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Valeria leaned heavily against the wall, until she felt the sudden waves of nausea fade away. When she’d informed Gahl’kalgor that his fleets were under direct attack by Baen’thelas, he’d bolted out of his quarters towards the Command Deck to see for himself. She realised that he must have already reached the Bridge and ordered a wormhole jump to the battlefield. As her stomach settled down again, she set off running down the corridor, trying to catch up with her lord and master.

When she finally entered the bridge, Gahl’kalgor was staring at a holographic depiction of the battlefield, a look of shocked incredulity on his face. Valeria cautiously approached him, her amber eyes flicking towards the map to look for the main target of this invasion. There was no sign of Maliri forces anywhere in the vicinity, or Baen’thelas’ dreadnought for that matter, and the Galkiran fleets just seemed to be milling about in confusion.

“What is he doing?!” Gahl’kalgor raged, his fists clenched in fury. “How dare he attack my ships!”

“Is it definitely him?” Valeria asked, her voice hushed with uncertainty.

Gahl’kalgor whirled around and grabbed her by the back of her tunic. Hauling her effortlessly up into the air, he dangled her in front of the holographic map, and shook her violently.

“Of course it’s him! Who else would it be?!” he screamed, his finger stabbing towards the chaotic battlefield. “Look what he did! That’s not right!”

Valeria was long past feeling any shame or humiliation in front of her thralls. She paid them no attention as she stared at the holographic map, seeing the trail of destruction that had been wrought through the Galkiran fleets.

She suddenly blinked in surprise and twisted around to look at Gahl’kalgor over her shoulder. “He didn’t destroy any of them!”

“What?” Gahl’kalgor snapped, a dangerous edge to his voice.

“Look for yourself, my Lord,” she said gently, being careful not to agitate him further. “Those ships have taken engine damage... but they’re otherwise intact.”

He dropped her unceremoniously on the deck plates, then leaned closer to take a better look. His face contorted with blank incomprehension as he muttered, “Why would he only target their engines? Those ships still have all their guns... why didn’t he destroy them all?!”

His gaze swept over the destroyers, cruisers, and battleships, and saw that a handful of them still had limited manoeuvrability, as not all their engines had been crippled.

“My Lord!” the Senior Tactical Officer called out, drawing his attention. “We’re under attack again!”

“Where?!” he demanded, his eyes flashing back and forth across the battered collection of Galkiran warships in the fleet. “I can’t see his dreadnought anywhere!”

“Over there!” the thrall called out, highlighting the next engagement.

There were two other fleets that had been mysteriously incapacitated, with multiple ships in each group suffering catastrophic damage to their engines. The fourth fleet in the battle line had looped around behind them, intending to charge into the attack while the dreadnought was preoccupied with finishing off the stragglers from the first fleet. However, Baen’thelas had sailed past them while cloaked, then blasted those ships in the rear as they charged past.

The holographic battlefield was ablaze with blue tachyon beams, the energy weapons lashing out to scythe through the shields of thrall cruisers. A succession of dazzling sapphire rounds slammed into the rear of the closest battleship, overwhelming its shields in a cascade of thunderous impacts. As soon as the shield collapsed, there was nothing to stop further shells from the Quantum Flux Cannons from slamming into the rear of the huge capital ship, which erupted in a devastating series of detonations.

As the clouds of shattered engine fragments dispersed, it looked like a massive interstellar beast had taken a savage bite out of the rear of the ship. The engine housings and mounting assemblies had been completely vaporised, leaving the battleship incapable of forward propulsion. It tried to turn to face its attacker, rotating painfully slowly with only the retro-thrusters able to assist the yaw rate.

“Full power to the engines!” Gahl’kalgor barked at his command crew. “Get after them!”

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“Are you sure you don’t want me to throw a little chaos into the mix?” Irillith asked, gazing longingly at an unscathed Dominator class battleship.

The thrall vessel swung about, trying to keep track of the cloaked vessel sowing mayhem through the Galkiran ranks. In the process, it had lined up a beautiful point-blank broadside on the battleship right next to it, which was making Irillith salivate with anticipation.

Calara looked sorely tempted, but reluctantly shook her head. “Let’s not tip our hand too soon. The more surprises we hold back, the longer we can keep the Galkirans disorientated and demoralised.”

“I don’t think you’re going to be able to break their morale,” Tashana said hesitantly.

“No, I don’t think so either,” John interjected. “But confused, frustrated, and angry crews make a lot more mistakes than calm ones do.”

The Latina grinned in agreement. “Exactly.”

“Should I bank around for another pass?” Jade asked, her feline eyes flicking to Calara for direction.

Calara considered it for a moment, then shook her head. “We can’t risk it. If the Progenitor’s after us, we don’t want to let his dreadnought get too close.”

Alyssa quickly highlighted several waypoints that would take them through four more fleets, before sailing away at an oblique angle to the Maliri border. “Retreat that way, Jade. The dreadnought won’t be able to catch up to us unless they jump straight into hyper-warp, then circle around to cut us off. There’s no way he’ll know where we’re going, unless that Progenitor can predict the future.”

She paused and stared at Calara, suddenly realising that using clairvoyance to predict their route of egress wasn’t actually outside the bounds of possibility.

“Follow the new nav points, Jade,” John said decisively. “Predicting the future uses Kyth’faren runes and Progenitors don’t have access to those. I’d bet a million credits he can’t do it.”

“You heard the Admiral,” Calara said to her Nymph cohorts. “Let’s see if we can’t cause a bit more trouble on the way out.”

The catgirl gunners grinned and nodded, eagerly aiming at the next thrall ships in line.

John rose from his chair and walked over to Irillith. “Can you hack a battleship discreetly?”

“You mean circumvent all their firewalls without just bulldozing my way through?” the Maliri hacker asked, her violet eyes glinting at the prospect. “It won’t be easy, especially when I’ll only have about thirty seconds to complete the hack... but I’d like to give it a try.”

“Do it. I want you as familiar as possible with thrall data networks before our next battle. If you can get in, don’t do anything that might tip them off that their network was compromised. Just consider this a stealth mission to scout out their defences.”

“Oh shit!” Dana gasped, her eyes widening.

John grimaced and quickly corrected himself. “Obviously, I meant a limited recon in force, with no tactical engagement.”

“Phew,” Irillith said, wiping her brow. “I thought things were going to get really serious for a minute.”

They shared a smile, then Irillith’s eyes began to glow with a violet light and she immersed herself in the Cyber Realm.

John turned back to watch the action, as Jade steered the Invictus through scattered pockets of Galkiran warships. Cohesion in the individual fleets seemed to have broken down entirely, with the thralls searching in vain for their cloaked opponent, then attempting to chase after each new firefight. Calara and the Nymphs raked the beleaguered thralls with repeated salvos, focusing their fire on individual targets until shields were overwhelmed and engines destroyed.

When they neared the outer engagement range of the last fleet, John turned to Calara and said, “Tune yourself into the ship. Can you spot any trouble?”

Calara looked at him in surprise for a moment, then closed her eyes and focused her willpower inwards. The psychic drain on her energy reserves was intense, but Alyssa quickly channelled more eldritch power to the brunette. The future stretched out before her in a series of frames, each one revealing their path was free from attack.

She turned towards Alyssa who was poised and waiting to execute their escape. “We’re clear! Go!”

Alyssa activated their Tachyon Drive and the Invictus leapt into hyper-warp, sending them rocketing away from the battle.

John and the girls all held their breath as they watched the white battlecruiser surge across space, putting more and more distance between them and the invaders.

“We’re safe,” Alyssa said with a reassuring smile. “Even if that dreadnought had jumped straight into hyper-warp, they couldn’t catch us now.”

With a great sigh of relief, John sagged against Irillith’s station.

“Holy crap,” Dana murmured, her hands trembling with adrenalin. “I can’t believe we actually pulled that off!”

“How many ships did we actually take out?” Jehanna asked, breaking into a grin. “I started counting, but then the dreadnought jumped in and I completely lost track!”

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“Say that again,” Gahl’kalgor muttered ominously, his eyes glittering with barely suppressed rage. “How many did we lose?”

The Senior tactical officer quailed with fear, but obediently followed his orders. “Fourteen battleships, fifty-seven cruisers, and sixty-two destroyers were incapacitated, my Lord. They all report severe damage to their propulsion systems... and their navigation profiles are so badly deformed, they’re incapable of maintaining a cohesive hyper-warp bubble.”

There was a deathly silence on the Bridge as the thrall crew awaited one of his explosive outbursts. Gahl’kalgor gritted his teeth together so hard, the sharp-eared Galkirans could actually hear them grating as the tension mounted.

“My lord?” Valeria asked hesitantly. “We’re receiving evacuation requests from the immobilised ships. Their crews are asking to be transferred to combat-ready vessels to reinforce the existing personnel.”

“Leave them,” he commanded. “We’ve wasted enough time. Proceed with the invasion.”

Valeria opened her mouth to reply, then broke into a cruel smirk, and nodded in compliance with his orders. She began issuing telepathic commands to the captains of all the vessels that had seen combat, and arranged the unscathed survivors of the old fleets into new battle groups. The thrall warships then turned away from their marooned sisters-in-arms, abandoning them to their fate.

Gahl’kalgor pivoted on his heel and stalked out of the Bridge, but he paused mid-departure as he passed Valeria. He glanced at her rumpled jacket, the collar torn from when he’d clenched it in his fist and hauled her into the air. He raised a hand and reached out to her, but froze when she flinched involuntarily as his fingers drew nearer to her face.

They made eye contact and Valeria struggled to read the unfamiliar look in his eyes. He seemed troubled, and she desperately wished she could understand the flurry of emotions she saw there. Before she could say anything, Gahl’kalgor walked away, leaving her staring in bewildered silence at his back as he departed.

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“That was incredible, and you were all amazing!” John said, smiling warmly at his beaming crew. “We’ve got a lot of hard fights ahead of us, but I couldn’t have asked for a better start. I’m very proud of all of you.”

The girls shared glances with each other and grinned at his praise, riding high after their first victory against the Galkirans.

“I’m afraid it’s not over yet,” Calara said with a rueful frown. “We need to leave a few presents behind for our guests.”

“Don’t the spider mines need their target’s shields down to be effective?” Sakura asked hesitantly, reluctant to doubt the confident Latina.

Calara nodded in agreement. “That’s right, but we’ll put a little bit of distance between us before laying a couple of minefields. If we leave the thralls alone for a while, they’re likely to deactivate their shields, and that’s when they’ll run right over our spider mines.”

Sakura laughed and shook her head. “I’m glad you’re on our side.”

“What are you planning next?” John asked his strategic savant.

“I’ve got a few things in mind,” she replied thoughtfully. “I had a pretty good read of the Brimorian Commander, so I was able to make him constantly second guess himself. Unfortunately, I don’t think that’s going to work against this Progenitor for a couple of reasons. First of all, I’m not sure what kind of personality he has, so I can’t target his weaknesses. Second of all, I doubt he cares in the slightest about any attrition we inflict on his forces... at least not until it’s too late.”

“Those are fair points,” John agreed. “So how do we exploit that?”

Calara turned towards Dana and asked, “How long can you keep our shields up for before it starts to become a problem?”

“It all depends on the power of the shield generator, the efficiency of the shield projectors, and the quality of the focusing crystals being used,” the redhead explained. “Most space battles are over pretty quickly, so it’s not usually a factor, but I wouldn’t push it beyond about eight hours. The longer you keep them going after that, the more likely you’ll start running into problems. If you leave the shields on for too long, the focusing crystals will burn out, and your shields stop working.”

“What if we ambush the Galkirans every six hours or so?” Calara suggested. “Then follow their fleets while cloaked and monitor when they do shut their shields down. As soon as they do, we drop another minefield in their path. What would happen if we kept that up for a couple of days?”

“Well first of all, I’d say you were an evil genius,” Dana said with a wicked grin. “Second, the thralls aren’t going to be very happy. If they don’t shut down their shield projectors to give them a chance to recover, there won’t be a ship in their armada with working shields by the time they reach Kythshara.”

“So we’re going with a campaign of constant harassment,” John said thoughtfully. “It’s a good plan and I think it’s going to infuriate this Progenitor. We’re going to have to watch out for him laying a trap in his dreadnought though, especially with their jump capabilities.”

“Eleven hours and thirty-eight minutes until the bad guy’s Wormhole Generator is fully recharged,” Alyssa informed him, gesturing towards a countdown clock she’d set up.

“How do you know... oh, of course,” Jehanna said, rolling her eyes at herself. “You started it when he jumped in.”

“I thought it might be sensible to keep track,” Alyssa said with a sly wink.

“How soon will it be until we can start detecting cloaked ships?” John asked his Tactical Officer.

