Three Square Meals Ch. 164

Venkarys was an exceptionally beautiful planet, the Maliri homeworld swathed in rolling green plains and a patchwork of glittering aquamarine lakes. Dispersed across the planet’s surface were dozens of elegant cities, their golden spires attaining lofty heights, as if reaching up to touch the cloudless blue skies. Surrounding them were exquisitely designed parks, adding lush greenery and stunning water features to each metropolis for the citizens to enjoy.

The fleets of thralls that swarmed towards Venkarys cared nothing for the lovely aesthetics of the Maliri planet. Like a horde of sinister black locusts, the Galkiran forces blotted out the skies, the fleets dispersing around the globe to target all the major cities. They dropped to low orbit, with Dominator class battleships leading a cohort of cruisers and destroyers as they moved into position.

When the signal was given, they began their orbital barrage on the defenceless cities below. Tachyon Lances lashed down in blinding purple columns of malevolent energy, the beams searing through buildings and vegetation with equal ease. Wherever those beams slashed down, they left fires in their wake, setting the spires and parks ablaze.

Even more terrifying were the huge Quantum Flux Cannons that jutted from the hulls of the Galkiran battleships. Their barrels crackled with energy as power built up inside those formidable weapons, then they recoiled again and again, launching hyper-accelerated slugs into the urban areas below. Each shell punched through everything in its path, before striking the ground and detonating in huge explosions. Entire blocks were obliterated by each terrifying salvo, the blasts leaving nothing behind, and only huge impact craters marked the place where those graceful buildings had once stood.

Only one city escaped the wanton destruction that rained down on all the others. Surrounded by leafy suburbs, Kayrona was significantly larger than any of the other cities on the planet, clearly marking it as the planetary capital. On a hill overlooking the city was the magnificent matriarchal palace, where Keishara Venkalyn had ruled over her homeworld, and all the other systems owned by House Venkalyn, for the past two centuries.

An enormous Progenitor dreadnought descended from the heavens, its three-kilometre length casting a dark shadow across the golden palace below. It was accompanied by a host of thrall warships, the command group looming ominously over the Maliri capital. Hangar doors opened up in the hulls of those vessels, and a swarm of dropships emerged, their engines blazing brightly as they soared across the city in search of landing zones.

Among that horde of troop transports was Gahl’kalgor’s personal shuttle, the vessel faster, tougher, and more manoeuvrable than any conventional thrall ship. It was the first to land, retro-thrusters flaring as it touched down in a park near the centre of the city. The airlock split open, and Gahl’kalgor emerged, setting a booted foot down on his first Maliri world.

Scores more transports descended all around him, then thralls poured out of the parked craft, their arrival accompanied by the ominous beat of thousands of boots striking metal ramps. The planetary invasion could hardly have gone unnoticed by the city’s occupants, and sleek hovercars raced away, trying to escape from the alien forces. After being cooped up inside spacecraft for an interminable amount of time, the thrall troops were hungry for battle. No sooner had they disembarked from their transports, the thralls began to open fire, and fleeing hovercars were blasted out of the sky, plummeting to the ground in a plume of smoke and flame.

The sound of gunfire was like music to Gahl’kalgor’s pointed ears, as were the screams of terrified civilians, before those cries were cut off in strangled shrieks. He grinned in satisfaction, relishing the ugly sounds of war, the hellacious cacophony raising his spirits to new heights. It was exhilarating to finally be striking back at Baen’thelas’ empire, especially after spending weeks sitting around impotently.

He turned to look back at Valeria, who was standing in formation with her elite squad of bodyguards. “Let the Selan’kethari have their fun. I have something special planned for you, my loyal Matriarch.”

Valeria looked thrilled and she dismissed her cohort of bodyguards with a wave of her hand. The elite Galkiran troops wasted no time departing, and rushed off down the boulevard towards the city centre, eager to join in the slaughter.

“What now, my Lord?”

“Come with me,” he replied, and beckoned for her to follow after him.

Gahl’kalgor led her away from his shuttle towards a large plaza, and when they reached the edge, he held up a hand. “Hold here a moment,” he ordered, before continuing onwards by himself.

Doing as he’d asked, Valeria waited obediently near the corner of the open square, watching as the Progenitor walked towards its centre. He came to a halt there, then closed his eyes, concentrating his will inwards as he summoned his psychic abilities. A nimbus of power began to gather around him, the eldritch energy flickering with a malevolent murky grey light.

His form started to swell, growing taller and taller by the second, until he was already twice her height. She watched him in awe as he continued to grow, until her Progenitor master towered above her, even looming over the nearby buildings. Gradually the psychic growth spurt began to taper off, and when his form had stabilised, he turned and took a step towards Valeria, the heavy impact on the ground sending vibrations through her booted feet.

Lowering himself to one knee, Gahl’kalgor held out one hand flat to the floor, directly in front of his tiny matriarch. “Come, Valeria,” he rumbled, his deep voice reverberating around the plaza. “Let’s find you a better view of the city.”

With catlike grace she vaulted onto the palm of his hand, then looked up at him with open adoration as he raised her up high. Gahl’kalgor carefully placed his matriarch on the roof of one of the nearby buildings, the city block at least twenty stories, giving her a spectacular view of the city below. Valeria could see squads of black-armoured Galkiran troops rushing through the streets, mercilessly gunning down civilians that tried to flee from the massacre.

Gahl’kalgor brought his head closer to the edge of the building and gazed down at her with his huge compelling eyes. “Pick one,” he said, turning to gesture towards the skyscrapers behind him.

Valeria bit her lip, then pointed towards the closest. “I choose that one, my Lord.”

The Progenitor grinned at her, then pulled on his helmet, and turned to line himself up with the huge golden building. With a roar he charged towards it, lowering his shoulder just before slamming into the elegant spire. Crystalline windows shattered into a million shards, the razor-sharp fragments raining down on him as the building let out a tortured groan of protest. The bone-crushing impact had done huge damage to the creaking building, bending enough beams and supporting columns to weaken its structural integrity. It slowly toppled over, the shriek of twisting metal drowning out the terrified screams of the inhabitants as the skyscraper crashed to the ground.

Valeria watched the brutal demolition in awe, then clapped her hands with glee, applauding her Progenitor master’s spectacular efforts.

