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“Almost there,” Alyssa said, glancing up at the Sector Map.

She leaned forward to tap an icon on John’s console and switched the holographic display to the local System Map for a clearer view. The Invictus raced towards the gravity well of a red dwarf star, where the Brimorians had deployed a temporary comms beacon. It was the last link in a communications chain that snaked across the Kintark Empire to the Enclave border, allowing the armada to keep in contact with Deep Lord Athgiloi.

John watched as the Invictus roared across the smaller focused map, travelling at twenty-four times the hyper-warp speed his old freighter could achieve. He still remembered what it was like to plod up to a star in the Fool’s Gold, then drop out at the edge of the gravity well and slowly trudge his way in-system. Operating as a solitary merchant had suited him at the time, giving him plenty of opportunity for quiet introspection away from the ravages of war.

When the girls had joined him, they’d all gone through the Change... but as Alyssa had pointed out, each of them had changed him too. They’d unlocked his psychic legacy and massively increased the eldritch power he had at his disposal, but the changes to his personality were far deeper and more profound than that. Before he met Alyssa, John had been shut off from the galaxy, withdrawn from the few remaining people in his life and living like a recluse. He couldn’t imagine going back to that lonely existence now, not after being surrounded by all these wonderful women that he cared about so deeply.

He gave the blonde and brunette sitting on his lap an affectionate squeeze and received a distracted smile from each of them for his efforts. They turned back to watch the holo-map and he joined them in staring at the Brimorian comms beacon. It was protected by blue and purple armour plating, the communications device only slightly larger than the Raptor gunship.

The Invictus roared past, moving at incredible speed, and the effect on the comms beacon was catastrophic. It was smashed aside by an invisible titanic force, shattering the armoured satellite into a million pieces. The hyper-warp bow wave tossed the debris around like a cork in a storm, scattering fragments of the device in a wide arc when the wake subsided.

“Now that was impressive...” John murmured, shaking his head in awe. “But I can’t helping feel like an obnoxious jackass in a speedboat.”

Alyssa turned around and kissed him. “Next time, we’ll wear bikinis to really look the part.”

Calara didn’t join in the banter, as she was too busy studying the obliterated wreckage in fascination. “I know you said the bow wave was destructive, but that was far more powerful than I thought...”

“I wasn’t avoiding all those freighters back at Olympus just for fun,” the blonde replied with a wry smile.

There was a flash of red on the much smaller Sector Map that floated above the Command Console. Alyssa leaned across to expand the holographic image so that it replaced the System Map in the centre of the Bridge. They were now close enough to detect sensor contacts located in the Kintark Homeworld and the Scan Array was picking up what had to be the Brimorian fleet.

“Thar she blows...” John said quietly, staring at the alien armada.

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“We’re approaching the Kinta system, Shoal Master,” the helmsman announced, his call echoing around the Bridge of the Retribution from the Depths.

Kaelotegh watched as his last three intact fleets dropped out of hyper-warp on the outskirts of the Imperial homeworld. It might have been his imagination playing tricks on him, but the Enclave warships seemed to huddle together for protection after being cruelly abused for hours. With a worried frown, he turned his attention to the Kintark defences, searching for any sign of more traps.

The birthplace of the Kintark species was a lush green world on the second orbital track around a golden yellow star. It was the only inhabited planet in the system, with one large volcanic world and seven multi-coloured gas giants to keep it company. While the lack of colonisable planets had hurt the Kintark Empire’s expansion during its fledgling years, having so many sources for helium fuel had subsequently allowed them to spread throughout the galaxy at an impressive rate.

There were scores of gas mining stations in the system, but not much in the way of defensive platforms, the Kintark homeworld never having come under threat before. The one exception to this was Mar’Trinark Shipyard on the third orbital path around the star, which loomed over the strip-mined volcanic world that had provided materials for the Kintark fleets for centuries. Arrayed before the enormous space station were a broad mass of sensor contacts, which had been expertly deployed in defensive formations.

The leader of the Brimorian invasion force stared in silence at the Kintark defences, his clawed fingers drumming on his console. The rapid clicks of his claws striking the surface had picked up an extra tap at the end, a nervous twitch in his index finger causing it to click twice. He flinched reflexively when he spotted a broad swathe of asteroids on the fourth orbital track around the star, their proximity dangerously close to the Brimorian’s invasion route to the heart of the system.

Like the rest of the officers on the bridge, Shoal-Commander Libtegh waited patiently for the Shoal Master to begin deploying the armada into combat formations. He glanced at his commanding officer with concern, hoping that the legendary Brimorian leader had something innovative planned to deal with the Kintark final stand... but Kaelotegh stayed worryingly silent.

Libtegh stepped closer and whispered, “Shoal Master, what are your orders?”

Kaelotegh ignored him, his claws tapping out that maddening beat.

Clearing his throat, the Shoal-Commander tried again. “Perhaps we should sent scouts into the asteroid field? It would be the ideal location for an ambush. The Kintark could have concealed more warships inside the cover of the belt.”

“That’s just what he wants us to think!” Kaelotegh suddenly blurted out, a disconcerting gleam in his eyes. “As soon as we hold position to investigate, there’ll be some kind of trap... or an ambush! No, I’m not falling for his clever tricks this time! I’m going to do something he’d never anticipate in a hundred lifetimes!”

Feeling a sense of dread, Libtegh had to ask, “What are you orders?”

“We’ll stop at nothing until we slaughter the mastermind behind all our misfortunes!” the Shoal Master declared, his command reverberating around the unsettled silence on the Bridge. Opening the fleet command interface he sent an order to the entire armada. “Set course for the enemy and increase engines to full thrust!”

“Shoal Master...” Libtegh said cautiously. “What about our carrier groups? They won’t be able to match our speed.”

“They won’t need to,” he replied with a confidant smile. Issuing more orders, he commanded the carrier groups to launch all their fighters. “The strike craft will still be able to join our charge!”

Libtegh darted a doubtful glance back at the hulking heavy carriers at the rear of the formation. “But they’ll be left undefended...”

Kaelotegh leapt up from his command chair and pointed a clawed finger at the Kintark forces deployed protectively in front of Kinta. “That won’t matter when we smash their fleets and kill my nemesis! He’ll never expect such a bold strike!”

All around his flagship, the Brimorian forces powered up their engines and began their advance. The Shoal Master wasn’t alone in wanting revenge and the Enclave battle groups surged towards the Kintark, eager to have their vengeance against their tormentors.

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From where High Prelate Zorlin stood on the raised Command Platform, he had an impressive view over the Bridge Pit of the Breklan'tohok. Two-dozen Kintark officers sat at their stations without saying so much as a word, each and every one of them watching and waiting in the gloom. He could feel the tension in his comrades and knew exactly how they felt. With the massive battlecarrier operating on minimum power, he felt incredibly vulnerable hiding from the Brimorian invaders, expecting them to launch an attack towards his position at any moment.

The sensor grid surrounding the home system had picked up the Enclave armada as they approached and Zorlin had been astonished at the reduced size of the force. Based on preliminary reports from the border, the Brimorians had invaded Imperial territory with at least six reinforced battle groups. Given the perilous state of the Kintark defence fleets after the disastrous war with the Terran Federation, the Enclave had sent more than enough forces to wipe out the Empire... but now they’d been reduced to half that number.

Zorlin marvelled at the effectiveness of the Lion’s defensive plans, which had done an incredible job of delaying or destroying a huge proportion of the enemy forces. He’d faced Admiral John Blake once before on the opposing side of a battlefield... and he almost pitied the Brimorian commander at being in that position now. After the disaster at the Battle of Regulus, fighting the Terran Federation’s champion was an experience that Zorlin never wished to repeat again.

“A thousand blesssingsss to you, Tamalaz the Fortunate... for our alliance with the Lion... and I bessseech you to ensssure it continuesss in perpetuity,” he murmured under his breath.

He was not a pious soul, but Zorlin didn’t believe in taking any chances.

Movement on the glowing System Map drew his attention and the High Prelate stared intently at the enemy forces. He watched the Brimorian destroyers, cruisers, and battleships accelerate to attack speed, and was startled to see them pull away from their carriers. Those hulking vessels at the rear of the group were launching squadrons of fighters, which proceeded to join the Enclave capital ships in their headlong assault on Mar’Trinark Shipyard.

“Why would you leave your carriersss undefended?” he mused aloud, shaking his head in bewilderment.

With no answer forthcoming from his Brimorian counterpart, he turned to address the Bridge Pit. The well-trained crew saw him move into position and they all turned to listen, intrigued and excited to find out what their leader had planned for the invaders.

“Hold thisss posssition until their vanguard are well passst usss,” Zorlin ordered, holding onto the railing that surrounded the platform. “We ssshall ssstrike where they are mossst vulnerable and crusssh the morale of the enemy before the true battle commencesss. Wait for my sssignal...”

He turned to study the map again and watched as the lead Brimorian elements drew level with his position. Zorlin could feel his heart pounding in his chest, a host of factors praying on his mind. Was this some kind of Brimorian trickery to draw him out of hiding? Would the new missiles work as promised? Was the Lion still rushing to aid their defence? The High Prelate tamped down his nerves, knowing that he would soon have the answers to all his questions.

Seeing the Brimorian big guns move past the asteroid field, he allowed himself a toothy grin. “Divert power to the enginesss... 20% thrussst... and bring usss to the edge of the belt. We ssshall punisssh the Brimoriansss for their treachery!”

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Kaelotegh looked on eagerly as his battle-ready fleets bore down on the Kintark forces arrayed before Mar’Trinark Shipyard. Huge numbers of Brimorian fighter squadrons swirled around the destroyer screen at the front of his formation, eager to get to grips with the enemy and establish strike craft supremacy. The Enclave cruisers and battleships were in battle-line formations, set up in massed ranks to exchange devastating broadsides with the enemy.

Even after several fleets had been crippled by running that nightmarish gauntlet to the homeworld, the Brimorians still outnumbered the Kintark nearly two to one. The Shoal Master had brought the carrier assets with him from the last ambushed fleet, the drone mines having targeted line ships rather than the heavy carriers that had been located at the rear of the formation. They were following the same protocol now, the eight enormous capital ships pouring out waves of fighters as they lagged behind the assault warships.

With the significant tech advantage his forces possessed, Kaelotegh was feeling quietly confident about the upcoming battle. Or at least he would be, if not for the niggling doubts left behind after spending hours being tormented by his sadistic nemesis. His black-eyed gaze swept over the Kintark fleets, looking for any sign that something was amiss.

The enemy forces were still too far away from the Brimorian sensor arrays to display them as three dimensional models, but everything about the deployment rang true. Transponder codes identified a Kintark destroyer screen at the front to intercept fighters and missiles. Cruisers and battleships held the centre ground, lined up in vertical stacks to present as many guns to the enemy as possible. At the rear were Kintark light carriers, heavy carriers, and the mighty battlecarrier Breklan'tohok... the flagship of his cunning adversary.

Kaelotegh had seen the Kintark use the infuriating transponder trick all too often, but two things convinced him this was the real enemy he was finally facing. The first was that the Kintark fleet assets exactly matched those that Deep Lord Athgiloi’s spy had reported, even down to the name of the Imperial flagship. The second was that as soon as the Brimorians had entered the system, fighters had been pouring from Mar’Trinark Shipyard... and more importantly... from the Kintark carrier groups within the fleet formations.

No, he was quite certain that this was their elusive foe, cornered and forced to fight a last stand.

“It’s time to end this!” Kaelotegh snarled, his voice carrying over the fleet interface to his battle group commanders. “All ships move to maximum range and fire at will!”

Shoal-Commander Libtegh glanced at his leader and frowned. Kaelotegh’s fierce declaration would have been inspiring, if not for the discordant drumming of his claws that had continued without pause for the last ten minutes. Despite the Shoal Master showing worrying signs of instability, Libtegh knew that the nightmarish campaign would soon be concluded. He glanced up at the System Map and saw that they were now close enough for their sensors to start displaying the forward elements of the Kintark forces.

Expecting to see the green iridescent armour plating that was distinctive to Kintark warships, Libtegh was surprised to see a row of squat brown vessels. He frowned in confusion and leaned closer to stare at the ugly ships, then his eyes widened in alarm.

“Shoal Master... they’re tugs!” he blurted out, gripping his leader’s arm.

Kaelotegh had been staring with feral intensity at the Breklan'tohok and his brow furrowed in confusion. “What?”

“That destroyer screen... they’re just a bunch of tugboats!” Libtegh exclaimed, watching in shock as more Kintark ships were revealed as holographic images.

Just like the tugs, the next set of warships were not what they appeared to be either... showing scores of freighters masquerading as Imperial cruisers. The Brimorian officers gaped at the holographic images in horror as the Kintark battleships turned out to be blocky fuel haulers.

“No, that’s impossible!” Kaelotegh gasped, his voice riven with fear. “What about all the fighters?! There must be carriers in that group!”

It turned out that all the heavy carriers were merely passenger liners, their broad hulls covered in mag-clamped strike craft. Every so often, a squadron would detach and peel away, fooling anyone watching them on sensors that they were being launched from a carrier.

“Where in the depths is he?!” the Shoal Master raged, grinding in his teeth in fury as the battlecruiser Breklan'tohok turned out to be a huge garbage scow.

“Behind us, Shoal Master!” Libtegh managed to gasp in warning, fear constricting his throat.