“It all depends if the Galkirans let us herd them where we want them to go,” Calara explained. “We’ve got full coverage around Kythshara, and along most of the approach vectors towards the homeworlds. There’s a large hole in our coverage near the Kirrix border as well as towards the border with the Trankaran Republic.”

“All the areas my father conquered,” John said, remembering the territory maps. “I guess we’ll just have to wait and see how the Progenitor reacts to our tactics.”

“It’s all we can do for now,” Calara agreed with a helpless shrug.

John was quiet for a moment, then said, “If we can’t lure the Progenitor out of his dreadnought, how are we going to go in there after him? Have we got enough firepower to realistically be able to slug it out with his ship and hack our way inside?”

The rest of the girls didn’t know either, and all looked to Calara for an answer.

“Yes and no,” she finally stated, her brow furrowing with concern.

“That was vague enough to come from Athena,” John said, arching an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“Yes, we have enough firepower to eventually wear down a dreadnought’s shields,” Calara clarified. “But realistically, no, we can’t just slug it out with them. The Invictus isn’t tough enough... yet.”

“That sounds like the cue for a ship upgrading montage!” Jehanna joked, making them all laugh.

“Three ships actually,” Calara said with a wry smile. “The Invictus, the Raptor, and the Valkyrie are all using Brimorian shields and we need to upgrade them to Progenitor versions. The Raptor is still missing its two primary guns, and the Valkyrie needs a complete weapon overhaul to bring it up to par.”

“I’ve got a few upgrades in mind,” Dana admitted, her blue eyes sparkling with excitement. “Now that we’ve got a working Soulforge, we just opened up a whole new level of tech that we can start pushing to the limit.”

“What do we focus on first?” John asked. “I freely admit, I’m not too keen on the idea of the Raptor and the Valkyrie getting shot at by a Progenitor dreadnought.”

“The Valkyrie’s actually pretty well suited for that kind of fight,” Sakura said, looking remarkably calm about the prospect of going up against such a deadly warship. “The mech’s not much bigger than a strike craft, which makes it extremely hard to hit. It’s also extremely fast and nimble, which means most big guns can’t pivot fast enough to track it. As soon as we knock out a dreadnought’s shields, I can just land on its hull, which makes me almost impossible to aim at with their defence grid.”

“The Raptor is very similar, Master,” Jade stated, just as calmly. “The new version is bigger than the Valkyrie, but it’s even faster and more agile. With upgraded shields, I could survive multiple lucky hits from Tachyon Lances and stay in the fight for a long time.”

John winced and shook his head. “Yeah, but what about a Quantum Flux Cannon? A direct hit from one of those rounds and you’d be blasted into a million pieces.”

“I’ll just avoid their fire arcs,” the Nymph said with a blasé shrug.

Before John could make any further comment, Calara interjected, “Remember that guns that big are primarily anti-capital ship weapons. Even I’d find it damn near impossible to shoot an agile strike craft out of the sky using one of our Quantum Flux Cannons. They’re just not designed to be fired at a target that small and fast.”

“Alright. I don’t like the idea, but I will concede that our recklessly brave pilots have no problems volunteering to fly that mission. But what happens after we knock out the dreadnought’s shields? Do we just blast our way through the hull?”

“It’ll take time, but we could brute force our way in like that,” Calara agreed. “I’m sure Irillith could find a more elegant solution though.”

Irillith hesitated, her anxious expression reflecting her self-doubt. “I... haven’t had much success against Progenitor networks so far.”

“How did you get on with the thrall battleship?” John asked, as he recalled her most recent hacking attempt.

Her beautiful face brightened into a triumphant smile. “I was like a digital ninja! They had no idea I’d managed to sneak through their firewall.”

“So you’re confident you can hack a thrall battleship in a firefight?”

“Absolutely!” she gushed, eager to try it.

John eyed her speculatively for a long moment.

“What?” she asked, unsettled by his intense scrutiny.

\*Don’t put her under any more pressure for now,\* Alyssa quietly advised him. \*I know what you’re thinking, and I agree with you... but Irillith had her confidence badly knocked in Mael’nerak’s bunker. Just give me a bit more time to build her back up again.\*

“Nothing really,” John smoothly deflected. “I was just thinking how gorgeous you look when you’re excited.”

Dana groaned in frustration. “Let me guess. She’s getting a full tummy next?”

“Good guess,” John agreed, flashing a grin at the blushing Maliri.

Alyssa glanced at the chronometer and saw that it was nearly 9 AM. “We should start prepping the spider mines. By the time we’ve got them all configured, it’ll be time to stay laying the next minefield.”

“Do you need my help?” John offered.

“No, I can handle it with a few volunteers,” she replied with a gracious smile. “Your time will be better spent on building Progenitor Shield Generators for our ships.”

“Don’t forget about our Paragon suits too,” Sakura reminded them. “They need an upgrade.”

“You’re right, but we can’t just swap out the shield generators,” Dana ruefully admitted. “We’re using a knock-off version of a Progenitor Power core, so we don’t have enough power to upgrade the shields. We’d need to upgrade both at the same time.”

John shook his head. “Let’s focus on the ships for now, we can upgrade the Paragon suits later.”

“Fine by me,” Dana said with an amiable shrug. “While you’re building those shield generators, I’ll finish off some weapon schematics for the Raptor and Valkyrie.”

“I’ll watch the Bridge with my sisters,” Jade volunteered. “That frees up the rest of you to help wherever you’re needed.”

“Thanks, Jade,” John said gratefully. “I suggest we all reconvene at 12 for lunch. We can check on the thrall fleets and if they’ve deactivated their shields again, we can plan our next ambush.”

The girls all acknowledged his orders with respectful nods, then they waved goodbye to the Nymphs and left the Combat Bridge.

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Bill Armstrong stared up at the marble statue of Lady Justice, his pose thoughtful and reflective. As the camera zoomed in on his handsome face, Bill turned to look directly into the lens, his artfully sombre expression reflecting that this was very serious news.

“This is Bill Armstrong, bringing you a special report for TFNN, live from the Military Court of Justice in Unity City. We have the latest update from the trial of Commander Thomas Walker, the officer accused of betraying his fleet to the Brimorians... which led to the murder of nearly 350,000 Terran Federation personnel at the Callopean Shoals massacre.”

He turned and walked towards the imposing entrance to the courthouse, the camera following close behind him.

“The Prosecution and Defence teams have been busy logging evidence, and today they’ll begin presenting that evidence to the jury. We’ll be here to capture the highlights of the trial, which will determine the fate of the man that many have been calling ‘The Rat of the Federation’.”

There were a dozen soldiers standing guard and keeping out the crowd, but they recognised the TFNN anchor and waved him through. Bill kept up his dialogue as his camera team followed him inside, then they walked down the stately wood-panelled corridors until they reached the courtroom itself.

“And there’s the accused,” Bill whispered to the camera, as they quietly moved around to the raised press gallery that overlooked proceedings. “Commander Tom Walker looks calm and composed as he faces the prosecution’s evidence. But is that the assured confidence of an innocent man? Or are we watching the cold indifference of a murderous psychopath as he relives his unspeakable crimes?”

The camera zoomed in on Tom, then panned around to the tense relatives of the accused who were seated in the rows behind him.

“Over there, you can see Commander Walker’s mother and father, here to support their son. As you can tell by his uniform, Laurence Walker is an Admiral, with over thirty years of service to the Terran Federation.”

Bill grimaced off-camera, wishing he could’ve expanded the profile of one of the highest status men in the court room. Laurence Walker was a senior figure in the Admiralty, but despite all the reporter’s best efforts, the man proved to be something of an enigma. Bill’s contacts had investigated the Admiral’s service record, but the details were disappointingly bland. Taken at face value, that meant that Laurence Walker had led a rather mundane career, plodding his way up to senior rank through a combinations of bootlicking and years of service.

However, the reporter suspected the details were a fabrication, and that the admiral had been involved in activities that High Command wished to keep classified. He knew that when Laurence Walker left the Academy, he’d been in the top tier of graduates, with high expectations for an illustrious career. The young lieutenant had been assigned to Terra for his first posting, and then spent a tour aboard the Heavy Cruiser Ananke, guarding the borders of the Terran Federation. When that tour was complete, Lieutenant Commander Laurence Walker had then been reassigned back to the Core Worlds, where he began a grindingly tedious ascent to his current rank.

Bill remembered reading through that long record of commendations and promotions. At face value they seemed authentic enough, but the fact that nothing particularly noteworthy happened to Laurence Walker over the next three decades made the reporter suspicious. He just wished he could dig deeper and find out the real truth behind the admiral’s service record.

The editor poked his TFNN anchor in the arm. “Bill!” he hissed under his breath.

Blinking in surprise, Bill was horrified to realise that the camera was back on him, and had caught him daydreaming.

“Errr...” he mumbled, his mind going blank. “And there’s Tom Walker’s fiancée!” he blurted out in desperation. “Annabelle Newmont is actually Fleet Admiral Buckingham’s daughter!”

His outburst drew the attention of everyone in the courtroom, and Bill cringed under the disapproving glares from the Judge and Jury. Even the accused turned to glower furiously at him, a flash of anger breaking Tom Walker’s previous composure. Despite wilting under all those pointed stares, Bill’s editor gave him an excited thumbs’ up.

“Umm... and the trial is about to start,” Bill mumbled, cringing with embarrassment.

When the camera swung back to the lawyers, Bill frowned and looked at his teammate for an explanation, wondering if he was being mocked.

“That shot of Walker was perfect! Nice work, Bill!” the editor whispered, beckoning him over to look at a frozen image of Tom’s furious face. “What about this for a headline: The Rat bares his teeth!”

The TFNN reporter broke into a matching grin, and nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah... let’s use it!”

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Tom glanced back at Anna with concern, worried that she was upset about being outed as Vincent Buckingham’s daughter by that buffoon of a reporter. They locked eyes for a moment, and he could tell she wasn’t happy to be the centre of attention, but she quickly shrugged off her embarrassment to give him a supportive smile. He was touched that she was more concerned about his wellbeing than her own, reminding him just how lucky he was to have Anna in his life. Feeling reinvigorated, Tom turned back to focus on the Prosecution Lawyer again.

“The prosecution will now present evidence which documents the series of events that led up to the Callopean Shoals Massacre,” Commodore Marcus Bromidus stated. “The evidence is damning, and will erase any doubt of Thomas Walker’s guilt.”

“You may proceed,” Judge Nancarrow said, gesturing the officer to do so.

“When we first suspected Thomas Walker’s involvement, our investigation team began searching through the communications records from Admiral Morgan’s fleet to look for any trace of contact with the Brimorians. It took some digging... but we found what we were looking for,” the lawyer said, his expression grim. “The contents of those messages were unrecoverable, but digital experts were able to repair the communications log from the Janus.”

Bromidus touched a remote on the lectern and a holographic image appeared, showing thousands of records that scrolled down endlessly. He clicked another button, and some of the entries were then highlighted in bright red.

“These calls date back to just a few weeks after the Kintark invasion of Terra, and they are the only communications between the Callopean Shoals fleet and the Brimorian forces. All the calls came from just one anonymous account, and the traitor attempted to cover his tracks by deleting the log files.”

The lawyer turned to look at the jurors. “You might ask yourself how is this evidence useful, when the caller’s identity was obscured?” After a distinct pause, he continued, “Because all these messages were sent from just one terminal. The one located in the personal quarters of... Commander Mason Newmont.”

The crowd in the courtroom gasped, and Tom’s eyes widened in shock. With a surge of hope in his chest, he glanced at his lawyer for confirmation, and Caspian Kincaid responded with a nod. He expected the suave attorney to be as hugely relieved as he felt, but to Tom’s surprise, the lawyer was watching him closely, and merely seemed satisfied rather than delighted.

“My brother would never betray the Federation!” Anna snarled furiously, springing to her feet to defend Mason’s honour.

“Silence in the gallery!” Judge Nancarrow demanded. “If there are any more outbursts like that, I’ll have the bailiff clear the court!”

Bromidus watched the beautiful blonde with sympathy, as she reluctantly retook her seat. “The young lady is quite correct about her brother, and I apologise for any distress I may have caused. We were meant to believe that Commander Newmont sent those messages to the Brimorians, but it was quite impossible for him to have done so. The investigation team cross-checked with the security camera footage retrieved from the wreck of the Janus, and Mason was on duty as the watch commander when each of those secret communications was made.”

He paused for dramatic effect. “However, Commander Walker was off-duty during every single one of those calls.”

Tom gave his lawyer a pleading look, expecting him to make an objection, but Caspian leaned closer and whispered, “I’ve seen the logs myself. I’m sorry, Tom; the times match up perfectly.”

Before Tom could defend himself, the other lawyer spoke up again.

“We then checked the access privileges for Command Newmont’s quarters,” Bromidus stated, his tone damning. “We were shocked to discover that the name Thomas Walker had been inserted into that secure access file.”