\*That was incredible, my Lord!\* she gushed, thrilled that he was doing this for her entertainment.

He chuckled at her reaction, the deep rumbling laughter sending a thrill down her spine.

\*Pick another,\* he said, thoroughly enjoying her jubilant applause.

\*\*\*

Hundreds of light years away, Fleet Commander Lyshalla leaned forward in her chair, watching as her fleets of Galkiran warships rapidly approached the enemy system. Now that her battleship had closed the distance to the target, the sensor array was able to supply considerably more data to the tactical view.

The starbase was unlike anything she had seen before, the size, shape, and design radically different to the orbital facilities constructed in the Galkiran Empire. The space station was definitely armed, but she didn’t recognise the type of weapons in the gun batteries that were interspaced between ostentatious towers and gaudy domes. In Lyshalla’s experience, different always meant weaker, so she wasn’t fazed in the slightest by the space station’s peculiar appearance.

“Dropping out of hyper-warp in ten seconds, Fleet Commander,” the navigator stated, with an unmistakeable ring of excitement in her voice.

Lyshalla made no attempt to curtail the wicked grin that appeared on her face. She was just as eager for her first taste of real battle as her crew, who had spent the last week being harassed by the enemy Progenitor’s ambushes. She almost pitied the occupants of that space station, who were soon to be the outlet for her battle group’s seething frustrations.

The Galkiran forces began to slow, before abruptly leaving hyper-warp at the periphery of the star system’s gravity well. Lyshalla was just about to give the order to close up the fleets into attack formations, when a searing blue beam lashed across the holographic map. She blinked in surprise, then felt a flicker of dread as she frantically searched for the enemy Progenitor’s ship.

It didn’t take her long to locate the gleaming white battlecruiser, then she stared at the Invictus in astonishment as dozens more beams of azure light illuminated the map. “What are they doing?!” she blurted out incredulously.

The battleship’s senior tactical officer gawped at the enemy vessel, the thrall stunned into silence. A few seconds ticked by, then the map flared with light again and again, casting bright blue reflections around the dimly-lit bridge.

“Well?! Answer me!” Lyshalla demanded.

“They appear to be firing on the Maliri station,” the crewwoman stammered, watching the battle in shocked disbelief.

“I can see that!” the Fleet Commander snapped, narrowing her eyes dangerously. “Why is he shooting at his own forces?!”

The tactical officer could only give her a helpless shrug in response, as bemused by the Progenitor’s bizarre actions as she was.

The Invictus’ relentless assault soon began to inflict catastrophic damage on the space station, and the facility flashed red as it started to break apart. Large chunks of the superstructure fractured away from the main base, the dismantled pieces sailing off into space. Another searing blast slammed into one of those larger chunks, the colossal beam carving through the remnants like a hot knife through butter.

Explosions followed after that devastating blast, reducing the kilometre wide fragment of the starbase into a million pieces of glowing debris. It seemed like the enemy Progenitor wasn’t just content with destroying the battlestation, he wanted to obliterate it until there was nothing left. The Galkirans could do nothing except watch the wanton destruction in stunned silence. It was quite apparent that the Progenitor would thoroughly demolish their target long before they had any chance of reaching it themselves.

\*\*\*

The Invictus rapidly tore apart Genwynn’s habitation modules. The demolition charges safely ejected them from the concealed battlestation, which allowed Calara to destroy them with impunity. It didn’t take long for the outer shell to lay in utter ruins, blasted into oblivion by a combination of Nova Lance blasts, Tachyon Lance beams, and salvos from the four Quantum Flux Cannons.

Freed from the stifling additions to the core structure, Mael’nerak’s ancient battlestation was finally able to work as it had been originally intended many thousands of years earlier. Upper and lower turrets emerged from the central core, then pivoted to lower the enormous weapon barrels of the Quantum Devastators into firing positions. The reinforced starbase was now ready for battle, the muzzles of those weapons tracking the approach of the Galkiran fleets.

Alyssa rose from her chair and glided over to stand beside John, where they observed the invaders from the safety of their cloaked battlecruiser. The thrall forces cautiously approached the sea of debris, seemingly oblivious to the lethal danger posed by Genwynn’s massive cannons. Alyssa knew full well that a blast from the Quantum Devastators would instantly vaporise the closest pair of Galkiran battleships, but she also possessed an advantage that the thrall forces lacked. The Invictus was equipped with a Progenitor sensor array, allowing it to see the cloaked starbase, whereas the Galkirans had no idea it was even there.

“I was wrong and you were right,” she whispered softly. “You’re very clever, Mr. Blake.”

He responded with a relieved smile, before turning his attention to Calara. “Is there any chance the Galkirans can track Leylira’s fleet?”

She shook her head. “All the evacuation ships have moved well outside their sensor range now.” Pre-empting his next question, she added, “We’re right on the Brimorian border, so we’re a long way from any Maliri settlements. The closest is the secret colony built by the males, but it’s concealed by cloak generators and located outside of their current detection range.”

“Alright then,” John said, watching a squadron of Galkiran cruisers slowly skirt around the periphery of the debris field. “Let’s wait and see what they do now.”

\*\*\*

Far away in deep space, a fleet of sinister black spacecraft dropped out of hyper-warp, their hulls crackling with glowing particles as the tachyon field dispersed. The vessels engaged their propulsion systems, which blazed with a corona of orange light as the engines burst into life. The sleek warships manoeuvred into formation, then cautiously approached an ancient Progenitor edifice.

Triggered by their proximity, massive generators were activated, sending energy surging through the colossal onyx ring. Electrical discharges seethed over the surface, the purple lightning arcing wildly as the power levels climbed to dangerous levels. Suddenly a spatial rift burst into existence in the centre of that ring, the disc expanding until it filled the inner circumference. Just as it seemed like it would envelop the entire structure, it held in place, contained by powerful gravitational stabilisers.

Despite the ominous black disc being an affront to the natural laws of the galaxy, the thrall warships boldly pressed forward, until the squadron of cruisers in their vanguard made contact. Those vessels were then dragged into the featureless abyss, and to an observer, it would seem that they had been completely obliterated. However, those warships were instantaneously transported thousands of light years across the galaxy, where they were disgorged by an identical Hyper-warp gate... deep in the heart of Maliri territory.

