Three Square Meals Ch. 168

Tashana sprinted down the brightly-lit street, the sound of booted footsteps ringing out behind her as she led Retharyn’s Renegades towards the crash site. Reaching an intersection, she glanced to her left and saw a deep furrow ploughed through the asphalt where the Galkiran dropship had skidded to a halt.

“Over there!” she called back to the Maliri marines. “Fan out and take cover!”

Activating the thrusters on her Paragon suit, Tashana kicked off the ground and launched herself into the sky. She soared up in a smooth arc, then landed gracefully on the roof of a two-storey boutique that overlooked the smoking troop transport. From her vantage point she could see the heavy damage to both engines that had caused the dropship to crash, but in a testimony to Betrixa’s accurate shooting, the rest of the fuselage hadn’t taken so much as a scratch.

While the Nymph had done an excellent job of sparing the lives of all the Galkirans onboard, that meant that the transport was still full of combat-capable troops. The loading doors on both sides split apart, and the thrall squads began to disembark. Rather than sprinting outwards to take up defensive positions, they stumbled clear of the wreckage, and it was clear to see that they were still shaken from the crash. The enemy marines were all armed, but the long barrels of their assault guns wavered unsteadily as they clambered over broken ferrocrete slabs.

“Open fire!”

Retharyn’s barked order rang out clearly down the street, then the crash survivors were hit from both sides by a withering hail of purple tachyon bolts. The Galkirans staggered backwards from the ambush, their shields flaring brightly as they were struck by dozens of impacts. Those protective barriers started to fail under the sudden onslaught, but instead of taking cover, the thralls raised their own guns and started to fire back.

It was unsettling to watch the enemy forces fight with so little regard for their own safety, the Galkirans more intent on killing their attackers than ducking behind cover. Tashana glanced over the boulevard at the Maliri opposite, and was relieved to see that they’d all concealed themselves within the buildings, making it much harder for the invaders to retaliate. While the Maliri had started the ambush with an overwhelming advantage, they were doing their best not to kill the thrall marines, so the Galkirans quickly rallied and were responding with massed firepower. Tachyon bolts scythed through the buildings, punching holes through the walls, and tearing up all the protective cover.

Knowing that she had to intervene immediately, Tashana raised both hands, feeling the flickering flame within her flaring brightly. All across the rooftop a troupe of fire elementals blazed into life, then the fiery sprites sprinted towards the edge and dived towards the shattered street. The cavorting elementals pirouetted through the enemy ranks, and shocked cries of alarm rose up from the Galkiran troops. Everywhere the dancing sprites touched burst into flame, and while the thralls were protected by their armour, the women reacted instinctively and flinched backwards from the fire.

Drawing both pistols, Tashana followed her elementals in leaping from the rooftop, the thrusters on her suit carrying her right into the midst of the invaders. She landed in a crouch, and aimed her left pistol at the back of a thrall’s knee. Tashana squeezed the trigger, and a burst of azure tachyon bolts slammed into the armour’s weak point, searing through and scorching Galkiran flesh. With a howl of pain the thrall toppled over as her injured leg gave out, the soldier collapsing in a heap. The second pistol was pointed at the back of another thrall’s shoulder, and when Tashana fired at her next target, the Galkiran dropped her long underslung gun with an agonised shriek.

The Maliri forces were soon forgotten about, as the thralls were distracted by the Pyrokinetic Lioness tearing up their ranks. The return shots quickly petered out, letting the Maliri finish the job of stripping the last enemy troops of their shields. Soon all the Galkirans were either frantically trying to put out the flames curling around their armour, or rolling around on the ground, clutching at fresh gunshot wounds.

“Cease fire!” Retharyn called out, when she saw that all the enemy were ablaze.

She shuddered at the sight of a burning thrall fleeing in terror, both her arms shrouded in flames, until Tashana aimed a pistol at her legs and ruthlessly gunned her down. The reverberating squeal of those tachyon pistols rang out again and again, until not a single Galkiran was left standing. The Maliri stared in stunned silence at the white-armoured Lioness, as she strode away from the dropship without a backward glance.

Tashana’s attention was skyward, her violet gaze tracking another troop transport as it veered towards the ground, trailing a plume of smoke from its destroyed engines. Sheathing one of her pistols, the Maliri pistoleer clicked her fingers, then the blazing elementals and all the fires they’d ignited were extinguished with a breathy whump.

“There’s another one,” Tashana calmly stated to the shocked squad leader. “Gather your troops and follow me.”

“Yes, my lady,” Retharyn responded with a hurried bow.

Her squadmates jogged over to join her, watching wide-eyed as Tashana broke into a sprint towards the next crash site.

Jaenari darted a pensive glance back at the scores of scorched thralls left moaning on the floor. “I reckon we were worried about the wrong sister.”

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“Over there! Away from the tall buildings!” the panicked Galkiran co-pilot blurted out.

Vystra grimaced with the strain as she grappled with the flightstick. Both engines had been shot away, so the dropship had lost all thrust, and she was desperately trying to avoid a stall while making the rapid turn. She dipped the nose, letting the transport pick up more speed, but it also filled the cockpit view with the rapidly approaching ground.

“We’re coming in too fast!” the young Galkiran beside her gasped, staring out the canopy in horror. “Pull up!”

The dropship soared away from the city centre, swooping over the streets as it plunged towards the elevated edge of the plateau. Gritting her teeth, Vystra pulled back on the vibrating stick, her arm shaking as much as the airframe. At the last moment before impact, the nose lifted, then the undercarriage hit the street with a violent lurch.

No longer having any control over the crashed dropship, Vystra could only hold on tight as the black transport slewed across the ground. The boulevard ended in a T-junction, and the Galkiran flight crew could only watch helplessly as they barrelled into the building facing them. Fortunately, grinding through the ferrocrete had robbed their ship of much of its momentum, so when the cockpit smashed through the wall, the impact only jolted them in their seats.

Raemiri turned to look at her in astonishment. “You did it! I can’t believe we survived!”

With a chuckle of relief, Vystra slumped back in her chair. She could hear movement in the troop compartment behind her, as the thrall squads they were transporting scrambled to vacate the crashed dropship. Warning lights on the dashboard lit up as exit hatches were opened, letting the flight-crew know that the troops were already disembarking.

“What do we do now, Captain?” Raemiri asked, her voice trembling anxiously.

Vystra wasn’t sure herself. They were supposed to provide fire support to the ground troops once they’d all been deployed on the surface, but their battered dropship had flown its last mission.

She detached her harness, and rose unsteadily from her chair. “We have to return to the nearest landing zone. We can get a flight back to the dreadnought from there.”

Raemiri nodded and drew her sidearm, but the shaking pistol didn’t imbue her companion with much confidence. Vystra followed suit and armed herself, then led the way over towards the door leading into the troop compartment. The serrated door split apart, revealing an empty room with rows of recently vacated seats.

She could already hear the sound of battle outside. The staccato squeal of tachyon guns being fired in rapid bursts rang through the wrecked dropship, as the Galkiran squads engaged the enemy in a ferocious firefight. Bright flashes of purple light illuminated the cabin from both sides, filling Vystra with dread. That meant they were being attacked on both flanks, or maybe even completely surrounded.

High-pitched screams were soon intermingled with the squawk of gunfire, and the flight crew exchanged frightened glances as they realised the battle must be going badly.

“Wait here,” Vystra said to her co-pilot, who stood behind her in cockpit. “I’ll see what’s happening.”

“Be careful!” Raemiri urged her, anxiously gripping her pistol with both hands.

Vystra cautiously crossed the troop compartment, every step taking her closer to the exit hatches. The shrieks of pain were getting louder and closer, while the background dirge of tachyon guns being fired was slowly petering out. Just as she was about to reach the open doorways, a marine stumbled back into the dropship, her tachyon gun blazing away on full auto.

“Stay back!” the thrall cried out, firing burst after burst at the enemy.

The startled pilot did as she was told, and sprinted backwards towards the cockpit, as the deafening roar of gunfire filled the cabin. Vystra saw Raemiri ahead, peeking around the corner, her eyes wide with fear. Something in Raemiri’s expression suddenly changed, the fear turning to terror, and Vystra felt a shiver run down her spine.

She rushed through the doorway into the relative safety of the cockpit, and finally chanced a look behind her. Vystra couldn’t believe her eyes when she saw a gleaming axe floating towards the terrified marine, the stream of tachyon bolts sailing harmlessly through its ethereal form. The trooper let out an anguished scream, then fell to the floor, and the axe was joined by a blood-stained sword that had just cut the thrall down from behind.

Both of the ghostly weapons then turned towards the cockpit, continuing their remorseless advance. Vystra darted a desperate glance around the small room, looking for any way to escape. The canopy had cracked when the transport crashed into the window, but she didn’t think she’d have enough time to break it open and climb out.

“Close the door!” she yelled at her companion, who still stood frozen in the doorway.

But Raemiri was paralysed with fear, staring at the ethereal weapons as they advanced ominously towards her.

“Close it, Raemiri!”

The terrified co-pilot finally reacted, but not by shutting the pressure door. Instead she flung away her pistol and cowered on the floor, her head down as she whimpered with fear.

Vystra grimaced as the axe got within striking distance, bracing herself for the killing blow to be administered to Raemiri. Instead, the glowing weapon floated past the younger woman, now intent on her. She aimed her pistol at the approaching axe, determined to fight until the last, but something made her hesitate before pulling the trigger. Vystra glanced at Raemiri again, as the ethereal sword also ignored the grovelling co-pilot.

She let out a gasp of understanding, then tossed her own pistol on the floor, and flinched back with her hands held up instinctively to protect her face. Both the axe and sword froze mid-air, the gleaming white light that was radiating from both weapons banishing any shadows from the interior of the dropship. With a bright flash, the weapons were gone, leaving the shocked and frightened flight crew alone in the gloomy cockpit.

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Sakura watched as Gahl’kalgor’s dreadnought exchanged another devastating salvo of Quantum Flux Cannon rounds with the gun emplacements around the city. Explosions lit up the underbelly of the massive warship, the orange and crimson contrasting with the flashes of blue and purple tracer fire that streaked across the sky.

The bright colours and thunderous booms reminded her of New Year’s Eve celebrations on her homeworld, back when she was a child. Sakura had always loved fireworks, and her doting parents always made sure she got to see them at those joyful events. It was a poignant memory from happier times, when she’d been a sheltered and naive little girl, thinking that the galaxy was full of excitement and adventure.

That wonderful life had been torn away from her by a psychopathic monster. Sakura’s kidnapping led to decades of heartbreak and despair for her mother and father, who never discovered what happened to their beloved daughter. She knew that they would have been devastated if they’d ever found out the horrific truth.

Sakura tightened the grip on her ninjato, eyes narrowing with hatred. Amatsu Mikaboshi liked to play god with people’s lives, and turned her into an obedient puppet that obeyed his malevolent will without question. This Lord Gahl’kalgor was of the same ilk, and she was eager to make him face Justice for all his unspeakable crimes.

She glanced back at the park where John was now facing the Progenitor. As much as she longed to race back to join the fight, Sakura knew that she had to bide her time, and wait until she was called. John was still getting a measure of their opponent, and didn’t want her to intervene until the perfect moment, when she could inflict maximum damage on the Progenitor.

A booming crash echoed down the street, but it was much closer than the detonations rocking the dreadnought. Turning away from the park, Sakura immediately saw what had caused the deafening noise. A black-hulled dropship burst out the hole it had just smashed through one of the towering buildings that lined the boulevard, sending a shower of debris across the sidewalk below. Its wing caught on a reinforced stanchion as the transport ripped free, sending it into a spin as it plummeted towards the ground.

Activating psychic speed, she sprinted down the street after the dropship. It disappeared from view behind the northern row of buildings, so she heard rather than saw the crash. By the time Sakura had taken a right, then a left, to reach the same street, the Galkiran transport had ploughed across the road and finally come to a halt. It had left a trail of destruction in its wake, with shattered ferrocrete slabs strewn all over the road, lampposts smashed aside, and a geyser of water jetted into the air from a broken fire hydrant.

As she stalked towards the wreck, Sakura remembered John’s strict orders not to kill any of the thralls. They were just indoctrinated pawns, their loyalty enforced by sinister and nefarious means, and John wanted to save as many of them as possible from their terrible lives. She would have to hurt those women to prevent them from fighting, but the wounds shouldn’t be too severe, so they could be quickly healed after the battle.

Sakura suddenly wavered, and felt a pang of profound sympathy for the Galkirans. They were in exactly the same predicament she had been in, until John and the girls had freed her from slavery. The thralls were innocent puppets, and she couldn’t bring herself to harm them.

Fortunately, none of the marines had emerged from the dropship yet, the survivors still recovering from the high-velocity spinning impact. That gave Sakura a few precious moments to desperately rack her brain for an alternative to stabbing each of the Galkiran troops. She studied the crash site for a couple of seconds, then broke into a grin, as she was suddenly struck by inspiration.