Kaelotegh’s head snapped around to stare at the edge of the asteroid belt, where an endless sea of red sensor contacts had emerged. Brimorian vessels were close enough to those contacts to identify them without relying on transponders and the real enemy defence fleet materialised amongst the chunks of rock. Unfortunately, the vessels close enough to identify them were the eight heavy carriers he’d left behind... those hulking capital ships now horribly exposed to the marauding Kintark.

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Massive thrusters blazed brightly at the stern of the Breklan'tohok, the Imperial flagship at the forefront of the Kintark forces as they sprung their ambush. The hidden fleets ramped up their engines to full power and emerged from the gloom of the asteroid belt, their green armour shimmering as it was bathed in sunlight.

High Prelate Zorlin was transfixed by the holographic map, watching as his ships moved to intercept the heavy carrier group at the rear. The Brimorian capital ships were huge, each of their broad-beamed hulls the home for hundreds of strike craft. They were currently deploying squadrons of fighters, the blue and purple plated interceptors racing ahead to join the rest of the armada in the assault against Mar’Trinark Shipyard.

“Prepare to fire EMP misssilesss at your desssignated targetsss,” Zorlin called out in warning, his clawed fingers tapping icons to allocate enemy carriers to the Kintark cruiser groups.

He kept a careful eye on the ponderous Brimorian vessels, waiting until he was certain that they wouldn’t be able to avoid a missile salvo with evasive manoeuvres. Rather than fleeing directly away from his forces, which would give them the best opportunity to avoid a missile barrage, they were travelling perpendicular to him as they attempted to catch up to the rest of the invaders.

“Launch misssiles!” he called out, his command broadcast over the fleet interface to scores of Kintark cruisers.

The green missiles streaked away, leaving billowing trails behind that rapidly dissipated into the void of space. They raced across the kilometres separating the opposing forces, neatly divided into clusters aimed at each individual capital ship. It was easy to tell the moment the Brimorian carriers realised they were under attack, because they attempted emergency turns to evade the incoming swarm.

Denuded of destroyer escorts that were designed to shoot down exactly these types of weapons, the lumbering heavy carriers were critically vulnerable to missile and torpedo attack. Unfortunately for them, the 1500m-long capital ships were also far too sluggish to dodge out of the path of the incoming missiles. The salvo pierced through sturdy shields that were incapable of holding them at bay, which was followed a second later by sharp detonations against the carriers’ hulls.

If the missiles had been carrying regular payloads, the Brimorian ships would have been showered in green explosions and doused in burning plasma. Against vessels of that vast size, the damage would have been significant, but far from crippling. However, the EMP warheads had a far more sinister purpose, the electro-magnetic blasts shorting out electrical systems and plunging the craft into darkness.

Zorlin watched as lights guttered out near each of the impact sites, the heavy carriers shutting down as power modulators and a host of other subsystems were deactivated. Among them were the Brimorians’ highly-advanced shield generators, stripping the heavy carriers of their formidable protective fields.

“All ssshipsss... open fire!”

Plasma Cannon batteries across the battlecarrier’s topdeck unleashed a terrifying broadside of volatile energy at the enemy. The Breklan'tohok’s fusillade added to the blistering storm of plasma blasts aimed at the Brimorians, the roiling green balls streaking towards the stricken carrier group.

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Kaelotegh gaped at the Kintark fleets in disbelief, appalled that he’d fallen prey to such a simplistic ambush, the likes of which a novice Wave-Squire would have easily avoided. Shaking off his shock and humiliation at being made to look like a fool yet again, he began punching commands into the fleet interface.

“Turn us about!” the Shoal Master bellowed at his stunned crew. “The heavy carriers will weather the storm and we can hit the Kintark in the flank. We’ll finally have our vengeance!”

They began to respond to his orders, cutting power to the engines as retro-thrusters flared across the bow on the starboard side, pushing the flagship into as fast a turn as possible. The Retribution from the Depths slowly yawed about, the rest of the ships in the fleet copying the manoeuvre with varying degrees of alacrity.

“By the depths!” Shoal-Commander Libtegh suddenly exclaimed in horror. “They just knocked out the carriers’ shields!”

Looking up from his frantic issuing of commands to the fleet, Kaelotegh frowned at the interruption. With those heavy carriers being targeted by so many Kintark warships, one of them was bound to lose its shields if the entire fleet focused their fire at it.

“Which one?” he muttered in irritation.

Libtegh pointed a trembling hand at the group of stricken capital ships. “All of them!”

“Impossible,” Kaelotegh snorted, searching for the bulbous shape of the heavy carriers on the System Map.

The sight of all eight capital ships... amongst the largest vessels in the armada... all with deactivated shields shook him to the core. What’s more, the synced status data provided by the heavy carriers was not being updated, the information feed having gone as dark as the blacked-out windows along the length of their colossal hulls. He knew at a glance that those ships had lost all power.

Staring at the unresponsive hulks in open-mouthed horror, he blurted out, “How?!”

“A wave of missiles...” Libtegh faltered, as if doubting his own eyes. “I thought they were plasma missiles at first... but they just shut down everything!”

As they looked on in dread, the massed firepower of the entire Kintark defence force opened up on the defenceless heavy carriers. Green plasma bolts rocketed across the gap between the two forces, before slamming into their hulls. The flux field holding the plasma together lost its cohesion over longer distances, but that didn’t make the broadside any less terrifying. The port flanks of all eight Brimorian vessels seemed to erupt in a fel-green conflagration, billowing plasma fire exploding all over the hull.

The Kintark were advancing on the marooned heavy carriers at full speed and they continued pouring deadly fusillades into the helpless ships as they closed the distance. The exploding plasma blasted bigger craters out of the blue and purple armour plating, the plasma fires burning bright hot as the damage intensified. By the time the Brimorian armada had executed an about-face, the carrier force was a seething inferno of plasma fire, the deadly flames raging out of control.

One of the carriers continued deploying its fighters, but the strike craft left the launch tubes ablaze, spinning out of control before exploding seconds after emerging. Some of the carrier crews made it to escape pods, but cascading plasma leaked over the jettisoning craft, roasting the Brimorians alive as they tried to flee. The horrifying scenes reached their dreadful climax as the lead heavy carrier was ripped apart by a climactic explosion, the fiery maelstrom igniting torpedoes in the ship’s magazine.

Libtegh couldn’t tear his eyes from the appalling disaster unfolding on the holo-map, one Brimorian carrier after another blown apart or incinerated by plasma firestorms.

“All our bombers... gone. A hundred-thousand dead...” he whispered, his mind unable to comprehend the scale of the carnage.

Shoal Master Kaelotegh tried to drum his claws on the console, but his hand was shaking too badly and didn’t respond. He feebly thumped the surface a few times, his index finger tapping out a frenzied beat.

Libtegh whirled around to face the Shoal Master, fury raging in his black eyes. “This is all your fault! You led us headlong into a slaughter and failed us every single time! I’m relieving you of command, Kaelotegh! The Deep Pool will have your head for this disaster!”

He didn’t expect Kaelotegh’s feral shriek of rage or the Shoal Master lunging for him, the burst of adrenalin overcoming frayed nerves. They toppled over with the leader of the armada landing on top of his startled underling, the two locked together in mortal combat. Raking his claws across Libtegh’s face, Kaelotegh slashed the shoal-commander’s eyes, followed an instant later by a scream of agony. With Libtegh distracted by trying to protect his eyes from further attack, the Shoal Master was able to wrap his hands around the smaller Brimorians throat, closing off his opponent’s gills.

“Die... traitor...” he snarled, squeezing with all his might.

Libtegh’s struggles grew weaker as he flailed at Kaelotegh, hitting with feeble punches that didn’t even bother his opponent. Black eyes bulged in a grotesque expression of terror, the spark of life there slowly snuffed from his body. With a horrid wheeze, he breathed his last, his body twitching spasmodically before going still.

Kaelotegh wiped the blood from his face, then staggered upright on shaking legs. “Set course for Kinta,” he growled, a rattling burble to his scratchy voice.

The frightened bridge crew jumped to follow his orders, not wanting to share Libtegh’s fate.

Slumping back in his command chair, Kaelotegh activated the fleet interface and set a new nav-point in orbit above the Kintark homeworld. He turned to smirk at his arch-rival aboard the Battlecarrier Breklan'tohok, a disturbing glint of madness in his eyes. There was no way that the Shoal Master was going to chase after the Kintark again and risk being led on a merry chase through an asteroid belt.

“Now it’s my turn...” he chortled, leaning forward with anticipation. “Time to lure you into my net...”

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Zorlin stood on the Command platform with his hands crossed behind his back. He tried to watch dispassionately as the entire heavy carrier group was engulfed in a plasma storm, but it was always unsettling to watch a once-mighty ship reduced to a funeral pyre. One-by-one the Brimorian capital ships succumbed to the raging plasma fires, all life extinguished while the flames continued to burn.

Turning his attention to the Brimorian armada, he expected to see them rushing to engage his forces, in an attempt to stop him retreating into the asteroid belt. It therefore came as a surprise to see that the remaining three fleets had continued their turn, rather than moving to intercept him. For a brief elated moment, he thought the Brimorians had seen enough death for one day and were retreating from the system. Unfortunately, Zorlin’s hopes were dashed as the Enclave ships were now flying directly towards his homeworld.

There were no significant strategic assets based on Kinta, which meant that the Brimorians had another purpose in mind for visiting the homeworld... a very dark purpose. Zorlin could guess what that were planning and shook his head, appalled that they would stoop to such despicable actions. He watched the enemy ships, torn with indecision as he tried to decide the best course of action. His duty was to protect the Empire... but if the last two Kintark fleets were destroyed, there’d be nothing left to protect the Empire with.

With one last grimace of resignation, the High Prelate realised he couldn’t just stand by as the Brimorians ravaged the Imperial capital.

“Ssset courssse to intercept the invadersss,” he called out to the Bridge Pit. “We are Kinta’sss lassst line of defence againssst the Brimorian menace!”

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John watched the Battle of Kinta unfolding on the Sector Map, the Brimorian and Kintark forces shifting position as they each attempted to outmanoeuvre the enemy. The Kintark victory against the carrier group had filled him with hope, which was quickly dashed as the Brimorians made a beeline for the Imperial homeworld. He was immediately reminded of the Terran Federation bombardment at Galon Prime and the horrific death toll inflicted on civilians in that atrocity.

He wasn’t alone in realising what the Brimorians were planning and Calara sprang up to stare aghast at the holographic map. “No! What are you doing?! That doesn’t make any tactical sense!”

Alyssa quietly slipped off John’s lap and moved aside, letting him rise to stand beside the distraught Latina. All they could do was watch helplessly as the Brimorian forces descended to low orbit around the thriving Kintark capital and commenced firing on cities teeming with civilians. Yellow bursts of light illuminated the planet’s surface, as particle beams slashed down to demolish skyscrapers and inflict widespread devastation.

“Why would they do that? There’s no reason... those civilians aren’t any kind of threat,” Calara said plaintively, her brown eyes filled with deep sadness. She froze and looked up at John with shock. “Oh no! This is all my fault!”

“You’re not responsible for any of this, honey,” John said, rubbing the brunette’s back to soothe her.

Calara shook her head. “I am! The Brimorians are only bombarding those cities to provoke the Kintark into fighting an open battle! I must’ve pushed them too far with all my traps!”

She turned back to the holographic depiction of Kinta and zoomed into the world. The Brimorians were laying waste to every metropolis on the planet, inflicting untold misery on the civilians. The distressing scenes triggered another flashback for John, as he remembered watching Terran cities burn at the orders of Fleet Admiral Sutton. He glanced at Calara, seeing her beautiful face shadowed with grief and guilt... feelings he remembered all too well.

“You’re not to blame for this,” John insisted firmly, gesturing towards the map. “You hit the Brimorians with everything you could to slow them down and cripple their fleets. You did everything I asked of you. If anyone’s responsible... it’s me.”

Calara turned to face him, her face shadowed with remorse. “You weren’t to know that the Brimorians would snap like that... but it’s my job to anticipate what the enemy is going to do. All those people are dying because I failed!”

He shook his head, grim resignation in his eyes. “The truth is... you never should’ve been forced to try to delay the Brimorians in the first place. We should have been able to use a Wormhole Generator to jump directly in front of the invasion Armada and destroy them all before they could fire a shot at Kinta.”

“You can’t blame yourself for that,” Calara protested. “I know exactly why you gave Rahn’hagon the dreadnought and told him to leave. Your father tried to kill you, then your mother begged for his life... what other choice did you have? Besides, now we know how Progenitors make the black metal, I never want to step foot in another one of those awful ships again!”

“I don’t mean using Larn’kelnar’s dreadnought. I had the schematics for the Wormhole Generator up here the whole time,” John said, tapping his temple. “Everything I needed to know about Progenitors and their technology has just been sitting there waiting for me... I should have confronted my guide months ago and taken what was rightfully mine.”

Calara exchanged a worried glance with Alyssa.

The blonde stepped forward to interlace her fingers with his. “You weren’t ready back then, John. We talked about this... you wanted to find out what happened to your parents first.”

John grimaced, his expression darkening. “We all know how well that worked out.”

“You’re not responsible for this,” Alyssa insisted, gesturing towards the besieged planet. “All the wars we’ve been dragged into... it was Larn’kelnar that started them.”

“Yeah... but if we had access to all the Progenitor tech, we could’ve shut these conflicts down before they turned into a bloodbath. Millions of people have died because we’ve been fighting with one hand tied behind our back. I need to unlock that knowledge... before anyone else loses their lives.”

Calara hugged him and looked up into his eyes. “When?”

He glanced at the Enclave forces ravaging Kinta. “First we’ll take care of those bastards... then I’ll deal with my guide once and for all.”