\*\*\*

The image of a triple-stranded DNA helix slowly rotated, with key parts of the structure highlighted in blue. Those sections could be expanded and viewed in more detail, with accompanying runic text explaining how to make the necessary modifications.

Rahn’hagon studied the ancient Kyth’faren script with meticulous precision, searching through the notes to find the answers he was seeking. Thousands of years ago, when he had first stumbled across the Kyth’vindathys project, the instructions had seemed so straightforward. Now that he was scrutinising the details, he realised that the genetic coding contained numerous subtle modifications that were not listed in the scope of the explanatory text. That unnerving discovery made him wonder precisely what the other changes entailed.

Not all the instructions were contained in this particular Kyth’faren archive, and Rahn’hagon gritted his teeth in anger, knowing he’d never be able to research the largest depository ever again. As much as he blamed his reckless son for the destruction of that Astral citadel, Rahn’hagon bitterly regretted his decision to take John to visit that particular archive. The choice had been made from force of habit, as he’d spent far more time in that citadel than any of the others, during the millennia that he’d been plotting his revenge against Xar’aziuth.

The Kyth’faren’s genetic enhancement procedure had originally been intended for a fully-grown adult Progenitor, but Rahn’hagon had never had any intention of experimenting on himself. When Jessica Blake had stumbled into his life, she had provided a unique opportunity to implement the Kyth’vindathys project, one which would not expose him to any risk. Modifying Jessica’s DNA so that she would give birth to the instrument of his vengeance had been a simple task, at least in comparison to altering the original project so that it was tailored for a Terran female and her progeny.

Rahn’hagon paused, a sudden intriguing thought coming to him. Jessica’s DNA remained unchanged, which meant that she was a living repository for everything he’d implemented from the Kyth’vindathys project. If he studied her DNA, it was possible that he might find the elusive answers to why his son had been such a disappointing failure. He could then correct those mistakes, and simply try again.

His brief surge of optimism died just as quickly as it had arrived. There was nothing simple about his interactions with Jessica anymore, the brunette blaming him for the disastrous confrontation with their son. Every time he’d attempted to reconcile with the obstinate Terran female, she’d been openly hostile, even to the point of threatening him with violence.

Pulling back from the biometric data, Rahn’hagon withdrew his consciousness from the Kyth’faren polyhedron. He sat there staring bleakly at the globe of glowing hexagons, feeling an inexplicable surge of unfamiliar and painful emotions. As much as he was loathe to admit it, Rahn’hagon was lonely for the first time in his unnaturally long existence. He dearly missed his former companion, who had made such a tremendous difference to his life over the past four decades.

As the Progenitor wallowed in melancholy thoughts, he was dimly aware of a disturbance near his corporeal form. Rahn’hagon stopped resisted the pull of his astral cord, and sailed back through the high-arched corridors until he’d left the citadel. He raced across an endless grey plain, covering incalculable distances in the blink of an eye, until his astral form was reunited with his body.

It took a moment for the disorientation to pass, then Rahn’hagon looked up at the holographic map that floated above the dreadnought’s Bridge. To his surprise, a proximity notification had been triggered. The runic icon flashed insistently on the three-dimensional display, while emitting a chime that reverberated around the empty room.

He tapped on the controls built into the armrest of his command throne, shifting the focus of the holographic map to the ships that had triggered the proximity notification. His initial surprise turned into stunned disbelief, as the runic script advised him that a fleet of his empire’s warships had completed a hyper-warp jump close to his vicinity. Close in this case being the centre of Maliri territory, nearly a thousand light years away.

It was a notification that he’d seen hundreds of times before, triggering memories of brutal conquests against rival progenitors. What made it so shocking, was that Rahn’hagon had not ruled over an empire or laid claim to a thrall species, for over nine-thousand-years.

\*\*\*

Valeria couldn’t stop herself from beaming with joy as she strolled back to the landing zone at her master’s side. It had been thrilling to watch him level the city, with Gahl’kalgor effortlessly demolishing one ostentatious tower after the next. The Galkiran Matriarch had never felt so powerful before, the adrenalin rush as her master unleashed his glorious might at her command, left her giddy with euphoria.

“Your surly disposition seems to have greatly improved, Gladiatora,” he noted with wry amusement, as they entered the plaza where his shuttle was waiting for them.

She blushed, and fidgeted with the helmet tucked under her arm. “I... wish to apologise for my outburst this morning. It was inexcusable to behave in such a petulant manner.”

Gahl’kalgor came to an abrupt halt, then studied the woman he’d known for nearly a thousand years, an unreadable expression on his face. “You are forgiven. There is something... very special... about this place. You are not the only one to have succumbed to its pervasive influence.”

Valaria glanced around in confusion at the devastated metropolis. “We razed the city to the ground, my Lord. I don’t understand... what makes it so special?”

“No, not this city, or even this planet,” Gahl’kalgor murmured, his gaze rising towards the heavens. “Can’t you sense it all around us? It feels like someone draped a vast psychic net over this sea of stars.”

She followed his stare skyward, but the clouds of smoke billowing up from the demolished city obscured any view she might have had of the local star clusters. A rock clattered nearby, distracting Valeria as it skittered across the pockmarked boulevard. Following its trajectory back to the source, she saw her squad of bodyguards approaching, with Camine at their lead. Unlike Valeria’s jubilant mood, Camine looked particularly disgruntled, as did the rest of the Selan’kethari.

“Please excuse me a moment, my Lord,” she requested politely.

Gahl’kalgor dismissed her with a grunt, his focus still on the skies above.

“Matriarch,” the thrall muttered, having the good sense to greet Valeria with a respectful nod, despite her foul mood.

“What vexes you, Camine?” Valeria asked, raising an eyebrow. “I would have thought you’d be thrilled to savour this battle, especially after being cooped up on the ship for weeks.”

“Battle? What battle?” Camine snorted with disgust. “There was barely enough of those Maliri rats here to crew a garbage scow. I didn’t even get to fire a shot!”

The Galkiran Matriarch looked at her in surprise. “The city was deserted?”

Camine scowled and nodded. “They knew we were coming and abandoned this wretched hovel... perhaps two days ago at most.”

Valeria cast a sweeping glance over the desolate ruins, her brow furrowing. “This isn’t just some rural village. With suburbs this extensive, the city must have had a population of at least five million thralls. So where did they all go? You can’t evacuate that many people off-world in just a few days.”