Sheathing her twin ninjato across her back, she held out her hands towards the fountain of water showering the street. The inner cold responded to her psychic call like an old friend, eager to work with her again. Ice began to form around the hydrant, growing thicker as it climbed up to the spout. Sakura extended her frigid construct over the jet of water, redirecting the stream towards the smoking gunship.

Hundreds of gallons of water doused the transport, making it so much easier for Sakura to freeze it in place. The deluge continued, and she thickened the ice until the dropship was fully entombed, trapping all the thralls within. She knew it wouldn’t hold them forever, but by the time the ice melted and they could break free, the battle would be long over.

With a nod of satisfaction, the former assassin turned on her heel and sprinted after the next crashing dropship, eager to keep herself preoccupied while she waited. It wouldn’t be long now until John called for her aid, and then she could help liberate all these women, just like he’d done for her.

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Despite Dana’s and Betrixa’s best efforts to shoot down every dropship in sight, there were too many to intercept them all. Alyssa watched as the first wave of Galkiran transports managed to run the gauntlet of anti-aircraft gun batteries, and safely land in the centre of the city. She could see the hatches opening and black-armoured thralls pouring from each dropship, looking like a hive of angry ants that had been kicked by a mischievous child.

She turned away from the landing site, and headed into the command bunker, where she found Jehanna poring over a holographic map of the city.

“They’ve started to deploy troops,” the blonde informed the distracted general. She pointed to the locations on the map. “Here, here, and here.”

Now she had Jehanna’s full attention, and the raven-haired beauty nodded with grim satisfaction. “Good. That’s exactly where we anticipated.”

“Shall I give the order to open fire?” Alyssa asked, picturing the cohort of Maliri Field Commanders in her mind.

Jehanna quickly shook her head. “Wait! Not yet. Let them establish a bridgehead first, then they’ll continue to reinforce that position instead of abandoning it and landing elsewhere.”

“So you can keep them exactly where you want them,” Alyssa noted, giving her an approving nod. “Very sneaky.”

“I can’t claim the credit for that one,” Jehanna admitted. She glanced at the brunette beside her. “It turns out our resident Doctor has quite the gift for Games and Theory.”

“Where’s the fun in being smart, if you can’t abuse it to be a more ruthless killer,” Rachel said with a sardonic smile. “It’s a time-honoured military tradition.”

Alyssa raised an eyebrow, and looked at her with concern.

“I’m okay,” the brunette replied, with a dismissive wave of her hand. “Just feeling a bit jittery before the battle gets really messy. There’s not much for me to do until the casualties start flooding in.”

After giving Rachel a reassuring hug, Alyssa joined Jehanna in staring at the holographic map. However, unlike the commander of their ground forces, her focus was on the park near the centre of the city. She desperately wanted to run out of the bunker and rush to John’s side, but Alyssa knew that he was relying on her to save as many Maliri and Galkiran lives as possible. It went against her every instinct to prioritise the troops over protecting John, but she’d given him her promise, and she couldn’t face disappointing him again by disobeying his orders.

Trapped between loyalty and duty, Alyssa could only grind her teeth in frustration.

Rachel nudged her gently with an elbow. “More to the point, are you okay?”

Forcing herself to smile, Alyssa nodded. “I’m fine. Just a bit worried about John.”

Those piercing hazel eyes could see far too much, and Rachel gave her a knowing look. \*If you rush off to join him, and thousands of Maliri are killed because their positions get overrun, just imagine how many months we’re going to have to spend convincing John that it wasn’t his fault.\*

Alyssa stifled a giggle. \*You’re right. It’s totally not worth it.\*

Rachel winked at her, then the two teenagers went back to studying the map. The atmosphere inside the command bunker was tense as they waited, with Jehanna carefully monitoring the updates from all her reinforced positions, informing her of the growing size of the enemy forces.

“Alright, give the order,” Jehanna finally stated, her eyes locking with Alyssa.

The blonde immediately contacted the Maliri ground troops and issued the command. \*Open fire!\*

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Tashana heard the telepathic order at the same time as the marines in Retharyn’s Renegades. The Maliri troops had been cautious around her since ambushing the dropships, which was disappointing as she’d hoped to build up some trust with them, but they all immediately turned to her for confirmation.

“You heard her. Give them hell!” Tashana exclaimed, brandishing her pistols.

The narrow firing slit provided fantastic cover, but greatly reduced her visibility on the flanks. Fortunately, all the Galkiran forces had landed in the central hub of the city, which meant they were directly ahead of Tashana’s position. The closest squads of thralls were nearly a kilometre away, making them a difficult target for even a skilled marksman. However, the objective wasn’t to snipe at the enemy troopers, at least not yet.

All around the circumference of the city, Maliri opened fire from their concealed positions in the bunkers. For the dropship pilots descending towards the landing zone, it looked like every street in the metropolis had suddenly turned purple. Streams of tachyon bolts sprayed over the troops from all directions, causing even the recklessly brave Galkirans to dive for cover.

Tashana fired burst after burst with her brace of pistols, alternating between them to give the flux heat-exchangers time to cool the barrels. Being the only one firing blue tachyon bolts was quite the advantage, as it meant she was able to easily see where all her shots were landing. With most of the enemy troops ducking under the massive volume of suppressing fire, Tashana turned her attention to the closest dropship.

She aimed both pistols at the sleek transport, peppering its shields with an unrelenting hail of energy bolts. Her pistols might have been much smaller than the long-barrelled underslung guns that everyone else was using, but they packed a real punch. It didn’t take much time for the shields to start flickering, the barrier becoming unstable, before collapsing entirely.

The Maliri pistoleer didn’t even try to shoot her way through the dropship’s thick armour plating with tachyon bolts. Instead she flipped the fire selector on both guns, then took careful aim at the transport’s engines before squeezing the trigger. Hyper-accelerated slugs slammed into the rear, the runic imbued rounds boring straight through the engine cowling, before triggering an internal explosion that ripped the engine from the spacecraft. The force of the blast actually lifted the back of the dropship off the ground, and sent it toppling over on its side.

There was a temporary lull in the shooting from her bunker, and when Tashana glanced at the Maliri to check they were alright, she saw them gaping at her in astonishment.

“What? We’re only supposed to avoid killing the thralls,” she said with a self-conscious shrug. “Nobody said anything about not wrecking the dropships.”

The Maliri exchanged incredulous glances, then broke into laughter, the tension immediately lifting in the bunker. Tashana grinned back at her new comrades, then they continued pouring fire down on the Galkiran landing zone.

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Gahl’kalgor showed no sign of tiring as he hacked away with both axes at John’s defences. They were big, heavy-bladed weapons, and each two-handed parry rang out with a booming clang, the impact sending vibrations up John’s arms. What surprised him the most, was that his Progenitor adversary had made no attempt to use psychic abilities alongside the onslaught of melee attacks, relying solely on his enhanced strength and speed for brutal effect.

\*I don’t get it,\* Alyssa said, sounding genuinely confused. \*You two could keep this up for hours. Why isn’t he trying to finish you off?\*

John brought up his blade to fend off an overhead chop, then swung down sharply to meet the swipe at his waist. He could see the maniacal gleam in Gahl’kalgor’s eyes as the Progenitor swung each axe again and again, his opponent relishing every moment of the fight.

\*He’s enjoying it,\* John replied, staggering backwards to dodge another frenzied slash. \*He thinks I’m much weaker than him, so the sadistic bastard is dragging it out. I bet he finished off most of his victims this way.\*

\*I don’t want to rush you,\* Alyssa said tentatively. \*But the longer this goes on, the more Maliri risk getting hurt.\*

\*I know,\* John agreed, faking a look of panic as he warded off the next flurry of blows. \*Let’s finish this. Can you call Sakura for me?\*

\*She’s on her way,\* his matriarch advised him.

\*Warn her that she needs to be careful. This guy isn’t subtle, but he’s very quick and hits like a truck. I don’t think she’s strong enough to parry his axes, so after she strikes, tell her to retreat before he can react.\*

There was a brief lull in the conversation as Alyssa relied his instructions. \*Okay, I let her know.\*

Overhead, a chain of explosions lit up the night’s sky, as another fusillade of Quantum Flux Cannon shells smashed into the black dreadnought. Despite the incredible punishment its armour was taking, the huge Galkiran flagship was still holding position. It retaliated with its own heavy guns, striking back at the gun emplacements around the city, the force of each blast sending tremors through the ground.

“Your defences crumble,” Gahl’kalgor taunted him, when he saw John’s worried gaze flick to the bright explosion on the horizon. “Yet my dreadnought endures. Now do you see how hollow your feeble boasting was?”

“It’s not over yet,” John said defiantly, a blur of white catching his attention behind his opponent. “I still have a few surprises!”

The wind began to pick up, leaves swirling around the duellists as the vegetation got caught up in the eddies. At the same time, the temperature began to drop and there was a noticeable chill in the air. As the gusts intensified into a buffeting gale, it began to emit an eerie howl that set John’s teeth on edge. Beneath their feet, hoar frost coated the lawn in a glittering white carpet, and the whistling storm quickly turned into an icy blizzard.

Gahl’kalgor sneered at him in amusement. “You think these sorcerer’s tricks are going to save you?”

“Try blocking this!” John exclaimed triumphantly, and several foot-long shards of ice veered into Gahl’kalgor’s shield.

Each one struck the psychic barrier, cracking hexagons but not impacting with enough force to break them.

Gahl’kalgor threw his head back and broke into mocking laughter. “Is that the best you’ve got?! That was truly pathetic!”

John had fought Sakura many times before, and he knew her glacial hurricane was only getting started. He faked a look of fear and disappointment at the ineffectiveness of the psychic attack, just as they’d previously planned, and raised his runesword with grim resignation. Lunging forward, he managed to catch Gahl’kalgor off-guard, the thrust slipping past his defences. The desperate stab actually managed to break a trio of hexagons, but the Progenitor battered the blade aside with a back-handed swipe of his axe, and instantly repaired the holes in the hex-shield.

“I’m going to enjoy cutting off your head and mounting it in my trophy room,” Gahl’kalgor declared, giving John a menacing grin.

The Progenitor spun both axes around in an elaborate flourish, then launched another furious assault. Both vicious weapons hammered down on John’s faltering runesword, driving him back a step as he struggled to parry each bone-jarring chop. It was obvious to Gahl’kalgor that John was starting to tire, the exertion from summoning the ineffectual snowstorm now taking a heavy toll.

Gahl’kalgor ignored the whistling blizzard, dismissing it as to weak to be a concern, but the howling winds continued to pick up speed. Hidden within the whirling snow were dozens of icy shards, with more of the razor-sharp projectiles forming by the second. The flurries also concealed another threat, one that was far more deadly. Lurking inside that wintery storm was a white shadow, silent as the grave, stalking ever closer to her prey.

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The first wave of dropships from the thrall fleets entered Kythshara’s atmosphere, weaving from side to side to evade the Maliri interceptors who were hot on their tail. The Galkiran pilots pushed their craft forward at full throttle, desperate to reach their goal before being shot down. Several more of the troop transports were crippled by blue pulse cannon fire, but it didn’t take long for the thralls to come within range of the dreadnought’s defence grid, forcing their pursuers to peel away or be destroyed.

Inside Field Captain Arathelle’s landing craft, the marines in the troop compartment had fallen silent. They’d listened with growing apprehension to the panicked warnings over the comms, so the marines were as relieved as the pilots when they escaped from the Maliri interceptors. The dropships plunged down through the atmosphere, heading directly towards the dreadnought, and the city under siege.

However, that sense of relief proved to only be a temporary reprieve. They could all see bright flashes of purple and blue from the cockpit, the searing light illuminating the canopy with each burst. Despite the dropship’s inertial dampeners working at full capacity, the troops could feel brief tremors beneath their booted feet, as the pilots made a series of frantic evasive manoeuvres.

Kaija couldn’t stand the feeling of helplessness any longer, and with a grim look of determination on her face, she unbuckled her harness. Ignoring the stern looks of disapproval from her squadmates, the young thrall approached the reinforced airlock that led into the cockpit. Captain Arathelle was still inside, standing behind the co-pilot, and watching pensively as they approached the planet.

From the doorway, Kaija had a much better view of their destination, and she stared wide-eyed at the chaos below. The city was brightly illuminated, and not just by the street lighting. Everywhere she looked there were streams of purple tachyon bolts, as gunfights broke out all over the metropolis.

“Heavy AA fire from the city!” someone barked over the comms.

“Watch out for that gunship!”

“I’m hit! We’re going down!”

Kaija saw the rear of one of the lead dropships explode in flame, then it spiralled away as the pilots struggled to keep it under control. Amidst the hundreds of landing craft descending towards the surface, she spotted a lone white strike fighter, and realised it must be the gunship the pilots were warning about. The Raptor roared through the wings of transports, firing bursts of dazzling blue amidst an endless storm of purple. Everywhere that nimble gunship went, it left a trail of crippled Galkiran craft in its wake, each one dropping out of the sky like a stone.

