airy invitation. The very idea that she would prioritise anything over receiving a gift from John was utterly absurd, but she could tell by Alyssa’s teasing tone that her matriarch secretly meant: “Come down here right now! You don’t want to miss this!”

Her pulse raced just a little bit faster and she broke into a sprint to reach the Engineering Bay. After skidding to a halt, she slapped her hand down on the door control, then darted inside before it had even opened half-way.

“Hello?” she called out, her head whipping around to search for her friends.

“We’re over here!” Dana yelled, giving her an exuberant wave that could be seen over the mass fabricators.

Taking a deep breath, Sakura forced herself to take a measured stroll across the workshop, so as not to seem desperately eager to find out what John’s gift actually was. She walked around the bulky machinery and found John and the girls waiting for her in the construction yard beside the Soulforge. Dana and Alyssa both waved in greeting, which Sakura promptly returned, and she could tell by their beaming grins that both girls were buzzing with excitement.

“Hey, honey,” John said with a warm smile. “Thanks for coming down so quickly.”

Sakura’s heart skipped a beat when he greeted her using that affectionate name, just like it always did. John never called anyone else ‘honey’ except the girls closest to his heart, and he might as well have just said, “We are soulmates, Sakura. We belong together forever.”

She suppressed the urge to let out a breathy sigh, and instead padded over to join them. While she would’ve loved to say, “My heart soars to be in your glorious presence, Senpei.”, she actually greeted him with a brief kiss, and said, “Hey, John. Alyssa asked me to come down and look at something you’ve just made?”

His eyes sparkled with a glint of anticipation, and John gestured over towards the Soulforge. A pair of telekinetic hands floated towards her, presenting twin blades on the flat of their glowing palms, ready for her inspection.

Sakura inhaled sharply, then reached out with trembling fingers towards the closest of the two magnificent swords. They were not straight-edged blades like the Ninjato that she was used to, but much more similar in style to the gentle curve of the swords that Luna favoured, and that the Maliri swordmistress had mastered over six decades of intensive training. Although these weapons were obviously designed for slashing, Sakura could tell by the viciously sharp point, that she would have no problem stabbing an opponent with them either.

She refrained from touching the glistening white blade with her fingertips, but followed its graceful curve all the way back to the ornate hilt. What she saw there made her eyes widen in awe, with the beautiful design of the crossguard and pommel hinting at a similar origin to John’s mighty warblade, Kyth’vindathys itself. She held her breath and brushed her fingers over the hilt, then gasped at the sudden onrush of sensation.

The former assassin had only intended to lightly caress the sword, but she found herself clasping it in a firm grip, the hilt fitting her palm perfectly. She felt a heady surge of excitement, knowing that a weapon like this was built for just one purpose... to rid the galaxy of the foul scourge of the Progenitors. Sakura could easily picture plunging this gorgeous blade into the chest of her enemies, and longed for the chance to skewer the black hearts of her vile quarry. Justice demanded no less!

Then the matching sword was in her other hand, and she whirled around, the blades cutting through the air with an ominous hiss. It was like those gleaming edges were slicing through the air molecules in their path, a trail of frosted motes swirling in their wake. The glow from the swords drew her attention, but she wasn’t surprised to see Kyth’faren runes adorning each blade. Ancient weapons such as these deserved such special enhancements, like the final spectacular flourish from their creator, to complement their meticulous craftsmanship.

She whirled across the deck, pirouetting and spinning, the runed swords proving to be perfect dance partners. Sakura broke into a grin of anticipation, feeling an eagerness for battle that she’d never quite experienced before. It was almost as if these spectacular blades shared her hunger for justice, and the runes blazed brighter, surging with the promise of righteous destruction.

Suddenly John was behind her, moving with her spin until his hands clasped her wrists and carefully slowed her to a halt. There was no escaping the daunting strength of his implacable grip, not that she would have even tried to resist him, and Sakura let herself be gently restrained in her fiancé’s embrace. She tossed back her head, flicking her raven mane out of the way, then looked up at him with an inquisitive smile.

“You’re charging the blades with too much eldritch energy,” John warned her, nodding towards the twin weapons in her clenched grip.

Her gaze snapped back to the swords and Sakura was shocked to see that the runic script was blazing with untapped power.

“Oh!” she gasped in surprise, having been completely unaware that she was pouring psychic energy into the ancient weapons.

Sakura stared at the rime-edged swords, fascinated by the glacial cold emanating from each frozen blade.

“Just relax... and slowly release it,” John murmured, before leaning down to kiss her exposed neck.

The feeling of his lips brushing her sensitive skin broke the enchanting spell of her new toys, and with a startled gasp, she released her focus on the runeswords. The Kyth’faren script began to fade, the glow slowly dimming as harmless zephyrs of wintery air swirled across the Workshop floor.

“These swords are amazing!” Sakura gushed, looking up at John in wonder.

“You’ve been such a good girl, you deserved something special,” he said intently. “You should be wielding weapons that are as unique and exceptional as you are.”

She blushed at his heartfelt praise, savouring the deep sentiment behind each word. When she’d first joined their crew, Sakura had worried that she didn’t have a niche in their loving family, but such doubts had been thoroughly banished. Sakura knew that she was precious to John; that he truly needed her beside him in this war, in a way that made her almost giddy with joy.

“Come on, you two love birds, time to wrap it up,” Alyssa said with a fond smile. \*He adores you, Sakura. You should have seen him watching you practice with your runeswords... he was absolutely captivated.\*

Sakura’s heart fluttered and she subconsciously leaned back into her fiancé, relishing the feel of his firm body next to hers.