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High Prelate Zorlin stood on the Bridge of the battlecarrier Breklan'tohok, his heart aching as he watched the Brimorians rain destruction down on his homeworld. Kinta was the birthplace of the Kintark civilisation and had a rich cultural history, their draconic pantheon venerated by the population and worshipped in many sacred shrines and monuments. The invading aliens cared nothing for those sites and virulent yellow beams lanced down to rake across ancient cities, indiscriminately obliterating everything in their path.

The majestic temple to Yusarranax the Redeemer had stood for over three thousand years, its ornate sandstone towers reaching aloft to the heavens. Zorlin stared in horror as one of the Brimorian battleships blasted the edifice with a flurry of particle beams, carving gaping chasms through the cathedral until it collapsed in on itself, millennia of history destroyed in less than a minute. He knew that the desecration of those hallowed sites would scar his people for generations to come.

Even though the Enclave armada had been dramatically reduced in size during the final leg of their invasion, there were still three reinforced battle groups besieging Kinta. Outnumbered and outgunned, the Kintark High Prelate was left with no choice but to try to stop this wanton act of sacrilege. He began issuing orders over the fleet interface, rearranging formations and allocating targets to those warships.

Clearing his throat, Zorlin said to the prelates under his command, “I know your heartsss are filled with grief at the atrocitiesss committed by the Brimorian ssscum, but now isss not the time to mourn. We mussst hurl ourssselvesss into the fray with a vengeful fury that the dragonsss themssselvesss would sssalute.”

His orders were acknowledged by enraged Kintark ship captains, the hatred plain to see on their faces. Nodding to them with respect, he turned his attention back to the Enclave fleets, bracing himself for the sight of more gut-wrenching acts of barbarity. Zorlin’s attention was drawn to the dozen light carriers that were fast enough to keep pace with the battle-line warships. They had already launched their entire complement of fighters and now a host of dropships were emerging from their hangars. The troop transports were escorted by sleek gunships as they swiftly descended towards the planet below.

Opening a comms channel to the Imperial palace, he saw that the call was going through and was relieved that the Brimorians had not jammed all communications.

Empress Tamolith’s fearsome draconic face appeared on the holo-screen, an uncharacteristic glint of worry in her reptilian eyes. “Zorlin, what are you doing up there?! They’re bombarding Xen-Martek! I order you to blast these Brimorian vermin out of the skies!”

“Our fleetsss are outnumbered and outgunned, Imperial Majesssty,” the High Prelate replied, relieved he wasn’t having this discussion with the Empress in person. “I have ordered all my forcesss to break the planetary sssiege, but I mussst caution you... it is highly unlikely we will be sssuccesssful.”

The huge red dragon stared at him in shock. “There must be something you can do, Zorlin!”

“I implore you to evacuate the Palace, Empresss... the Brimoriansss have launched a ground invasion directly to your location.”

Tamolith inhaled sharply, the worry on her face shifting to fear. “No! I have to get them to safety!”

Before Zorlin could say another word, the Empress had whirled away, forgetting all about the call in her haste to reach her family. The High Prelate closed the comms channel and leaned heavily against the command table. Heart sinking once again, he could only watch in helpless frustration as the Brimorians deployed thousands of marines directly onto the grounds of the Imperial palace.

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“Like a hapless marrowfish entranced by a glowrark’s lure...” Shoal Master Kaelotegh gloated, his scaly claws beckoning the Kintark fleet onwards. “Come to me! Show me how brilliant you are!”

With a cackle of glee, the Brimorian leader watched his forces open fire as soon as the charging defenders were in range. The holographic map was suddenly ablaze with yellow particle beams, which throbbed with power as they bridged the gap between the two fleets. Kaelotegh’s opening salvo proved surprisingly accurate, the Brimorian gunners finding it easy to hit their targets when their own vessels were stationary and the Kintark were heading directly towards them.

Kintark shields quickly buckled under the onslaught, leaving dozens of warships exposed. The cruiser Markan’tok at the forefront of the battle group was the first casualty of the Battle of Kinta. Iridescent green armour was ripped apart, blasted into glowing shards as a dozen energy beams carved through deck after deck. The starboard flank of the warship broke apart as its structural integrity collapsed, 150 metres of the vessel shearing away and spilling terrified crewmen into the void of space. The gasping Kintark didn’t suffer for long, as particle beams ignited the cruiser’s plasma reserves, triggering a ghastly explosion that incinerated the asphyxiating lizardmen in virulent green flames.

Similar scenes of destruction played out along the Kintark front lines, with destroyers and cruisers blown to pieces as they came under concentrated fire. Kaelotegh knew that the rival commander was trying to close to point-blank range, seeking a brutal face-to-face slugfest where the Kintark held the advantage with their Plasma Cannons. The big problem for the desperate Kintark defenders was that they had started the fight significantly outnumbered... and the glaring disparity in fleet assets grew worse by the second.

The Shoal Master briefly considered a careful withdrawal from Kinta, with his fleets reversing away from the enemy homeworld to maintain their range advantage for as long as possible. It was the logical course of action that would ensure minimal casualties... which meant his cunning foe would have predicted he’d do exactly that.

“You’re not fooling me this time...” Kaelotegh muttered, his feverish gaze locked onto the Kintark flagship.

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John strode along the corridor past the girls’ quarters, with Alyssa and Calara walking briskly to match his fast pace. There was a quiet tension in the air, with the blonde and brunette shooting furtive glances his way. Both girls were worried, but it wasn’t because they were on the eve of battle. John’s declaration that he would confront his Progenitor Guide was first and foremost in their minds... and they could tell by his terse silence that he was thinking about it too.

Distracted as they all were, there were still the practicalities of impending war to attend to. They all needed to get dressed in jumpsuits before wearing Paragon armour, so Calara parted company with John and Alyssa, quickly darting into her quarters to get changed. Her companions continued onwards to the commander’s quarters, but were surprised to find Jehanna waiting there, a pensive expression on her face.

She stepped forward and asked hesitantly, “John, could I speak to you for a moment please?”

“Of course. What’s on your mind?” he asked, putting aside his troubled thoughts to focus on their newest recruit.

“I heard you’re planning to fight the Brimorian army that’s landing on Kinta,” Jehanna replied, her furtive glance at Alyssa giving away the source of that information. Squaring her shoulders, she looked him in the eyes and boldly declared, “I want to join the ground combat team.”

John looked at his blonde matriarch and raised an eyebrow. “Was this your idea?”

“First I’ve heard of it,” Alyssa replied, smiling at the dusky-hued beauty. “I can’t wait to find out what’s going on in her pretty little head, but we haven’t bonded... yet.”

He turned back to Jehanna. “Alright... get geared up.”

“I’m an excellent shot! And I’ve had combat experience!” she blurted out, before pausing in the middle of her counter-argument with a startled expression on her face. “Really?!”

“You already proved you can handle yourself in a firefight. You’ve also grown a fair bit since I started feeding you, so you should be able to wear a Paragon suit without it being uncomfortable.”

Jehanna glanced down at her stretched shirt, which was struggling to contain her significantly enhanced bust. When she looked up again, the former reporter grinned in delight.

“I meant in height, but you’re definitely filling out everywhere,” he clarified, his gaze sweeping over her impressive new curves. Making eye-contact with Jehanna again, he continued, “I know you’re an excellent shot with a pistol. Have you had any training with rifles?”

“I’ve used shotguns for clay pigeon shooting, but that’s it,” she admitted with a rueful frown.

“Alright, no problem. You can use the pistol Dana gave you for now, it’s still more powerful than a Gatling Laser. I’ll ask Sakura to train you how to use a Tachyon rifle after the battle.”

After nodding eagerly, Jehanna hesitated and gave him a curious look. “I thought I’d have my work cut out for me trying to convince you. Why did you agree so quickly?”

John gently stroked her cheek, an ambivalent expression on his face. “The next time we fight, we’ll probably be up against Thralls. I want you to get some combat experience fighting alongside the girls before we face anything like that.”

That thought shocked Jehanna, but she rallied immediately. “I thought we’d be taking on the Brimorians for the foreseeable future... I didn’t anticipate facing a Progenitor army so soon.”

“Rahn seemed convinced that we’d be facing an imminent attack. I might not like him, but I do respect my father’s instinct for self-preservation; it’s probably wise to assume he was correct.”

Alyssa brushed her fingers against John’s hand. “We better hurry. We’re closing on Kinta and we need to allocate the girls to combat teams.”

“I’ll go grab my pistol!” Jehanna exclaimed, rushing out of the bedroom.

She nearly collided with Calara in her haste, the Latina nimbly stepping aside just in time to let her pass. They exchanged brief smiles, then the brunette hurried across the bedroom towards the express grav-tubes. Seeing Calara garbed in a form-fitting jumpsuit reminded John and Alyssa why they’d made their way to the bedroom in the first place. They entered the walk-in-wardrobe, where they quickly dressed in identical clothing to the Latina.

Alyssa unhooked a second jumpsuit from the clothing rails, then gave John a quick kiss. “I’ll help Jehanna get geared up. See you down there.”

Placing his hands on the gentle curve of her hips, John stopped her pulling away. “Am I doing the right thing letting Jehanna fight with us?”

The blonde looked up at him, an ambivalent expression on her beautiful face. “You surprised me by agreeing so fast. You’re normally very cautious about making sure the girls are fully trained before you expose them to combat.”

“You think it’s a mistake?” he asked with a frown.

She shook her head. “It’s an unfortunate necessity. You were right earlier; Jehanna needs to get used to fighting as part of our team and combat with Brimorian marines is a good place to get some practice. Going up against a Thrall army will be way more dangerous... and if we’re fighting a Progenitor at the same time, it’ll be a fucking nightmare. I wouldn’t want to throw a rookie into that shitstorm.”

“Exactly. We’ll have our hands full just trying to keep everyone alive,” he agreed, his frown deepening.

They both heard running footsteps coming in their direction and turned to see Jehanna skid to a halt in the doorway, her holstered pistol clasped in her hands.

“I left my shield belt behind,” she said, walking into the room. “I assume I won’t need it?”

“That’s right; the Paragon suits have much stronger shields,” Alyssa replied, turning to beckon the dusky-hued beauty into the room. “I’ve got this jumpsuit for you. It’s the most comfortable thing to wear under full body armour.”

John returned Jehanna’s smile as he left her to get changed, then walked across the bedroom to the express grav-tubes. Dropping down to the Armoury, he donned a Paragon suit, then retrieved his sword and a Tachyon Rifle from the weapon racks. He loaded the Tachyon rifle as he walked down the ramp into the Combat Bridge, the ammo count cycling up to 50 when the magazine was slotted into place. The rest of the girls were already there and prepared for battle, each of them turning to greet John with a nod as he arrived.

John sheathed his runesword behind the Command Chair, then stood before the holographic map to study the Battle of Kinta. There was a swirling mass of sensor contacts near the homeworld, with the two alien fleets locked in a ferocious firefight. Everywhere he looked, solid beams of yellow light contrasted with staccato bursts of green plasma bolts, the salvos punctuated by bright explosions. Swarms of fighters fought deadly dogfights around the lumbering capital ships, locked together in a desperate struggle to establish strike craft supremacy.

“What’s the status, Captain Fernandez?” he asked as he sat down, unable to get a clear picture of the chaotic battlefield.

Calara turned her tactical chair to face him, a worried frown on her face. “The situation is dire for the Kintark. The Brimorians are still bombarding the capital and the Kintark fleets have launched a suicidal charge to try to stop them.”

“They’ve got no chance of defeating the Brimorians?”

The brunette shook her head. “The Kintark started off badly outnumbered and the Brimorians are cutting them to pieces as they rush to stop the planetary siege. The Enclave forces are holding position, so the Kintark will inflict some serious damage when they do finally get to point-blank range... but not enough to win. Even with a dozen Brimorian battleships staying out of the battle to continue bombarding Kinta, the Enclave fleets still have enough firepower to wipe out the Kintark forces.”

“We’re nearly in comms range... can we contact the Kintark fleet commander and tell him to withdraw?” John asked, staring at the battlecarrier in the centre of the Imperial fleets.

Calara’s frown deepened. “If High Prelate Zorlin disengages, then all the Brimorians ships fighting him will rejoin the bombardment. We’ll be able to save the Kintark fleets, but the civilians on Kinta will pay a heavy price.”

“How long until we arrive?” John asked, walking over to his command chair.

He activated a second holographic map that showed the Invictus rocketing across the sector towards the Kintark homeworld.

“We’re fifteen minutes away,” she explained, looking up at the tactical map with concern. “If you want to save the Kintark fleets, we need to contact Zorlin immediately and order a retreat before they get too heavily engaged with the Brimorians.”

John ground his teeth in frustration as he stared at the alien fleets locked in savage combat. “If the Kintark lose those warships, the Empire’s going to be left completely defenceless for years... but I’m not willing to sacrifice civilian lives.” He turned to lock eyes with Calara. “Can you think of any way we can save both?”

She hesitated, weighing up the possibilities. “If I micro-manage the battle, I might be able to claw my way to a narrow Kintark victory... but there won’t be much left of their fleets afterwards. Unfortunately, I haven’t got the time or assets in-system to come up with any special surprises.”

“What about diplomatic options?”

“The Kintark could offer to surrender... but if the Brimorians are willing to commit atrocities against civilians, they’ll probably just destroy the defensive fleets. Alternatively, we could contact the Brimorians and try to scare them away from the homeworld, although I’m not sure they’d believe just how destructive the Invictus is now.”