The red-skinned woman shrugged with barely-concealed disappointment. “They must have predicted that we’d assault the capital, so they fled and cowered in the other cities. Trust the fleets to steal all our kills.”

Her frown deepening, Valeria was about to question Camine’s theory, but was cut off before she could reply.

“Come, Valeria, it’s time we continued the hunt,” Gahl’kalgor declared, his tone expecting her instant obedience. “My trophy room grows impatient for its next prize.”

She hurried to join him as he walked towards the shuttle, with her cohort of bodyguards falling into step behind her. Gahl’kalgor appeared to be preoccupied with his private thoughts, and made no further effort to converse with his matriarch. Feeling relieved to just be in his close proximity after days spent apart, Valeria was content to remain silent and wait for her Progenitor master to initiate the next conversation.

When they returned to his dreadnought, Gahl’kalgor headed up to the Command Deck, with his dutiful matriarch in attendance. As they entered the Bridge, his gaze was drawn to the holographic display, those piercing eyes burning with a fierce intensity.

“Show me the progress of the other attack group,” he demanded, taking a seat on the command throne. “Have they destroyed that starbase? What news of Baen’thelas?”

As the tactical officer rushed to obey his command, operating the holo-display with deft fingers, the comms officer cleared her throat to draw his attention.

“Yes? What is it?” he asked, glancing her way.

“We have received several communications from Fleet Commander Keylessae,” she explained. “I took the liberty of memorising her messages so that I could give you a concise summary.”

He turned to give her his full attention. “Tell me.”

“Our forces moved to engage the starbase, but just before they entered the system, the enemy Progenitor appeared.”

“He ambushed them?” Gahl’kalgor muttered, his black gauntlet clenching into a fist. “How long until our Wormhole Generator is ready?”

“It’ll be fully charged in two hours,” the Senior Engineer quickly interjected.

As Gahl’kalgor scowled with irritation, the comms officer continued, “He didn’t attack our ships, my Lord. He attacked his own starbase.”

“What?!” he balked, giving her a sceptical frown. “Why would he do that?”

“I can’t understand his actions either,” the Galkiran replied helplessly. “Is it possible that he’s mentally defective in some way? He has spent the last week deliberately crippling hundreds of our warships; it would have been far simpler to just destroy them.”

“That would explain a lot,” Valeria said softly. “His actions have been bizarre to say the least.”

Gahl’kalgor seriously considered her suggestion for a long moment, grimacing at the thought of facing an unhinged maniac. If that was the case, this Baen’thelas would be even easier to dispatch than he was expecting, and provide no challenge at all.

“How disappointing,” he muttered, feeling robbed of what could have been a glorious victory.

Deciding to take a look at Keylessae’s messages himself, his gauntleted hand activated the comms interface built into the black chair. It appeared a moment later, the glowing panel listing all the recent incoming messages. He saw the several updates from his Fleet Commander, but below them were dozens of urgent messages from Captain Narzera, who led the scout group ahead of the other fleets.

He opened the latest, and scanned through the text, his scowl deepening as he read onwards. Narzera was almost begging his matriarch to respond, the scout captain desperate to notify her that she had located his rival’s throne world. Gahl’kalgor glanced back through the list of ignored correspondence, each one requesting he be informed that Captain Narzera had successfully completed her mission.

Gritting his teeth with barely suppressed fury, Gahl’kalgor followed Narzera’s instructions on how to tap into the hidden data feed she had discovered. When he glanced up at the holographic map again, it showed an unfamiliar star system, not far from his current location. The map teemed with Maliri ships, the golden-hulled vessels surrounding what was obviously Baen’thelas’ homeworld. What erased any doubts about its authenticity, was the presence of a fleet of black-hulled thrall warships, which had moved into a defensive position around the planet.

He slowly turned his accusatory gaze towards Valeria. “Why?” he asked bluntly.

She looked stricken, her beautiful scarlet face a picture of desperation and contrition. “Ashryn...” she pleaded, unable to meet his furious glare. “You were ignoring me... and I was jealous.”

After all the effort he’d just made to raise her spirits, this was a galling betrayal of his trust. Gahl’kalgor delved into his psychic network, and located the dazzling crimson flame that represented Valeria. Focusing his will on that blazing light, he knew that it would only take a bare minimum of effort to snuff the life out of his rebellious matriarch. He savoured the moment, his fury at her insolence demanding the severest of punishments.

Valeria shivered with dread, sensing that her soul was only seconds away from oblivion. She gave Gahl’kalgor one last look of profound regret, then her shoulders slumped as she waited for the inevitable.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, resigned to her fate. “I love you... I always have.”

He froze, her sincere declaration triggering deeply repressed memories. He remembered Delsanra kneeling down and pulling him into a hug, enveloping a young boy in pure maternal affection. His mother used to tell him that she loved him... told every day until...

“Go,” he snarled, pointing towards the reinforced doors. “Get out of my sight.”

Valeria blinked in surprise, astonished that she’d been spared. Then she bolted from the Bridge, not wanting to risk doing anything that might change his mind.

\*\*\*

“Look!” Jade exclaimed, pointing at the holographic tactical map. “They’re leaving!”

John stared up at the ten Galkiran fleets, and sure enough, the hundreds of black warships were turning away from the field of wreckage surrounding Genwynn station. They ramped up power to their engines, then raced towards the edge of the gravity well at full speed.

“It looks like they took the bait,” Calara observed, noting the abrupt change in course from their previous flight path. “They’re heading directly towards Kythshara.”

“How long until they run into any colonised planets?” John asked, gesturing towards the map. “Can we check?”

“Two days,” Alyssa interjected, without needing to verify it on the map. “51 hours and 17 minutes to be precise, based on maximum thrall hyper-warp speeds.”

“What about the other attack group?” he asked, turning to look at his gifted XO. “How long until they reach Kythshara?”

“If the thrall armada is still at Venkarys, and they’ve just left too, then thirteen hours,” she replied with certainty. “But the dreadnought might be ready to use its wormhole generator in as little as thirty minutes, depending on when they did their last jump.”

“Shit...” John muttered, thinking how exposed Kythshara was at that moment.

“Ours won’t be fully recharged until 4PM,” Dana informed him, looking as worried as he felt. “What if this asshole jumps straight to Kythshara now he knows where it is? We haven’t even got the defence grid fixed yet. He’ll be able to just sail right up to the planet and blast the hell out of all the cities. Faye won’t stand a chance!”