The blonde jerked a thumb over her shoulder. “We should probably get back up to the Bridge. Calara’s been making attack plans.” She glanced at Sakura, making brief eye contact. \*Just ask if you want any help planning your special date. I know how much you’re looking forward to spending some romantic time alone with him.\*

Sakura’s almond-shaped eyes softened as she returned the blonde’s gaze. Alyssa was like the older sister she’d always longed for but never had... until now, when she’d been so warmly welcomed into their family. \*I’ve made some tentative plans. Can I discuss them with you?\*

“It’s been an hour already?!” John asked in surprise. “No way!”

\*Of course, I’d love to help,\* Alyssa murmured to Sakura, before her cerulean eyes snapped back to John. “Time flies when you’re having fun, handsome. You spent half-an-hour forging Sakura’s new toys in the Soulforge. Then we all spent twenty minutes watching the slice’n’dice ballerina make mincemeat out of some imaginary Progenitors.”

“It can’t have been that long!” John and Sakura both protested at the same time.

“Jinx!” Dana crowed in triumph.

The silenced pair shared self-conscious smiles.

\*Your new runeblades are very powerful... but you need to handle them with care,\* Alyssa warned her.

\*What do you mean?\* Sakura asked, surprised by her warning.

\*They’re relics from the past... a past that was torn down and mercilessly devoured by Xar’aziuth,\* Alyssa explained quietly. \*The Kyth’faren wanted their vengeance... and they weren’t fucking around to get it. We need to talk about this later.\*

Sakura eyed the two runeblades with wary respect, before glancing up at John. “Are they safe for me to use? I didn’t even realise I was powering them up earlier; it felt as natural as breathing.”

“If they’re anything like my sword, you’ll feel this strange sensation, like a...” he paused, struggling to find the right description.

“Hunger?” she interjected.

“Yeah, that’s it exactly,” he replied, nodding as she confirmed his own experiences with his ancient blade. “If you push psychic energy into the runes, it’ll amplify their power. Just ignore the sensation if you want to save your energy.”

“That’s good to know,” she said gratefully. “I’m going to have to start training with them extensively.”

“I’ll make you some sparring versions so you can get used to the weight and balance,” John offered. “We should probably try and make sure you get plenty of time to practice with Luna.”

Sakura nodded eagerly. “Yeah, I noticed how similar these blades are to her favourite sword. Do you think that’s a coincidence?”

John gave her a helpless shrug. “She is a Maliri and they are a thrall race. It might just be an old design that thrall forces have used historically for millions of years.”

“Ahem,” Alyssa interrupted. “Calara’s waiting?”

“Crap... sorry,” John apologised, as he gently released Sakura’s hands.

“And how come you’re ignoring the Jinx?” Dana pouted.

They laughed as John grabbed Dana instead, lifting her up into the air and tickling her. Her giggles echoed around the Workshop as the group departed, with John carrying the redhead over his shoulder.

When they reached the Armoury above the Command Deck, the rest of the girls were all waiting for them, excited to see Sakura’s new swords. She reverently showed them off to her admiring audience, before removing her old ninjato from the weapons rack, and giving the twin runeblades pride of place.

John walked down the ramp, with Calara falling into step beside him. “Alyssa said that you’d come up with a new attack plan,” he said to the Latina.

She nodded, a thoughtful look on her face. “I considered a number of different options. Being forced to ambush them when they’re shielded will greatly reduce the amount of damage we can inflict, especially because we can’t utilise spider mines. Of course we could wait another four hours or so until they’re forced to stop again like last time.”

“But they’re probably going to huddle around his dreadnought again like last time?” John asked.

“That seems highly likely,” Calara said with a rueful frown. “Do we want to take the chance that he isn’t there after all?”

“Where else would he be?” John replied, shaking his head. “No, I don’t think we can take any chances like that. The Galkiran fleets will be so tightly packed around the dreadnought, he’ll be able join the battle almost immediately. Let’s ambush them when they’re spread out, even if they have their shields up.”

“I thought you’d say that,” the Latina said, breaking into a grin.

She trotted over to her Tactical Console, then tapped a couple of buttons, which brought the local sector map into existence. John looked up at the holographic map, which clearly showed the projected flight path for the invasion force, then Calara’s intended attack vector for the Invictus.

“So we hit them hard, then escape that way,” he said, pointing to her nav point. “I’m guessing one of our primary objectives is to get them to pursue us in that direction?”

“Any detours we can trick them into making will give the Maliri more time to get back home,” Calara agreed. “We’ve slowed their progress already, but we really need to grind them down to a crawl.”

“Understood,” John said, nodding in agreement. “Alright, let’s get ready and move into position.”

“Umm... can I see?” Dana asked meekly, from over his shoulder.

John let out a dramatic sigh, then set her down on her feet. “Oh, go on then.”

As the blushing redhead studied their attack plans, John glanced over at Sakura. “Have you had any more thoughts about separating this Progenitor from his fleets?”

She hesitated for a moment, then nodded. “Yes.”

He raised an eyebrow at her reticence. “Am I not going to like it?”

“The best way to lure away a target, is provide him a really juicy temptation that he can’t resist,” Sakura said quietly. “If you know your target’s darkest vices, they will often abandon their bodyguards to indulge their perverse desires in private.”

Jehanna studied the former assassin with morbid professional curiosity. “If I ask you for some prior examples, you’re not going to tell me, are you?”

“No, I don’t want to give you nightmares,” Sakura replied, firmly shaking her head.

John stared at the invading forces, wondering what this Progenitor’s vices might be, and how he could exploit them.

“Was that helpful?” Sakura asked dubiously, standing beside him. “I hadn’t mentioned it yet, because I was still trying to figure out how this could be applicable to our situation.”

“It’s good advice,” he said appreciatively. “Now we just need to figure out what makes him tick... then crush him like a bug.”