“The Brimorian Commander must be high-ranked enough to know what happened at the Battle of Terra?” John asked with a frown.

Calara gave him a helpless shrug. “Even if he has seen video of us in action, he might not believe we’re a threat to a force his size. The Invictus had a lot less firepower back then and we took a real beating in that fight. Our final option would’ve been to ask Edraele to threaten the Deep Pool and force a ceasefire... but we just knocked out the last Brimorian comms beacon. There’s no way Deep Lord Athgiloi can contact the invasion fleet to order them to stop the bombardment.”

John froze as an idea suddenly came to him. He turned to look across the Combat Bridge at Jade, who heard what he was thinking... then wrinkled her nose and frowned with distaste.

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Tamolith head-butted the doors to the Imperial suite, the doors slamming into the walls with an almighty crash. She rushed inside, her long claws gouging deep furrows out of the heavy stone floor in her desperation to be reunited with her brood of whelps.

Etheiss was closest to the entrance and she trotted out of the anteroom. “Mother, will you please tell Tondax to stop being so annoying! He won’t give me a moment’s peace.”

“Where’s Zulkayr?!” Tamolith snapped, her long serpentine neck craning around to search for her eldest son.

Her eldest daughter frowned at the Empress’ abrupt tone. “Oh, I think he’s outside somewhere...” Etheiss looked indignant as she continued, “Zulkayr promised to help me look after the little ones, but he’s always spending time with Ruvith and Ondyrth!”

Tamolith shot a fearful look towards the veranda that led to the palace roof. “Fetch Tondax and your sisters! Meet me in the Imperial archives!”

“But, mother...”

“Do it now, Etheiss! I don’t have time to argue!” Tamolith barked, her eyes blazing with anger.

The dragonling cringed, lowering her neck in supplication. “I’m sorry, mother.”

Taking a deep breath to calm herself, Tamolith padded across the chamber to nuzzle her daughter. “I apologise for speaking sharply, my precious darling. Please hurry and do as I ask... our family is in danger.”

Etheiss’ eyes widened in alarm and she quickly nodded. Tamolith rushed out to the veranda, the booming thumps of her heavy clawed feet echoing loudly around the suite.

After fearfully watching her mother leave, Etheiss hurried back through the anteroom to the nursery, her claws scrabbling across the floor. “Tondax, Damopha, Chysenteil... where are you?”

A scaly red shape ambushed her from beside the doorway, the impact sending Etheiss tumbling to the ground with a startled hiss.

“Hah! Got you!” Tondax declared in triumph, before turning to grin at his youngest sister. “Beat that!”

Damopha grudgingly nodded. “Alright, that was pretty good...”

Etheiss clambered to her feet and snorted with irritation. “Stop messing around!”

Chysenteil laughed as she bounded over. “You’re just mad that he got you!”

“No, I’m not!” Etheiss said indignantly. She lowered her voice and continued dramatically, “Mother said that we’re in danger! We need to meet her and Zulkayr in the archives!”

The three younger dragonlings froze and looked at her in wide-eyed surprise.

“Come on... we need to hurry!” their sister declared, beckoning them towards the door.

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High Prelate Zorlin darted a worried glance at his Chief Engineer as the Breklan'tohok’s shields were blasted again and again by volleys of Brimorian particle beams. “What’sss our ssshield ssstatusss?!”

“Twelve percent, High Prelate!” the harried officer replied, his eyes wide with alarm. “We can’t withssstand thisss volume of firepower!”

“Better usss than them,” Zorlin muttered under his breath, his eyes snapping back to the holographic map and the battered lead elements of the Kintark fleet.

As soon as the Breklan'tohok had come within range of the Brimorians, the enemy had switched targets to start firing on his flagship. Not all of the Enclave forces were close enough to join in the ferocious onslaught... and that was the sole reason Zorlin’s battlecarrier hadn’t already been blown to pieces. While his flagship’s shields were now on the verge of collapse, the Brimorians had inadvertently granted a temporary reprieve to the beleaguered cruisers at the vanguard of the Kintark battle formation. The Breklan'tohok was by far the largest and toughest vessel in the system, but no ship could withstand concentrated fire from three hostile war fleets.

The question plaguing Zorlin was whether he should continue forging ahead, knowing that his battlecarrier would surely be doomed. However, if he stayed with the fleet and acted as a magnet for incoming fire, dozens of cruisers would be spared destruction. Those ships were all equipped with the new EMP missiles and if they could get close enough, the cruisers would inflict terrible retribution on their foes. With grim resignation, Zorlin made his choice... but before he could issue the fateful order to maintain their reckless charge, an excited shout from the Bridge Pit drew his attention.

“High Prelate, we’re being hailed!” the comms office called out, half-rising from his seat. “It’sss a Terran ssship... the Invictusss!”

“Put Admiral Blake through immediately!” Zorlin exclaimed, his heart skipping a beat.

Rather than the Lion of the Federation appearing on the holo-screen, he saw a young Terran female wearing white armour.

“High Prelate Zorlin! I’m so glad you’re still alive!” she said in a rush.

The Kintark Commander looked at her in confusion, then replied, “Thank you. May I ssspeak to Admiral Blake?”

“I’m afraid he’s indisposed at the moment,” the brunette replied, shaking her head. Her brown eyes flicked away from the camera, the woman’s concentration obviously elsewhere. “Now, I want you to order all your forces to cease fire and pull back from Kinta... then hold position just out of range and get ready to intercept the Brimorians when they try to escape.”

Zorlin stared at her incredulously. “Are thessse ordersss from the Lion?!”

“No, they’re from me,” she answered, focusing on the Kintark leader again.

“And who might you be?” Zorlin asked, his brows furrowing at the young woman’s audacity.

“Oh, I forgot we haven’t been formally introduced. My name’s Captain Calara Fernandez and I’m one of Admiral Blake’s Lionesses. You’ve been following my defensive plans to harass the Brimorian armada and slow their approach to Kinta.” Calara’s face fell as she added, “It looks like I was only able to disable half their forces... I’m so sorry I couldn’t prevent the rest from reaching you before we arrived.”

The High Prelate’s jaw dropped in shock as he gaped at the architect of the Brimorian’s misfortune.

“Zorlin? We don’t have time to delay,” Calara declared, a firmer tone of authority stiffening her voice. “The Invictus will reach the Kinta system in twelve minutes and I’ll deal with the Brimorians then... but I need you to withdraw immediately if we’re going to stop them from bombarding your homeworld.”

Doing his best to recover, Zorlin stammered, “I will order my forcesss to disssengage.”

“Thank you, High Prelate,” Calara said with a grateful smile. Her expression turned grim as she continued, “Just give us a few minutes... then you’ll have your revenge.”

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Shoal Master Kaelotegh stared intently at the Kintark fleet as it made an abrupt turn, the green hulled vessels banking around to starboard. Even though they were still under heavy fire from the Brimorian fleets, the enemy vessels had stopped shooting back, their banks of Plasma Cannons ceasing all activity.

“What are you planning now, my cunning adversary?” the Brimorian leader hissed, his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

The Kintark battlecarrier at the centre of the formation was struck repeatedly by salvos of particle beams, its shields finally collapsing under the onslaught. The hull was then savaged by blistering energy streams, deep trenches gouged out of the iridescent armour plating in a dozen separate places. Despite the severe damage to the Breklan'tohok’s armour, the enemy flagship managed to complete the turn with no major systems destroyed. The enormous capital ship arced around with the rest of the fleet, until there were rows of engines facing the Brimorians as the Kintark retreated.

“You’re fleeing?!” Kaelotegh balked, gaping incredulously at the withdrawing defenders. Shaking his head in disbelief, his lip curled into a derisive smirk. “You think me a Cacaradon? One scent of blood in the water and I thrash in a feeding frenzy after my prey?”

The Kintark began to withdraw under sustained fire, leaving a score of shattered hulks in their wake, the destroyers and cruisers sacrificed in a futile and utterly ineffective attack. Kaelotegh stared at the alien forces as they fled from the Brimorian guns, scarcely able to believe what he was seeing. He’d come to fear and respect the devilishly sadistic mind that had tortured him every step of the way to Kinta, so he refused to accept that this pitiful effort to dislodge the Enclave forces could possibly have originated from the same gifted commander.

The fleet interface lit up with requests from Brimorian ship captains, each of them requesting permission to pursue the haggard Kintark fleets. Kaelotegh knew that the obvious course of action was to hound his demoralised enemy to destruction... but that was just what the Kintark commander would be expecting. Or perhaps this was another feint... and his sly opponent knew that Kaelotegh would hold position because he was suspecting a trap. Maybe the Brimorians had been set up like lorgefish to the slaughter, herded into the Kintark nets where they would be butchered at their leisure.

His claws drummed a frenetic beat on the console, with a second finger now double-tapping erratically as his hand trembled with the strain. Frozen with indecision, Kaelotegh stared at the interface... until he scowled in frustration and rebuffed all the requests to give chase. Glaring malevolently at the Kintark homeworld, he decided to order all three fleets to join the bombardment; at least that was a tangible way of punishing his elusive foe for their cowardice.

“Shoal Master, we’re being hailed!” a Wave-squire announced, turning to look at his commander in shock.

“By the Kintark?” Kaelotegh muttered, feeling a flutter of anticipation in his guts.

The young Brimorian communications officer shook his head frantically. “It’s Deep Lord Athgiloi!”

Kaelotegh’s heart sank at the thought of speaking to the leader of the Deep Pool. Having to confess to his humiliations at the hands of the Kintark was a moment he’d been dreading for the last several hours. He suddenly paused, wary at the unexpected timing of the call... could this be another trick by his nemesis?

“Are the secure comms protocols authentic?” he asked, glaring at his underling. “This could be a Kintark ruse. Verify them.”

“But... it’s the Deep Lord!” the Wave-squire burbled fearfully. “I can’t just-”

“Check them now!” Kaelotegh snapped, losing his already frayed temper.

The frightened comms team did as he asked, hurrying to verify the authenticity of the secure channel.

“The protocols are authentic, Shoal Master,” the comms officer announced, his eyes wide with fright.

Kaelotegh cringed as he realised he’d kept the notoriously vindictive leader waiting for no reason. “Put him through...”

Deep Lord Athgiloi appeared on the holo-screen in all his magnificence. Larger and more imposing than any Brimorian Kaelotegh had ever known, the Deep Lord’s muscular body was sheathed in shimmering teal scales, his fins a resplendent orange. The Leader of the Brimorian Enclave was bathed in bright light and the room behind him plunged into complete darkness, the sharp contrast making him even more intimidating.

“Are you deliberately trying my patience?” Athgiloi scowled ominously, revealing rows of needle-like teeth. “Do you believe that I am some mere underling that you can keep waiting?”

“Please forgive me, Deep Lord!” Kaelotegh gasped, bowing his head in supplication. “Your timing is unfortunate... we have commenced battle with the Kintark.”

Athgiloi’s fins stiffened, his eyes narrowing in anger. “I know that, you imbecile! Cease fire immediately! Empress Tamolith has begged me to accept the unconditional surrender of the Kintark Empire!”

Kaelotegh looked up at his leader in confusion. “But... I thought you wanted to see her broken and humiliated?”

The Deep Lord blinked and didn’t reply for a moment.

“I have changed my plans,” Athgiloi suddenly announced, puffing out his chest. “I will soon be arriving in the Kinta system... to personally accept the Empress’ capitulation.”

“You’re coming here?!” Kaelotegh exclaimed, stunned that the Deep Lord would leave Enclave territory.

“Yes... so I order you to stop shooting at the Kintark!” the Brimorian leader demanded imperiously.

The Shoal Master bobbed his head and rushed to issue the command over the fleet interface to cease all fire on the retreating Kintark forces. He then commanded the battleships surrounding Kinta to end the orbital bombardment.

“We have ceased all fire, Deep Lord.”

“Very good...” Athgiloi nodded with satisfaction. “Now... err... I want you to give me a full status report on your fleets.”

Kaelotegh began to dutifully describe the gruelling approach to Kinta, making sure to place all the blame for their losses squarely on the incompetence of Shoal-Commander Libtegh. Athgiloi nodded as he listened, seemingly unfazed by the horrific casualties the Brimorians had sustained. As Kaelotegh neared the end of his report, he noticed an unusual flicker pass across Athgiloi’s face, the Deep Lord grimacing as his scaly skin seemed to convulse. The Shoal Master stared at the Brimorian leader in horrified revulsion as what looked like rippling waves undulated over his body.

“I’m sorry, Master!” Athgiloi groaned, his mouth twisting into a hideous snarl. “I can’t hold it!”

The Deep Lord was suddenly obscured by a verdant haze, which shimmered for a second, then coalesced into what looked like a green-skinned Terran female.

“Hello!” Jade said with a sunny smile, waving at the holo-screen. “Thanks for letting me distract you.”

Kaelotegh gaped at the grinning girl, stunned that she’d somehow been pretending to be Deep Lord Athgiloi. Shaking off the shock, he closed the comms channel with a furious snarl, then barked across the Bridge, “Commence firing on the Kintark!”

The Wave-squire manning the Tactical Station looked at him in bewilderment. “But... they’re no longer in range, Shoal Master.”

He stared up at the holographic map and scowled when he saw that the Kintark fleets were now positioned safely out of range of the Brimorian forces. A sensor contact on the periphery of the system drew his attention and he squinted at the mysterious object. It was leaping closer in skipping jumps and moving far faster than any spacecraft should be capable of travelling.

“What in the depths is that?!” he exclaimed, pointing towards the ominous blip on the Sector Map.