Rachel hesitated then spoke up confidently, “From everything we know about typical Progenitor behaviour, that would be wildly out of character. Their typical modus operandi is to throw thrall fleets at the enemy, while monitoring the battle from the rear.” Making eye contact with John, she continued, “I believe you told us that Rahn’hagon was outraged that Larn’kelnar attacked him directly?”

“Yeah, I’m guessing that was a drastic breach of protocol,” he agreed. “From what we know about fights between Progenitors, they grind each other’s thrall forces down in prolonged wars of attrition, until just the dreadnought is left. Then they hunt down the weakened Progenitor and finish him off.”

“Wait... that doesn’t make any sense,” Calara suddenly objected. “How are they able to track down a dreadnought if it’s cloaked? They wouldn’t be able to stop the losing Progenitor from just running away and hiding.”

“There were lots of pictures in Mael’nerak’s palace showing dreadnoughts being blown up,” Tashana said, recalling the long gallery displaying his many victories. “So there must be a way to stop them escaping.”

“Mael’nerak built the Lianelis Saevath network,” Irillith reminded them. “So he obviously developed sensor tech that was strong enough to detect cloaked dreadnoughts.”

Tashana shook her head. “I got the distinct impression that all those victories were from before Mael’nerak wiped out the Achonin. If he left the Shroud to finish off any Progenitors that attacked him here, then wouldn’t Xar’aziuth just take control of him again?”

“She’s right,” Alyssa concluded. “Larn’kelnar and Rahn’hagon were adamant about not leaving the Shroud. That must mean ordinary Progenitors have some way to track and destroy a defeated enemy in his dreadnought.”

A shiver ran down John’s spine, and a kernel of knowledge unlocked in his mind. “The Soulforge,” he stated without a flicker of doubt. “When that’s destroyed, it cripples the dreadnought’s Stealth Field Generator. Everything built by a Soulforge is psychically connected.”

“So this Progenitor wants to locate and destroy your Soulforge, to stop us from cloaking the Invictus?” Calara mused aloud. “No wonder the thrall fleets are all making a beeline for Kythshara.”

“Except Larn’kelnar already dismantled his Soulforge,” Tashana said, her brow furrowed with concentration. “And we’re using a Stealth Field Generator that we salvaged from Rahn’hagon’s crashed dreadnought.”

Alyssa gave John a wry smile. “If these red-skinned thralls are from the same species that your father previously claimed, then that means our Stealth Field Generator was built using the same Soulforge as theirs.”

John considered that for a moment, then nodded. “Yeah, apparently so.”

“In that case, we just need to locate his throne world and destroy that Soulforge,” Calara said, sharing a look of relief with John.

“We should also build a replacement cloaking device as soon as we get the chance,” Dana suggested. “We don’t want to accidentally wreck ours when we blast his Soulforge.”

“I don’t think we’ll have the time or opportunity before he attacks Kythshara,” John said, pondering the impending battle. “But if we can force him to retreat, at least now we know how to make his dreadnought vulnerable.”

A flicker of confusion crossed Sakura’s face. “Hey, I just thought of something. We already destroyed Larn’kelnar’s Soulforge, so does that mean your father can’t use the cloaking device in Larn’kelnar’s dreadnought anymore?”

Dana giggled and shook her head. “Nope, because we swiped Larn’kelnar’s original Soulforge; it’s the one down in my Workshop. If we did destroy it, then Rahn would be in deep shit.”

Jehanna had been trying to follow which ships were connected to the different Soulforges, and she finally groaned in protest. “This is all really confusing.”

Rachel gave her a sympathetic smile. “It is a bit of a convoluted mess. I suppose that’s our own fault for stealing anything that isn’t nailed down.”

“We *requisitioned* it,” Alyssa corrected her. “We’re the good guys, so that makes it okay.”

The girls all laughed, and John rolled his eyes at the blonde, but he shared their buoyant mood. They’d managed to avoid a brutal battle that would have cost millions of Galkiran and Maliri lives. It was reassuring proof he’d made the right decision to protect Genwynn station, even if it came at the terrible cost of abandoning Venkarys.

He was sorely tempted to jump back to the Maliri planet as soon as the Wormhole Generator recharged, to see if there was anything he could still do to save them... but the rational part of him knew it was too late. All they could do now was prepare for the upcoming battle at Kythshara. There would be plenty of time to mourn the dead if they somehow managed to survive this invasion.

Rising from his chair, John swept his gaze over the Combat Bridge and saw that he had everyone’s attention. “Alright, let’s get moving, ladies. We’ve got a lot to do before we jump back to Kythshara.”

“What’s the plan?” Dana asked, listening closely.

“First of all, we need to pick up Marika and Neysa from Genwynn station,” he replied, glancing at his Nymph matriarch. “Jade, do you want to fly me over there in the Raptor? I need to have one last chat with the Maliri elders.”

“Of course, Master!” she eagerly agreed, springing up from the pilot’s chair.

“While we’re visiting the station, I want the rest of you to deactivate the minefield and retrieve all the spider mines. I’m sure they’ll be very useful when we’re defending Kythshara.”

“I was just about to suggest that,” Calara said, nodding her approval. “I’ve already started to plan out where we can utilise them to maximise their impact.”

“Do you want me to modify the mines back to their original settings?” Irillith asked, giving him a meaningful look.

John hesitated, then glanced at Calara. “What do you think? Is there any chance we can cripple thrall ships to keep them out of this final battle, instead of destroying them?”

“Leave it with me,” the Latina said with a reassuring smile. “I’ll try to spare as many Galkiran lives as possible.”

“Thank you,” he said gratefully. “Make the changes then, Irillith.”

The Maliri acknowledged his order with a nod. “Will do.”

“Hey, John,” Dana called out. “When you’re speaking to the elders, would you mind asking them a big favour?”

“Sure, what do you need?”

“Well, it sucks that those Quantum Devastators are too wedged in for us to swipe, but Genwynn also has a bunch of Quantum Flux Cannon batteries. Can you ask Elder Darthas if he’d mind lending us a few?”

Calara perked up and nodded enthusiastically. “If we can borrow four of those cannons, we can replace the ones we took from the defence grid. Those turrets will bring a lot of firepower to the battle.”