“They’re tracking us!” the co-pilot barked in warning. “Evasive manoeuvres!”

Kaija’s heart skipped a beat, and she braced herself to be the gunship’s next victim. However her pilot had jinked their craft to the side, narrowly avoiding streaks of purple tachyon bolts that surged up towards them from the city.

Arathelle heard Kaija’s sigh of relief and turned to look at her with a frown. “Get back to your seat, Kaija. You shouldn’t be up here.”

“ETA 60 seconds!” the pilot warned the marine officer, as she wrestled with the flightstick.

The Field Captain grimaced, then quietly added, “And buckle in, it’s going to be a rough landing.”

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Dozens of lights years away, Valeria watched from the cockpit of Gahl’kalgor’s shuttle as they followed the dropships down to the space station. Now that she was seeing it up close, the orbital shipyard was much larger than she had originally assumed, with endless rows of maintenance facilities covering the interior of the huge ring. The invading forces were racing towards those open dockyards, and several of the lead dropships had already landed inside the station.

She turned away from the view of the gleaming golden spires, and focused her attention on the holographic tactical map. As per her orders, the Galkiran fleet had formed a defensive perimeter around the boarding craft, and were currently shrugging off hits from the shipyard’s puny defences. She felt a flicker of relief that those gun batteries didn’t include whatever monstrous guns had been mounted on the Maliri battleships. Underestimating them had nearly proved to be a fatal mistake.

The Maliri forces were in full retreat now, the cowardly crews turning tail and fleeing from the victorious Galkirans. Valeria smirked as she watched the scattered ships reach the periphery of the star system and jump into hyper-warp. They might have bought themselves a temporary reprieve, but when their Progenitor Lord fell to Gahl’kalgor’s axes, there’d be plenty of time to hunt down every last one of them.

“Touching down in thirty seconds, Matriarch,” the pilot announced, her tone suitably deferential.

Valeria acknowledged her with a nod. \*Hold position,\* she ordered the fleet captains. \*Be ready to depart as soon as we’ve seized control of the shipyard.\*

Gahl’kalgor might have ordered her to capture the space station, but Valeria had no intention of standing guard over it. If necessary, she’d leave the entire fleet behind, and make the journey to the enemy Throneworld in the shuttle. Her number one priority was to return to his side as soon as possible, and deal with Ashryn before she could convince him that she would be a better matriarch.

With those grim thoughts in mind, she turned on her heel and marched towards the door. Her retinue of elite warriors was waiting for Valeria at the airlock, and she sensed that the Selan’kethari were as eager for battle as their matriarch. She unholstered her pistol and drew her Vensys sword, the hilt a comforting and familiar weight in her gauntleted fist.

“It’s been too long,” Feyrous said with a crooked grin.

“I wonder if the Maliri have stiffer spines than the Waelentiri?” Haera mused, checking the gleaming edge of her glaive. “Maybe I should cut one open and see for myself?”

“I doubt it,” Valeria said, with a dismissive sneer. “Their fleets all fled like a pack of frightened Oloptris.”

The dozen Galkirans all laughed at their matriarch’s amusing metaphor, until they felt a tremor beneath their boots as the shuttle touched down inside the station.

Camine was waiting by the airlock, and she pressed the release button, opening the serrated door. “After you, Matriarch.”

Valeria heard the breaching charges explode before she’d even stepped out of the shuttle. When she emerged from the parked craft, she saw that her troops had already started to engage the defenders. Over on the far side of the dockyard, the interior doors had been blown apart, and black-armoured thralls were rushing through the gaping hole. The sound of gunfire echoed through the hangar, with bright flashes of blue and purple lighting up the corridor beyond.

Feeling the thrill of battle coursing through her veins, Valeria launched herself into a sprint towards the sounds of combat. She didn’t need to issue orders to her retinue, as they’d fought by her side for centuries. Leaping nimbly over the jagged debris that was scattered across the deck, Valeria skidded through the hole the breaching charges had torn through the doorway.

Half-way down the corridor, the Maliri had constructed a barricade to hold off the invaders. But sustained tachyon fire had blasted big holes through the defences, and a score of golden-armoured corpses lay crumpled where they’d fallen. At the end of the corridor was an intersection leading into a larger hallway, and the Galkiran marines had already rushed ahead to assault the next line of Maliri defences.

The sounds of sustained gunfire, hoarse shouts, and piercing screams were all coming from the right, so Valeria took a left turn. There were numerous signs on the walls, each written in peculiar runes that looked very familiar, but were suitably different from the Galkiran runic alphabet to be illegible. She shook her head in bemusement at the strange dialect, then jogged down the golden hallway with the Selan’kethari following close behind.

Valeria led her minions into a broad plaza, with scores of shops lining each wall. The area was deserted and eerily quiet, but she instinctively knew that they were being watched by unfriendly eyes. She didn’t hesitate, and aimed her pistol at the nearest boutique before pulling the trigger. Her squad followed suit, and began strafing the area with a storm of tachyon bolts.

It only took a few seconds before the screams of agony started, as those shots punched through walls and tore through the hidden defenders. The Maliri began to shoot back, but with the ambush reversed, the momentum was with the Galkirans. A burst of blue laser bolts hit Valeria’s shield on her right flank, so she calmly turned and returned fire. To her surprise, the golden-armoured ambusher wasn’t even shielded, so the tachyon bolts blasted several fist-sized holes through her target, killing the woman before she even realised she’d been hit.

After they’d gunned down a score of the Maliri marines, the rest finally broke and tried to run. Valeria carefully aimed at one of the terrified troopers, then her burst of tachyon bolts cut the woman in half, spraying blood and entrails all over the floor as her disembowelled torso tumbled to the side. She laughed at the carnage, shaking her head in amusement as her squad massacred the woefully equipped defenders.

If this was the best the Maliri had to offer, then the station would fall in record time. As Valeria stepped over a mutilated body to search for her next victim, she wondered how Gahl’kalgor was faring against Baen’thelas. Judging by the fight still left in the Maliri, she knew their enemy wasn’t dead yet, but it wouldn’t be long now.

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Calara studied the tactical map, and saw that the Invictus was steadily closing the distance with the remnants of the Galkiran armada. Unfortunately, chasing down the other half of their forces had taken the battlecruiser and the Maliri fleets far away from Kythshara, which meant the last thrall fleets had a significant lead. She was far more worried about the battle unfolding near the Valaden Homeworld, and a glance at the latest sensor data showed that Galkiran dropships had now landed inside the shipyard.

\*Alyssa, Genthalas has been boarded!\* she warned her girlfriend.

\*Shit,\* the blonde cursed, sharing all her concerns. \*Can you contact Luna and tell her to evacuate Edraele? I’d do it telepathically, but she won’t be able to respond.\*

\*Making the call,\* the Latina immediately agreed, activating the comms interface and opening a channel to Genthalas station.

It didn’t take long for the former assassin to answer, and Luna’s anxious face soon filled the holo-screen. “Calara! We’re in trouble!”

“I know, I saw that you’ve been boarded,” Calara replied, wincing in sympathy. “I’m so sorry we can’t be there to help. Is Edraele still unresponsive? Alyssa wants you to evacuate her from the station.”

Luna grimaced and shook her head. “I’ve already tried! She’s anchored in the air somehow... I can’t move her!”

Irillith looked up from her station and shared a worried glance with the brunette. “What are we going to do?”

Calara shook her head in frustration, feeling completely out of her depth. “Most of this psychic stuff is a mystery to me. Do you know why your mother might be locked in place like that?”

The Maliri could only respond with a helpless shrug. “I’ve no idea.”

\*Alyssa, we’ve got a problem.\*

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Reports continued to flood in from the Maliri Field Commanders, and the holographic map of the city flickered every few seconds as the enemy positions were updated. The Galkiran forces had been ambushed at fourteen landing sites located in the centre of the city, and while the suppressing fire had kept them pinned down for a while, there were reinforcements on the way. Jehanna was expecting the imminent arrival of the next wave of dropships, so it came as no surprise to see hundreds of them descend towards the city.

“Here they come,” she muttered, watching anxiously to see where they would land.

The holographic display showed the Valkyrie and Raptor moving to engage the incoming transports, while the city’s anti-aircraft batteries poured an unending stream of tachyon bolts up at the invaders. That much ordnance inevitably found its mark, and dropship after dropship began to spiral out of control as they were shot out of the sky.

Rachel leaned over to the blonde beside her, and whispered, “Remember when we were on the receiving end of that? I’m glad I’m not up there.”

Alyssa nodded, her expression grim.

Studying her friend more closely, Rachel narrowed her eyes perceptively. “What’s wrong now? It’s not John, or you’d be even more on edge... Has something happened to Edraele?”

Turning to look at her in surprise, Alyssa beckoned the astute doctor away from the holo-table. \*Edraele’s still unresponsive, but Luna can’t move her. Calara says that she’s floating in the air, but somehow anchored in place. Any ideas?\*

Rachel’s brow furrowed. \*I don’t remember immobility ever being a symptom of these psychically induced states. Have we actually tried moving you or Edraele before when you were love drunk?\*

\*John might have carried me to bed one time... I can’t remember clearly,\* Alyssa admitted. \*But I don’t think either of us have ever had this strong a reaction before.\*

\*Hmm... other than a sufficiently powerful null zone, I can’t think of any way to disable whatever’s anchoring Edraele in place,\* Rachel said, mulling over different options. \*Can Luna project hex barriers to shield other people?\*

Alyssa shook her head. \*Edraele’s much stronger than Luna, so I think we can forget any psychic attempt to nullify whatever she’s done subconsciously.\*

\*That just leaves trying to rouse Edraele from this psychic coma,\* Rachel suggested, before raising an eyebrow. \*I assume you’ve already tried waking her yourself?\*

\*I tried telepathic contact, but I wasn’t able to snap her out of it.\*

The door to the command room slid open and Ilyana darted inside. “We’ve got incoming troops... a lot of them. The thralls are advancing from the landing zone to assault our position.”

Daphne turned to look quizzically at Jehanna. “Do you wish to deploy our automated thrall forces?”

She shook her head, but gave the synthetic girl a grateful smile. “Not yet. Let’s keep them in reserve for now.”

“Let me deal with them,” Alyssa volunteered, heading towards the door. She glanced back at Rachel and added telepathically, \*I’ll ask Luna to stand guard over Edraele for now. Can you keep thinking of any possible way we can wake her?\*

\*Don’t worry. I’ll come up with something,\* Rachel replied, giving her a reassuring smile.

The blonde nodded gratefully, then followed Ilyana out of the bunker. Psychic abilities were truly wondrous gifts, but there was so much that was still a complete mystery about them, especially when dealing with these kinds of unpredictable events. Alyssa was well aware that while Rachel had a brilliant mind, the tawny-haired lioness was just as stumped for ideas as she was. Still, it was comforting to have someone else racking their brains for a way to help Edraele regain consciousness.

Ilyana placed a hand on her arm and pulled her back from the street. “Careful, they’ve got a clear line of sight up here.”

As if to confirm the warning, several bursts of tachyon bolts shrieked past the point where Alyssa had been standing, the Galkirans missing her by inches.

“Thanks,” Alyssa said to her vigilant bodyguard, blushing with embarrassment at letting herself get so distracted.

She darted a glance down the hill and saw that the thralls were in a firefight with the Maliri in the two bunkers flanking the broad street. The Maliri had a huge advantage, being entrenched within those fortifications, but they were also deliberately trying not to kill their attackers which significantly equalised the battle.

Alyssa narrowed her eyes as she glared at the Galkirans. If it hadn’t been for these irritating thralls, she’d be at John’s side, helping him to defeat the Progenitor. She gestured towards the pair of Tachyon Cannons that were propped up beside the entrance into the bunker, and the heavy weapons obediently rose up from the ground, then floated over to flank her.

Ilyana quickly stepped aside to let the big guns pass, having no intention of getting in their way. She stared wide-eyed at the gleaming white cannons, recognising that they were normally mounted on the Raptor gunship.

“Aren’t they too powerful to use on troops?” she asked cautiously. “John wanted to avoid fatalities.”

“These aren’t meant for the thralls,” Alyssa replied, affectionately patting the barrels. She gave Ilyana an enigmatic smile and glanced meaningfully past the Maliri’s shoulder. “But they are.”

Ilyana turned around to see what the Terran girl was referring to, then she gaped in astonishment at the phalanx of gleaming swords that had suddenly materialised behind her. The floating ethereal weapons turned in unison, then glided down the hill to begin their bloody work.

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Still showing no sign of tiring, Gahl’kalgor continued to rain down hefty blows on John’s upraised sword, forcing him backwards step by step. Faking exhaustion and panic was starting to get annoying, but John knew he had to keep up the pretence for just a few minutes longer. If he wanted to end this fight quickly, it was imperative that he trick his brutish opponent into drastically underestimating him.