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“Are you alright, honey?” John asked, turning on the lights in the commander’s quarters. “That looked... uncomfortable.”

The Nymph shivered with revulsion, goosebumps prickling her flesh. “I tried to hold onto Athgiloi’s shape for as long as I could, but knowing how grotesque you found his appearance, it became too much to bear.”

“I’m sorry... I didn’t realise that would be so difficult for you,” he apologised drawing her into a hug. “You did brilliantly though. You managed to keep the Brimorians distracted for at least ten minutes.”

John brushed his fingers through her mane of dark hair and was surprised to see that Jade had reverted to her old form instead of the new catgirl one.

She looked up at him and smiled. “This is the first shape you chose for me and the one I’m most comfortable with. It will always hold a special place in my heart, Master.”

\*John, we’re approaching the Kinta system!\* Alyssa called out in warning.

He clasped Jade’s hand and they entered the express grav-tubes, then dropped down to the armoury. As they hurried down the ramp into the Combat Bridge, John glanced at the holographic map in the centre of the room. The Battle of Kinta had come to an abrupt halt, and without all the shooting and explosions, it was much easier to see what the hundreds of warships were doing. The Kintark fleets were largely intact, rescued from destruction by Jade’s subterfuge, and were now waiting just outside engagement range of the Brimorian forces.

“John, they’ve restarted the orbital bombardment,” Calara informed him, turning to point at the battleships in orbit around the Kintark homeworld. She shot an admiring glance at the Nymph who was slipping on her summer dress. “You saved thousands of lives, Jade... well done.”

Jade smiled and tipped an imaginary hat at the Latina. “No problem.”

Glancing up at the Tactical Map, John watched the Invictus race towards the outer edge of the Kinta system. The holographic depiction of the white battlecruiser flickered intermittently as the navigation computer struggled to track its incredible speed.

“Are you going to do a drive by with a hyper-warp bow wave?” John asked the blonde sitting beside him in her XO chair.

Alyssa pouted and shook her head. “I’d love to, but I can’t risk flying that close to the planet’s gravity well.”

John drew his runesword from the back of his Command Chair, then sheathed it across his back. “Alright... ground team with me. We’ll head for the surface as soon as the Invictus drops out of hyper-warp.”

Dana, Rachel, Tashana, Sakura, and Jehanna rose from their seats, the teams already decided telepathically while John watched Jade masquerading as Athgiloi.

Sakura was out of her chair first and made a beeline towards him. “I appreciate the offer to join you, John... but you don’t really need me at your side for this one. I can do more good in the Valkyrie.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, looking into her almond-shaped eyes with concern.

She nodded earnestly. “I am.”

They exchanged a smile, then the Asian girl activated her psychic speed and bolted towards the grav-tubes.

That left Calara, Irillith, and Leylira manning the Invictus, with Helene, Neysa, and Marika observing. John glanced at their novice pilot, the tiger-striped catgirl tightly gripping the flight controls. As if she could sense John watching her, Leylira turned and gave him a wistful smile as she waved goodbye.

\*Leylira’s been training hard for this, Master,\* Jade said soothingly, patting his arm. \*I wouldn’t have recommended her if I didn’t think she was ready.\*

He returned Leylira’s wave, then picked up his Paragon helmet from the Command Chair. “Let’s go, everyone.”

Jade and Betrixa accompanied the ground team as they descended to the Secondary Hangar, the two Nymphs on duty as pilot and co-pilot for the Raptor. They bounded ahead to prep the gunship for takeoff and were already up in the cockpit by the time John reached the loading ramp. He followed the rest of the girls into the Raptor, then stood beside them in the forward loading area as they waited for Alyssa.

John glanced at Jehanna, who was nervously double-checking her laser pistol. “Are you okay there, honey? Do you remember the plan?”

“Stick with Dana and Rachel, and help them sweep the Brimorians from the palace,” Jehanna replied, doing her best to sound calm and confident. “Alyssa and Tashana will be clearing the grounds outside, and you’re heading directly to Tamolith.”

Dana nudged the reporter with an elbow and grinned. “Congrats... you’re on the best team.”

Tashana frowned in mock confusion. “Wait... so she’s joining me and Alyssa?”

The redhead laughed and rolled her eyes. “You wish!”

“Don’t worry. We’ll take good care of you,” Rachel said, slipping an arm around the dusky-hued girl and giving her a reassuring smile.

John nodded to her gratefully, then focused on Jehanna again. “Check your targets. The palace will be full of Kintark civilians and we don’t want to hit any friendlies.”

Dana’s smile wavered and she quietly asked, “Are they really our friends? The Kintark killed a hell of a lot of Terrans... and we killed a shitload of them.”

“I honestly don’t know what kind of reception we’ll get,” John admitted, turning to look at each of the girls in turn. “I never had any trouble dealing with the Kintark before the war. Baledranax and Larn’kelnar were responsible for all the problems, and they’re both dead now. Treat the Kintark as friends... but watch your backs, just in case.”

\*John, we’re entering the Kinta system,\* Alyssa informed him. \*Do you want to say anything to the Brimorians?\*

\*It’d be rude not to,\* John replied, turning and heading up to the Raptor’s cockpit.

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Shoal Master Kaelotegh stared at the unknown contact as it barrelled towards the Kinta system, wondering what it could possibly be. When the red icon finally got close enough for his flagship’s sensors to identify it, he was shocked when the symbol was replaced by a white Terran Federation battlecruiser.

“That’s impossible...” the Wave-squire at tactical gasped, shaking his head in denial. “No Terran ship can move that fast!”

The transponder code identified the vessel as the Invictus and Kaelotegh’s eyes widened in recognition. He was about to bark orders at his fleets to make defensive preparations, when he noticed that the white ship didn’t drop out of hyper-warp at the periphery of the system.

Kaelotegh watched in astonishment as the Invictus tore through the system directly towards his forces, seemingly unfazed by the system’s gravity well. It continued inbound without a moment’s hesitation, the holographic depiction of the Invictus leaping forward in unsettling jumps. It was almost as if the sinister warship was so hungry for battle, it was breaking all rules of physics in its haste to engage his forces.

His communications officer turned to face Kaelotegh. “They’ve just sent out a system-wide broadcast, Shoal Master!”

“Show me!” Kaelotegh demanded, lurching out of his command chair as he stared up at the holo-screen.

Admiral John Blake’s face appeared before him, the legendary Terran officer wearing white combat armour with his helmet tucked under one arm. Kaelotegh paid scant attention to the Lion’s battle suit though, as he was transfixed by the man’s eyes. Cold and hard, they reminded him of a Megacaradon’s terrifying gaze just before it tore apart its helpless prey.

“Brimorian war criminals,” John Blake began, glaring intently at the screen. “Cease all fire against the Kintark, power down your vessels, and surrender to be tried for the atrocities you have committed. Any ships in violation of these instructions will be destroyed.”

There was a deathly silence on the bridge of the Retribution from the Depths, with the crew unsure whether they should be terrified or amused by his threats. Shoal Master Kaelotegh shared their feelings. Admiral Blake was in command of one solitary vessel and was facing over 500 elite Brimorian warships. The man was either totally insane, or... the alternative was too ludicrous to contemplate; that the Invictus could actually be a danger to three reinforced battle groups. The idea was preposterous.

Kaelotegh had seen combat footage that showed the Invictus playing a pivotal role in the Battle of Terra, which he’d assumed at the time was Federation propaganda. The white battlecruiser had supposedly destroyed scores of Kintark ships, but had sustained significant damage in the process. If the footage was to be believed, the Lion was a formidable opponent, but hardly unbeatable. Years of training were telling Kaelotegh that Blake was either bluffing or a deranged lunatic... but he couldn’t shake the unsettling doubts that the Invictus’ astounding speed had raised in his mind.

He glanced at his communications officer, who nodded in confirmation that a comms channel had been opened with the Invictus.

“You have no jurisdiction here, Admiral Blake,” Kaelotegh replied, hiding his doubts with a sneer. “The Terran Federation is not allied with the Kintark Empire, nor has it formally declared war against the Brimorian Enclave. Your bold threats are just a desperate bluff.”

“I’m not here on behalf of the Terran Federation. I am simply informing you that any vessel that doesn’t power down and surrender will be destroyed.”

Kaelotegh opened his mouth to respond, but the screen went blank as Blake abruptly ended the call. He bristled at the indignity, then a knowing smile appeared on his face. All the arrogant grandstanding from the Lion of the Federation was just bluster, designed to unsettle the Brimorians into thinking he could actually back up his fanciful threats.

The Invictus roared closer, then when it looked like it would charge straight into the Brimorian forces, it dropped out of hyper-warp and came to an abrupt halt. Well outside of particle beam range, its engines powered up and the battlecruiser executed a smooth turn, so that it was flying parallel to the Enclave forces. There was a bright flash of light from the Invictus’ topdeck and a blue beam lanced out to strike a Brimorian cruiser at the front of their formation.

The two ships were connected by that column of energy for several seconds, the pulsing sapphire blast stripping away 80% of the Enclave cruiser’s enhanced shields in a single shot. Kaelotegh was stunned at the power the weapon possessed, but even more unsettling was its massive range, nearly twice that of a Brimorian Particle Beam. The Invictus would be able to slowly pick off his forces without fear of retaliation, leaving him no choice but to chase down the Terran warship.

He opened the fleet command interface and had just ordered all his strike craft to intercept this new enemy, when a second blue energy beam struck the almost shieldless cruiser. The protective field withered under the onslaught and seemed to collapse almost instantly, then the Tachyon Beam scythed into the bow of the Enclave vessel. The dazzling beam cored straight through the entire length of the Brimorian ship and blew apart the engines when it emerged at the stern.

Kaelotegh felt fear gripping his chest as he realised the Invictus had twice the long-range firepower he’d previously assumed. In the video he’d seen, the ship only had one of those incredibly destructive beams, not two! That was when the holographic map seemed to explode with azure light, leaving the Shoal Master blinking owlishly against the glare.

He looked on in horror as another eighteen energy beams lashed out to strike the cruiser group. The beams were being fired in pairs and utterly obliterating each cruiser they converged on, destroying nine more vessels in a matter of seconds. The Invictus then performed a languid roll and opened fire with a second horrific broadside, eviscerating ten cruisers from another group with the port gun batteries.

The command interface lit up with the faces of terrified captains asking for orders, the Enclave forces reeling as they watched this unstoppable enemy tear them apart.

“Shoal Master! Something’s infiltrated my ship’s systems!” Shoal-Commander Onghaich cried in alarm. “We’re losing control!”

The battleship captain looked off-screen as one of his crew screamed out a warning, then his face twisted in a mask of terror before he was unceremoniously ripped away from the screen. Kaelotegh quailed in fear as he wondered what dreadful calamity had befallen Onghaich and he searched frantically for his battleship, the Inexorable Wrath of the Seas, that was positioned at the rear of the Brimorian formations. He saw warning icons flashing around the capital ship, which was now venting its atmosphere out into space... along with the entire crew.

Kaelotegh let out an eerie howl of despair, knowing that his devious enemy had tricked him one final time. The aborted attack by the Kintark had been designed to keep the Brimorians right where they wanted all along and now they’d unleashed a frenzied Megacaradon upon him. The Enclave armada was trapped between the Invictus and the planet behind them, leaving them no safe path to retreat.

Shoal Master Kaelotegh glared with hate-filled eyes at the Kintark flagship. If the Brimorians were doomed to die, he was going to take down the enemy commander with him.

“All ships, target the Breklan'tohok!” he screamed into the fleet interface, his frenzied cry edged with the dark tint of madness.

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Jade shoved the throttle forward and the Raptor roared out of the hangar. She pushed the flightstick to the side and pulled back, bringing the gunship’s nose around to point towards Kinta. Her co-pilot was transfixed by the Nymph’s actions, Betrixa watching everything that her sister was doing with fascination.

“Leylira seems to be handling the Invictus without any problems,” John said, peering through the cockpit window at the white battlecruiser.

“She’ll be fine, Master,” Jade said confidently, her eyes locked on the approaching waves of Brimorian fighters. “All she needs to do is point the Invictus wherever Calara tells her to go. With a little luck, they’ll never be in range of the Brimorian guns.”

The optical tracking system aimed the gunship’s Tachyon Cannons at each of the strike craft Jade had selected. When she squeezed the trigger, the turreted guns opened up on the Brimorian ships, tracking them with impressive accuracy. Even though these fighters were protected by shields, the streams of tachyon bolts popped those defensive barriers like they were soap bubbles. Thin Brimorian armour plating stood no chance of deflecting the potent energy blasts and each successful hit blasted glowing holes through their hulls.

Dozens of ships were blown to pieces as the Raptor charged headlong towards them, but before the Brimorians could return fire, space around the gunship turned from black to blue. The Invictus had been following behind its smaller companion and Calara swept the sky clear with a storm of tachyon bolts from the battlecruiser’s defence grid. Entire squadrons were blown to pieces as they were engulfed in that azure maelstrom, annihilating the entire Brimorian fighter presence in under a minute.

John glanced at the Tactical Map and frowned as he studied the Brimorian formations. They appeared to be breaking apart, with ships scattering in all directions. “Are they routing?”

Alyssa had joined them in the cockpit and she shook her head. “Calara thinks the Brimorian commander has lost control of his fleets. Some of their ships are retreating, some are holding position, but a small group is moving to engage the Kintark fleet. Sakura is asking permission to intercept them.”