“Good idea. It won’t hurt to ask,” John agreed, before looking around at his crew. “Anything else?”

“Can I come with you?” Jehanna requested. “I’d like to get some footage of the survivors on the station.”

“You’re welcome to join us,” he replied with a warm smile. “Alyssa, can you oversee the mine recovery operation?”

“I knew I’d get the short straw,” she replied with a playful pout. “By the way, you should change into your Mael’nerak outfit before you go. It wouldn’t hurt to make a good impression when you’re asking the Maliri if you can borrow their big guns.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” he admitted. “Bye for now ladies, I’ll be back soon.”

Everyone staying on the Bridge waved goodbye, except for Jehanna and Jade, who accompanied him up the ramp. They split up in the armoury, with the girls taking the express grav-tubes down to the Raptor, while John removed his Paragon armour. He then ascended in the other set of grav-tubes, so that he could change into his tailor-made suit.

By the time he joined his two companions in the gunship, Jade had powered up the engines and was ready for immediate departure. The Raptor lifted off the deck as soon as the airlock closed behind him, then roared out of the Invictus’ hangar and banked towards Genwynn. Jade skilfully weaved the nimble craft through the sea of debris, and quickly closed the distance on the gleaming white battlestation.

“Ah, the last member of J squad makes his grand appearance,” the dusky reporter announced, as she filmed him entering the cockpit.

“J squad?” he asked quizzically.

Their Nymph pilot called back over her shoulder, “John, Jade, and Jehanna!”

He chuckled at the new nickname, then took a seat beside their resident war correspondent.

“I’m fortunate to be joined by Lord Baen’thelas, whose clever ruse just averted what would have been a bloody battle at Genwynn station,” she said, adopting her formal interviewing voice. “How does it feel to have saved a million lives this morning?”

“I’m relieved more than anything,” he explained, meeting her curious gaze. “My main priority is always going to be protecting the Maliri, but I don’t want to have to slaughter thrall forces in the process. The Galkirans have been psychically indoctrinated by the Progenitor that claimed them, and if there’s any chance I can spare their lives, I want to take it.”

“If sparing those Galkiran fleets then led to the deaths of more Maliri in the future, would you still have made the same decision?” Jehanna asked pointedly.

John was caught off-guard by her probing question and paused to carefully consider his reply. “My answer’s still the same. I wouldn’t have spared those thrall fleets if there was any danger of them immediately launching an attack on a Maliri colony. But this far out on the border, it’ll be days before they can reach populated worlds. By that time we’ll have dealt with their Progenitor, and can decide how we handle the thrall forces he left behind.”

“So you’re feeling confident of victory?”

“I can see three probable outcomes from the upcoming battle at Kythshara. Number one: we immobilise as many thrall ships as possible, then force the Progenitor to retreat when he realises the battle is lost. Number two: I goad him into a duel on the planet’s surface, and manage to defeat him in personal combat. Number three: we fight a duel, but he defeats me. Whichever way the battle plays out, this invasion will be over.”

Jehanna raised an eyebrow and asked, “What if he does retreat from the battle, but then immediately joins the thrall fleets we duped at Genwynn. Won’t that put Maliri colonies in dire jeopardy?”

“No, because they aren’t his priority. His main objective is to obliterate Kythshara and destroy me,” John explained. “The scenario you raised is the most likely outcome, but by the time the second Galkiran armada could reach Kythshara, the next battle would play out very differently. The Maliri will have returned with at least a dozen Larathyran fleets, and many more are being boarded and captured as we speak. We’ve been fighting a delaying action for the last week to give the Maliri enough time to seize all those warships.”

“Won’t the Larathyrans have something to say about that?” she asked airily.

John was aware that the reporter already knew exactly what had happened to the Larathyran crew, but any potential audience for this interview would have no idea.

“No, because all the Larathyrans forces were slaughtered by the Progenitor that claimed them. They were fiercely loyal, and would have fought to the death for him, but he betrayed their loyalty and drained the life out of them to augment his psychic powers. The Larathyran fleets are mausoleums now, filled with the countless corpses of Larn’kelnar’s victims. That’s the kind of inhuman monsters we’re dealing with here.”

“That’s horrifying,” Jehanna said quietly. “I think I speak for all of us, when I wish you the best possible luck for the battle tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” he replied, matching her sombre tone. “I know exactly what’s at stake. I’ll do everything I can to protect the Maliri from the ruthless cruelty of the Progenitors.”

Jehanna gave him a thumbs up as she ended the video recording. “That was amazing! Well done!”

“A bit of a warning would have been nice,” he said with a mock frown. “You weren’t pulling your punches with those questions.”

She quickly shook her head. “No, it was much better like this. The public loves seeing authenticity in their leaders, and you could tell by your answers that you were being completely sincere. The Maliri will love getting an insight into this side of you.”

He shrugged. “You’re the expert. I’ll trust your judgement.”

Jehanna beamed at him in delight, then her expression shifted into a thoughtful frown. “We might have to rerecord one bit though. It might be sensible to use a different phrase than ‘inhuman’. Strictly speaking, the Maliri are inhuman too. Is ‘inmaliri’ a word? If not, could we start using it anyway?”

Turning in her seat, Jade called back over her shoulder, “John’s the only Progenitor allowed ‘in Maliri’. Isn’t that right, Master?”

He cracked a smile at her joke. “I think you have your answer.”

Jehanna laughed and nodded in agreement. “Alright, we’ll just leave it as it is.”

“We’ll be docking with Genwynn in thirty seconds,” Jade warned them. There was a teasing lilt to her voice as she added, “Oh my goodness, that’s a lot of people...”

Rising from his seat, John walked over to stand beside the Nymph. From there he had a much better view out of the cockpit, and sure enough, the docking bay was packed with an enormous crowd.

\*You knew they’d be waiting for me,\* he accused Alyssa. \*That’s why you told me to wear this suit.\*

\*Of course,\* she freely admitted. \*As soon as you decided to visit Genwynn, Jade told her sisters, then Neysa informed the Maliri elders. They’re all very excited to see you.\*

He groaned, then turned to squint accusingly at Jehanna. “I suppose you’re in on this too.”

“Hey, I was completely honest with you,” she said, holding her hands palm up to protest her innocence. “I’m here to get footage of the survivors... as they cheer for the hero of the hour.”