John had spent most of the battle studying Gahl’kalgor’s dual-axe fighting style, and was feeling confident that he was a significantly better swordsman. After spending countless hours sparring with Sakura, he was very familiar with fighting such an aggressive opponent, who sought to overwhelm an enemy with a rapid flurry of attacks. The big difference between the two, aside from the Progenitor’s formidable strength, was that he’d taught Sakura to always vary her attacks, and not allow herself to use the same predictable combos.

He highly doubted that Gahl’kalgor had trained extensively with a superior instructor, at least not for a very long time. The axes came in again, right, left, right, all telegraphed by the Progenitor’s stance, and the way his shoulders rolled back to put more force into each blow. It was sorely tempting to pre-empt those strikes and force Gahl’kalgor onto the defensive, but with that black hex-barrier in place, John couldn’t just run him through with his runesword.

There was always the possibility that his adversary was also holding back, and putting on a show of being a rage-fuelled berserker, but John was confident that wasn’t the case. When he looked at Gahl’kalgor’s eyes behind his armoured faceplate, he saw only feral ferocity, not the sharp gleam of cunning intelligence. Even so, John was determined not to underestimate his opponent. There was far too much at stake to risk being duped by the same trick he was planning to pull on the overconfident Progenitor.

\*Sakura says she’s ready,\* Alyssa warned him.

John stumbled back a step as he parried the second overhead chop, and Gahl’kalgor lunged forward to take full advantage, hammering at his faltering opponent with massive blows. The Progenitor was so fixated on his imminent victory, that he was completely oblivious to the ear-piercing howl of Sakura’s glacial cyclone. The wind shrieked as it was funnelled in a new direction, and the lethal procession of ice shards that hurtled around the duellists, was now aimed directly at Gahl’kalgor.

With the shrill clatter of a hundred shattering icicles, Sakura pulverised his psychic shield, obliterating dozens of black hexagons in barely a second. John could see the look of complete shock register on Gahl’kalgors face, as the spears of ice then slammed into his flank, impacting with enough force to hurt him even through the armour plating. Before the Progenitor could react, John twisted his wrists to change the angle of his blade, and used his full strength to yank the runesword higher. The beard of each axe got snagged on the sword, and he lifted the man upwards, Gahl’kalgor’s arms outstretched to hold onto the hilts of both weapons.

Their faces were only inches away from each other, eyes locked together, so John saw the precise moment that Sakura struck. The shocked expression on Gahl’kalgor’s face contorted in agony, and he let loose a wailing howl. John glanced down and saw the blood-soaked tips of both ninjato protruding from just below the Progenitor’s onyx breastplate. Sakura had impaled him from behind, then driven the swords straight through his torso.

John could feel the sudden sharp bite of cold, even through his Paragon suit, as Sakura poured the full might of her Cryokinetic powers into each sword. There was a ghastly cracking sound, and Gahl’kalgor toppled backwards with another tortured scream, releasing his grip on each axe as he fell to his knees.

Rearing back with Kyth’vindathys, John prepared to deliver the fatal blow that would end this invasion in a single devastating stroke.

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Valeria vaulted over the makeshift barricade, moving too fast for the defenders to react. Her sword whistled down as she pirouetted past a startled Maliri trooper, neatly cleaving the woman’s head from her shoulders. As the decapitated body collapsed, she pointed her pistol at the next marine, and blasted a gaping hole straight through the centre of her chest. The Maliri keeled over with a grotesque wheeze, that could barely be heard over the terrified screams of her squadmates.

The Selan’kethari had charged into the fray, their vicious weapons rising and falling as they hacked the defenders to pieces. The Maliri were hopelessly outmatched in skill, equipment, and ferocity, and the marines stood no chance against the veteran Galkiran warriors.

Striding ahead, Valeria left her retinue to finish off their butchery. For some reason, she wasn’t enjoying the slaughter as much as she had hoped. The thrill of combat had worn off surprisingly quickly, and now she felt strangely uncomfortable.

She reached another intersection, where a new selection of mystifying signs were fixed on the walls, each providing unreadable directions around the shipyard. In the thousand years she had served Gahl’kalgor, the matriarch had never encountered a thrall race that used a different language before. There was something very unsettling about the runic script that sent a shiver down her spine.

She rolled her shoulders and shuddered, but she couldn’t shake off that eerie sense of discomfort. Valeria felt her skin prickling, and not just on her arms, but all over her body. She glared at the Maliri runes suspiciously, but her instincts told her that they were just harmless signs. There was something else making her feel on edge... like a frightening shadow that haunted her every step, the unseen spectre a horrifying echo of fear and pain.

\*Valeria!\* her Progenitor master screamed. \*Give me power!\*

The matriarch froze, rooted to the spot, and following a millennia of conditioning, she instantly obeyed his orders. Valeria drew deep from her own psychic reserves, then funnelled all that power directly to her Progenitor Lord.

In all the long years she had served Gahl’kalgor, she had never heard him sound like that before. His telepathic voice was laced with pain, and there was a shocking undercurrent of fear to his imperious demand for power. She drew more eldritch energy from thousands of thralls, tapping them for as much as she could without extinguishing them from the psychic network, then continued to do so until Gahl’kalgor told her otherwise.

Her skin crawled again, and Valeria darted a fearful look behind her, feeling like she was being watched.

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Gahl’kalgor let out an anguished moan, oblivious to the gleaming runesword that whistled down towards his head. His back arched, and the Progenitor gasped, as his body was flooded with a huge surge of psychic energy. A new hex barrier instantly materialised around him, and John’s double-handed blow bounced harmlessly off the black sphere. He’d managed to shatter half-a-dozen hexagons with that strike, but a moment later they were fully repaired.

Sakura could feel the cold she’d driven into his body receding, as Gahl’kalgor countered the attack with his full psychic might. She frantically twisted her twin ninjato, drawing a hiss of pain from the skewered Progenitor, but they locked in place, preventing her from disembowelling him. Gahl’kalgor twisted around, tearing her hands from the hilts of her swords, and she was suddenly facing his full fury.

She was standing too close to Gahl’kalgor for her psychic shield to protect her, and he backhanded Sakura before she could react. The whistling slap launched her high into the air, leaving her dazed by a blow that felt like being slammed head-first into a speeding hover-truck. She cartwheeled out of control into the woods, where she hit a tree with a sickening crack. The trunk snapped in half, toppling over backwards, and landed with a crash beside the crumpled body of the Lioness.

Gahl’kalgor slowly rose to his feet, the tips of Sakura’s twin ninjato still dripping blood where they stuck out from his waist. His eyes were blazing with psychic energy now, each shrouded in a malignant black aura as they locked onto his remaining adversary. John drew Kyth’vindathys back for another swing, but Gahl’kalgor drove his fist forward, the gauntlet crackling with psychic power.

The blow impacted the blue hex shield with all the force of an eldritch battering ram, unleashing a titanic blast wave that smashed John high into the air. He sailed backwards, his arms windmilling as he tried to control his turbulent flight, and was knocked clear out of the park.

No longer beset by enemies, Gahl’kalgor took a deep breath, then grasped the hilt of each ninjato in an unbreakable telekinetic grip. He moaned in agony as he tugged at both swords, each blade grating against his breastplate with a squeal of protest, until they finally tore free in a gout of blood. Flinging the weapons aside with an angry snarl, he focused on healing the damage Sakura had inflicted, pouring psychic energy into regenerating the ugly wounds.

Gahl’kalgor glanced down at the two puncture marks below his breastplate, his face twisting with incredulous disbelief. He couldn’t understand how that thrall had managed to hurt him so badly, and the debilitating cold that had radiated out from her swords was absolutely terrifying. As a comforting warmth banished the horrible chill from his internal organs, Gahl’kalgor noticed that the blizzard had blown itself out, leaving him standing on blood-soaked snow.

He looked back at the woods, where he’d smashed the thrall that had dared to attack him. Surely she hadn’t been responsible for that ferocious cryokinetic assault?

Grimacing at that ridiculous thought, he shook his head. None of this made any sense.

The insectoid vermin had shown him images of a yellow-haired female whose skin tone matched his own, the woman menacing the Kirrix with psychic abilities. Gahl’kalgor had automatically assumed she was a matriarch, but had Baen’thelas replaced her with that black-haired female?

Crouching down to retrieve his two axes, his eyes narrowed with fury. None of it mattered. They would all pay for the indignities he’d suffered. He would destroy Baen’thelas, slay all the Maliri, and burn this world to ash.

Valeria kept channelling more psychic energy to him, flooding his reserves, and overwhelming his senses. Gahl’kalgor closed his eyes and relished the feeling of pure, unadulterated power. He started drawing deep from that well of eldritch potential, letting it suffuse every cell within his body.

The lights lining the paths started to flicker ominously as the Progenitor began to grow. He became larger by the second, his body expanding to immense proportions. When Gahl’kalgor opened his eyes again, he loomed over the city like a malevolent titan.

\*Valeria!\* he thundered, his telepathic command reverberating around her skull. \*Order the fleets to destroy everything! Burn all the cities to the ground!\*

\*As you command, my Lord,\* Valeria replied obediently.

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John stood in the street, gaping up at the axe-wielding giant that towered over the park. \*Alyssa, tell Sakura to keep clear! There’s no way she can fight him like this!\*

\*I’ve lost contact with her,\* Alyssa replied, sounding deeply concerned.

A chill ran down his spine. \*Is she...?\*

\*No, just knocked out,\* Alyssa quickly replied. \*But she’s definitely hurt... I don’t know how badly.\*

\*Bring Rachel here. Find Sakura and heal her,\* John ordered, watching anxiously as the gigantic Progenitor began to move, every massive footstep sending tremors through the ground. \*I’ll find a way to distract him and lure him away from the park.\*

\*He’s too dangerous to fight alone!\* the blonde blurted out. \*Let me help you!\*

The runes on Kyth’vindathys flared with a fierce blue light, and John suddenly knew exactly what he had to do.

\*Leave Gahl’kalgor to me,\* he declared, his doubts fading away. \*Jade, give me more power. As much as you can spare.\*

Alyssa gasped in alarm. \*John, wait!\*

But she was too late to intervene.

\*Yes, Master!\* Jade gushed, happily obeying his command and opening the floodgates.

John let out a startled cry as the exuberant Nymph poured vast amounts of psychic energy into his body. Floating above the ground, his head thrown back, ethereal wisps curled around him as he struggled to contain the mind-shattering amounts of power. He’d experienced this only once before, and the sensation was just as exhilarating as the last time.

It felt like he was powerful enough to unmake the universe. Reality would be his playground, and everything within would bend to his will. The feeling was intoxicating, and he teetered on the brink of madness, the endless possibilities too much for his mind to contain. He wondered if access to this kind of raw power had seduced Xar’aziuth, and turned him into the horrifying nightmare he eventually became.

The runes on Kyth’vindathys blazed like an azure sun, soaking up the immense amounts of energy like a psychic sponge. John slowly descended back down to the street, his eyes wide open as he panted with exertion. Now that reason had returned, he focused his will inwards, tapping into that immense well of eldritch power to enhance his own body. He began to grow as his adversary had done, expanding until he matched the Progenitor’s gigantic size.

John hefted the massive runesword in his grip, then swung the blade around, unleashing a telekinetic blast wave that slammed into Gahl’kalgor’s back. The Progenitor was knocked forward a step, then he whirled around, his eyes gleaming with hatred.

“Gahl’kalgor,” John thundered, the tip of his sword pointing towards the Progenitor’s face. “It’s time to end your miserable existence.”

The Progenitor roared his defiance and launched into a charge... and the city could only quake in fear as the two behemoths clashed.

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Alyssa burst into the command bunker, a frantic look in her eyes. “Rachel, we need to move! Sakura’s in trouble!”

The doctor was already heading in her direction. “Let’s go.”

Turning to Jehanna, the blonde gave her an apologetic frown. “I have to go to him. I’m sorry, but I can’t help you anymore.”

“Go. I’ve got this,” Jehanna said, giving her a reassuring smile.

Almari and Ilyana exchanged worried glances, then Ilyana gave her friend and lover a brief wave goodbye. As Alyssa and Rachel strode out of the bunker, the House Valaden assassin followed right behind them.

“I wish to accompany you,” Ilyana stated, hurrying to keep up.

“You should stay here,” Alyssa replied, shaking her head. “It’s too dangerous out there. You and Almari can protect Jehanna.”

Ilyana’s turquoise eyes flicked to Rachel. “We have very specific orders... from John.”

Alyssa knew that John had asked the bodyguards to watch over Rachel and Jehanna, and keep them safe in the battle. She also knew that any counter arguments that she could protect their doctor would fall on deaf ears, as neither of the Maliri would ever dream of disobeying him.

“Fine. I haven’t got time to argue with you,” Alyssa reluctantly conceded.

The trio activated flight mode on their Paragon suits, then ramped up power to the thrusters, launching them up into the night’s sky.