Caspian rose to his feet. “Objection, your honour. The prosecution is implying that my client gained access to Commander Newmont’s quarters by nefarious means. However there is a simple and innocent explanation. If the prosecution would care to investigate the security logs for my client’s quarters, he will find that Mason Newmont was granted access rights in return. The two men knew each other since childhood and regularly drank together while off-duty; if one of them had too much to drink, his friend would help him get back to his bunk.”

“Do you wish to confirm this as a fact, Commodore?” Judge Nancarrow asked.

“No, your honour,” Bromidus replied. “For the sake of expediency, the prosecution will accept the defence’s statement at face value.”

“That sneaky bastard. He knew all along,” Caspian whispered to his client as he sat down.

“But how did you know?” Tom asked in a hushed voice. “And why didn’t you warn me about the comms logs?!”

“This isn’t my first rodeo, Tom. It was the first thing I checked when we did our own digging,” Caspian replied. He looked him directly in the eyes and continued, “I didn’t warn you, because I wanted your reaction to be genuine.”

Tom nodded in understanding, then frowned as he realised why Caspian Kincaid had been watching him so intently. It appeared that Tom’s lawyer also harboured a few lingering doubts about his innocence.

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“Here you go,” Dana said, handing John the holo-viewer. “I’ve uploaded the schematics for a Progenitor grade Shield Generator, along with the external projectors we’ll need to upgrade on the Invictus. Now you can use the Soulforge, you should be able to make a perfect copy; except it’ll be white instead of black, and you won’t have to suck the life out of anyone to make it.”

“That’s okay, I prefer our version,” John noted emphatically. “Thanks, honey. I’ll start memorising those blueprints.”

Dana gave him a thumbs up, then strolled back to the Engineering Podium. “Just give me a shout if you need anything,” she called back over her shoulder.

“What are you working on now?” he asked, watching the redhead return to her station.

She stopped accessing the research files, her fingers poised over the console.“Why? Is there something you’d like me to focus on?”

“No, just curious,” he replied, holding the holo-viewer in one hand, and looking around for somewhere to sit down and focus on learning the schematics.

“Well, I figured our biggest problem at the moment is knocking down a dreadnought’s shields,” she mused aloud. “Now that we’ve got access to much stronger materials, I thought I’d see if I could find a way to improve the Invictus’ guns. I was going to start with the Nova Lances, as I haven’t given them any upgrades yet... except stick in eternity crystals, but that doesn’t really count.”

“Sounds good. Will they be easier to enhance than our Progenitor level tech?” John asked, giving up his search for a chair and leaning against one of the ore crates

“Fingers crossed,” she said, doing exactly that.

They lapsed into comfortable silence as they worked, with John committing the huge variety of components they would need to memory. When he was satisfied that he had learned the schematic, he walked over to the Soulforge and picked up the circlet that was connected to the interface, before slipping it onto his head. As before, he closed his eyes and focused his willpower, then pushed against the stubborn inertia of the psychic machine. He felt the resistance lessen, then opened his eyes and watched as the white rings began to rotate around the block of crystal Alyssium suspended in the centre.

“How does that feel?” Dana asked. “Any headaches?”

John glanced her way and saw that she was watching him warily. “No, I feel fine. I have to concentrate pretty hard to keep it moving though, so I doubt I’ll be able to operate the Soulforge all day.”

“It should take you about six hours to shape everything we need,” the redhead noted with concern. “Can you keep going that long?”

Before John could reply, Alyssa’s telepathic voice drifted through his mind. \*If you start getting tired, then just take a break. Calara isn’t planning another ambush for a while, so we should have enough time to build and install the new shield generator before our next battle.\*

\*Alright, will do,\* John agreed.

He continued carefully forging the parts required to make the Shield Generator, but once he’d established the shape in his mind, there wasn’t much else to do. It was just a matter of exerting his will and waiting for the Soulforge to complete each component, so John found himself leaning idly against the ore crate and watching Dana work. It was remarkable to see the redhead fully immersed in her research, with her fingers gliding over the engineering console as she operated multiple holographic screens at the same time.

John saw that she was constantly referring to a schematic for a Quantum Devastator, then performing complex calculations on the left holo-screen, before making modifications to her Nova Lance blueprint on the right. It was fascinating to watch, and he could only imagine what technological innovations Dana was planning to incorporate into the Invictus’ guns. John was sorely tempted to ask the engineering genius for more details, but he was loathe to interrupt her while she was hard at work.

The door slid open and when John glanced that way, he was pleased to see Daphne enter the workshop. She exchanged a wave with Dana, then walked over to join him.

“Hey, Daphne,” he said warmly.

“Hello, father,” she replied, coming to a halt an arm’s length away.

The synthetic girl paused for a moment, then stepped closer to greet him with a gentle embrace.

“That was nice, thank you,” he said, pleasantly surprised as he enfolded her in his arms. “Is everything okay? Or did you just need a hug?”

She looked up at him, her cute features twisted into a mask of indecision. “I saw that you were in need of a chair, so I began searching through the ship’s inventory for a suitable piece of furniture. I have found one that would be ideal, but I wasn’t sure if it was an appropriate choice. Given recent events, I believe its status might have been disassociated from any previous negative connotations, but I lack the nuanced insight into human emotions to ascertain whether this suggestion will be received badly.”

John frowned in concentration as he tried to follow her convoluted description of the problem, then couldn’t help chuckling. “It’s like that for most people as well, Daphne. Just show me, and I promise I won’t be offended.”

“That’s not the emotional response that this item would trigger,” she replied, before glancing at the door and following his advice.

One of the maintenance bots backed into the room, with Faye’s high-backed chair cradled in its arms.

John watched wide-eyed as the floating robot carried the leather chair over to him, then set it down next to the Soulforge. Whenever he’d been near it before, seeing Faye’s chair had brought back a terrible sense of loss, but now he realised that his feelings towards it had changed. He brushed his fingers across the back of the chair, feeling the soft leather beneath his fingertips. Instead of painful memories of Faye’s last moments reaching out to him, John pictured her sleeping peacefully on Kythshara, just waiting to be woken up.

“Thank you,” he said gruffly to the maintenance bot.

[+++ [Begin sympathetic endearment] Out of all the souls I have encountered in my travels, hers was the most... human. [/End sympathetic endearment] +++]

He was surprised by the robots poignant comment, but even more shocked by what sounded like profound sadness in its delivery.

Reaching out, he patted the automation on the arm. “We’re doing our best to bring Faye back. Hopefully it won’t be too much longer.”

“Becoming an organic girl was Meta\_Faye’s greatest wish,” Daphne stated quietly.

“I know. Rachel and Irillith are brilliant; if anyone can achieve the impossible, it’s them,” John said with conviction.

“I am confident that you will be successful,” Daphne said in agreement. Turning to the robot, she continued, “Come along, Thirteen. We have duties to attend to.”

Their sudden departure startled John, but he quickly called out after them, “Thanks for the chair. That was really thoughtful.”

“You’re welcome, father,” Daphne replied politely, then the pair left the Engineering Bay.

John took a deep breath, then slowly sank down into the plush leather furniture. As he rested his forearms on the armrests, he was immersed in memories of the purple sprite, recalling Faye sitting in this very seat as she woke him with one of her beautiful songs. He’d missed his cheerful companion and fervently hoped that Daphne was correct in her optimistic prediction.

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Alyssa listened to the conversation with interest, a thoughtful expression on her face. She was pleased for John, that his eager anticipation of bringing back Faye had quelled the sharp pangs of grief he’d felt over her loss. However, there was something a bit off about his brief exchange with the robots, but she couldn’t quite put her finger on what was making her feel that way. She sighed in frustration, wishing that Daphne and the robots of the Collective had emotions that she could sense, like all the girls aboard the Invictus.

That same lack of psychic connection with Faye had always made Alyssa feel somewhat distant from the purple sprite. After being intimately attuned to the thoughts and emotions of all the girls she’d bonded with, it made it very difficult for the telepath to relate to the emotionless void of a synthetic creature. She admired John for his willingness to look beyond those differences, and build a close relationship with first Faye and then Daphne, because it was something that went against all her instincts.

She turned her attention back to the eight-legged machine in front of her, and clicked a button adorned with the image of a man draped in a cloak, then the one next to it identified by a cartoon bomb. Both lit up with an ominous red light, then Alyssa closed the access panel, having fully armed the spider mine. Fortunately, the ingenious device was only primed to detonate when it was in close proximity to a thrall warship’s engines, so she was perfectly safe... at least according to their Chief Engineering Overlord.

Alyssa was glad that the mines had worked flawlessly in the first ambush, as Dana needed a confidence boost after failing to locate the fault in the Wormhole Generator. She gestured towards the control panel that activated the hangar doors, and when they slid open, she lifted the spider mine off the deck using telekinesis. With a flick of her wrist, the arachnid inspired device was tossed out into space, and she watched as retro-thrusters flickered to life and repositioned it to the designated coordinates.

\*I’ve started laying the minefield, Jade,\* she informed their Nymph pilot. \*You can fire up the engines.\*

\*How fast can I go?\* Jade asked eagerly.

\*Better stick to half-speed. We’re not in any urgent rush, and we don’t want to spread the mines too far apart.\*

\*Sure!\* the Nymph cheerfully agreed.

As Alyssa moved down the line and jettisoned one mine after the other, she glanced across the huge hangar at the girls assisting with priming the explosive devices. Tashana, Jehanna, and Sakura were rushing along the rows, competing with each other to see who could finish first. The Asian girl had taken the lead, and her companions were now playfully accusing her of using psychic speed to cheat. Sakura vociferously defended her impinged honour, leading to more teasing and banter. The huge hangar was filled with the melodic sound of their laughter, but the fourth Lioness present was too distracted to participate in the friendly competition.

The teenage matriarch watched Helene as she moved slowly down the row, the teal-hued mermaid lost in her thoughts. Fortunately, Alyssa could read this troubled young lady like a book, and knew exactly how to remedy this particular problem.

\*Helene, can you help me out with something important please?\* she politely requested.

The Abandoned girl looked up from the control panel, startled by her matriarch’s telepathic voice intruding in her thoughts. \*Of course, Alyssa. What would you like me to do?\*

Alyssa walked in the teal-hued beauty’s direction and beckoned her over. \*John’s stuck twiddling his thumbs in the Workshop.\* When she saw Helene’s blank look of confusion, she elaborated, \*He’s bored and got nothing to keep him occupied while he’s working on the Soulforge. Would you mind going up there for a while to keep him company?\*

Helene brightened at the prospect, then glanced back guiltily at the row of mines still waiting to be armed. \*Sorry I was so slow. I got a bit distracted.\*

The blonde walked up to give her a supportive hug. “Don’t worry about that; you’ll be doing me a huge favour if you can keep John entertained. The last thing we want is for him to start dwelling on feeling guilty about recruiting us, or something even more dumb and annoying.”

The mermaid laughed and nodded her agreement. “I’ll do my best. Thank you, Alyssa... there’s something I’d like to talk to him about anyway.”

“Well that works out perfectly then!” Alyssa said cheerfully. “Have a nice morning. I’ll see you later.”

Helene waved goodbye to her and the other Lionesses, then strode purposefully towards the exit. Alyssa allowed herself a smile of satisfaction, then returned to tossing high-explosive mines out into space.

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John watched as the white rings rotated around the object slowly taking shape in the Soulforge, the phased frequency inverter looking like three dumbbells stacked on top of each other. While it was impressive to see a delicate web of Crystal Alyssium being woven into the component, the pace was so gradual that it didn’t hold his interest for long. He readjusted his psychic headset for the fifteenth time in as many minutes, then slumped back in his chair with a despondent sigh.

When the door to the Workshop slid open once again, he perked up immediately, and greeted his next guest with a beaming grin. “Helene! It’s great to see you!”

The aquatic beauty gave him a lovely smile as she walked over to join him. “I don’t think anyone has ever been that happy to see me before.”

“I always love spending time with you,” he said, pulling the lithe girl onto his lap where they shared a tender kiss.

“Oh, that’s nice to hear. Alyssa told me that you were bored and desperately needed someone to keep you occupied,” Helene said with a knowing grin.

John blushed and ruefully admitted, “Alright, that is true... but I really do enjoy your company.”

“Me too,” she agreed, relishing being held in his arms. She eventually pulled back to look him in the eyes, and continued, “I actually know what that’s like.”

“Feeling bored?” he asked curiously.

She nodded, her expression turning sad. “I tried to make myself useful in Neptra village, but most of the villagers thought I was bad luck. They didn’t like me being around them too long, so after a while, they’d send me to do another task with someone else. I usually ended up on my own, doing something very dull, like... braiding rope.”

“I’m so sorry they treated you that way,” John said, giving her a sympathetic squeeze.

Helene paused, nibbling her lip nervously.

“You look like you’ve got something on your mind? What’s up?” he asked, watching her with interest.