“I should have known. I keep forgetting you’re all as thick as thieves.”

Jehanna grinned at him, appearing quite unapologetic. “I do love chatting to the girls about fluffy kittens and pretty dresses.”

“It didn’t take you long to settle right in,” he grumbled.

“Ten seconds, Master,” Jade informed him. “I’ll reverse into the docking bay so that you can leave by the rear ramp.”

“Thanks, honey,” he said, patting her shoulder. “I better not keep them waiting.”

He strode out of the cockpit with Jehanna following close behind. They walked through to the cargo bay, and John gestured towards the ramp controls, activating the mechanism. He could actually hear the conversation in the crowd drop to an expectant hush, as the ramp began to lower, and the Maliri awaited his arrival.

John walked out onto the ramp as it descended the last few feet, and his appearance was met with a jubilant roar. He’d grown used to appearing before vast hordes of female Maliri, so the baritone cheers struck a very different chord. Unable to stop himself from being caught up in the infectious enthusiasm of the Maliri, John broke into a grin, and acknowledge the crowd with a friendly wave.

It took some time for the cheering to fade, as the men celebrated living through a bleak predicament that most of them never expected to survive. The trio of Maliri elders emerged from the crowd, accompanied by Jade’s two sisters, and the catgirls bounded over to greet him with a kiss on the cheek. That only rallied their audience for another round of applause, much to the amusement of the three elder Maliri.

“I must admit, you had us worried for a moment, Lord Baen’thelas,” Elder Aldorellan confided. “When your ship started shooting at Genwynn station, I didn’t know what to think.”

“Sorry about that,” John apologised, raising his voice to be heard over the cheers. “It was a spur of the moment decision, and I didn’t have time to warn you.”

“No apologies are necessary,” Elder Darthas said, giving him a wry smile. “These two lovely ladies explained what was happening.”

Elder Lordual nodded enthusiastically. “That was an ingenious plan! Hiding a battlestation in a debris field of your own making... I was holding my breath waiting for the Galkirans to discover our duplicity!”

“My main priority was always to try to protect everyone on Genwynn. The safest way was to avoid a battle entirely,” John explained.

Elder Aldorellan patted him on the shoulder. “You’ve done very well, young man. Some of the citizens here still harboured doubts about you, but I’m glad to say that I always believed you had our best interests at heart.”

John was quite moved by the Maliri elder’s warm words of praise. Aldorellan reminded him of his grandfather, but it was a long time since he’d heard that kind of encouragement after their relationship had become strained.

“Thank you,” he said gruffly, before glancing back towards the gunship. “Can you three spare a few minutes to chat? There’s a couple of things I’d like to discuss with you in private.”

“We’re all in your debt, Lord Baen’thelas,” Lordual stated. “You may monopolise as much time as you require.”

With a final wave to the crowd, John led the three Maliri into the Raptor.

“It’s a pleasure to see you again, Jehanna,” Darthas said politely.

She looked at him in surprise. “I’m amazed you remembered my name. I don’t think I said a word when we last met, as I was too wrapped up in listening to the conversation. I can’t have made a very good first impression.”

“On the contrary, you all made a lasting impression,” Darthas disagreed. “The exalted company you keep speaks volumes about the remarkable person you clearly are.”

“Thank you,” she said, feeling uncharacteristically self-conscious.

John led them through to the cockpit, then gestured for the Maliri to make themselves comfortable on the curved row of seats. When they’d all sat down, he turned the co-pilot’s chair so that it was facing them, and sat down too.

“Now that Genwynn station isn’t in any immediate danger, we’ll be leaving soon and returning to the Maliri homeworlds to protect them from the invaders,” he patiently explained. “There’s a second Galkiran armada, about the same size as this one, but they’re led by the Progenitor in his dreadnought.”

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Elder Aldorellan immediately volunteered.

John nodded in confirmation. “We’re setting up a trap around Mael’nerak’s old throne world, but we stripped several defensive turrets of their Quantum Flux Cannons to arm the Invictus. Is there any chance we could borrow some guns from Genwynn station? They’ll make a big difference in the battle, and I promise we’ll return them to you afterwards if we win.”

“And if you lose, we’re all doomed anyway?” the venerable Maliri concluded.

He hesitated for a moment, then nodded. “Basically, yes.”

Aldorellan let out a dry-humoured snort. “I appreciate your honesty, Lord Baen’thelas.”

John shrugged his shoulders with helpless resignation. “Sorry for being so blunt, but the clock’s ticking and we can’t afford to waste time with the usual diplomatic dance.”

“No, I do genuinely appreciate it. Far better to be concise and efficient; let’s us get to the point much quicker,” Aldorellan clarified. He glanced at his two colleagues, who both nodded in approval. “We’d be fools to deny your request, my Lord. You have our permission to take whatever you require from Genwynn station.”

“That’s amazing, thank you.”

“You’re fighting to protect the Maliri from extinction,” Elder Lordual said soberly. “We would like you to consider us your steadfast allies in this endeavour.”

“I’d like that too, and I hope you see me in the same light,” John said, rising from his chair to extend his hand in friendship to each of them in turn.

“We do,” Elder Darthas stated as he shook his hand. “And we wish you every success in the battle against this Progenitor.”

John was quiet for a moment, then admitted, “There’ll be more after him. This is just the beginning.”

“Then we’ll stand by your side to defeat them too,” Aldorellan declared.

“I really appreciate the unreserved support. It means a lot,” John said gratefully. He paused, and looked at each Maliri in turn. “There is one other thing I want to talk about. It’s not urgent, but I’d like you to give it some serious thought.”

“Name it,” Darthas said without hesitation.

“I’d like you to consider dropping the secrecy surrounding the planets you’ve colonised, and the fleets you’re maintaining,” John said, before pausing to watch their reaction.

The three men all grimaced, struggling to contain their instinctive aversion to unveiling a secret they’d helped maintain for centuries.

Aldorellan looked him in the eyes, and asked simply, “Why?”

“For a few reasons,” John began. “First and foremost, Queen Edraele already knows everything.”

That revelation certainly had a dramatic effect on the three Elder Maliri. Despite having seen the new and improved version of the House Valaden matriarch, Edraele had a terrifying reputation.

“You told her all our secrets?” Lordual asked, unable to keep the accusatory tone from his voice.