\*\*\*

Ashryn paced back and forth on the Bridge of the dreadnought, watching anxiously as the gunnery teams exchanged broadsides with the gun emplacements. They’d managed to locate all of the Quantum Flux Cannon turrets that surrounded the city, but destroying them was proving challenging to say the least.

The Galkirans would pound the turrets with a salvo of shells, only to find that the gleaming white guns were somehow still operational. She had settled on simply knocking the turrets over, by blasting huge pits in the surrounding ground. It was a simple but effective tactic, and they were finally making some headway.

Lord Gahl’kalgor’s flagship could withstand an immense amount of punishment, but even a vessel as resilient as his dreadnought had its limits. Four of the colossal warship’s Quantum Flux Cannons had been destroyed, along with most of the Tachyon Lances and Tachyon Cannons on its underbelly. Ashryn darted a worried glance at the damage assessment hologram, which had painted most of the lower decks in red. She just hoped that her lord wouldn’t be too angry when he saw the extent of the damage inflicted on his flagship.

\*Ashryn, order the fleets to start bombarding the cities,\* Valeria snarled, her voice dripping with loathing. \*He wants you to destroy everything.\*

The Fleet Commander blinked in surprise, a shiver of fear running down her spine at the matriarch’s surly tone. Valeria’s temper was infamous amongst the Galkiran thralls, and the thought of being the focus of the matriarch’s ire was terrifying. Now more than ever, Ashryn knew that staying in Gahl’kalgor’s good graces was critical to her survival, and she was quite determined to keep it that way.

She sat demurely on the Command Throne, feeling a thrill of excitement to be in such a privileged position. As Ashryn stared at the holographic map, she mulled over the possibilities presented to her. At first, all she’d ever wanted was to get Gahl’kalgor’s attention, but now she most assuredly had it, she definitely wanted more.

Hearing Gahl’kalgor be so dismissive about thralls had definitely stung, but there was one woman that she knew he respected. Valeria wouldn’t have served him for so long as matriarch otherwise, but after a thousand years, maybe it was time for a change. Ashryn tried to ignore the fluttering in her stomach at that delicious thought. She would have to start working to usurp Valeria’s position as soon as she was reunited with Gahl’kalgor.

Ashryn glanced up at the holographic tactical map, searching to locate the armada, and find out how long it would take them to reach the Throneworld. She was shocked to see that less than half of the Galkiran fleets were approaching orbit, while the rest were out of restricted range of the dreadnought’s sensors, and still hidden in the nebula.

Activating the comms interface, she contacted the lead battleship of the thrall armada. “Keylessae, why are there only three fleets with you? Why didn’t the rest follow my orders to support the dreadnought?”

The Galkiran Fleet Commander gaped at her incredulously. “We’re all that’s left!” she hissed, her voice shrill with anger. “Why did you abandon us?! The Progenitor and the Maliri have been tearing our fleets apart!”

“That’s impossible, he’s down on the planet,” Ashryn declared. “Lord Gahl’kalgor is fighting him as we speak.”

“I know what I saw,” Keylessae said defiantly. “That damnable white ship definitely had a Progenitor aboard! There’s no other explanation for everything we’ve witnessed.”

“I haven’t got time to argue with you,” Ashryn said, growing increasingly annoyed with the frazzled officer. “We have new orders. Spread out and bombard every city on the planet. Preliminary scans show that they’re all heavily populated; Lord Gahl’kalgor wants them destroyed.”

“But what about-”

“That wasn’t a suggestion, Fleet Commander,” Ashryn said coldly. “You have your orders, I expect them to be carried out.”

She abruptly ended the call, then shook her head in frustration. For the first time in her life, Ashryn actually felt some sympathy for Valeria. Trying to maintain her position of authority over millions of obstinate thralls must be a truly thankless task, and the temptation to execute anyone foolish enough to defy her commands must be overwhelming.

“Finish off those turrets,” she ordered the gunnery teams. “Then start bombarding the Maliri positions. Lord Gahl’kalgor wants everything destroyed.”

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Betrixa tugged the flightstick to the left, pushing the Raptor into a barrel roll. She let the gunship complete half a turn, then pulled back on the stick to reverse direction for another pass. Hundreds more dropships had entered the planet’s atmosphere and were now descending towards the centre of the city. The Nymph had swept back and forth on multiple strafing runs, but the enemy transports kept on coming.

She glanced at the rear of the closest dropship, the optical targeting system locking on to the matching pair of engines. Squeezing the trigger on her flightstick, the Raptor’s Tachyon Cannon turrets all fired at the same location, savaging the armour protecting the propulsion systems. They exploded in rapid succession, forcing yet another transport to perform an emergency crash landing.

The Nymph searched for her next target, and Betrixa noticed a dazzling burst of tachyon beams cut the tails off a trio of dropships. Impressed by Dana’s marksmanship, she watched the crippled troop transports spiral down towards the city, each one trailing a long plume of grey smoke. Her sharp feline eyes noticed more movement on the ground, and she watched as dropships from the first wave started to lift off.

She stabbed a finger down on the comms system, contacting the redheaded Lioness.

“Everything alright?” Dana asked, her attention elsewhere as she focused on shooting down the invaders.

“Some of their dropships are taking off again,” the Nymph informed her. “Should this one hunt them instead?”

That got the teenager’s full attention, and her blue eyes locked on Betrixa’s. “Take them out asap! We can’t let those dropships start tearing up the Maliri bunkers!”

“Okey-dokey!” the Nymph agreed with a playful grin.

She hummed a merry tune to herself as she moved the flightstick to the left once again, this time pushing the Raptor into a steep dive. Weaving between the descending transports, her gunship was moving too fast for the enemy gunners to track, and streams of purple tachyon bolts sailed harmlessly wide. Betrixa lined up the Raptor’s nose with one of the thrall dropships, then carefully pressed the button on top of her stick.

The Tachyon Lances began gathering power, before unleashing it on her target in a pair of searing azure beams. They scythed through the black hull like a hot knife through butter, and when the incision was complete, the wing toppled to the ground in a shower of debris. Losing all those retro-thrusters unbalanced the dropship, and it pitched over in an uncontrolled roll, before crashing into the craft taking off beside it. Both slammed into the ground, the wingless transport pinning the other beneath its smoking fuselage.

“Nice shot,” Dana said with a grin. “You planned that, right?”

“Of course,” Betrixa lied, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “I thought it’d be quicker if I turned them into a stack of pancakes.”

Dana laughed and shook her head. “You fibber.”

The Nymph giggled, then pulled the Raptor out of the dive to soar above the city. “This one will take care of them. You keep shooting the fresh ones.”

“Got it,” Dana agreed, as they continued their valiant defence of the city.

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Despite the dozens of occupants in Mael’nerak’s bunker, it was eerily quiet, so much so that Helene found it unsettling. The Collective were all preoccupied, with the Invictus’ full complement of cleaning robots standing motionless around the room. Helene was used to seeing them acting flirtatious and playful, so it was shocking to see the difference.

The other two organic lifeforms present were Neysa and Marika, but they were just as silent as the Collective. The Nymphs hadn’t said a word since the battle started, their full attention on the console screens in front of them. The two catgirls were normally warm and friendly, so it was even stranger to see them so quiet and still.

Helene was desperate for any kind of news about the battle. Not knowing how all her friends were doing was driving her crazy with worry, but she didn’t want to disturb Alyssa unless it was really important. She nibbled anxiously at a fingernail, then her eyes flicked up to the system map, hoping it would provide some useful information about the battle. There were red icons spreading out across the planet, which Helene thought might be thrall spaceships, but she couldn’t imagine why they were flying away from the city where everyone was fighting.

She suddenly jumped in surprise as a warm pair of arms pulled her into a hug from behind. “Don’t worry, everything’s going to be okay,” Jade whispered in her ear.

Helene twisted in her embrace and looked at the Nymph in astonishment. “Jade! I thought you were supposed to be standing guard outside?!”

“I’ll head back in a minute. Alyssa said you were getting anxious, so I thought I’d check on you.”

Flinging her arms around the Nymph, Helene gave her a fierce hug. “Thank you so much! I was really worried!”

They held each other close for a long moment, then Helene pulled back, blushing with embarrassment.

“Don’t feel that way,” Jade said, fondly caressing her flushed cheek. “We should have realised you’d have no one to talk to. Would you like me to explain what’s happening?”

“Yes please!” Helene gushed, before looking at her with concern. “As long as you can spare the time?”

“I’ll keep it brief,” the green-skinned Nymph replied, before gently turning Helene around again and hugging her from behind. “The Collective are all closely monitoring the battle. The cleaning bots are waiting patiently to take direct control of the automated thralls, and are in constant communication with Daphne and the maintenance bots. They aren’t deliberately ignoring you, it’s just that their minds are fully focused on protecting the Maliri.”

“Oh... I understand,” Helene said with a sigh of relief.

Jade kissed her shoulder, then turned to look at her sisters. “Marika and Neysa were controlling the weapon platforms we set up in space. After ambushing the thrall ships, they switched to the gun turrets around the city, and have been trying to shoot down the dreadnought. They might seem quiet, but they’re talking to each other constantly using telepathy. They don’t mean to ignore you either, but they’ve been given a very important job, and they’re concentrating hard to make sure they do their best for our master.”

“How are they doing so far?” Helene whispered, turning to look at Jade out of the corner of her eye.

“Amazing. I’m really proud of them,” the Nymph said, her emerald eyes shining brightly. “They’ve done a massive amount of damage to the dreadnought, but it keeps shooting back at the turrets. We haven’t got many left.”

“How many?” the mermaid asked breathlessly.

“Seven... out of the original twenty-four,” Jade explained, her smile fading. “When they’re all down, it might start to get bad.”

Helene’s face fell. “Oh no...”

“Don’t worry. If it comes to that, we’ll deal with it,” Jade said, her tone warm and reassuring. Her feline eyes flicked up to the holographic system map. “The space battle went perfectly. All of Calara’s plans worked like a charm, and they’ve managed to immobilise nearly all the thrall ships. The last few fleets arrived at Kythshara, then spread out to attack the other cities. It looks like Dana successfully tricked them into thinking those places have millions of people living there, so they’re going to waste their time blowing up a bunch of ruins.”

“She’s so smart,” Helene said wistfully, looking up at the map in admiration.

“Smarter than me,” Jade readily agreed. “But if we were all as clever as Dana, she wouldn’t seem so special anymore. That’s why John gave us different gifts, to make us all wonderful in different ways.”

Helene slowly nodded, then turned around to study the Nymph. “I think you’re very smart... and wonderful too. Thank you for coming to see me, Jade. It means a lot.”

Jade gave her another kiss. “You’re welcome. Do you feel better now?”

“So much better,” Helene agreed. “But what about the rest of the battle? How is that going?”

“The ground battle is just starting, so we haven’t lost any Maliri yet,” Jade solemnly explained. “John is fighting the Progenitor at the moment, and trying to kill him before the thralls attack in large numbers.”

“To keep them all safe?” Helena asked, listening attentively.

“Exactly.”

“What about the girls? Are they all alright?”

Jade hesitated, then quietly replied. “Everyone’s fine... apart from Sakura.”

“What happened to her?!” Helene gasped in alarm.

“The Progenitor punched her very hard, I don’t know much more than that,” the Nymph admitted. Seeing the look of consternation on Helene’s face, she quickly added, “She’s alive, and that means Rachel can heal her. You’ve seen what she can do; Sakura is in safe hands.”

Helene took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. “Rachel is the Angel of Terra. Sakura will be fine.”

Jade knew that Helene was trying to convince herself, so she simply nodded. “That’s right.” Glancing back towards the door into the reinforced bunker, Jade ruefully continued, “I better get going. I still need to guard the palace.”

“Thank you again, Jade,” Helene said gratefully.

The Nymph released her from the hug, then loped across the command room towards the exit. Helene returned her wave goodbye, then watched as Jade slipped outside. She felt much better after her friend’s brief visit, all the pent up anxiety fading away. The kind-hearted mermaid was still worried about Sakura, but she knew there was nobody better in the galaxy to take care of her than Rachel.

Her curious gaze returned to the system map and Helene smiled as she watched the Galkiran fleets rushing off to shoot at abandoned cities. Looking at the spaceships reminded her that there was one more battle she’d forgotten to ask about. With a shrug, she figured that if anything important had happened at Genthalas, Jade would have told her all about it.

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The forty-metre-long runesword hurtled through the air, before crashing into Gahl’kalgor’s double-axe parry with a deafening boom. The impact knocked the Progenitor back a step, his boot digging a deep furrow through the muddy ground, and he grimaced with the strain of holding John’s blade at bay. As soon as John released the pressure, Gahl’kalgor raised his right axe to counterattack, but his eyes widened in surprise at the speed with which John struck another blow.