“It’s just.... I want to be useful here too,” she said in a rush.

John frowned in confusion. “But you already are. Nobody can do the things you’re capable of with your empathic abilities.”

“I know... but when you said you were proud of everyone after our first battle with the Galkirans, I hadn’t done anything to deserve it. I felt like a fraud.”

“Is this about wanting to fight alongside the rest of the lionesses?” he asked, carefully watching her reaction.

“I just really wanted to be worthy of that praise,” she explained earnestly.

“Not everyone participates in every battle,” he patiently explained. “I just praised all of you this time, because it was easier than naming the girls who were involved. Sakura didn’t directly contribute to that fight either, but she has an incredibly important role when we do ground missions. Your role is similar; you might not be able to contribute every time, but when you do, you make a huge difference. You helped heal hundreds-of-thousands of civilians from horrific trauma when we rescued them from the Kirrix; they would have suffered horribly if it wasn’t for you.”

Helene gave him a helpless shrug. “I know. I’d still like to do more though.”

John studied her thoughtfully for a moment. “Actually, it’s a funny coincidence that Sakura immediately sprang to mind, because she said the same thing a few weeks ago. Are you really desperate for combat training, or do you just want to do something useful aboard the Invictus?”

“I’d like to do anything that would be a help to you and the girls,” she said longingly.

“As long as it’s not braiding rope?” he asked with a teasing grin.

She laughed and nodded. “Exactly!”

He considered her request for a moment, then had a sudden inspiration. “I do have something you could do. It’d keep you busy for at least a couple of hours every day, you’d be helping Alyssa by taking away one of her responsibilities, and you’d make a significant difference to the entire crew.”

“That sounds amazing!” Helene gushed, her eyes light up with excitement. “What is it?”

“How about being our Catering Officer?” he asked cautiously. “With the crazy hours we’ve been keeping recently, we keep skipping meals. You’d be in charge of making sure we all get fed regularly.”

“Oh, I’d love to do that!” she exclaimed, looking thrilled. Helene suddenly hesitated, a flicker of uncertainty and self-doubt in her eyes. “But... I’m afraid I’m not as good at cooking as you and the rest of the girls.”

John gave her a reassuring kiss. “Don’t worry about that. There’s far too many of us for you to do all the cooking on your own. The girls are always eager to help prepare meals, and we’ll all be able to teach you how to cook lots of different dishes. You’ll just need to remind Alyssa that you need some assistants, and she’ll ask the girls for volunteers. So, are you interested in the job?”

Helene bit her lip and nodded enthusiastically.

“Thanks, honey. That really will be a big help,” John said, hugging her tight. “I enjoy cooking for everyone, but with everything going on at the moment, I rarely find the time. When I am free, I’d love to spend some time with you in the kitchen and share some of my recipes.”

She let out a happy sigh and snuggled into him. “I’m so glad I talked to you. This is perfect!”

John brushed his fingers through her long, silky green hair. “There’s an old Terran expression: An army marches on its stomach.”

Helene glanced down at her tummy with a puzzled frown. “They had to crawl along the ground?” Isn’t that very slow?”

He laughed and shook his head. “No, it means that any fighting force needs to be well-fed to be effective in combat.”

“So I really will be helping in every battle?” she asked, looking delighted.

“Exactly.”

“That Terran expression is very true,” Helene said, her lips lifting into a playful smile. “The Lionesses are very effective and you do like to keep us well-fed.”

John placed his hand on her stomach and gently caressed her. “I certainly do.” As he stroked her teal skin, he continued, “I’m sorry that I made you feel the same way as you did back on Brimor. I should’ve realised that treating you differently, and keeping your out of combat might stir up some bad memories.”

Helene looked at him in horror and quickly blurted out, “Oh, no! You mustn’t blame yourself. It’s not the same thing at all... I promise!”

“Are you sure?” he asked with concern.

She gave him an emphatic nod. “Yes, definitely! Being on the Invictus with you and the girls is nothing like my old life in Neptra village. Living here with all of you is wonderful! I feel loved and appreciated, and I’m surrounded by all the people I care about most in the galaxy. You’ve all done so much to make me feel at home... and that I’m part of your loving family.”

John relaxed and continued brushing his fingers across her velvety skin. “Good. I’m glad you know how much we all care about you.”

The Abandoned girl snuggled into his chest again. “I really do. Thank you, John.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, kissing her affectionately on the top of her head.

They sat quietly together, with John enjoying holding her on his lap, and Helene feeling safe and protected in his strong embrace.

“Is there anything you miss from your old life?” John asked curiously.

She thought about her previous life on Brimor for a long moment, then replied, “The Lagoon is amazing, but I do miss being able to swim freely in the ocean. The reefs around Neptra Village were very beautiful and full of all sorts of colourful sea creatures.”

“Will you tell me about some of them?”

“I’d love to!” she gushed, beaming at him happily.

John listened as Helene described a huge variety of exotic marine life, and enjoyed seeing her chattering away animatedly about her old underwater home. With her stories of playing with the fish to keep him entertained, the minutes ticked by as he continued to build the components for their new shield generator.

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“There is still no sign of the enemy dreadnought, Captain,” the Galkiran Tactical Officer notified her commanding officer. “It’s been two hours; should we stand down from action stations?”

Captain Zaralene stared intently at the holographic map, wishing she could tell if their unseen attacker was still lurking in the darkness, waiting to spring another ambush. She was a veteran of Gahl’kalgor’s last two campaigns, but nothing in those protracted battles of attrition had prepared her for this current threat. It was deeply unnerving to see no sign of enemy thrall forces, and a huge shock to be attacked by the rival Progenitor himself. The experienced battleship commander could tell that her bridge crew were just as rattled by the last attack as she was, but she was determined to keep her fears concealed.

“He must have turned tail and fled,” Zaralene declared with a contemptuous sneer. “Keep watch for the cowardly mongrel, but I believe we’ve seen the last of him for a while.”

“Deactivate shields, Captain?” the engineer asked, her gauntleted hand hovering over the console control.

Zaralene dismissed her with a wave, not even bothering to reply.

The protective shield around the battleship collapsed, leaving it unguarded as the Galkiran vessel cruised through hyper-warp. Now that the shield projectors were no longer under constant strain, they were able to slowly diffuse the latent resistance that had built up over time. Following the lead battleship’s example, the rest of the thrall warships powered down their shields in preparation for the next battle.

The Galkiran captain rose from her command chair and walked closer to the holographic map. She studied the blank expanse of space before them, but there was neither hide nor hair of any opposing thralls. There also didn’t appear to be any habitable systems on the outskirts of their enemy’s territory, just long swathes of bright colours from the many nebulae located in this sector of space.

Turning her attention to the vast wall of fleets that were spread out on either flank, Zaralene was satisfied to see that her battle group led the pack. Her warships would be the first to tear into the enemy as soon as they appeared, giving her an opportunity to impress Lord Gahl’kalgor with her ferocity in combat. With no hostile contacts to keep her attention, the Galkiran captain indulged herself in a daydream about being hand-picked to serve about his dreadnought.

As she fantasised about Gahl’kalgor confiding that he’d much prefer to have her as his matriarch, the floor beneath Zaralene’s feet began to shudder. Before the captain could even open her mouth to ask what was happening, alarms went off around the bridge, and the battleship lurched violently. She lost her balance and was sent sprawling, then narrowly avoided serious injury by grabbing onto the nearest console to stop herself being thrown across the floor.

Before she could demand an explanation, the Engineering Officer cried out in alarm, “We’ve been knocked out of hyper-warp! We’re caught in a gravity well!”

“New contacts!” exclaimed the Galkiran at Tactical. “They’re everywhere!”

“Shields up! Open fire!” Zaralene snarled, as she staggered to her feet.

The tactical officer frowned as she stared at her targeting screen, then shook her head frantically. “They’re tiny! I think we’re in a minefield!”

“Get us out of here!” Zaralene yelled at the helmswoman. “Full reverse!”

Retro-thrusters flared brightly across the bow of the dominator-class battleship, and the enormous black vessel began to accelerate backwards out of the minefield. The other capital ships responded almost as quickly, their pilots slamming the huge warships into reverse. As the biggest spacecraft in the fleet responded to the imminent threat, there was a rippling bloom of detonations ahead of them and a cruiser was rocked by the massive blasts. When the plume of debris cleared, the forlorn ship spun end over end, its stern completely obliterated by the explosions.

“Imbeciles!” the captain sneered at the crippled cruiser. “Why didn’t they activate their shields?!”

There was another dazzling explosion, then another, and Zaralene stared up at the holographic battlefield in disbelief. Two more cruisers had also been ravaged by detonating mines, the rear of each vessel a charred ruin where the engines should’ve been. Zaralene was shocked that the crews could be so incompetent. One cruiser captain might be incompetent enough to forget about activating her shields in a minefield, even though that was hard enough to believe, but three of them was absurd.

She was about to send a fleet-wide broadcast, ordering everyone to get their shields up, when another fiery explosion flared on the holographic map, but this time it was much closer. Zaralene stared wide-eyed at the nearest battleship, wondering how it could have hit a mine when it was retreating on the same path that had taken it into the minefield. As the debris, fire, and smoke from the blast dispersed, she was stunned to see that it’s huge starboard engine had been blown clear from the hull, the armoured housing a twisted ruin.

Zaralene’s blood ran cold as she realised there was no way that Ceriah, the veteran captain in charge of that battleship, could have forgotten to raise her shields. That meant the mines were exploding with enough force to knock out a fully shielded battleship in a single terrifying blast.

“Their shields are still up!” the tactical officer blurted out in confusion, echoing her captain’s thoughts.

“What? That’s impossible!” Zaralene declared stubbornly. “Zoom in on that battleship, let me see for myself!”

The Galkiran Officer did as she was ordered, bringing the thrall capital ship into sharp focus. It loomed above them in the centre of the bridge, the hull of the sinister black warship bristling with a forest of powerful gun batteries. The sensor suite showed that the battleship was indeed fully shielded, despite having sustained critical damage to its starboard propulsion system.

As Zaralene stared at the twisted wreckage, a flicker of motion caught her eye. “I saw something move!” she hissed, pointing at the tiny white object. “What is that thing?!”

The tactical officer saw it too and zoomed in on the mysterious moving object. When the scuttling spider-mine came into sharp focus, there was a collective gasp from the crew, who stared in revulsion at the eight-legged creature as it crawled across the battleship’s hull.

“It got inside the shields...” the Galkiran thrall said in a frightened whisper.

Zaralene whirled around and barked, “Warn them! Quickly, before it reaches the engines!”

As the Communications Officer frantically relayed the message to the second battleship, her face suddenly blanched and she looked at her own commander with dread. She hit a button and the scarlet features of Captain Ceriah filled the holo-screen.

“Zaralene!” she shrieked in panic. “It was a trap! There’s something crawling over your hull!”

“Ah fuck,” Zaralene muttered, her shoulders slumping in defeat.

Before she could utter another word, her world got turned upside down as her battleship was ravaged by a trio of massive explosions.

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“Worked like a charm,” Alyssa said, stroking her girlfriend’s back.

She stood beside Calara on the Bridge, the two women watching the action unfold on the holographic map of the battlefield. The Invictus was still cloaked, and parked close enough to observe the Galkirans running into the minefield, while still maintaining a safe distance for a quick escape if necessary.

“Hopefully we made them think twice about dropping their shields,” Calara said with satisfaction, as she studied the devastation sown through the Galkiran ranks. “Now we just need to wait until the next time they’re vulnerable, then we’ll ambush them again.”

“How long do you reckon?” the blonde asked.

She watched as the other enemy fleets dropped out of hyper-warp, presumably to prepare themselves for an imminent attack by the Invictus. All the thrall vessels were now shielded again, only ten minutes after deactivating the protective fields.

“They’ll keep their shields running for as long as possible,” Calara predicted, eyeing the enemy forces speculatively. “I doubt they’ll deactivate them until they’ve got no other choice. Dana should be able to give you a pretty accurate estimate for when that will be.”

After Alyssa explained the situation to her friend, Dana quickly replied, \*They can probably keep their shields going for another five hours before the projectors start burning out. Pushing it that long will cause long-term damage though, like microscopic cracks forming in the focusing crystals, but I doubt the bad guys give much of a shit about that right now.\*

“Five hours...” the blonde murmured aloud. “It’ll be close, but that should give us just enough time to refit the Invictus before the next battle.”

“Perfect,” Calara said, nodding her approval. She hesitated, then glanced at Alyssa. “Are you keeping John up to date?”

“Yeah... but he should be up here, praising you for another successful ambush,” Alyssa said with regret. “I should be down in the Workshop shaping parts, not him.”

Calara laughed and looked at her lover with amusement. “You spent months complaining about having to reshape all that armour plating, and now you’re not happy that John’s doing it instead? He doesn’t even mind, does he?”