“Permission granted.” John stared at the Enclave battleships directly ahead of him that were bombarding the planet’s surface. “Those bastards are still firing on Kinta. Can you ask Calara to take them out?”

Alyssa shook her head. “They’re floating directly above Kintark cities. If Calara blasts them out of the sky, they’ll crash on the planet and kill even more civilians. Irillith’s going to take care of it.”

“Good,” John said, nodding his approval. He glanced at the chaotic mass of Brimorian ships, seeing nothing but frantic evasive manoeuvres. “Have any of them actually powered down and surrendered?”

“Not one ship,” Alyssa replied quietly. “I guess they didn’t think they’d get much mercy from the Kintark.”

Jade weaved the Raptor through the vanguard of the Brimorian armada... or what was left of it. Everywhere they looked, blue and purple plated warships had been systematically obliterated, fallen victim to Calara’s deadly aim with the Invictus’ Tachyon Lances. There were still a handful of surviving cruisers ahead of them, some of which even tried to fire on the Raptor, but Jade jinked the tiny gunship from side-to-side and effortlessly dodged the forest of particle beams.

The Nymph tapped her thumb button and fired back at the closest cruiser, hitting it with the Raptor’s twin Tachyon Lances. The dual beams throbbed with power as they demolished the Brimorian shields, then carved a glowing trench through the doomed warship before blasting out the opposite side. Internal explosions wracked the 500m vessel until it exploded outwards, killing the entire crew in a devastating reactor core meltdown.

After that shocking display of formidable firepower, the rest of the cruisers seemed to lose any interest in provoking the Raptor. Retrothrusters flared along the hulls of those ships, as they tried to get out of the Raptor’s path. Jade ignored them after that, concentrating on guiding the gunship through the turbulent sea of debris. She banked to starboard to avoid the broken stern of a shattered Brimorian destroyer, its engines still flaring on full power, then pushed down on the flightstick to duck under a cruiser’s lifeless hulk.

As they drew closer to Kinta, John watched a pair of Brimorian battleships rapidly ascending towards low orbit, the two capital ships heading directly towards them. Jade didn’t seem to have noticed them as she raced towards the Imperial palace and had stopped making any evasive manoeuvres.

“Careful, Jade,” John warned the Nymph pilot. “Watch out for those battleships, they’re on an intercept vector.”

“It’s alright, John... just watch,” Alyssa said, patting his arm.

As the battleships left the planet’s atmosphere, John saw air being vented from the airlocks dotted along their hulls. The Raptor flew between the two huge Brimorian vessels as a stream of convulsing crewmen were ejected into space, Jade narrowly avoiding the ghastly flotsam.

“Irillith...” John murmured in sudden understanding.

“She’s pushing herself hard,” Alyssa said, nodding in confirmation. “There’s another three under her control and heading for space.”

John watched the suffocating Brimorians as the Invictus raced past, feeling no sympathy for the crew that had been mercilessly bombarding civilians only minutes before. “It’s a shame we couldn’t hand them over to the Kintark for war crimes tribunals.”

Alyssa shrugged. “Calara figured the Kintark would prefer being handed fully operational Brimorian battleships.”

He looked at her in surprise then broke out into a laugh. “Yeah, I think she may be right.”

His laughter died as they entered Kinta’s lower atmosphere and John could finally see the extent of the destruction the Brimorians had wreaked on the city below. Any large structure, be it an office tower or majestic temple, had been devastated by the alien bombardment, leaving half of Xen-Martek reduced to rubble. Fires raged out of control as Brimorian particle beams ignited the leafy jungle that grew throughout the city, turning the shattered ruins into a nightmarish hellscape.

The only imposing building left standing was the Imperial palace, which was built on a ridge of hills overlooking the city. It was dusk in this region of Kinta and landing lights illuminated the Brimorian dropships that had parked on the palace grounds. Hundreds of marines could be seen moving to secure the location, the bright flashes of yellow particle bolts a grim warning that combat still raged around the drop site.

John gently squeezed Jade’s shoulder. “Put us down right in the middle.”

“Will do,” she agreed, angling the Raptor towards the centre of the battlefield.

He pulled on his Lion helmet, then left the cockpit with Alyssa at his side. They descended in the grav-tube and rejoined the girls in the forward loading room.

“We’re going in hot,” John said, unshouldering his Tachyon Rifle. “I’ll help secure the landing zone, then I’m going to head directly to Tamolith. The Brimorian commander said that Athgiloi wanted the Empress ‘broken and humiliated’, so capturing her must be their main objective.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” Dana said, her expression grim.

John shook his head, then glanced at Alyssa. “Can you help me track her down?”

“I’ll sweep the area as soon as we land,” she replied, her eyes already glowing with a radiant light.

“Are we taking prisoners?” Rachel asked quietly.

“I’ll leave that to your discretion, but don’t let prisoners slow you down,” John replied, meeting her troubled gaze. “Our number one priority is to stop the Brimorians killing Kintark civilians.”

The girls nodded their understanding and readied their weapons.

Jade’s gentle voice echoed through John’s mind. \*Touching down in 10 seconds...\*

The loading ramp began to descend, the whine of hydraulics drowned out by whistling winds. Artificial gravity kept the team level and stable as the Raptor dropped out of the sky, the Null-inertia Gyroscope negating over 10Gs as Jade pulled the nose up hard. Retro-thrusters roared as they levelled out the plummeting gunship, dramatically announcing the Lion’s arrival.

“Go!” John called out as he took the lead, bounding down the loading ramp with his Tachyon rifle at his shoulder.

He activated his psychic speed and the world around him seemed to slow down as his reactions were enhanced to superhuman levels. Two-dozen Enclave dropships had landed in the palace grounds, each one carrying a hundred Brimorian marines. The soldiers wore fully enclosed combat suits, the blue and purple armour plating shaped to look like shimmering fish scales. Shocked by the Raptor’s dramatic entrance, the closest marines had whirled around with their long rifles at the ready. John could see their startled expressions through the bubble-like helmets they wore, and realised that their bodies were completely submerged in water within the suit.

Aiming his Tachyon rifle at the closest, John squeezed off a shot, launching a hyper-accelerating slug at his torso. To John’s surprise, the 10mm bullet rebounded off a shimmering personal shield, leaving the alien trooper unscathed. Switching to pulsed tachyon fire, John fired off a burst at the Brimorian marine, obliterating his shields in an instant.

The tachyon bolts struck the trooper mid-chest, blasting holes the size of dinner plates through the Brimorian’s body. Smashed backwards by the force of the impact, the marine’s liquefied internal organs were sprayed in a bloody arc behind him, dousing his comrades in a steaming shower of gore. They didn’t have a chance to react as John gunned down the rest of the squad, killing half of them before the first dead Brimorian had even hit the ground.

The girls fanned out around him, joining in the slaughter. Sheets of blue tachyon bolts swept across the battlefield, carving a bloody path through the squads assembling in the drop zone. Behind them, Jade lifted the Raptor off the ground, its turreted Tachyon Cannons opening up on the parked dropships.

The glowing blue energy bolts from those weapons were powerful enough to punch through cruiser plating, so the lightly-armoured transports stood no chance of resisting them. Jade strafed the closest dropship with a burst from the cannons mounted in the chin turret, the dual stream of bolts punching straight through the parked craft and out the other side. As tachyon bolts ripped through the engines, they ignited the fuel tanks and the dropship erupted in a thunderous explosion.

Alyssa ignored the alien troops and vehicles being blown to pieces all around her, focusing instead on the eldritch energy that whirled around her arms. The lights on the ships dimmed around the drop zone, then flickered erratically as she tapped into greater levels of psychic power. Crouching down, Alyssa thumped the ground with both fists, sending a shockwave out across the grounds.

The dazzling pulse of light swept over startled Brimorian marines, bathing them in a sinister crimson hue, then surged onwards into the palace itself. Alyssa concentrated intently on the hundreds of minds she touched, delving deeper into those alien subconscious’ than ever before to ensure there were no false readings this time. She was able to build a snapshot of their personality, sensing the wants and needs that drove them... and cringed away from the ugliness she saw there.

Unable to detect Tamolith’s presence within the circumference of her psychic pulse, Alyssa pushed herself harder, channelling more energy to enlarge the range. Her judgement aura expanded outwards, the radiance making contact with every Brimorian and Kintark located within the palace grounds. She groaned with the strain and was about to release the pulse, when she suddenly detected hundreds of Brimorians below the palace structure.

The Enclave troops were moving at a hurried pace, the marines’ excitement at the thrill of the hunt, tempered by a substantial amount of fear as they hunted their ferocious quarry. Alyssa furrowed her brow and channelled the pulse further, then sighed with relief when she encountered a cluster of very different minds. Having plumbed the depths of Baledranax’s subconscious during the Battle of Terra, she instantly recognised their distinctive draconic outlook. Tamolith and her brood were similar to the Kintark, but their intellect and drives had been heightened by meticulous genetic engineering.

Dropping to one knee, Alyssa panted for breath. \*Tamolith’s trying to escape underground. The Brimorians are chasing her through the tunnels.\*

\*Why didn’t she just fly away?\* John asked, frowning in confusion.

She looked up at him, her expression troubled. \*She’s protecting her children... the Brimorians are hunting them.\*

\*Shit!\* he cursed, turning to look at the imposing palace. \*Can you guide me down there?\*

Alyssa quickly nodded. \*Go! I’ll give you directions.\*

Handing his Tachyon Rifle over to the blonde, John drew his runesword and set off at a sprint towards the main entrance. He passed several defensive emplacements but the bunkers were deserted, showing no signs of battle damage. Frowning in confusion, he pressed onwards, wondering why the Kintark hadn’t used the fortifications to hit the Brimorians when they were most vulnerable.

The palace itself was an ancient granite structure, the walls and columns beautifully constructed by skilled artisans to be as imposing and majestic as their draconic overlords. The grounds were similarly adorned in magnificent sculptures, the ancient stone dragons depicting the extensive pantheon of the Kintark Empire. As he got closer, John saw that the statues had been vandalised by rampaging troops, the priceless Kintark artefacts blown to pieces by particle rifles.

He grimaced when he saw the senseless destruction, fearing that the Brimorians’ contempt for the religious iconography of their former allies would foreshadow worse to come inside the palace. Sure enough, when John ran through the sundered doorway, he found the site of a bloody massacre, scores of palace staff gunned down in the broad foyer. John glanced down at one of the dead Kintark, who was wearing soil-encrusted overalls and appeared to be unarmed. His body was peppered with scorch marks from particle bolts, the terrified gardener shot in the back as he ran from the invaders.

\*It’s a bloodbath in here... the Brimorians are slaughtering everyone,\* John muttered as he picked his way around the corpses.

\*Look for a stairwell 400 metres ahead of you on the right,\* Alyssa told him, the tension in her voice palpable. \*The entrance to the tunnels is two levels lower, at the back of a big room.\*

Up ahead, he heard the eerie thrum of particle rifles being fired, yellow flashes illuminating the side corridors. Shrill cries of fear and agony reverberated in their wake, the terrible sounds harrowing proof of the atrocities being committed by the Brimorians. It was galling not being able to intervene, but John knew he couldn’t afford to be distracted.

\*I need you in here asap,\* John said as he sprinted across the foyer. \*You’re our best shot at saving the Kintark survivors in the palace. You’ll be able to wipe out the Brimorians much faster than any of us.\*

\*I’m on my way,\* his blonde matriarch replied.

John moved in a blur as he sprinted down the huge hallway, the floor strewn with the corpses of dead Kintark. Up ahead he saw scores of Brimorian troops marching deeper into the palace, the squad laughing amongst themselves as they revelled in the carnage. With his psychically enhanced speed, he was travelling far faster than them and quickly closed the distance. As much as John wanted to take out his rage and frustration on the cruel Enclave forces, hacking them to pieces would take time that he couldn’t afford to waste.

He focused his will into the runesword and felt the embedded glyphs respond, feeding off the psychic energy that charged them with power. The blade glowed with a fierce blue light, reflecting the potent destructive forces constrained within the ancient weapon. John brought the sword around in a sweeping slash, the razor-sharp Crystal Alyssium edge whistling through the air as he unleashed a telekinetic arc.

The Brimorians had personal shields and were also protected by thicker plating than the lightly armoured Kirrix drones he’d fought previously. However, the projection of his psychic might proved to be just as devastating against the Enclave forces. The deadly psychic projection thundered down the corridor and scythed through the Brimorian ranks before they’d even had a chance to turn around. Their shields were incapable of resisting the force arc and it sheared through their body-armour at the waist. Rather than exploding in a shower of limbs like the Kirrix drones, the Brimorians were disembowelled, collapsing to the ground in two separate chunks.

John strode amongst the dying troops, their callous laughter replaced by screams of pain, or silenced completely as they stared up at him in mortal shock. Leaving the mangled squad to wallow in a sea of salt water and their own bloody entrails, he ran onwards, searching for the stairs that would take him deeper into the palace.

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“The Brimorians are slaughtering everyone. John wants me to head inside and help rescue the Kintark in the palace,” Alyssa informed the girls. \*Jade, can you provide covering fire for Tashana?\*

The Raptor jinked so that it was flying directly over the Maliri pistoleer, its turrets pouring unending streams of tachyon bolts into what was left of the stunned Enclave forces. \*I’ll watch over her.\*

Tashana holstered a pistol and flickering flame sprites burst into life on the palm of her gauntlet. “Don’t worry about me, I’ll have plenty of company.”