He was forced on to the defensive yet again, shocked at the staggering difference in Baen’thelas’ fighting style. Neither of the duellists were using psychic speed now, the tremendous strain of maintaining their massive size precluding them from using such mentally intensive abilities. However, that long sword with its sinister glowing runes seemed almost alive, moving with uncanny quickness in his adversary’s hands.

It wasn’t just the speed that was the problem. Baen’thelas suddenly seemed to have realised that he had much longer reach with his two-handed sword. Every time Gahl’kalgor tried to regain the upper hand, and go back on the offensive, his hex-barrier was getting stabbed, or slashed, or chopped, as his opponent struck before he could attack. For the first time in nearly a thousand years of combat, he began to have doubts that his twin battle-axes really were the ultimate melee weapon.

John backed off, then slowly circled his opponent, a grim smile on his face. “Yes... I tricked you,” he freely admitted. “You’re not as smart as you thought you were.”

He lunged forward, the massive runesword whistling around in a devastatingly powerful slash. Gahl’kalgor’s eyes widened in alarm, and he barely managed to parry the thunderous blow with both axes. Caught off-balance, the Progenitor stumbled backwards several steps, crushing the wall that surrounded the churned up park.

“Or as strong,” John noted, all traces of fear and exhaustion replaced by calm confidence.

He followed the retreating Progenitor onto the city streets, their boots clunking down on the cracked ferrocrete. The tip of the runesword weaved through the air, its movements almost hypnotic. It reminded Gahl’kalgor of a sea snake coiled to strike, before it lunged out and bit a fisherman from the village. That man had died in agony, the lethal poison killing him in under a minute. The Progenitor was now firmly convinced that his opponent was just as deadly.

John stepped over a small building, moving across the wide boulevard at a cautious pace. He suddenly exploded into action, his blade hurtling towards Gahl’kalgor’s leading knee. The Progenitor was too slow to parry, and the crushing impact shattered dozens of hexagons, enough to destabilise the integrity of his psychic shield.

Gahl’kalgor swung both axes down, in a desperate attempt to block a stab at his leg, but John had already anticipated that predictable defence. Instead of pulling back to strike again, John whipped the glowing blade straight upwards, the tip still inside the new hex barrier that Gahl’kalgor had hastily constructed. The razor-sharp edge connected with a black gauntlet, shearing off the little finger of his right hand in a fountain of blood. Gahl’kalgor howled with pain and lurched back a few more steps, and the look of astonishment was plain to see, even in those black shrouded eyes.

John shook his head with disbelief. “Who taught you to fight? Your mother?”

Gahl’kalgor’s frayed temper finally snapped, and he let loose a furious scream as he launched himself at his opponent. “Don’t talk about my mother!”

“Don’t talk about my mother...” John echoed at the same time, rolling his eyes as he effortlessly sidestepped the clumsy charge.

Instead of crashing into John, Gahl’kalgor barrelled into his runesword, the arcing slash aimed just below his upraised axes. The blow struck the psychic shield with another ferocious impact, shattering dozens more hexagons and dropping Gahl’kalgor’s protective barrier yet again. Just as before, John didn’t withdraw his blade, and simply shifted the angle, keeping it close to his opponent’s body.

As Gahl’kalgor stumbled past, John lunged in the opposite direction, using his momentum to add extra force to the scything cut. The blade arced up into the Progenitor’s armpit, biting deep through the thinner armour, and slicing through flesh. John smoothly pivoted to face Gahl’kalgor again, and bright red blood now coated the entire length of his huge runesword.

“Empty threats? Hollow boasts?” John asked, giving him a wry smile. “I don’t think so.”

The Progenitor watched his blood drip down onto the street, and blazing rage was doused by chilling fear.

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The first wave of Galkiran marines had rallied, and were now storming up the hill towards Tashana’s position. Many of them had already lost their shields, having been taken completely by surprise when the Maliri caught their landing zone in a crossfire. Their charge was met by sustained fire from Retharyn’s Renegades, who aimed short bursts of tachyon bolts at the Galkiran troops.

The Maliri marines were decent markswomen, especially aided by the smart-linked targeting interface that was connected to their helmet. But they were always careful to only hit each of their targets with a couple of energy bolts; not enough to cause any fatal damage, but more than enough to determine if they were still shielded. Whenever their shots were absorbed by a protective shield, they kept on firing until it collapsed.

And that was precisely what Tashana was waiting for. Her eyes swept along the enemy lines, watching for confirmation that a Galkiran was vulnerable. As soon as she saw a tachyon bolt deflected by a thrall’s armour, she took careful aim and hit them in the knee, or the hip, or the elbow. One after the other, the enemy soldiers pitched over onto the street, crying out in pain as they clutched at their newly acquired gunshot wounds.

Tashana didn’t relish hurting all those troops, but every injury was relatively minor; enough to incapacitate the thralls but not leave them dead or dying. It didn’t take long for the enemy charge to falter, and soon the moans of the wounded were drowning out the occasional high-pitched squeal of tachyon bolts. When the last of the Galkirans had been taken down, the Maliri ceased fire altogether, then they turned to look at their newest recruit with admiration in their eyes.

Retharyn patted Tashana on the shoulder. “I’m glad you joined us. We all are.”

Trying her hardest not to break into a broad grin, Tashana acknowledged their praise with a modest nod. “It’s not over yet. There’s a lot more on the way.”

Down the hill, scores of dropships were landing to reinforce the drop zone. Galkiran troops rushed out of their transports to engage the defenders, bolstering the invading force with thousands more bloodthirsty thralls.

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Mael’nerak’s ornate palace had survived the battle so far without so much as a scratch, with none of the Galkiran forces coming anywhere near the northern edge of the suburbs. Jade stood outside in the beautifully kept grounds, watching as swarms of dropships swooped down towards the centre of the besieged city. Every few seconds, the endless forest of purple bolts was outshone by a burst of brilliant blue, and the Nymph smiled as she watched her sister wreak havoc amongst the invaders.

Jade always enjoyed flying the Raptor, and would’ve been happy to pilot the gunship in this battle, if her current role wasn’t so important. She knew how much the girls cared for Faye, each of them longing for her return almost as much as John, who dearly missed his effervescent friend. Because Faye was special to them, Jade would do anything within her power to keep their fallen lioness safe.

The purple sprite had never grown particularly close to Jade, but the Nymph knew that was simply due to their contrasting natures. Faye was a synthetic being, but Jade was very much tailored to organics, and she’d developed deep bonds with all the girls she’d fed on John’s behalf. Instead, Faye had been more drawn to Dana, Rachel, and Irillith, who were all part of her growth into the fully-sentient creature she’d become before her untimely end.

But if all went to plan, Faye would return as an organic being, and Jade knew that this time, their relationship would be very different. As she watched for any threats, the Nymph daydreamed about holding the petite girl to her breast, and feeding her pints of her master’s delicious cum. She could just imagine that slim purple tummy stuffed to the brim, Faye gazing up at her with a doe-eyed look of contentment.

A massive explosion struck the outskirts of the city, close enough to disturb Jade’s idle musings. She frowned with irritation, her sharp eyes drawn to the source of the interruption. Another one of Dana’s gun emplacements was under heavy bombardment, each blinding explosion tearing up tons of dirt that showered down around the deepening crater. As the clouds of dust and smoke cleared, Jade could see that that turret had toppled over, further reducing their ability to strike back at the dreadnought.

The nymph looked up at the Galkiran flagship with a worried frown, not sure how she could protect Faye against such a devastating bombardment. The palace was shielded, but the energy barrier wouldn’t last long against firepower of that magnitude.

Her train of thought was interrupted for a second time, as Jade noticed one of the dropships veering in her direction. The Maliri gunners were targeting the jinking transport, and as she watched, a long burst of anti-aircraft fire clipped the tail. The engines erupted, belching flames and debris as the dropship’s nose dipped towards the ground.

It plummeted out of the sky trailing a plume of fire, and Jade watched its descent with mounting trepidation. She didn’t think it would hit the palace, but it would definitely be very close.

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Inside the dropship, the flight crew struggled to hold the transport stable, the rear ailerons blown to pieces when the engines were destroyed.

“Full power to the forward retro-thrusters!” Daemytera ordered her co-pilot. “We’ve got to reduce our speed!”

“I’m trying, but they’re not responding!” Sinaeth blurted out, pressing the rune on her console repeatedly. “I think the fuel line was ruptured when we lost the engines.”

Daemytera swore, then her muscles strained as she fought with the flightstick. “I’ll try and bring us down in that field over there!”

“Watch out for that building!” Sinaeth warned, her eyes widening as they roared over the palace.

The pilot managed to steer them between two gleaming towers, and then they’d safely cleared the sprawling mansion. Now there was nothing ahead of them but open fields, stretching far away towards the horizon. The dropship sank lower, losing altitude at a steady rate. The distance ticked down until impact, then the undercarriage crashed into the ground, the force jolting them both in their seats. The floor juddered as the dropship skidded over the fields, gradually losing speed until it came to a peaceful stop.

“That was an incredible landing, Captain,” Sinaeth said, looking at the pilot with sincere admiration. “I don’t know how you got us down safely.”

“Experience... and a lot of luck,” Daemytera admitted, leaning back against her chair with a sigh of relief.

“We better unlock the troop compartment, Sinaeth suggested, reaching for the hatch controls.

Suddenly the dropship lurched, rocking violently from side to side.

“What was that?!” Daemytera gasped, looking at her console for answers. “Is the ground unstable?”

A piercing scream made her freeze, and she glanced over at her co-pilot in alarm. Before Daemytera could ask what was wrong, she realised Sinaeth was looking straight up at the canopy, her face a mask of terror. With mounting dread she looked up too, then she joined her co-pilot in screaming herself hoarse.

A pair of massive green jaws had clamped down over the cockpit. She could see a huge tongue, rows of enormous jagged teeth, and a gaping throat that was large enough to swallow a woman whole. The dropship lurched again, then the Galkirans felt a sudden sinking sensation, like they were falling.

The jaws released and pulled back out of sight, leaving the flight crew staring up at the stars in terrified silence. Before they could summon enough courage to speak, a spray of dirt scattered across the cockpit. It was followed by another, then another, the soil piling up around the edge of the canopy.

Sinaeth turned to look at Daemytera, her eyes wild with fear. “We’re being buried alive! We need to open the rear hatches before it’s too late!”

Daemytera lunged forward and grabbed the co-pilot’s wrist before she could tap the door release rune. “You want to go outside?! With that monster waiting for us? Are you insane?!”

The thrall paled, and fearfully shook her head. They both watched as clumps of dirt continued to land on the canopy, slowly blocking out their view of the stars above.

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The three Paragon suited Lionesses soared over the city, unnoticed by the thralls advancing on the Maliri in their fortified bunkers. Alyssa took the lead, having memorised the layout of every street, and followed the broad boulevard that would take them directly towards the centre of the metropolis. She spotted John long before finding the park, and her heart skipped a beat when she saw him squaring off against Gahl’kalgor.

“Holy shit,” Rachel swore, when she got her first glimpse of the gigantic combatants.

They were fighting in the most built-up area, and every swing of those monstrously huge weapons that missed, invariably struck one of the adjacent buildings. The two had left a trail of destruction in their wake, completely demolishing what had once been magnificent examples of stunning architecture.

“I normally love it when John grows big, but watching them fight is terrifying,” Alyssa admitted, hovering in place as she stared intently at the duel.

Rachel glided to a halt beside Alyssa, retro-thrusters keeping her stable. “We need your help to find Sakura,” she firmly reminded her blonde matriarch. “You can join the battle after she’s safe.”

Alyssa nodded, then tore her gaze away from the duel as she jetted off towards the park. “This way. It isn’t far from here.”

They could all see where John had begun the fight against the Progenitor, a white blanket of snow covering the battlefield. Even at night, they could make out the sharp contrast with the splash of red blood in the centre.

“I can’t see Sakura anywhere,” Ilyana said, her gaze sweeping over the striped lawns as she searched for their injured comrade.

“According to John, she got knocked back into some woods,” Alyssa muttered, pointing to the copse of silver birch trees on the far side of the park. “That’s the closest. Let’s try there.”

They raced over to the thicket, then activated the pair of spotlights on their Paragon suits. Sweeping those bright beams from side to side, they quickly began a systematic search for Sakura, until Ilyana spotted her gleaming white body armour beside a felled tree.

“There she is!” the former assassin called out, before landing by the injured woman. She darted a worried glance at Alyssa and added, “Are you sure she’s still breathing?”

“Sakura’s alive,” Alyssa said with certainty. “I’d have immediately felt her loss if something terrible had happened to her.”

Rachel dropped to her knees beside their wounded companion, her eyes already glowing with a soft grey light. “A couple of broken ribs, a fractured jaw, and a nasty concussion. Give me a minute and she’ll be as good as new."

“Will she still be able to fight when she wakes up?” Alyssa prompted the doctor.

The brunette glanced up at her with a disapproving frown.

“I’m asking for Sakura,” Alyssa explained. “It’s the first thing she’ll want to know.”