“That’s not the point,” the blonde grumbled. “He’s supposed to be able to wander around the ship chatting to you girls. I’m supposed to support him by doing all the boring stuff. If I hadn’t pretended to complain about it, John would’ve started to worry that he’d turned me into his obedient little slave... and not in the fun way.”

“It all sounds very complicated,” Calara joked. “As John’s XO, aren’t you just supposed to follow his orders?”

Alyssa turned to face her and raised an eyebrow. “Are you saying that you didn’t enjoy spending time with John, just when you needed him the most?”

The Latina blushed, remembering how each of those impromptu conversations brought them much closer, and inevitably ended up with a passionate romp in bed together.

“How are you going to resolve this situation with Athena?” she asked quietly.

“I honestly don’t know,” Alyssa admitted, brushing her hair back from her face and letting out a frustrated sigh. “I really like Athena and she’s been a huge help to us so far, but she’s not happy at the moment, and she does have a point about us needing to merge to help John.”

“Even if it means losing her forever?” Calara asked, watching her friend with sympathy.

“That’s the big problem, and it doesn’t help how close Athena and John have become. I should have expected that, with them sleeping together every night in the Astral.”

“He’s very fond of her,” the Latina agreed.

“Yeah, I know,” Alyssa said with a ambivalent frown. Her expression lifted a moment later, as she continued, “John did have one intriguing suggestion though. How would you feel about making a clone of me for Athena? Do you think you could handle twins?”

Calara’s pupils flared and she turned to embrace the statuesque blonde. “Two of you? Are you serious?”

Alyssa pressed her chest into the brunette’s luscious breasts, then leaned in to taste Calara’s flushed lips. \*Sounds hot, right? Sadly I don’t think it’d work.\*

\*Such a shame...\* Calara replied, sucking gently on her tongue.

\*Mmm hmm,\* Alyssa agreed, deepening the kiss. As she got more aroused, her thoughts naturally turned towards John. \*Hey, handsome. Are you ready to see Irillith?\*

\*Yeah, that would be great,\* he replied. \*Could you ask Rachel to come along too? I wanted to talk to them both about Faye.\*

\*Of course. I’ll send them both down,\* she replied, before sending out a flurry of telepathic requests.

\*Thanks, beautiful,\* was his grateful reply.

Alyssa pulled back to look into Calara’s sultry brown eyes. “I think you need a break from staring at this holo-screen.”

She darted a guilty glance at the holographic maps, then broke into a playful smile. “Okay. Just a quick one.”

As they walked towards the grav-tube, a telepathic voice fluttered into Alyssa’s mind.

\*I’m in her quarters!\*

Alyssa grinned with anticipation. \*Thanks, Jade. We’ll be right there.\*

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“I better make a start on lunch,” Helene said, conflicted between the excitement of starting her new job and reluctance to leave John’s lap. “That was a lovely morning. Thank you.”

“I should be thanking you. The last couple of hours just flew by,” he said, repositioning the cable connecting his circlet to the soulforge so she wouldn’t get tangled up in it.

She rose to her feet and stretched contentedly. “I enjoyed talking about all the creatures that lived on the reef. I hadn’t realised how much I was missing some things from my old home.”

John stood up too and glanced at the Soulforge to check on its progress. The energy diffraction inducer was now fully formed, so he used telekinesis to add it to the pile of completed components and removed his headset.

“The Nymphs said there was a big reef near Saelihn Immanthe. Maybe we could explore it together next time we go back to the palace?” he suggested to his beautiful companion.

Helene’s expression fell, as she ruefully admitted, “I would have loved doing that with you, but I’ve already explored the whole reef with the Nymphs.”

“Maybe you could show me around then?” he suggested, stroking her arm. “If you already know the reef, you could be my tour guide... unless you’re bored of the place?”

“Oh, I’d love to!” she gushed, her eyes lighting up. “It’s amazing! There’s so many different types of fish and coral to see!”

“It’s a date then,” John said, giving her a parting kiss. “I’ll look forward to it.”

Helene waved him and Dana goodbye, then left the Workshop practically floating on air. Just as she was leaving, Irillith and Rachel arrived, the pair exchanging friendly greetings with the joyful mermaid as she skipped past.

“Hey, John,” Rachel said, as she walked over to join him. Her lips curled up into a coy smile as she added, “It looks like your last patient enjoyed her therapy session.”

“Satisfaction guaranteed... or your money back,” John said, pulling her into a hug.

“Now that sounds intriguing,” Irillith purred, as she eagerly embraced him too. “Especially as Helene didn’t waddle out of here with a full tummy.”

“I think you have a pretty good idea why,” he replied, with a playful grin.

The Maliri nodded, an eager gleam in her violet eyes. “I’ve been looking forward to this all morning.”

Rachel hesitated and looked at John in confusion. “I had the same impression; so why did you ask for me too?”

He held them both a bit closer. “I haven’t had the chance to properly thank you both for all your hard work in trying to bring back Faye. I was in shock this morning when you revealed that you’d grown her a new body, but I also couldn’t give you a proper hug, because we were all wearing Paragon suits. So... thank you. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate what you’re doing for Faye.”

Their gaze softened and they both hugged him back.

“You’re welcome,” Rachel said with a fond smile. “We know how much she meant to you.”

“But Faye was our friend too,” Irillith added. “So there’s really no need to thank us.”

“Of course there is,” John said sincerely, looking at each of them in turn. “What you’re doing is truly amazing, and you’re the only people in the galaxy capable of bringing Faye back to life as a real girl. I wish that I was able to help you with your research, but the only way I can contribute is... give you a bit of a boost.”

Rachel and Irillith grinned at each other.

“Sound like the best kind of help to me,” the brunette said.

“I always concentrate better with a full tummy,” Irillith agreed, licking her lips in anticipation.

“Come on then, let’s go,” John said, releasing them from the hug and clasping their hands.

As they walked towards the exit, Dana turned to watch them with a wistful look on her beautiful face.

John opened the door, then stepped aside to let his lovely companions go through first. “We’re just heading to the Dojo bedroom,” he called over to the redhead.

“Okay, have fun,” she said, with a forlorn wave goodbye.

He paused in the doorway, then gave her a mock frown of disapproval. “We haven’t got much time, Dana. Hurry up.”

She blinked in surprise, then her face lit up with a delighted grin. “You want me as well?!”

“Of course. You’re doing important research aren’t you?” he asked rhetorically, beckoning her over.

Dana leaped off the engineering podium and bolted across the workshop to join them. John gave her a playful smack on the bottom as she darted through the door, and her giggles harmonised nicely with the other girls’ laughter as they flounced towards the Dojo.

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\*There’s been another ambush, my Lord,\* Valeria thought to her Progenitor master.

\*Engage his dreadnought! I’ll be there at once!” Gahl’kalgor ordered, his voice filled with an eager hunger.

\*Baen’thelas didn’t attack personally this time. He laid a minefield in front of our fleets,\* the matriarch explained, her attention fixed on the holo-screen that dominated the Bridge.

\*I don’t care about mines!\* he snapped, his impatience mounting. \*Just raise shields and plough through them!\*

\*But... the design is bizarre, my lord, and-\*

\*Don’t waste my time with excuses, Valeria,\* Gahl’kalgor growled ominously. \*Keep going at full speed!\*

Valeria sighed in frustration and stared up at the video recording of the white arachnid crawling across the thrall battleship’s hull. She watched it scuttle towards the rear of the massive capital ship, dart inside the engine housing, then the screen filled with a huge explosion. That same warship was now marooned in space, adrift and helpless, with no means of navigating its way through the stars. She turned to the holographic Sector Map and wondered how many more minefields were hidden out there in the darkness.

Contacting the senior commanders of each fleet by telepathy, she ordered, \*Prepare to jump into hyper-warp and continue the invasion. Keep your shields up to negate their mines.\*

The comms interface began to light up, as the dreadnought was hailed by thrall vessels. It started with just a couple of incoming calls, until there were dozens of messages being received, one from each fleet’s leading battleship.

With a grimace of irritation, Valeria walked over to the command chair and hit a rune to accept the first incoming communication. “What is it?” she snapped at the Galkiran captain.

“Matriarch, I regret to inform you that we cannot follow your orders,” the scarlet-hued thrall replied deferentially.

Valeria bristled, tensing at having her orders challenged. “Why not?” she muttered, a dangerous edge to her voice.

“I have just been advised that continued usage of our Shield Generators will exponentially increase the risk of burning out the projectors. We must deactivate our shields to give them a chance to recover.”

The matriarch paused, caught in a quandary with Gahl’kalgor’s two conflicting orders. If they continued the invasion, the fleets needed active shields to negate the minefields. However if the shields needed to be shut down to avoid permanent damage, then continuing onwards would be extremely foolish, as it would leave those ships completely exposed to the deadly mines. After mulling over the problem for a moment, Valeria made a quick decision to try to still follow both orders.

\*I will assign each fleet a number. Odd numbered fleets will take the lead with their shields still raised. Even numbered fleets will shut down their shields and follow in the wake of the lead vessels. After an hour, we will reverse the front and rear fleets to give all ships a chance to recuperate shields before the next battle.\*

The Galkiran captain heard the order telepathically, then inclined her head in acknowledgement. “As you command, Matriarch.”

Valeria was satisfied to see grudging respect in the thrall’s eyes, and allowed herself a smug grin as she disconnected the call. She was well aware that all the experienced officers coveted her position as matriarch, and were waiting to capitalise on any mistakes she might make. Relaxing in her command chair, she watched as the fleets began to execute her orders, repositioning themselves into two rows.

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Rachel let out a breathy sigh, her luscious body relaxing around John as she savoured the afterglow of her climax.

“Mmm, I needed that,” she purred contentedly, gazing up at him with heavily lidded eyes.

“I could tell,” he agreed with a wry grin. “I don’t remember you being that... vocal before.”

She wrapped her lithe legs around him a little tighter, giving John an appreciative squeeze. “I missed you.”

“Who’s fault was that? You were the one avoiding me,” he said playfully, kissing the tip of her delicate nose. “No more keeping secrets from now on, no matter how noble your intentions. Okay?”

She nodded contritely. “I promise.”

Dana was lying beside him, and she stroked his arm to get his attention. “So what’s the plan now? You’ve fucked all our brains out; do you want to keep switching between us until you finish?”

Rachel rolled her eyes in exasperation at her girlfriend. “You’re so impatient, babes.”

Irillith leaned in from the left and kissed John’s shoulder. “She’s just eager for a full tummy,” she murmured, a hungry gleam in her eyes. “I know how she feels.”

“How about you, gorgeous?” he asked the tawny-haired brunette.

“I am feeling a bit peckish after all that exertion,” she said coyly.

John eased himself out of her snug grip and sat back on his haunches.

“How do you want us?” Dana asked eagerly.

He stretched his aching muscles, then glanced at the big chair in the corner of the room. “Over there,” he replied, sliding off the bed and beckoning the trio to follow. John sat on the edge of the leather seat, then pointed to the padded floor. “Let’s have Dana on the left, Rachel on the right, and Irillith in the middle.”

The girls hurried to obey his commands, excited to know what he had planned for them next. They knelt on the floor in the positions he’d requested, with the two Terran teenagers at either side, while the Maliri took her place between his spread thighs.

“Now, just move a bit closer...” he said to the redhead and brunette, placing his hands on their backs and coaxing them forward. “There you go. Perfect.”

Dana giggled as she looked down, seeing John’s cock nestled between the cushiony embrace of her breasts pressed against Rachel’s. “It’s so awesome that I’ve got a big enough rack to do this!”

His length was slick and well lubricated from being inside each of them, so he was able to slide effortlessly between their velvety soft cleavage.

“You look painfully hard,” Rachel whispered, her voice sympathetic and seductive.

“You three really turn me on,” John replied, watching the trio gazing at his throbbing cock in fascination.

They moved together, leaning down to lick the engorged head, their tongues swirling over his hot flesh.

“That feels amazing,” he murmured appreciatively.

The girls glanced up at him, and the excitement was plain to see in those three sparkling sets of blue, grey, and violet orbs. Their hair was long and loose around their shoulders, tousled with passion from the frantic coupling with him earlier. The ruffled hair made them look wild and lustful, and he nearly came right then, just from the thrilling sight of their raw sensuality.

Dana and Rachel attempted to French kiss each other around his shaft, leaving Irillith to smoothly envelop the head in the moist heat of her mouth. John could only groan in ecstasy as they worked together as a coordinated team, licking, lapping, and sucking his sensitive skin. He cupped the Terran girls’ heads, filling his left hand with a thick mane of auburn locks, and his right with the doctor’s brown tresses.