Seeing their distress, John gave them a rueful look. “I appreciate that it might feel like a betrayal of trust, but it really couldn’t be helped. I’m telepathically connected to Edraele; she can listen to all my thoughts, and is privy to every conversation I have. As she’s one of my most trusted advisors, I try not to keep any information from her.”

“What about the other matriarchs?” Darthas asked, staring at him in shock. “Do they know everything too?”

\*I haven’t informed them yet,\* Edraele confided. \*I thought it might be prudent to wait for your approval first.\*

“No, just Edraele for now,” John replied. “As well as all the Lionesses on my crew.”

Aldorellan’s shoulders slumped in defeat. “So it’s just a matter of time until word gets out then.”

“They won’t tell anyone, not unless I give them permission,” John said confidently. “But I’m partly asking this as a personal favour. I don’t like keeping secrets from the women in my life, and I’d like to share this information with the Council of Matriarchs.”

“What was your other reason for asking?” Darthas asked astutely.

“When all the males from your colonies return to the homeworlds, how long do you think it’ll be before they start sharing all their secrets with the women in their lives? I can tell you from experience that Maliri females can be very astute, and very persuasive. It won’t be long before rumours are flying around like wildfire... and wouldn’t it be better to start this new future for your people with open honesty?”

Aldorellan considered that for a moment, then let out a resigned chuckle. “You’re right. Trying to keep this secret now is like trying to carry water in your hands. Sooner or later trickles of truth are going to spill out until there’s nothing left to hold onto.”

Darthas nodded in agreement. “What exactly did you have in mind? How would you like to reveal our secrets to the females on the homeworld?”

“I just want to share this information with my matriarchs,” John explained. “I’m happy to let you discuss this with them, and decide between you what the best solution is for the Maliri.”

“I’m sure we can accommodate your wishes,” Darthas said, glancing back at his fellow elders, who both nodded. “Can you give us a few days to inform the other guild leaders, and obtain their consent? You’ve made some very convincing arguments, so I’m sure they’ll agree.”

“Of course,” John willingly agreed. “I don’t want this to be a bone of contention between us. I’d just like to be open and honest with the matriarchs.”

“You trust the matriarchs implicitly, don’t you?” Aldorellan asked, studying him perceptively.

“I’m still getting to know the recent replacements,” he admitted. “But I think you’ll be surprised at how different they are from their predecessors.”

“We saw. You showed us that video message from the homeworlds,” Lordual reminded him with a wry smile. “Nineteen matriarchs... you’re either the bravest man I’ve ever met, or-”

“The most foolish?” John interjected with a self-conscious grin. “Probably the latter.”

“You interrupted before I could finish. I would never dream of calling you a fool, Lord Baen’thelas,” Lordual said light-heartedly.

“I’m sure the thought never crossed your mind,” John joked. “But in any case, I won’t see the matriarchs until after the upcoming battle, and I’d like to tell them in person. That gives you at least a day to discuss this with your colleagues.”

“That’s more than enough time,” Aldorellan said magnanimously. “Besides, you discovered all our secrets by yourself, so we’re hardly in a position to swear you to silence. We do appreciate your openness with us however.”

“It’s the best way to be between friends and allies,” John declared. “Anyway, that’s everything I needed to talk to you about. Unless there’s anything else that you want to discuss, I better head back to the Invictus. We have a lot of work to do before we jump back to defend the homeworlds.”

The three elders all wished him good luck, then exchanged farewells with the girls before disembarking from the Raptor. After escorting them off the gunship, John returned to the cockpit and sprawled in the co-pilot’s chair.

“That went well,” he said, smiling with relief.

“They were very grateful to you, Master,” Marika stated, as she padded over to join him.

He opened his arms for the tabby striped catgirl and welcomed her onto his lap. “I didn’t do all that much. We were very lucky the Galkirans didn’t attempt to fly through the debris field. That would’ve been awkward if they clanged into Genwynn’s hull.”

Neysa smiled at him, but shook her head. “If we hadn’t intervened, Genwynn station would have been destroyed and every Maliri aboard would have been slain. They all know that you saved their lives, Master.”

“I’m glad we were able to make a difference,” John said, as he stroked Marika’s hair, making her purr with contentment. “I like the elders a lot. Aldorellan reminds me of my grandfather.”

“I would have liked to meet him,” Jehanna said softly.

John sighed and leaned back in the chair. “We were barely on speaking terms before my grandparents died. They both blamed me for running off to join the military instead of taking over the restaurant. They were forced to sell the place when it got too much for them by the end.”

“You made the right choice, Master,” Jade told him, taking a hand off the flightstick to lovingly caress his arm. “A chef wouldn’t have been able to save the galaxy.”

“But I could have offered to cook up a tasty Fettuccine if the Progenitors agreed to leave us alone,” John joked to relieve the melancholy mood.

“It’s not too late to still give that a try; everything you make is delicious.” Jehanna looked at him with sympathy and added, “I’m sure your grandparents would have been very proud of you now.”

Marika tilted her head up and gazed at him with her expressive brown eyes. “But that’s not the same as actually hearing them say it. Right, Master?”

He kissed the tip of her nose. “I didn’t realise I’d made you as smart as Neysa.”

The catgirl snuggled into him, hugging John tight. “You have a new family now, and we’re all very proud of you.”

“You were right, it is nice to hear it,” he said, returning the hug.

They lapsed into comfortable silence for the rest of the flight back to the Invictus, where Jade guided the Raptor into the Secondary Hangar. John and the girls were ready to disembark as soon as it touched down, and when he opened the airlock, he found Alyssa and Calara waiting for him.

“Welcome back, handsome,” Alyssa said, greeting him with a warm kiss.

“Thanks, honey,” he replied. “That was good news about the Quantum Flux Cannons. I’ll go and get changed into my Lion armour, then I can help remove those guns.”

“About that,” Alyssa said, breaking into a teasing smile. “Calara had an interesting idea...”

“I’m all ears,” John said, turning to the brunette with interest.

“The elders gave us permission to take whatever we needed from Genwynn, correct?” Calara asked, her eyes sparkling with anticipation. “Do you think they’d object if we stripped *all* the guns from the battlestation?”

He looked at the Latina in surprise, then laughed at her brazen grin. “I better call them and check.”

\*\*\*