Rachel’s gaze softened as she looked down at the unconscious girl. “Ideally she should get some rest and fully recover... but you’re right, she’s never going to agree to that.”

Suffused with the doctor’s misty aura, colour quickly returned to Sakura’s cheeks, and she let out a gasp as her broken bones were mended. Her eyelashes fluttered, and she looked up in confusion, before a sudden look of alarm flashed across her face.

“You’re safe,” Rachel said, her voice calm and soothing. “John led the Progenitor away from the park.”

That didn’t have quite the effect she was intending, as Sakura now appeared even more frantic. “Where are my swords?!” she blurted out, immediately sitting bolt upright. “I need to help John!”

“You rest for a minute,” Rachel said firmly. “We’ll help you find them.”

Alyssa knelt down beside the dazed Lioness. “Hey gorgeous. How’s your head?”

Sakura gave her a forced smile. “Never felt better.”

“Mmm hmm,” the blonde murmured, obviously not convinced. “I want you to listen to Rachel and just take a few moments to make sure you’re 100%.”

The Asian girl’s smile disappeared in an instant. “But-”

“You can’t help him right now,” Alyssa interrupted, moving aside and pointing across the park. “See?”

Those almond eyes widened as Sakura saw the two giants dominating the city’s skyline. “Oh crap...”

Alyssa nodded. “Yeah, exactly. There’s not much we can do right now, except get in the way.”

Sakura relaxed and leaned back against the fallen trunk. “How’s the battle going?”

“We’re holding our own here, but the Galkirans just got a lot of reinforcements,” Alyssa replied, her expression turning grim as she straightened up. “Jehanna says the Maliri to the west are heavily outnumbered. Can you give them a hand?”

Sakura’s gaze returned to the duel between John and the Progenitor. She looked like she was about to protest, then reluctantly nodded in agreement. “Alright, I’ll help.”

“Thank you,” Alyssa said sincerely, locking eyes with Sakura and acknowledging how hard that had been with a nod. She then turned her attention to the brunette beside them. “Are you heading back to the command bunker?”

Rachel considered it for a moment, then shook her head. “No, I’m staying.”

Sakura looked at the doctor in surprise, then her expression shifted to indignation.

“I can’t really contribute much to the battle until the casualties start rolling in,” Rachel explained, pre-empting the Asian girl’s unspoken protest. “But you’re able to intervene and protect the Maliri from getting hurt. When you’ve finished saving them, you’ll rush back here to help John, so I think it might be wise if I stick around... just in case.”

Looking contrite, Sakura gave both girls a guilty frown. “I’m sorry.”

“I know how much you want to help,” Alyssa said soothingly, patting her on the shoulder. “But there’s not much you can do when Gahl’kalgor’s stomping around as an angry giant. We’ll try to force him to change back to normal, then you can finish him off.”

“Sounds like a good plan,” Sakura agreed, rising to her feet just as Ilyana returned with her Ninjato.

“Your blades,” the Maliri stated awkwardly, reversing her grip and presenting them to Sakura.

“Thank you for finding them,” the Asian girl said, as she gratefully accepted both swords.

Ilyana flexed the fingers of her gauntlets, a puzzled expression on her face. She gave the pair of rune-inscribed blades a wary glance, watching as Sakura sheathed both weapons.

“What are you going to do now?” Sakura asked their blonde matriarch.

Alyssa turned towards the duelling titans and slowly rose off the ground, the determined look in her eyes outshone by a bright inner radiance. “I’m going to get in the way.”

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John drove Gahl’kalgor back with a succession of pounding strikes, skilfully avoiding the Progenitor’s frantic parries and landing heavy hits on his hex barrier. Every time John breached that shield, instead of drawing back the runesword to deliver a fatal blow, he lunged forward to deliver a quick jab. It went counter to all his training, but fighting an opponent with an instantly renewable psychic shield was very different to sparring against an ordinary foe.

The tip of John’s runeblade stabbed into Gahl’kalgor’s knee, connecting with just enough force to pierce the black body armour and cut flesh. The glancing wound was barely more than a scratch, but it still caused the Progenitor to yelp in pain and stumble backwards. Although it was gratifying to land hits on Gahl’kalgor instead of just breaking his hex barrier, being limited to these superficial cuts was also very frustrating. John had to fully extend himself to inflict each light wound, and didn’t have the reach to drive the blade deep enough to cause serious damage.

Despite Gahl’kalgor instantly healing these trivial scratches, John could see how badly shaken his opponent had become. The Progenitor had gone from dominating the battle, to being forced back onto the defensive, his every attempt at a counter-attack overwhelmed before it got started. The flesh wounds might have been little more than paper cuts, but they still stung, and John would wager every credit he had, that Gahl’kalgor wasn’t used to being hurt.

\*I don’t want to rush you... but you need to hurry this up,\* Alyssa warned him.

\*I’m trying,\* John replied, pressing his advantage against the retreating Progenitor. \*I’ve got him rattled. If I can force him to make a serious mistake, I can finish this.\*

\*John... Genthalas has been boarded and the Maliri are taking heavy casualties,\* Alyssa informed him, her tone as grim as the news. \*Luna’s trying to evacuate Edraele, but she’s anchored in position, and still unresponsive. They’ve only got a couple more minutes, then the command deck will be overrun.\*

\*Shit,\* John muttered, fear gripping his heart for the Maliri Queen and all the marines still aboard the station.

He slapped aside a swipe from one of Gahl’kalgor’s axes, and drew deeply from his psychic reserves.

\*Snap out of it, Edraele!\* John thundered, his telepathic command reverberating with eldritch power. \*We need you! It’s time to wake up!\*

There was no response, the only sound the hefty clang of sword against axe, and the distant retort of gunfire echoing through the city.

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Floating in front of Edraele, the thrusters on Luna’s Paragon suit kept her stable in the air as she fretted over her lover. Despite her best efforts, she hadn’t been able to budge her Queen so much as an inch; the psychic tether holding the unconscious Maliri in place was far stronger than any physical force she could muster. The anxious assassin could hear fighting in the distance now, and knew the Galkirans must be getting close to the command centre. Luna had already ordered the Maliri personnel stationed there to abandon their posts, and if she was going to have any chance of escaping with Edraele, they needed to leave immediately.

“Wake up, Edraele!” Luna urged her frantically, trying to shake the House Valaden matriarch but to no avail. “We have to evacuate Genthalas right now!”

The gleaming light shining from Edraele’s eyes suddenly dimmed, and Luna saw her pupils rapidly contract. The Maliri Queen started to stir, the rigid tension in her body finally easing as she roused from her psychic slumber.

“Edraele!” Luna gasped with relief. “You’re awake!”

“I am an instrument of thy will, mighty Kyth’vindathys,” Edraele whispered reverently.

Luna was startled by her eerie response, but didn’t have time to question her about it.

“The Galkirans have breached the drydocks,” she quickly informed her Queen. “Their marines are sweeping through Genthalas, cutting down our forces. We need to evacuate the station, then wait for John and the girls to rescue us.”

Edraele acknowledged her with a solemn nod, then began to move, floating gracefully towards the exit. Descending with her, Luna landed on the golden deck plates, and walked briskly beside the hovering matriarch. They left the command centre through the reinforced bulkhead, but instead of turning right towards the nearest airlock, Edraele banked around to take the left hallway.

Caught by surprise, Luna turned on her heel and rushed to catch up. “This is the wrong way,” she warned her lover anxiously. “You’re heading towards the fighting. The airlocks are back there.”

When Edraele turned to look in her direction, Luna could see that her glowing purple eyes had become sharply focused. “We must reclaim Gen’thalas,” she intoned. “It is pivotal to achieving our vengeance.”

Luna was about to protest that they were facing impossible odds, but the unwavering conviction in Edraele’s voice made her pause. The Maliri Queen stared at her with an air of expectation, and Luna realised that nothing she said would convince Edraele to alter her self-appointed mission. With a sigh of resignation, Luna drew her sword, then followed faithfully at Edraele’s side as they headed directly towards the sound of combat.

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A storm of tachyon bolts swept across the plaza, striking thralls, dropships, and buildings with impunity. The noise from all that gunfire was deafening, and Kaija crouched low behind the battered wall, not daring to raise her head into that deadly maelstrom. She darted a worried glance at her suit’s HUD and grimaced at the shield status, which showed less than a third of its strength left.

This terrifying battle was nothing like the epic stories retold by the veteran marines in her squad. As soon as they’d stepped foot off their dropship, the Maliri had sprung their ambush, and it seemed like her squad was hit from every direction. In a matter of seconds, several of the Galkiran troopers had lost their shields, and tachyon bolts began careening off their black body armour.

All around the dropzone, wounded thralls were screaming in pain as they clutched at ugly wounds, a stark reminder that Kaija wasn’t in a simulator anymore. She’d been trained to charge the enemy, and mow down hostile thralls with overwhelming firepower, guaranteeing a quick victory. But the big problem was that there was no one here to charge.

Huddled against the wall, she flinched as a flurry of tachyon bolts sprayed across her cover, blasting holes through the ferrocrete and scattering the floor with glowing chunks of debris. She didn’t dare poke her head up to see where those shots were coming from, but from this angle, it wasn’t even necessary. Kaija could look across the plaza at the multitude of energy bolts being strafed across the landing zone, like a flickering purple wave that destroyed everything it touched.

Most of the nearest streetlights had been mown down, plunging the area into darkness, which actually made it easier to follow the glowing streams of enemy gunfire back to their sources. When Kaija used the HUD to zoom in, she was astonished to see that their ambushers were all shooting from bunkers built into the surrounding hills. Entrenched in those fortifications, she knew that the Maliri would be almost impossible to hit. But they weren’t supposed to fight like that! This whole battle was a nightmare!

“Get up! Come on, move!”

The barked orders snapped Kaija out of her panic and she refocused all her attention on the source. Arathelle was yelling at her squad, and they reluctantly scrambled to their feet.

“We can’t stay here!” the Galkiran Captain yelled at the shaken troops. She jabbed a finger towards a broad street in the distance, that led away from the plaza towards the ridgeline surrounding the city. “Over there! We need to neutralise those bunkers!”

Gritting her teeth, Kaija pushed herself up from cover and joined her squad in sprinting away from the landing zone. They darted around the dozens of injured thralls that were strewn all over the ravaged park, and tried to ignore the bursts of tachyon bolts that hounded their every step.

“Keep going!” Arathelle ordered, running alongside the rookie marine. “Up the hill and assault that position!”

Dozens of other squads had already made the attempt, and those thralls were now sprawled out across the street, like a macabre black and red carpet. At the base of the hill was a broad crossroads, and several more dropships were landing in that open area, joining the dozen that had already touched down. As soon as they settled on the ferrocrete surface, doors were thrown open and hundreds more Galkiran marines poured out, the reinforcements rushing to attack the Maliri.

All the shooting aimed at Kaija’s squad rapidly switched to the closer threat, and she winced in sympathy as she saw the troops run straight into that deadly suppressing fire. The women at the lead of those formations caught the brunt of the enemy’s attacks, and they soon began toppling over, felled by vicious energy bolts. As more and more casualties were added to the those writhing on the ground, the Galkiran forces pressed onwards, fearlessly returning fire at the Maliri.

Readjusting her grip on her tachyon gun, Kaija followed her squad past the last of the dropships, finally reaching the base of the hill. Kaija could see the shots from her comrades tearing up the fortifications, the bursts of purple bolts blasting chunks out of the hidden bunkers. She spotted flickers of movement behind those narrow firing slits, as the Maliri aimed down the hill and shot at the assaulting troops. That sudden glimpse of her hated enemy lit a blazing fire in Kaija’s veins. The urge to slaughter them all for the glory of Lord Gahl’kalgor left her giddy with righteous fury.

She just had to run this final gauntlet, then it would be time for revenge. Kaija would make these cowards suffer for this despicable ambush!

“Charge!” Arathelle yelled, urging on the frenzied marines.

Kaija screamed her own battle cry, caught up in the terrifying euphoria of war.

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Ailita peered through a firing slit in the command bunker, watching the Galkiran forces as they rushed up the hill towards the closest Maliri fortifications. Both sides were heavily engaged with each other now, and the air was bristling with opposing streams of energy bolts. The Nymph thought that all the sparkling lights were very pretty, like purple fireflys flitting around in the night sky. It was just really sad that so many of the Galkirans were getting hurt.

Turning away from the pitched battle, she gazed across the bunker at Jehanna, who was engrossed in the holographic map. Ailita was very fond of the former reporter, who had been nothing but kind and caring towards the Nymph ever since she’d been rescued by her Master. Jehanna usually had a warm smile on her beautiful face, so it was unsettling to see her closest friend appear so grim. The Nymph hoped that some good news might cheer up the pensive general.

“Jehanna, the last squad has cleared the landing zone,” Ailita politely informed her.