They moved freely under his light grip, but the sense of domination and control was electrifying. It was no exaggeration to say that Dana, Rachel, and Irillith were amongst the most brilliantly gifted women in the galaxy, yet the three of them were obediently nuzzling into his cock, focused solely on his pleasure. Dana caught his eye and winked at him, then smoothly swapped with Irillith, and parted her flushed lips to engulf his throbbing head. She let out a submissive moan as they held eye-contact, then sucked him lovingly, nothing but absolute devotion in her gaze.

He had a sneaking suspicion that the Karron orphan knew exactly what he was thinking at that moment, and also knew how. \*Are you telling them my thoughts?\* he asked his blonde matriarch.

\*Of course,\* she purred. \*They get off on this just as much as you do.\*

“Rachel first,” he grunted, guiding her into place.

She swapped with Dana, filling her mouth with his cock, and suckling him with passionate intensity. John couldn’t hold back any longer and he exploded in response, his shaft flexing powerfully between the snug pillows of their breasts. Rachel hurriedly swallowed down spurt after spurt, moaning with pleasure as she felt the comforting warmth fill her stomach.

“Me next?” Dana gasped, poised and waiting to pounce.

He nodded in response and they quickly swapped, an errant shot of cum just missing her lips and covering her nose. Rachel giggled and licked her clean, while Dana groaned with relief as her belly swelled with his load. Irillith was last, and they stared intently at each other as she took over from the redhead. At the first sweet taste on her tongue, Irillith’s eyes rolled back, and she let out a muffled cry of ecstasy. John guided the unresisting Maliri down his shaft, and cradled her head in the girls’ heaving breasts as she hungrily sucked his quad dry.

John collapsed back in the chair when he was spent, his balls aching after feeding so much cum to the trio kneeling before him. When he gradually regained his senses, he saw that Dana, Irillith, and Rachel had risen to their feet, presenting their curved stomachs for him to admire. He reverently stroked the teenagers’ gentle curves, then leaned closer to place a tender kiss on Irillith’s rounded belly.

“You look gorgeous,” he murmured, just imagining what it would be like when those bumps were real.

He looked up to see matching doe-eyed looks, or at least he assumed they were, judging by their softened expressions. It was difficult to read the emotions in their eyes, as they were all brightly lit with an inner radiance, their psychic potential surging.

“That was amazing,” Rachel said softly, leaning down to gently kiss his cheek.

“Super hot,” Dana agreed, brushing her lips against the other cheek.

“It gets better every time,” Irillith agreed, her slender fingers tousling his hair.

\*I’m sorry to interrupt, but we need you on the Bridge,\* Alyssa informed him, her voice losing its playful edge and turning serious.

\*What’s the problem?\* John asked getting up from his chair.

\*It’ll be easier just to show you.\*

He gave the three girls a quick hug in gratitude. “Good luck with your research ladies. I hope you feel inspired.”

They thanked him as he tugged on his clothes, then waved John goodbye as he hurried out the door. He was keen to find out what emergency required his presence on the Bridge, so John activated psychic speed to quicken his journey along the corridor. After diving into the grav-tube, he launched himself skyward, accelerating up through the floors until he reached the Command Deck. Leaping out of the grav-tube, he saw that Alyssa and Jade were standing beside Calara at her Tactical Station, the Latina engrossed by the holographic map of the surrounding sector.

“Hey, what’s up?” he asked, jogging down the ramp to join them.

“Hello, Master,” Jade replied, greeting him with a friendly wave.

“You didn’t need to break the speed record to get here,” Alyssa said affectionately, welcoming him with a hug. “I would’ve warned you if it was a real emergency.”

“It’s no problem,” he said, giving each of them a kiss, before turning his attention to the brunette. “I’m guessing the Progenitor has done something unexpected?”

“See for yourself,” Calara replied, gesturing towards the holographic map.

He studied the Galkiran invasion force and was intrigued to see that they were now arrayed in a neat formation, with eighteen fleets lined up in front, and another eighteen following close behind.

“Only the front rank are shielded,” Calara went on to explain. “The rear element have dropped their shields, presumably to let them recuperate.”

“So if we don’t intervene, they’ll be able to undo all the strain we’ve put on their shield generators so far?” he asked, his brow furrowing with concern.

“Yes, exactly,” she confirmed with a nod. “The fleet formation is simple but effective. I assume their reasoning is that the vanguard will trigger any minefields they encounter, but those ships will be protected by their shields. By rotating which fleets take the lead, they can keep the forward vessels shielded.”

 “Makes sense,” he agreed. “Do you have a plan to counter it?”

“I suggest we prepare a couple of minefields to cripple the two fleets on the rear left of their formation. We can wait for the first wave to pass, then activate the gravity well and mines remotely, but we’ll need to be quite close for them to pick up the comms signal,” she explained, pointing to the targets in question.

“What do we do about the dreadnought?” John asked warily. “It must be lurking around somewhere behind the thralls fleets.”

“I think we have two options,” Calara informed him. “First, we could launch an attack on the unshielded ships as soon as they drop out of hyper-warp. We should be able to inflict a huge amount of damage if we hit them before they can raise their shields.”

“What’s the downside?”

“As soon as the thralls are knocked out of hyper-warp, the Progenitor will probably make a beeline for those fleets. We’ll have a very short window to launch our ambush before his dreadnought arrives, so we’ll need to withdraw after a minute of combat, maybe two at most.”

“Alright, and what about our second option?” he asked, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

“We trigger the ambush on the left, then immediately move to the far right of their fleet formations. We drop out of hyper-warp there, interdict their ships, then cause as much damage as possible.”

John chuckled and nodded in understanding. “So we bait the Progenitor into rushing off to the left, then we clobber the right. That would give us maybe five minutes of mayhem before we have to withdraw?”

“Exactly. We lose the initial advantage of firing on unshielded ships, but we should be able to cause considerably more damage overall before we’re forced to disengage. Attacking multiple targets in one ambush should raise anxiety levels across their entire armada.”

“Tricking the Progenitor would also make him look very foolish,” Jade noted with a sly grin.

“Yeah, very true,” John said, giving her a sideways hug. “I’m guessing this is your favourite plan, honey?”

The Nymph nodded enthusiastically.

“What about you two?” he asked the blonde and brunette. “Do you think we should go with the second option?”

“It’s my preferred choice,” Calara replied, looking satisfied with her analysis. “It should let us inflict the maximum amount of damage before a safe withdrawal.”

Alyssa hesitated, her gaze on the map. “My only worry is how the Progenitor is going to react if we make him look like a chump. I can’t imagine one of those egomaniacs will handle being humiliated particularly well.”

“That’s a good point,” John conceded. “But we also need to knock out as many of the Galkiran fleets as possible while we’ve got the opportunity.”

“There is one other factor to consider,” Calara said, as she steepled her fingers and leaned back in her chair. “Alyssa said that you’re only about half-way through building the new Shield Generator?”

“We’re still on schedule for the afternoon attack we’d planned,” John replied defensively. “I just took a quick break from using the Soulforge to feed Dana, Rachel, and Irillith.”

Alyssa leaned in to give him a reassuring kiss. “She’s not criticising you, handsome. Calara’s just reminding you that if something goes pear-shaped in the battle, we won’t have the new shields to rely on... that’s all. Loading up the girls to boost their research is always a good use of your time.”

“I know you still have several more hours of shaping to go,” Calara elaborated. “Even if you hadn’t fed the girls, you wouldn’t have been able to finish building the new Shield Generator in time for this fight. We’ll need to launch an ambush as soon as possible.”

He gave them a self-conscious smile. “I just didn’t want you to think I was goofing off.”

“Don’t worry, Master,” Jade said, stroking his hand. “We only just arrived on the Bridge ourselves a few minutes ago. My sisters warned me that the Galkirans were moving their ships around, so we came up here to investigate.”

“Really?” he asked in surprise.

The Nymph nodded exuberantly. “We were taking a break as well. Alyssa wanted to show Calara what it would be like if she had a twin. Calara liked it very much.”

John raised an eyebrow and grinned. “Did she now?”

“Jade!” Calara groaned in protest, her cheeks flushing dark red.

John laughed, then pulled her into a hug. “Now that I would’ve liked to see.”

“You’re always welcome, handsome,” Alyssa offered.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he said, giving her bottom an appreciative squeeze, before glancing at the sector map. “Okay, we better set up those two minefields. Have you planned out where we’re going to deploy them?”

“Of course,” Calara replied, with a confident smile.

“You can leave me in charge of the mine deployment,” Alyssa offered. “If you want to get back to operating the Soulforge, I’ll let you know when we’re done.”

John was about to protest, then realised that nobody else was capable of forging the components they needed, so they were solely reliant on him to finish the shaping. “Alright, I’ll head down to the Workshop. See you soon, ladies.”

The blonde gave him a sympathetic kiss as they parted, and the three girls waved goodbye as John exited via the grav-tubes. He’d barely begun his descent in the red anti-gravity field, when a pink-haired bundled of energy launched herself out of the Deck Three corridor and into his arms.

“Hi, Master!” the Nymph gushed, beaming at him in delight.

“Ailita!” he remarked in surprise. “Hi to you too.”

She snuggled into him and purred contentedly, the vibrations pleasant against his chest.

“Everything okay?” he asked the happy catgirl.

“Everything’s wonderful!” she replied cheerfully. “Jade said you needed lots of cuddles... so here I am!”

\*You looked so sad at missing out on the minelaying, Master,\* his Nymph Matriarch explained. \*As Ailita doesn’t have a role on the Invictus yet, I’ve asked her to look after you while you’re working on the Soulforge.\*

John paused, about to object that he didn’t need constant companionship, but a glance down at the ecstatic Nymph changed his mind. He had no intention of disappointing Ailita, which she most certainly would be if he refused her company. Besides, he wanted her to be able to break her pre-programmed instincts and develop her own free will like her sisters, which meant giving her more of his undivided attention.

“That sounds perfect,” he said with an indulgent smile. “I’d love to spend some time with you.”

She crinkled her nose at him in delight, her beaming grin getting wider. “This one is so happy!”

They stepped out of the grav-tube on Deck Seven and Ailita skipped along at his side as they walked to the Engineering Bay. John opened the door for his Nymph assistant and followed her inside, where he found Dana and Rachel engrossed in their work. The redhead and brunette were so caught up in their research that they didn’t even hear him enter, so he put a finger to his lips and beckoned Ailita over towards the Soulforge.

He took a seat on the comfortable leather chair, and leaned back against the padded upholstery as he slipped the control circlet back on his head. When he patted his lap, Ailita wasted no time making herself comfortable, pressing her delectable form against his body. John wanted to have a long conversation with the youngest of Jade’s sister Nymphs, but he was loathe to disturb Dana and Rachel while they were hard at work on their research.

Looking down at Ailita, he gently lifted her chin so that she was gazing into his eyes. Pushing out with his will, he tried to make tentative telepathic contact with the sweet-natured alien shapeshifter.

\*Ailita? Can you hear me?\*

Her pupils flared wider, and Ailita gazed at him with an awestruck expression on her beautiful face. After taking a moment to recover from the euphoria of direct telepathic contact with her master, she exuberantly bobbed her head.

\*Can you speak to me this way too?\* he asked, watching her in fascination.

She bit her full lower lip, then focused on him with greater intensity. John felt a delicate flutter against the mental barrier protecting his mind, so he opened a door for her, admitting the Nymph into his deeper subconscious.

\*Can you hear me, Master?\* she whispered, her voice filled with longing.

He grinned and nodded back. \*You’re such a clever Nymph, well done!\*

Ailita looked elated and her purring intensified.

\*We haven’t had a chance to chat for a while,\* he said, stroking her soft pink hair. \*Why don’t you tell me what you’ve been up to since you joined us? I’d really like to hear your thoughts on the girls, and what it’s been like for you living on the Invictus.\*

\*Oh, I love it here, Master!\* she gushed, her whole face lighting up with joy. \*This one has never been happier!\*

John focused on shaping the next set of parts as Ailita chattered away, the Nymph excited to share everything she could about her new life with him.

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“I just need to help Alyssa prepare another minefield,” Jehanna said, while stirring a bubbling pot filled with an ochre-coloured sauce. “Could you keep stirring this until I get back? I won’t be long.”

“It smells very exotic,” Helene said, inhaling deeply as she took over with the spoon.

“That’s the spices,” Jehanna explained as she washed her hands. “I’ve made this curry quite mild, so hopefully you should enjoy it.”

“I can’t wait to try some,” the mermaid said, as she diligently stirred the cooking pot.

Jehanna left the fragrant aromas of the kitchen and hurried through the Officers’ Lounge on her way to join Alyssa. She decided to take the express grav-tubes instead of the slower central one, so continued along the corridor to John’s old bedroom. Her stomach flip-flopped as she dropped down in the rapid anti-gravity field, then walked out into the Armoury. They weren’t planning on engaging in combat until after the minefield had been prepared for the invaders, so she strode past the equipping racks and weapon frames towards the second set of grav-tubes.