She held out her hand and a quartet of fiery elementals leaped away, spinning through the air to land on the ground. With a roar of flames they grew larger, until they were as tall as the Maliri pyrokinetic they cavorted around. Alyssa and Tashana exchanged a nod, then the Maliri turned and sprinted towards the outskirts of the grounds where they’d seen numerous yellow flashes from particle rifles. Her fiery entourage spun and danced as they kept pace, leaving a trail of burning footsteps behind them.

“When we get inside, you two take the left wing,” Alyssa said, glancing at Dana and Rachel as they all jogged towards the palace. “Jehanna, you stay with me and we’ll clear out the right side.”

“What about the central section?” the raven-haired girl asked, gazing up at the enormous building with trepidation. “Shouldn’t we be careful about dividing our forces when we’re this close to an enemy? We’re outnumbered and very vulnerable to a pincer movement. The Brimorians on the flanks could call for reinforcements, then one of our groups would be caught in a crossfire.”

Dana raised an eyebrow and studied Jehanna curiously. “I thought you were a reporter for TFNN? How do you know all this squad tactics stuff?”

“My father taught me...” Jehanna replied, her expression turning sombre.

“Don’t worry, we’ll fix things with your family,” Alyssa said, giving her a sympathetic smile. “You’re right about being careful not to get surrounded... but I’ve got it covered.”

She gestured ahead of them and a legion of telekinetic swords and axes popped into existence. The serrated blades looked wickedly sharp, gleaming with a sinister red hue as they reflected the flickering firelight. The floating weapons tilted forward with unnatural eagerness, then surged into the towering granite fortress ahead of the four Lionesses.

Dana saw Jehanna’s shocked expression and grinned. “Yeah... we’re about to fuck up someone’s day alright.”

Alyssa led the girls through the garden of shattered statues and their group entered the palace through the smashed gates. They paused at the disturbing sight of the massacre, where Brimorian Marines had clearly gunned down fleeing Kintark civilians.

Rachel’s speculative gaze swept over the bodies. “I haven’t seen any sign of Kintark troops, either here or outside. I wonder why they didn’t contest the drop zone?”

“Yeah! Where the fuck are the palace guards? Shouldn’t there be like... a royal garrison or something defending this place?” Dana asked, frowning at the piles of corpses.

“I don’t know,” Alyssa replied quietly, her expression bleak. “But it felt like nearly all the Kintark I detected nearby were civilians... so something bad must have happened to their soldiers.”

There were several exits from the foyer and the girls split up to sweep and clear their allocated sections of the palace. Dana and Rachel started shooting as soon as they reached the left-hand corridor, their rifles spitting out a continuous stream of energy pulses. Moving confidently, they advanced while laying down a curtain of fire, disappearing out of sight as they unleashed a deadly azure storm.

Alyssa passed over John’s Tachyon rifle to a pair of glowing disembodied hands, then unslung her own rifle and repeated the same actions. Flanked by both floating weapons, she strolled over to the corridor on the right, with Jehanna watching her in awe.

“Let’s go, rookie,” the blonde said, smiling at their newest recruit.

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“Is it much further?” Tondax complained, panting as he trotted alongside his siblings. “I’m tired!”

“Not much further, my precious darling. Please keep going for just a little longer,” Tamolith replied, anxiously twisting her long neck around to look behind her up the tunnel.

She could hear the sound of many booted feet running after them, the noise getting louder as the Brimorians steadily gained ground. The Kintark Empress knew that the Enclave troops would soon be upon them... unless she took steps to discourage their pursuit.

“Zulkayr, attend me a moment!” she called out to her eldest son who was at the front of their group.

He skidded to a halt, then bounded back to join her. “Of course, mother!”

Leaning in close, she whispered, “Guide the others onwards... we are not far from the exit. Seek shelter in the jungle, I will join you shortly.”

Zulkayr looked up at her in alarm. “No, we should stick together, mother! Let me help you fight the Brimorians!” Puffing out his chest, he bared his teeth and snarled fiercely, “I will be like Tiemeth the Destroyer reborn!”

“You would be magnificent, my son,” Tamolith agreed, her eyes shining with pride. “But I need you to protect your siblings and your future consorts. You will be Emperor one day and it is your duty to protect the Imperial family.”

He turned and saw that his brother and sisters were looking back at them, fear and exhaustion written across their draconic faces. Ruvith and Ondyrth were watching him too, their expressions intrigued despite the dire circumstances.

Lowering his head in resignation, he nodded. “I will do my duty, mother.”

“As I knew you would,” Tamolith murmured, nuzzling him affectionately. Raising her head to tower over the rest, she declared, “I am going to bloody my claws with the Brimorian vermin. Do not worry, my precious darlings, I will not be gone long.”

Damopha perked up and bared her teeth. “Can we come too?” She growled and leapt forward in a pounce. “We’ll show them!”

Tamolith shook her head. “You would scare them all away and leave none for me. Listen to Zulkayr and do what he says. He will keep you safe until I return.”

The dragon whelps reluctantly agreed, then trotted after Zulkayr as he led them onwards down the tunnel. Tamolith watched them leave for a long moment, before she turned and stalked back along the corridor, retracing her steps to one of the abrupt twists in the broad and winding tunnel. Lurking in the darkness, her hulking form was tensed and ready for action as she waited for the alien invaders to appear.

The sound of hundreds of armoured boots grew deafeningly loud, but as the first group of Brimorian marines rounded the bend, the noise was drowned out by Tamolith’s booming roar. She charged forward, using her massive bulk to smash the terrified troopers against the wall, popping their armour with a satisfying crunch. Kicking off against the blood-soaked ground, she barrelled into the next group, her claws and fangs gleaming wickedly in their spotlights.

Tamolith fell on the Brimorians, ripping away armoured limbs or crushing their bodies in her powerful jaws. Their flesh was delicious, but the salt water in their suits added a bitter, briny aftertaste. Agonised screams filled the tunnel along with frightened cries, as the enraged dragon slashed and maimed her way through the front ranks. Amidst the carnage, those marines broke and fled for their lives, but the troops advancing behind stood fast. They raised their particle rifles and opened fire, yellow energy bolts striking Tamolith’s scarlet hide. She was hit dozens of times, the stinging impacts leaving blackened scars across Tamolith’s bloody foreclaws, sinuous neck and powerful shoulders.

She snarled as she shrugged off the pain and charged into the next squad, tearing them apart for their insolence.

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The Breklan'tohok’s Bridge was deathly quiet, the crew of the Kintark flagship stunned into silence by the terrifying scale of the destruction heaped on the Brimorians. High Prelate Zorlin watched in disbelief as the Invictus cruised towards the Enclave formations, annihilating everything in its path. The alien armada had seemed unstoppable only minutes earlier, but now their fleets were being torn to pieces as they faced that relentless onslaught.

A forest of sapphire beams lanced out again and again, instantly overwhelming shields and blowing cruisers to pieces. The Brimorians had launched a huge swarm of fighters before Zorlin ambushed their heavy carriers and hundreds of strike craft now moved to engage the Terran battlecruiser. Unfortunately for those squadrons, the Invictus’ defence grid was just as lethal as its main guns and the Brimorian fighters were cut to pieces before they even got in range.

Zorlin should have been elated at having achieved strike craft supremacy, but was too numb with shock and could only watch the carnage in appalled fascination. He expected the biggest ships in the Brimorian force to offer some sterner resistance, but the first battleship to get within the Invictus’ staggering range was engulfed in a dazzling blast that hurt his eyes with its ferocious intensity. Zorlin had witnessed that weapon being used once before at the Battle of Regulus and it was just as terrifying as he’d remembered.

He rubbed his eyes, the after-image of that incandescent blast seared onto his retinas. When his eyesight had recovered, Zorlin searched in vain for the battleship that had been hit by the Nova Lance, until he realised it had been completely atomised. He shuddered with fear at the thought of facing an enemy with such staggering firepower and could only imagine what must be going through the Brimorian Commander’s head at that moment.

Unsurprisingly, the Brimorians chose to run for their lives, rather than hold position and be systematically annihilated. The Enclave formations broke apart as every ship captain sought to save themselves, the Brimorians scattering in every direction as they routed. The Invictus was preoccupied with escorting a single gunship to Kinta... or eager to slaughter the bombarding battleships, Zorlin wasn’t sure which. The momentary respite gave the surviving Brimorians a chance to flee from the slaughter, which they gladly took.

Zorlin froze as he remembered Captain Fernandez’s request for him to withdraw and hold position until the Brimorians tried to escape. The battle had played out exactly as she’d predicted, with the two Kintark fleets now ideally placed to intercept the fleeing aliens. It was almost as if the young Terran female had orchestrated these exact circumstances to allow the Kintark forces a chance to avenge the bombarding of their homeworld.

Turning his attention to the fleet command interface, the High Prelate grimaced as he began to reorganise his forces for the upcoming battle. A third of the remaining Kintark forces had sustained damage in the aborted charge against the Brimorians and they had still not fully recharged their shields. He moved his damaged vessels into a reserve force, keeping them away from the main battle line, but still allowing them to add supporting fire.

With his forces at the ready, he picked the obvious target... a greatly diminished fleet of Brimorian warships led by their flagship. The enemy battlegroup was heading directly towards the Kintark position and Zorlin realised that this was a last-ditch effort by the Brimorians to inflict some serious damage on the Imperial forces. Supporting the enemy flagship was a core group of ten Brimorian battleships, packing enough firepower to pose a massive threat. It was going to be a dangerous fight, but Zorlin knew that every Kintark crewman in his fleets needed the catharsis of revenge.

“High Prelate, we’re being hailed,” the comms officer announced in a hushed voice.

Normally, he would’ve been drowned out by the background noises on the Bridge, but in the eerie silence, everyone heard him loud and clear.

“By who? The Invictusss?” Zorlin asked, walking across the command platform to look down on the communications officer.

“No, High Prelate. Their desssignation is Ssstrike Valkyrie Ultra.”

Glancing up at the holo-screen, he ordered, “Put them through.”

Another Terran female appeared, but this young woman had jet-black hair and almond-shaped eyes.

“This is Lioness Sakura Honami,” she declared, inclining her head politely. “With your permission, I would like to assist in engaging the incoming Brimorian force.”

Zorlin hesitated and looked at her in confusion, wondering why she was asking permission. He suddenly realised that Sakura was treating him as a respected ally... one that wasn’t in dire need of help. By asking if she could join the battle, rather than rushing to the rescue, Sakura was allowing the Kintark to keep their pride intact. Touched by her thoughtful deference, which flew in the face of everything he’d believed the Terrans capable of, Zorlin gave her a grateful nod.

“I am not too proud to asssk for asssistance, not when Kintark livesss are in jeopardy,” he replied with great relief, bowing to her respectfully. “You may engage them at will, Lionesss.”

She gave him a tight-lipped smile. “Thank you, Zorlin. Feel free to designate any targets you wish to claim for yourself.”

“Their flagssship...” he replied, understanding her intent.

Sakura nodded then closed the comms channel.

Zorlin turned back to the Tactical Map and began searching for the Valkyrie, wondering what manner of warship Sakura was commanding. His attention had been wholly focused on the Invictus after its dramatic entrance, so he wasn’t surprised that he’d missed the arrival of another Terran vessel. With so many ships scattered around the system, it proved impossible to spot Sakura amongst the sea of red sensor contacts.

He activated the search function to help him locate the Valkyrie’s transponder, which quickly identified her craft and made it flash on the three-dimensional map. Zorlin blinked in surprise and couldn’t help feeling foolish, as it transpired that the Valkyrie was nothing more than an unusually shaped strike craft. He sighed with resignation as he designated Sakura’s sensor contact as a friendly fighter, then turned his attention back to his battered fleets. The impending fight against the core of the Brimorian fleets was going to be a far more dangerous prospect than the slaughter he’d been expecting.

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John bounded down the stone steps, forcing himself to slow down as he took the turns in the stairwell so that he wouldn’t crash into the walls. He spotted another squad of Brimorians as he reached the level below, but didn’t stop to fight them. Instead he whipped his sword around in passing, the lightning-fast backhanded swipe sending a telekinetic arc through their midst. The sound of agonised cries reached his sharp ears as he rushed onwards, telling him that the hastily aimed psychic projection had hit its mark.

\*I’ve reached the second level,\* he said to Alyssa a few seconds later as he bounded out into the empty corridor. \*Which way now?\*

\*Keep going the same direction as before, but a bit to the left. Heading 340... about 150 metres.\*

\*Got it,\* he replied, turning to his right and continuing along the broad hallway.

Keeping an eye on the compass displayed on the HUD of his Paragon helmet, John sprinted along the high-arched passageway, which snaked through several turns. Forcing himself to slow down a little, he activated his psychically enhanced sight, the X-ray vision allowing him to see straight through the walls. There were numerous entryways on the left side of the corridor and John realised that the third one along would take him directly to his target.

He was so fixated on peering through the walls to keep his bearings, John nearly tripped over an armoured corpse lying in the middle of the corridor. Glancing down, he was shocked to see hundreds of bodies covering the floor, many of them still burning with fel green plasma fire. The fallen soldier he’d nearly stumbled into was a dead Brimorian marine, the aquatic alien’s face contorted in agony as he’d been incinerated by plasma bolts. There were many more Brimorians there... fifty at least... but the rest were Kintark soldiers, easily identifiable by their iridescent green body armour.

\*I found the Kintark garrison,\* John informed Alyssa as he hurried through the piles of dead warriors. \*The Brimorians wiped them out.\*

\*We wondered where all the soldiers were,\* she replied, sharing his sombre mood.