That immediately got Jehanna’s attention, and she acknowledged the Nymph with a silent nod, before sweeping her gaze across the holographic map. Those perceptive brown eyes tracked all the icons depicting the enemy forces, mentally ticking them off as she studied their shifting positions. She raised a gauntlet, which held a compact device in her armoured grip.

“Fire in the hole,” Jehanna said solemnly, before clicking the red button.

Ailita looked outside again just as a blinding flash lit up the view through the firing slit. It was followed a split-second later by a thunderous boom, the blast wave slamming into the fortifications with enough force to knock her back a step. She could only imagine how frightening that must have been for the Galkirans, who had been so much closer to the epicentre of those explosions.

Her feline eyes rapidly adjusted to the searing burst of light, Ailita’s pupils contracting to tiny dots. The attacking thralls had been knocked flat by the concussive force of that blast, and there was no longer anyone left standing on the boulevard. At the base of the hill, the crossroads had been completely obliterated, the detonation of the buried Maliri torpedo leaving a huge crater in the ground.

Everything thrown up in the air by that colossal explosion now began to rain down on the cracked ferrocrete. Mangled dropships crashed back to the surface in broken heaps, never to fly again. Ailita watched as dozens of Galkiran troops sailed across the street, then winced in sympathy as they crashed into buildings, hurtled through shattered windows, or tumbled limply across the ground. She knew they’d be bruised and battered now, but at least they were still alive.

“It worked just like you planned!” Ailita announced cheerfully, beaming at Jehanna with admiration. “The blastwave knocked over all the Galkiran troops!”

Jehanna’s tense expression finally lifted into a smile of satisfaction. “That should buy us at least a couple more minutes.” She glanced back at the holographic map, and the park near the centre of the city. \*Alyssa, how’s the fight with Gahl’kalgor going?\*

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Buffeted by the incredible turbulence generated by those blasts, Alyssa gave up trying to stabilise her tumbling flight with her Paragon suit’s thrusters. She closed her eyes and just focused on anchoring her body with telekinesis, until she managed to slow her momentum, and her head stopped spinning. Cautiously cracking open her eyes again, Alyssa was relieved to see that she was hovering about thirty metres above the churned up lawns on the outskirts of the ravaged park.

\*Alyssa?\* Jehanna asked again. \*Are you alright?\*

\*I got blown about a bit,\* the blonde replied tartly. \*A warning would’ve been nice.\*

\*Shit... I’m so sorry!\* Jehanna quickly apologised. \*I didn’t even think about you getting caught up in the blast.\*

\*Don’t worry about it,\* Alyssa replied, sounding distracted. \*I’m fine.\*

Making a slow turn, she could see plumes of smoke all around the city, each one rising from where they’d buried the Maliri torpedoes. There was a temporary lull in the gunfire, with both the attackers and the defenders reeling from the aftermath of those massive explosions. Even the dreadnought had stopped firing, the crew unsure how to react to the unexpected detonations.

The one exception was John and Gahl’kalgor, who were still locked in vicious melee combat. Alyssa caught glimpses of them behind a gleaming spire, the two giants flailing away at each other with their enormous weapons. She was relieved to see that John still maintained the upper hand, pressing his opponent backwards with quick stabs of his runesword whenever he broke through Gahl’kalgor’s hex barrier.

Alyssa set off towards them again, using the flight mode of her Paragon suit to sail high above the battlefield. When she got closer, the sheer scale of the two men was daunting, with each of them looming high above the city streets. Even more shocking was just how fast the two combatants were able to move, despite their enormous size. Alyssa had expected them to be lumbering around almost in slow motion, but the reality was that they were moving at normal speed. Now that they were thirty times bigger than a regular person, those vast axes whistling through the air like a hurricane were absolutely terrifying.

Alyssa had set off to help John in any way that she could, but seeing just how big Gahl’kalgor was from up close, she began to realise how difficult it would be to actually hurt the Progenitor. The pair of Tachyon Cannons flanking her would be ineffective against a normal psychic shield, let alone one that enormous. Alyssa also doubted that her telekinetic lances would be any better, lacking the force required to knock out a single one of those huge hexagons. There were more... substantial... psychic attacks she could try using to pierce that barrier, but they came with a heavy cost in psychic energy.

Gahl’kalgor let out a furious roar, and launched himself forward in a desperate lunge, his axes raised high to slam down on the blue hex-barrier protecting his adversary. John smoothly sidestepped the reckless charge, and traded a glancing axe swipe for a heavy two-handed slash. While Gahl’kalgor’s frantic attack only managed to crack a line of four hexagons, John’s much more powerful blow managed to shatter a score of the black hexagonal segments.

The instant the psychic barrier collapsed, the Progenitor renewed it, but the tip of John’s runesword was still inside the shield. John thrust forward, aiming at the joint between gauntlet and vambrace, and his blade finally cut deep enough to cause significant damage. Gahl’kalgor howled with pain as the tendons in his wrist were severed, causing his right hand to jerk open reflexively. His axe tumbled from his loosened grip and toppled towards the ground, the weapon rapidly returning to normal size as it fell out of his hand.

Gahl’kalgor desperately scrambled backwards from that gleaming blade, jets of blood spurting from the jagged wound to his wrist. Alyssa could clearly see his expression through the faceplate of his helmet. The Progenitor’s eyes were wide with shock, his features contorted into a rictus of fear.

\*Careful, John,\* Alyssa warned him, as she landed on the roof of a nearby building. \*Remember what Rachel said about pushing him too hard.\*

\*I haven’t got any other choice,\* John replied grimly. \*He keeps shielding himself before I can finish him off, so I’m just going to have to grind him down until he makes a serious mistake.\*

The blonde matriarch darted behind a tall comms array, so she could watch the duel without being noticed. As the Progenitor backed away from John’s weaving runeblade, Alyssa could see that he had already stopped bleeding, the wound closing rapidly as he regenerated himself.

\*We need to overwhelm him and finish him off quickly,\* she suggested, as sword clanged against axe, the boom reverberating down the street. \*Just like you and Sakura planned, but let me help instead.\*

\*Alright, sounds good,\* John agreed, as he easily parried a backhanded axe swipe. \*Wait for my signal, then you hit him with everything you’ve got.\*

Alyssa took a deep breath and started gathering eldritch power. Ethereal mists swirled around her arms as she tapped into her massive reserves of psychic energy, and she could feel the destructive potential building within her. Her fists began to glow, a shining nimbus of light forming and getting rapidly brighter.

\*I’m ready,\* Alyssa said quietly, as she aimed her clenched fists at the oblivious Progenitor.

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“We think they detonated buried explosives, Fleet Captain,” the Senior Engineer stated, accompanied by nods from her staff. “Even if there are more, they’re no threat to us.”

Ashryn resisted the urge to sigh with relief. The dreadnought had sustained massive external damage in the exchange of broadsides with the ground based turrets, and she was painfully aware how vulnerable her master’s flagship was in its present state. She studied the holographic map of the city, searching for any other potential dangers.

“Are you quite certain that we destroyed all of their turrets?” she asked the tactical officer.

The Galkiran inclined her head in a respectful nod. “We verified with ordnance tracking, and every emplacement that fired at us has been eliminated.”

“Excellent,” Ashryn declared, feeling a surge of confidence. “The Maliri are fortified around the outskirts of the city. Start targeting the ridgeline and wipe them out.”

“As you command, Fleet Captain.”

A flurry of activity on the battle holograph caught her attention, and Ashryn watched as a white gunship swooped between the city skyscrapers. The nimble strikecraft pulled up and turned into a languid roll, spitting endless streams of blue tachyon bolts as it flew over a trio of Galkiran transports. Explosions ripped apart a black gunship’s engines, and the crippled craft dropped into a terminal dive. The two other transports fired back at the gunship as they started to pursue the lightning fast strike craft, but the Raptor quickly pulled away.

“And destroy that damned gunship,” Ashryn snarled at the gunnery teams. “We won’t have any transports left if you don’t shoot it out of the sky!”

After checking that they’d acknowledged her orders, her eyes were drawn to the two Progenitors duelling in the centre of the city. The dreadnought’s sensors were sophisticated enough to portray the huge armoured figures locked in mortal combat, but could not provide enough detail for Ashryn to see a blow by blow rendition of the fight. She had every confidence that Gahl’kalgor was going to crush his vile adversary, but it was puzzling that it was taking much longer than she’d anticipated.

Ashryn sat back in the Command Throne and mused over what she could do to celebrate their impending victory. It wouldn’t be long until she was finally reunited with Gahl’kalgor, and Ashryn wanted to make sure he knew how much she adored him. Before he left for the battle, her Lord had been deeply unsettled due to being goaded by that filthy degenerate. After enduring all those foul taunts about his mother, she wasn’t surprised in the slightest at Gahl’kalgor’s dark mood.

She had also taken those insults personally, and hoped that he’d make Baen’thelas suffer for all those horrible slurs. Struck by a sudden moment of inspiration, Ashryn decided she’d bake Gahl’kalgor a fish pie, which had been one of Delsanra’s specialities. That would remind him that his beloved mother still lived on in her, bringing them closer together once again.

Ashryn knew that she just had to make herself indispensable to Gahl’kalgor, and he wouldn’t take much convincing to promote her to matriarch. She almost felt sorry for Valeria, but after the way that haughty bitch had spoken to her in the past, any sympathy quickly evaporated. Removing her helmet, she twirled her finger through a long lock of snowy-white hair, a precious gift from her Progenitor Master.

She noticed several of the crew darting curious glances her way, and sat up straighter, basking in their attention. Yes, Lord Gahl’kalgor had made it abundantly clear to everyone who was his favourite. Ashryn smiled with satisfaction, knowing that all her wildest dreams would soon come true.

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Baen’thelas aimed a slash at Gahl’kalgor’s head, then altered the angle of the swipe as runesword and axe clanged together in a booming parry. Deflected by the curved head of the axe, his blade chopped downwards and revealed his real target, hacking into the hex barrier once again. When the shield collapsed, Gahl’kalgor lurched backwards to avoid being stabbed by the glowing runesword, and inadvertently crashed into one of the skyscrapers that lined the street.

The impact shattered dozens of windows, raining down a shower of crystalline shards all over the pavement. Gahl’kalgor cursed as his remorseless enemy pressed the attack, desperately fending off the darting runeblade with his back pressed up against the crumpled building. The Progenitor parried a heavy blow with his axe, the weight of the colossal two-handed sword driving him down to one knee.

Taking advantage of his opponent’s fraught position, Baen’thelas smashed his sword down again and again, each blow forcing the axe further backwards. Gahl’kalgor had never experienced true fear before, but looking up at the hard eyes of his adversary, he saw only his own death reflected back. He gave up any hope of besting Baen’thelas in melee combat, the numerous swift cuts he’d received had been a sharp lesson that he had met his match.

\*Give me more power, Valeria!\* he yelled at his matriarch. \*Not the feeble trickle you’ve been feeding me! I need that tenfold!\*

Gahl’kalgor had never demanded that much eldritch energy before, and he could sense his matriarch’s shock at his telepathic command. His hands ached from the strain of trying to fend off repeated blows from that two-handed blade, each ringing parry sounding like his own death knell. Suddenly a tidal wave of psychic energy coursed through his gigantic body, banishing the weariness from his bones, and making Gahl’kalgor feel as mighty as Xar’aziuth himself.

He released his clenched grip on the axe with his left gauntlet and held it out towards Baen’thelas, who had his runeblade raised up high for another swing. A nimbus of black energy danced around the fingers of the Progenitor’s gauntlet, all that gathered power writhing with a seething intensity. With a roar he unleashed it all in a massive psychic blast wave, the concussive force roaring outwards with a thunderous boom that shattered every window along the street.

Caught completely by surprise, Baen’thelas was hurled backwards by that titanic blast. Struck with enough force to lift him off the ground, he was thrown the full length of a city block before crashing into a row of buildings. Crushed by his vast body, the demolished buildings collapsed on top of him, burying Baen’thelas in debris.

Gahl’kalgor let out a rumbling laugh as he rose to his feet, relishing the sight of this upstart brought low. He’d hoped to finish this battle as he’d ended so many others, by proving his superiority in martial skill, and relentlessly hacking his opponent to pieces. Being forced to concede that Baen’thelas was the better swordsman was a bitter blow to his pride, but that just meant he’d have to win the normal way.

This Baen’thelas fool had been driven back to his Throneworld, only able to muster a pitiful couple of thrall fleets to make his last stand. Gahl’kalgor knew that his opponent must be down to his final reserves of psychic energy, and would have already burned though most of those in this protracted duel. Using psychic abilities to crush a weakened opponent wasn’t particularly gratifying, but Gahl’kalgor was done toying with his foe.

He began gathering his will for another telekinetic battering ram, and stalked down the boulevard after his fallen opponent. As eldritch power formed a shadowy eclipse around his left gauntlet, he tightened the grip of his other hand on the hilt of his weapon. It wouldn’t be long until this battle was over, and he’d be able to hear that satisfying crunch as his axe removed Baen’thelas’ head.