On her way there, she passed the ramp down to the Combat Bridge, where Irillith was sitting quietly at her IntOps Station. The Maliri cut a lonely figure in the deserted room, her attention riveted to the holographic screens that floated above her console. Jehanna paused, then made a quick detour down the ramp to see her friend.

“Hey, Rill. How’s the research going?” she called out, her tone warm and friendly.

As she drew closer, the reporter noticed that Irillith was staring off into the distance, her eyes glowing with a bright violet light.

“Oh, hello,” Irillith replied, blinking rapidly as she turned to greet her with a smile. “Sorry, I was miles away there.”

“I should be the one saying sorry. I didn’t mean to break your concentration,” Jehanna apologised with a wince. “Were you focused on something important?”

“No, it’s alright. I was thinking about the best way to translate organic memories and personality into a digital format. Rachel suggested that I already do it automatically whenever I travel into the cyber-realm, but as that information isn’t actually recorded anywhere, it’s not a simple problem to resolve.”

Jehanna noticed the Maliri hacker’s rounded tummy and gave her a knowing grin. “So you asked John to fill you up and now you’re using psychic powers to cheat your way to a solution?” She laughed and nodded her approval. “Very smart. I’ll have to remember to get ‘stuck’ on some problem too.”

Irillith’s mouth fell open to deny it, then she closed it again as her mind started racing.

Leaning forward, Jehanna reached out with her hand, and asked quietly, “May I?”

After receiving a distracted nod of permission, Jehanna slipped her hand inside Irillith’s dress and lightly caressed her curved tummy.

“God... I love being stuffed full of his cum like this,” she confided, her voice turning husky.

Irillith’s eyelashes fluttered at the gentle touch on her sensitive skin. “I love it too.”

Jehanna moved closer for a tender kiss, then whispered, “It’s been a while since I spent time with a couple of Maliri princesses. Maybe tonight?”

“Shan says definitely,” Irillith agreed, breaking into a grin.

“I’ll stop distracting you then,” the dusky girl said with a flirtatious wave goodbye.

Irillith watched Jehanna depart, then turned her attention back to the console and the digital portal into the CyberRealm. She glanced around to check if the Nymphs were back yet, but they were still taking a quick break while Jade was watching over the Command Deck. Satisfied that she had the place to herself, Irillith retrieved her choker from a pocket, then slipped it around her neck.

The material felt confining around her throat, the slight pressure making her feel light-headed with exhilaration, as she savoured the thrill of being claimed by Baen’thelas. Her fingers drifted to her stomach and brushed across the swollen curves, reminding her of kneeling before John as he filled her tummy. She let out a soft moan as she revelled in the memories of submission, then delved deep inside her mind to tap into the eldritch spark that dwelt within.

Her eyes rolled back and the spark crackled into a sizzling bolt, electrifying the atmosphere in the Combat Bridge. The lights flickered wildly and Irillith was shrouded in a nimbus of arcing lightning, which reached out to the console and danced across its surface. Digitising her subconscious was something she did instinctively, but this time she felt hyper-aware of her surroundings, as she let herself be pulled into the Cyber Realm.

Irillith stumbled onto the glowing silicon platform, her arms waving wildly as she struggled to control her digital form. She felt aloof from her electronic avatar, having pulled back to observe, rather than let herself be fully immersed in the experience as she usually did. Her synapses were all firing simultaneously now, giving her unparalled insight into the entire process.

The Maliri hacker realised that she’d been overthinking this problem the entire time. The memories in her brain were stored on neurons, which were activated and recalled by electrical signals passed down axons to the synapses. Electricity was her element, so sensing and parsing that data was as easy for her as breathing.

Raising a hand, bolts of electricity coursed outwards, then writhed around a data stack as Irillith transcribed all that information into the repository. She had enough of an understanding of Mael’nerak’s unique programming language to download all the data directly in his three-dimensional format, building up an intricately detailed archive of her brain. Irillith was captivated by the process, a surge of hope building in her chest, as she unlocked the key to restoring everything that defined Faye into a new organic body.

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The court had adjourned for lunch, but now everyone had returned to the courtroom to hear the prosecution present their next piece of evidence.

Commodore Bromidus took his customary place at the lectern and addressed the thin bespectacled man seated in the witness box. “Mister Wheeler, please will you describe your area of expertise and your credentials to the court.”

“I’m a specialist in data forensics in the banking and exchange sector,” the expert witness declared, his nasally voice filled with professional pride. “I’ve worked in this field for the previous twenty-five years, providing analytical services to most of the top 100 corporations.”

“Thank you,” the prosecution lawyer replied. “Now, I would like to bring the court’s attention to exhibit 37A.”

Bromidus activated the device built into the lectern and a holo-projection showed a banking portal, with an account already highlighted and opened. The owner of the account was a Mr. Edward Henly, and the only transaction was a recent bank transfer for the amount of 500 million credits.

“Mister Wheeler, could you explain to the court the relevance of this bank account please,” the lawyer requested of his witness.

“Certainly,” the man replied, clearing his throat before he began. “This account was flagged as suspicious during our broader investigation of the Callopean Shoals massacre. That 16-digit code you can see there on the transaction is the company sorting code for LiorSenghi, an export consortium that has ties to the Special Operations Division of the Brimorian Enclave.”

“And who is Mr. Edward Henly?” Bromidus prompted him.

“A pseudonym... a fictitious person,” Wheeler replied. “However the biometrics that allow the owner to access this account are an exact match to... Commander Thomas Walker.”

“Is there any way that this account biometrics data could be artificially implanted into the system?” the lawyer pressed.

“No, absolutely not!” Wheeler declared, his voice ringing with conviction. “To do something like that, you would need to hack the banking exchange, but the system is impossible to break into.”

“Are you quite certain of that, Mr. Wheeler?”

“Hacking the banking exchange is considered to be the Holy Grail of data security and is targeted for cyber attack countless times per year. No one has ever been able to breach the banking exchange’s security.” Getting into his testimony, Wheeler turned to look at the jury and then the audience with a broad smile. “Those exchanges are harder to hack than Sentinel Fortress!”

“Objection, your Honour, supposition,” Kincaid interjected, his tone bland and professional.

“Well, they are!” Wheeler sputtered, annoyed at being contradicted.

“Have you ever attempted to hack into Sentinel Fortress?” Kincaid asked, raising an eyebrow.

The expert paused and licked his lips nervously, caught off-guard by the loaded question. If he admitted to never having attempted to breach their security, it undermined his professional opinion as an expert in the field. However, if he admitted to having tried to hack into the top secret High Command facility, he could have dozens of charges levelled against him, some of which carried the death penalty.

Deciding that avoiding capital punishment was the wiser option, Wheeler muttered quietly, “No.”

“Just to clarify...” Kincaid began, his tone amiable. “You’re confirming that you’ve never attempted to breach digital security at Sentinel Fortress? What about the banking exchange? Have you actually ever tried to hack through their cyber defences?”

Before Wheeler could respond, Judge Nancarrow interrupted. “You’ll have your turn to cross-examine the witness, Mr. Kincaid.”

Caspian inclined his head respectfully to the Judge. “My apologies, your Honour. I was just attempting to get a clear answer on whether the witness was speaking from experience.”

The older man grunted in acknowledgement, then turned to the digital specialist. “Please answer his question. Have you ever personally tried to breach digital security for Sentinel Fortress, or the Banking Exchange?”

Wheeler glared hatefully at Kincaid, but was forced to admit, “No, I have not.”

“You may continue, Commodore,” the judge said to the prosecution lawyer.

Bromidus looked irritated by the entire exchange, which had interrupted the narrative he was trying to play for the court. “In your expert opinion, Mr. Wheeler, is it possible for this account to have been forged, or altered in some way by a third party?”

“No,” Wheeler declared adamantly. “The galactic exchange has never been breached since its inception. Every expert in this field will tell you exactly the same thing. The only person who could have opened that account was Thomas Walker.”

Tom grit his teeth and scribbled a quick note on the pad in front of him, which he pushed to his lawyer. He watched Kincaid glance at his message, which said, “It must be possible, because I didn’t do it!”

The lawyer gave him a reassuring pat on the hand, but made no comment.

Judge Nancarrow looked expectantly at Bromidus when the witness finished speaking. “Do you have any further questions?”

“No, your honour.”

“Then you may cross-examine the witness, Mr. Kincaid,” Judge Nancarrow said, gesturing for him to proceed.

Caspian rose from his chair and took the prosecution’s place at the lectern. “Mr. Wheeler, you’re here today as an expert in cyber security, is that right?”

The thin man pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and sat taller in his seat. “That’s correct.”

“And... you’ve got 25-years of experience in this field... if I remember correctly from what you said earlier?”

Wheeler nodded in confirmation.

“So that must mean you’re about the best there is, right? With all that experience, working for the biggest and best corporations, I doubt there’s anyone that can match your level of expertise in cyber fraud and digital security? Am I right?”

Wheeler relaxed and puffed his chest out proudly again. “You are correct, Mr. Kincaid. I don’t want to sound arrogant, but I think it’s quite reasonable to say that I’m the best there is.”

Tom fidgeted nervously, wondering why on Terra his lawyer was doing his best to make the prosecution’s expert witness sound even more impressive.

“Great... great,” Kincaid said, with a disarming smile. “So, could you tell me a little bit about Panty-Sniffers, the erotic holo-site?”

Wheeler stared at him in horror, his eyes bulging behind his glasses. “Wh-whut... wh-“ he spluttered.

Kincaid glanced down at the holo-pad in his hand and said, “I believe the idea behind the site, is you buy ‘moist panties from barely-legal teens’... I’m quoting directly from the site here. Then wear them over your head, while you ‘jerk it off to horny schoolgirls’ in ‘steamy interactive holo-orgies’? Another direct quote.”

“Objection, your honour!” Bromidus snapped indignantly. “This is preposterous! How is this relevant?!”

Judge Nancarrow gave the defence lawyer a very stern glare. “You’re treading a very dangerous line here, Mr. Kincaid. I presume you must have an extremely compelling reason for these questions, beyond salacious shock value?”

“I’m attempting to verify the expertise of the witness in cyber-security issues,” Kincaid replied, his expression entirely innocent. “I promise you will see how it’s relevant very soon.”

“Proceed,” Nancarrow rumbled. “But be careful, Mr. Kincaid.”

The defence lawyer nodded respectfully. “So, Mr. Wheeler, please could you explain what transpired in your interactions with the ‘Panty-Sniffers’ erotic site?”

“I-I... Ah... I don’t know what you m-mean,” Wheeler stammered, cringing in his chair.

“Let me clarify then. In the police report you filed, you claimed that scammers associated with the ‘Panty-Sniffers’ site had stolen your credit chit details, and used that information to run up 27,000 credits in spurious charges.”

Wheeler had turned an interesting shade of crimson, the man absolutely mortified. “B-but... buh...” he mumbled, unable to string a coherent sentence together as his career burned down around him.

“Objection, relevance,” Bromidus muttered through gritted teeth, as he watched his expert witness fall to pieces.

“Overruled,” Nancarrow stated, already seeing the point Kincaid was making.

Caspian darted a victorious smile at Bromidus, before turning theatrically to the jury. “As the defence have stipulated, this man is the galaxy’s leading expert in digital security... yet he fell victim to a humiliating credit-chit scam. Should we really place all our trust in his fallible judgement? The possibility of human error exists everywhere, and in everything humanity builds, including the banking exchange.”

Kincaid turned back to the Judge. “No more questions, your Honour.”

“You may leave the stand,” Judge Nancarrow said to the witness slumped in his chair.

That was eleven year ago!” Wheeler protested weakly as he stumbled after the bailiff, and was led out of the court. “I dropped the complaint... they were supposed to delete it!”

Bromidus rose to his feet and said wearily, “The prosecution requests a temporary recess this afternoon, your Honour.”

“Yes, I’m sure you do,” Nancarrow noted, before glancing at the defence lawyer. “Any objections, Mr. Kincaid?”

“No, your honour,” Caspian replied cheerfully.

“Then we’ll reconvene tomorrow,” the Judge declared. “I’d advise you to make sure your witnesses are vetted thoroughly, Commodore.”

Tom Walker was led away by the bailiff and the court was cleared. He waited in the holding room afterwards, and a couple of minutes later, Caspian Kincaid entered through the door.

“You asked to see me, Tom?” the lawyer asked, after shaking his hand.

“That went great!” Tom said enthusiastically. “The way you dismantled their expert was amazing!”

“Thanks,” Caspian said, allowing himself a smile of satisfaction. “Going after an expert’s credibility is the oldest trick in the book. I’m surprised Bromidus was unaware of Mr. Wheeler’s hobbies.”

Tom frowned and leaned against the steel desk. “Why didn’t you tell everyone that I didn’t open that account though? You just focused on making that guy look like an idiot, and didn’t even mention that the account must have been forged to frame me.”

Kincaid let out a sigh, and met Tom’s expectant gaze. “Because all my experts said the same thing that Wheeler did. Nobody’s ever been able to hack the galactic exchange, and everyone insists it’s impossible. The only thing I could do was go after their expert, so hopefully the jury will be distracted by Mr. Panty-Sniffer getting scammed, instead of being repeatedly told that forging a bank account is impossible.”

There was an awkward pause, then Tom asked quietly, “I’m telling the truth, Caspian... I didn’t do this. You do believe me, right?”

The lawyer stared at him in silence for a long moment. “I’m a pretty good judge of character, and I was convinced you were innocent the first time we met. But there’s so much evidence stacked up against you, Tom... I’m not going to lie, I’ve got some doubts.”

“I’m screwed, aren’t I?” Tom said, his heart sinking. “If I can’t even convince you that I’m innocent, there’s no chance the Jury will believe me.”

“I’ve seen a lot of crazy things happen in court over the years,” Kincaid said, patting him on the shoulder. “You can never be sure exactly how things will pan out.”

Tom let out a sardonic laugh. “So you’re saying ‘pray for a miracle’? That’s not very reassuring.”

“I bet Bromidus didn’t predict his esteemed digital expert would end up hurting his case, but that’s ultimately what happened,” the lawyer said with confidence. “I promise I’ll do the very best I can to defend you, Tom. Don’t give up yet.”

“Alright, I’ll keep praying,” he said, hoping those prayers would end up being answered.

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\*Helene says lunch is ready,\* Alyssa informed John, as he worked on shaping his third shield projector.

The device looked like half a football, with a hexagonal-shaped emitter in the centre, surrounded by six more hexagonal emitters that formed a polygonal dome. Inside were grooves that would house the focusing crystals, the very components that Calara was attempting to burn out in the Galkiran thrall armada.

\*Thanks, we’ll just be a couple of minutes,\* John replied, as he concentrated on the six-sided shapes.

He patted Ailita’s toned thigh and she obediently slid from his lap to stand beside the chair. “Would you like me to keep you company this afternoon, Master?” she enquired hopefully.

John nodded as he got up and stretched. “Until you get bored and ask me for something more exciting to do, your job will be to keep me company whenever I’m shaping on the Soulforge.”

“Really?!” she gushed, looking thrilled.

“Yeah, really,” he replied, stroking her back. “You’re a sweet girl and it’s relaxing spending time with you. I enjoyed it very much.”

As the pink-haired catgirl bounced up and down with glee, John glanced over at the Engineering Podium. Dana and Rachel were still immersed in their research, their eyes glowing as they pored over holo-screens filled with incredibly complex calculations.

“Come on,” he said quietly, clasping Ailita’s hand. “Let’s not disturb them while they work.”

They crept out of the Engineering Bay, then took the central grav-tube up to Deck Two. Despite Dana and Rachel staying behind, the Officers’ Lounge was packed, with everyone congregated around the dining table. After a quick headcount, John realised that the whole crew were there, except for Jade and the three girls involved with research.

“John!” Alyssa called out to him, waving him over. “You’ve got to try some of this!”

He saw that the cooks had prepared an Indian-style buffet, with a wide selection of pastries, as well as more traditional rice dishes.

“This looks amazing,” he said appreciatively, admiring the spread. He hugged Helene and added, “You’re catching on fast, honey.”

She smiled and shook her head. “This was all Jehanna’s idea, and she supplied all the recipes. I just helped and followed her instructions.”

“Exactly,” John said, hugging her closer. “Learning tasty dishes from your guest chefs is the fastest way you’ll become an expert in the kitchen.”

“Oh... I hadn’t thought about it like that,” she said, looking pleased.

He glanced over her shoulder at the spicy food and felt his mouth watering. “I definitely want one of those Samosas, and an onion Bhaji... and is that a lamb Bhuna?”

“You know your Indian food,” Jehanna said, greeting him with a kiss.

“I love it,” he freely admitted. “Thanks for going to so much effort.”

“I had lots of helpers, so it didn’t take as long as you’d think,” she admitted, smiling gratefully at her volunteers. “I thought a buffet would be quicker with another battle imminent.”

“How long have we got?” he asked Alyssa.

“Fifteen minutes,” she replied, taking a tentative bite of a samosa, then smiling at the delicious taste. “Jade’s just moving us into position.”

“Here’s your food, Master,” Ailita announced, presenting him with a plate that included samples of all the dishes he’d mentioned.

“Thanks, honey,” he said in surprise, eagerly accepting the plate and a fork.

“I think you’re getting used to having an attentive assistant,” Alyssa teased him.

Calara watched with amusement as he rolled his eyes. “Actually, as John’s an Admiral, that makes Ailita his adjutant.”

“An admiral’s attentive adjutant,” Sakura said, carefully pronouncing each word. “Wow that’s a tongue twister; try saying that ten times quickly.”

“An amorous adjutant admired an admiral’s amazing appendage?” Alyssa suggested, making all the girls laugh.

“Not yet, but this one has high hopes for this afternoon,” Ailita confided in them.

John had his mouth full, so he just reached out to squeeze her bottom in confirmation. After swallowing the perfectly-cooked lamb, he said, “Less joking, more eating. We need to be combat-ready in fifteen minutes.”

The girls quickly filled their plates and the dining room fell into comfortable silence as everyone thoroughly enjoyed their meal. When they’d finished, the diners all thanked Helene and Jehanna profusely, then followed John towards the Combat Bridge.

“Do you want me to call Dana and Rachel?” Alyssa asked, as they walked down the corridor.

“Have you deployed gravity well projectors along with the minefields?”

“Of course; we can trigger them remotely too,” the blonde replied. “The maintenance bots are going to deploy one when we reach our ambush point, so we’ll be able to knock the closest fleets out of hyper-warp.”

“In that case, try not to interrupt the girls if we don’t need to,” John said, as they entered their old bedroom. “Dana and Rachel seemed to be making significant progress on whatever they were working on.”

“Yes, you did a remarkable job inspiring them,” Alyssa said with a coy smile. “Irillith in particular.”

“Really? Did it help?” he asked, as they stepped into the express grav-tube.

Her smile broadened. “You’ll see...”

When they reached the Armoury, John could smell the distinctive scent of ozone in the air, the atmosphere thick with it. More disconcerting was the strobing lights, which flickered wildly at the entrance to the ramp down into the Combat Bridge. Forgetting about his gear, John walked closer, intrigued to see what was happening below.

“Holy crap,” he muttered, when he peered around the corner.

Irillith was floating above the Combat Bridge, her body shrouded in a storm of surging lightning. It was like she was an overloading generator, containing so much energy it had to be released, with crackling electricity arcing from her body towards the console below.

“How is she not shorting out that station?!” Sakura marvelled in a hushed whisper.

“Because she chooses not to,” Alyssa replied, watching her protégé with pride. “Whatever she wills, the lightning obeys.”

John stared at the Maliri electrokinetic in awe, then turned to find Alyssa’s eyes already on him. “Should we run this battle from the Command Deck?”

“There’s no need,” Irillith interjected, her voice sounding eerily distant. “I have completed my task.”

He stepped out onto the ramp and looked up at her fiercely glowing eyes. “What were you working on?”

“I was transposing every facet of an organic brain into digital format. We now only require Rachel’s amalgam of Faye’s personality and I can prepare the prototype to become a suitable host for her mind.”

“I thought you were worried about uploading data?” John asked, amazed that she’d made so much progress so quickly. “Isn’t it a radically different process to downloading a copy of your own memories and personality?”

Irillith was about to respond, then she closed her eyes and the arcing electricity retracted to her body. The seething lightning dispersed with a whumping sound, and she slowly sank to the floor, the air around her shimmering with recently confined energy.

When her eyes snapped open again, Irillith broke into an ecstatic grin and she rushed across the Bridge to jump into his arms. “I did it!” she gushed.

“Yeah, we heard,” Jehanna said, patting her arm. “Hey, why do you sound so different now?”

“My mind was in the Cyber-Realm,” Irillith explained. “It’s really difficult to communicate here when you’re over there. It’s a bit like shouting at somebody through a closed window.”

John supported her as she clung to him, filling his hands with her delectable derriere. “You were going to explain how uploading information to an organic brain is the same as downloading data?” he prompted her.

Irillith quickly shook her head. “No, it’s not exactly the same, but I was over-thinking it before. We form memories by using bioelectrical reactions to stimulate the growth of corresponding neurons in the brain. After observing what happened when my own memories were forming, I realised that the microscopic electrical signals leave specific imprints on those neurons. By repeating those electrical signatures I can perfectly reproduce that particular memory.”

“But how is that going to work for Faye?” John asked, bewildered by her explanation. “We’ve got data dumps of her memories and personality, but those are digital files, not a direct copy of the information stored in an organic brain.”

“I know the context and the simulated emotions she was feeling at the time, so I can use my own memories as a guide to creating hers,” Irillith explained, elated at her breakthrough.

“For every memory she’s ever had?” John asked sceptically. “Faye split her subconscious into twelve processing streams; I’ve seen the size of those data archives and they’re absolutely massive.”

“I know, I’ve been analysing them already,” Irillith replied, completely unperturbed. “Just think of them as a vast collection of tiny electrical charges. Trust me, I can handle it.”

John pulled back to study her more carefully, and was amazed at the huge change in the Maliri’s demeanour. Gone was the timid girl who had her confidence badly knocked by the defeats against Mael’merak’s digital horde. In her place was a woman full of drive and determination, who seemed truly comfortable with her psychic capabilities for the first time since he’d known her.

“I do trust you,” he said, and meant it. “If you say you’re ready to bring back Faye, I believe you.”

Irillith’s eyes glittered with excitement. “I know I can do this. All we need now is Rachel’s personality framework and Faye’s prototype will be a perfect reproduction... except we’ll be bringing her back to life as an organic girl.”

“Then it’ll be down to you, handsome,” Alyssa said, placing her hand on his shoulder. “She’ll just need the Spark of Consciousness.”

He slowly nodded, feeling daunted by the sudden weight of responsibility that now rested on his shoulders. John already knew the part he needed to play in resurrecting the purple sprite, but Irillith’s trepidation had convinced him that it would be weeks, if not months, before they’d need to start planning an expedition into the Astral Plane. If Rachel proved to be as inspired as her lightning-toting compatriot, he wouldn’t put it past the gifted doctor to have already modelled every aspect of Faye’s personality.

“Are we really that close to bringing back Faye?” Sakura asked, voicing his thoughts.

John carefully lowered Irillith to the floor. “Not yet. First we have a Progenitor to defeat. How much time have we got, Alyssa?”

“About ninety seconds,” she replied, pointing towards the first wave of Galkiran fleets sweeping overhead on the tactical map.

“Let’s get geared up,” John ordered, leading the way back into the Armoury.

The room soon rang with the sound of whirs and clicks as robotic arms locked crystal Alyssium plating into position over their bodies.

“Are you planning on any boarding actions?” Sakura asked, as she stepped clear of the equipping frame.

“No, this is just a defensive precaution,” John replied. “If we do try boarding his dreadnought, I want our ships equipped with the best shields and guns we can build for them, and we need to carefully plan the assault. We’ll need to work as a coordinated team to wear down that dreadnought’s shields, then have a method prepared for breaching the hull.”

“Do you have any idea how you’re going to separate the dreadnought from the thrall fleets?” Sakura asked, listening attentively.

“We’re going to need to lure him out somehow,” John replied. “Ideally we need to get the dreadnought to make a wormhole jump into our trap, then he can’t use that to escape.”

“Leave that to me,” she said, her eyes narrowing. “I’ve got a lot of experience in baiting a trap for assassination targets, especially with separating them from bodyguards. The battlefield might be different, but the principles are the same.”

“That would be a big help, thank you,” he said, surprised but very grateful, as he slotted a magazine into his Tachyon Rifle. “If you want to bounce any ideas off me, I’d be happy to discuss them with you.”

“Let me coordinate with Calara first and we’ll work out some viable options,” the Asian girl suggested, while sheathing her twin ninjato across her back. “Then you can decide which plan you think has the best chance of working and we’ll iron out all the details.”

“Perfect,” he agreed, sharing a smile with her.

Jade dropped down in the grav-tube to their right and skipped past them as she headed towards the Combat Bridge. “Hi, Master! Ready to be the cat?”

“Definitely,” he agreed. “No mice here. Have you seen any sign of the dreadnought?”

“Not yet, but he’s out there,” she declared, her feline ears pricking up in anticipation.

John jogged down the ramp beside her, then peeled away to slot his weapons behind the Command Chair. He looked up at the holographic map as thousands of Galkiran warships swept overhead, and just like his perceptive companion, he knew that the Progenitor was waiting for them to make the next move.