\*It looks like they made a last stand defending Tamolith’s escape route,\* he replied, frowning in disapproval. \*But this was a terrible place to fight. They could’ve used the emplacements around the palace to murder the Brimorians as they landed, cutting them to pieces with enfilading fire. Even badly outnumbered, they could have slaughtered hundreds of marines trying to disperse from their dropships.\*

\*Not if their Empress ordered them to protect her retreat,\* Alyssa said quietly. \*You know what Tamolith’s like. She only cares about her children and doesn’t give a shit about Kintark troops.\*

John frowned with disapproval, having seen more than enough of soldiers being sacrificed unnecessarily during his time in the Terran Federation military. He worked his way along the corridor, following a well-trodden path that avoided most of the corpses.

\*How many Brimorians did you see in the tunnels?\* he asked, finally getting past the bloodiest part of the battlefield.

\*A lot... hundreds.\*

He sped up again, returning to a full sprint after turning into the adjoining corridor. Following a few turns, he rushed through a set of double doors that had been flung open, revealing a huge library. Bookshelves stacked with books ran for at least 50 metres in either direction, containing a vast wealth of knowledge.

After seeing the destruction throughout the palace, John was actually surprised that the Brimorians hadn’t started a book-burning bonfire. The only sign of vandalism was the hundreds of bloody boot prints that crossed the room, ruining the plush carpets with the vile mess. Hurrying after the Brimorian invaders, he followed the disgusting path to a bookcase in the corner that had been torn down, revealing a tunnel into the gloom beyond.

\*I found the tunnel. I’m heading in,\* he told his matriarchs, running full tilt into the secret passageway. John activated low-light vision in his HUD, enhancing his view. \*Keep me updated if there’s any problems.\*

\*Will do,\* Alyssa replied.

\*Master... there’s something you need to know,\* Jade snarled, her voice bristling with barely-suppressed fury.

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Tashana skidded to a halt, her mouth falling open in shock as she neared the Brimorian forces on the outskirts of the drop zone. There were hundreds of Enclave marines here, the blue and purple armoured troopers firing down the hill in a pitched battle. Except that there were only yellow particle beams being fired and no answering plasma bolts from Kintark soldiers... because the Brimorians were shooting civilians fleeing from the burning city.

The road below was piled high with bodies, thousands of innocent Kintark civilians gunned down in cold blood.

\*Are you seeing this, Jade?\* Tashana balked, the telepathic conversation relayed via Alyssa.

\*They’re shooting children!\* the Nymph cried out in anguish, her sharp eyes spotting the tiny bodies amongst the dead.

\*Distract them for me...\* Tashana growled, her eyes blazing with rage. She dropped her pistols and her hands burst into flame, burning white-hot with her fury.

Jade dipped the Raptor’s nose and roared over the Brimorian forces, low enough for the gunship’s retro-thrusters to buffet the troops. She whirled the agile ship around, spraying streams of tachyon bolts along the Enclave lines to get their attention. After her excellent accuracy against the previous squads, it would’ve been astonishing that Jade didn’t manage to hit a single Brimorians with her opening volley... except that was never her intent.

The Brimorians stumbled backwards from this latest threat, hundreds of particle rifles turning their fire towards the gunship looming in front of them. The Raptor was almost obliterated from sight by yellow particle bolts, their massed firepower spraying wildly over its protective shields. Jade weaved the gunship from side to side, responding to the barrage with more pulses of tachyon bolts that blasted chunks out of the ground at the Brimorians’ feet.

Before the aquatic troops could question the miraculous fact that none of them had been shot, an unusual whistling sound caught their attention over the thrumming dirge of gunfire. One of the Brimorians turned around to glance behind him, then fell backwards, his eyes wide in horror. The whistling became a deep-throated roar as the firestorm gave vent to its fury, a scorching wall of flame running the entire length of the Brimorian lines that sucked in the very air around it.

Jade pulled back on the flightstick, lifting the Raptor’s nose to drift backwards as she felt the insistent pull of the nightmarish inferno. For the much smaller and lighter alien soldiers, there would be no escape from the firestorm’s hungry maw. A soldier was sucked off his feet and immolated by the conflagration, his flame-shrouded armour catapulted out the other side. He writhed in agony, howling himself hoarse as he was broiled to death.

Brimorians fell to the ground, clawing desperately for purchase as they were dragged kicking and screaming into the fiery maelstrom. There was no escape for any of the terrified marines, each and every one of them slowly incinerated as they were consumed by the hungry flames. Its infernal appetite appeased, the firestorm wavered and diminished, the temperatures rapidly cooling until it flickered out with a guttering whump.

Tashana collapsed to her knees as she panted for breath, having pushed herself to the limit. The flames enveloping her gauntleted fists had abated and she reached for her pistols again, now that her fiery retribution was complete. Looking up, she saw the Raptor hovering a dozen metres away, the nose tilted down so that she could see directly into the cockpit. Tashana made eye-contact with Jade and they shared a nod, satisfied that the Kintark dead had been suitably avenged.

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Jehanna carefully snapped off bursts of laser fire with her pistol, the bolts hitting the Brimorians ducked behind cover with impressive accuracy. The laser bolts struck them in the helmet or upper torso, the only places visible above the low granite walls surrounding the raised flowerbeds in the arboretum. Taking out their shields with the first couple of energy pulses, the next blasted fist-sized holes through their body armour, slaying the Brimorians instantly.

“Nice shooting,” Alyssa muttered, her own twin Tachyon rifles carefully picking off more of the squad.

“Thank you,” the reporter replied, appreciating the praise but surprised at the blonde’s surly tone.

It would’ve been far easier to simply blast their way through the cover and mow down every Brimorian in this section of the palace. However, they were doing their best to preserve the Kintark edifice rather than demolish it. The high-powered energy bolts from Jehanna’s laser pistol were strong enough to punch through walls, so the Tachyon rifles would’ve caused untold destruction.

The Brimorians were showing no such restraint as they returned fire, but it was fortunate that their particle rifles were a lot less powerful. Yellow bolts blasted scorched holes in the granite walls behind the two girls, every missed shot causing more damage to the palace. Alyssa and Jehanna had not escaped the gunfight unscathed, the shield status in their HUD’s dipping from bright green to show a hint of yellow.

Alyssa suddenly raised both her hands and a pair of huge telekinetic fists appeared amongst the ducking Brimorians. She curled her hands into claws and the psychic projections grabbed the two closest marines, lifting them off the ground in her implacable grip. The alien soldiers struggled to free themselves, crying out in panic as they floated higher.

“Fucking animals...” Alyssa snarled, her eyes shining with a harsh white light.

She used her improvised cudgels to batter the other Brimorians in the squad, their terrified screams turning to strangled gurgles as she bludgeoned them to death. When the two alien marines were too mangled to further serve as a mallet, she contemptuously tossed them aside, then grabbed another pair. Alyssa smashed the rest of the marines, their terrified wails echoing around the arboretum as she butchered the last members of their squad.

Rising from cover, Alyssa stalked across the blood-splattered lawns without giving the dead Brimorians a second glance. The blonde frowned when she realised she was alone, then glanced back to see Jehanna still standing by the wall, watching her with wide eyes.

“Come on, there’s still plenty more bad guys to waste,” she said, beckoning her dusky-hued companion to follow.

Jehanna walked over to join Alyssa, but her expression was filled with concern. “Did I do something to upset you?”

Alyssa looked at her in surprise and shook her head. “No, of course not. Why do you ask?”

Gesticulating towards the mutilated corpses and limbs strewn haphazardly across the room, Jehanna didn’t bother to reply.

Glancing around her, Alyssa’s gaze softened as she turned back to face Jehanna. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you worry. This has nothing to do with how you’ve been performing.... which is great by the way.”

“What then?” Jehanna pressed.

“The Brimorian genocide plan is looking better by the minute,” Alyssa muttered, scowling angrily. “These fuckers have been slaughtering children.”

Jehanna’s face darkened and she glanced towards the door. “Let’s go... there’s still plenty more bad guys to waste.”

Alyssa gave her a bleak smile and they left the arboretum side by side.

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Sakura studied the Brimorians, choosing her best avenue of attack. The Enclave force was flying at full thrust towards the waiting Kintark ships and would soon be in range to open fire. Although the Kintark now outnumbered what was left of the Brimorians, a significant portion of the Imperial warships had sustained battle damage and was hardly in a fit state to fight.

She decided that damage limitation was the best course of action and would accomplish that by reducing the amount of firepower the Brimorians could bring to bear. Sakura twisted her body, angling the mech’s thrusters so that it shifted course to intercept the ten Enclave battleships at the centre of the spearhead formation.

Also accompanying the Brimorian flagship were eighteen cruisers, over a score of destroyers and four light carriers. The carriers had sought protection from what was left of the Brimorian armada, but a suicidal charge into the teeth of the Kintark guns was the last thing they had in mind. The quartet peeled away, making a desperate dash for the periphery of the system’s gravity well.

Ignoring them, Sakura focused her attention on the capital ship group. She couldn’t help smiling at the bizarre situation she found herself in. Only a few weeks ago, she’d fought against a dozen Praetorian battleships to stop them bombarding Unity City during the Battle of Terra. Now she was trying to protect Kintark cities from destruction by attacking Brimorian battleships. She would only need to attack Terran Federation battleships to stop them bombarding a Brimorian metropolis and the chaotic circle of switching affiliations would be complete.

The range indicators for her Tachyon Lances were overlaid on the Tactical Map, the enormous arcs extending from the quartet of shoulder-mounted guns towards the Brimorians. She watched as the Valkyrie rushed closer, the leading edge of the range indicators sweeping past several cruisers on the flank of the enemy formation. She tracked the closest destroyer with the two turreted Tachyon Cannons, but those weapons were still a long way from firing range.

Drawing from the soothing glacial chill that dwelled deep inside her, Sakura channelled the cold towards the mech’s guns, coating them in a frigid layer of ice. The battle preparations were like second nature to her now, the Asian girl a veteran of ferocious combat in the Valkyrie. She accelerated her body, her movements a blur as she moved with frenetic haste.

\*Engaging the Brimorians,\* she informed Alyssa.

\*Happy hunting!\* the blonde replied. \*When they’re dealt with, can you help Calara chase down the runners? She’s taking care of the ones on the opposite side of Kinta.\*

Sakura glanced at the map and saw that the Invictus had banked away from the Imperial homeworld, the white battlecruiser now rushing to catch the fleeing Brimorians. Its engines burned brightly as Leylira pushed the Invictus to full thrust, rapidly closing the gap on the retreating enemy. That left more than a score of fleeing Brimorians on Sakura’s side and she assigned them secondary target status.

\*Will do,\* she agreed, readying herself for combat. \*Has Calara actively scanned any of their battleships?\*

\*The Reactor Core is in the Stern section in the lower decks,\* Alyssa replied, guessing why she was asking. \*Aim below the Fire Control Tower on the flank.\*

\*Got it, thanks!\*

The weapon arcs flashed as they overlapped the closest Brimorian battleship and Sakura flexed her trigger fingers, firing her shoulder-mounted Tachyon Lances. The four sapphire hued beams pummelled the capital ship’s shields, making them undulate frantically as their integrity was overloaded. The bubble popped after a few seconds, allowing the energy columns to rake a savage clawmark across the exposed hull.

Twisting her body, Sakura shifted the mech’s position so that it brought itself upright. She aimed the underarm cannon at the shieldless battleship, then waited for the weapon to get into range. The rapid chilling from the barrel’s icy coating meant that the Tachyon Lances were ready to fire again before she was close enough to fire any other weapons. She aimed at a second battleship and hammered it with another salvo of tachyon beams, denuding that vessel of its shields and leaving it horribly vulnerable.

The Brimorians reacted to this shocking new threat on their flanks, with supporting cruisers and destroyers pivoting around to protect the wounded battleships. They returned fire, pouring a tsunami of particle beams and particle bolts at the incoming Valkyrie. Try as they might, they found it impossible to hit the incredibly nimble mech, which dodged aside as it mimicked Sakura’s limber acrobatics.

She had no such problem hitting her slow-moving targets and the underslung cannon pumped hyper-accelerated slugs towards the first of the stricken battleships. Its hull erupted with explosions, the ferocious impacts doing massive damage to the lighter-armoured Brimorian capital ship. Sakura followed Alyssa’s instructions and gouged a deep crater in the flank of the closest battleship, blasting fragments of shattered armour plating into space.

It took her several seconds of concentrated fire before she found her target. The Brimorian vessel’s hull bulged obscenely, before erupting in a dazzling reactor explosion that vaporised the entire ship. The trio of battleships within the blast zone were smashed aside, their shields the only thing saving them from disaster. The craft didn’t escape unscathed though, as being caught in the detonations weakened their own shields, leaving them critically exposed to the mech’s next Tachyon Lance barrage.

“One down, nine to go,” Sakura said with a grin of satisfaction.

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For the second time that evening, High Prelate Zorlin was shocked speechless. The fighter he’d dismissed as inconsequential had just demolished one battleship entirely on its own, leaving a gaping hole in the enemy formation where the mighty vessel had once been. As he gaped at the Valkyrie in astonishment, a second thunderous blast illuminated the holographic map, the explosion boldly announcing Sakura’s second battleship kill before the Kintark fleet had even fired a shot.

He sagged forward and clutched the command table with both hands, a throaty chuckle bubbling up that caught him by surprise. Zorlin shot a guilty glance at the crew in the Bridge Pit, embarrassed by his momentary lapse in professional conduct. A number of them grinned back, their reaction telling him that they shared his palpable sense of relief.

“We can’t let her wipe them out sssingle-handed!” he called out, feeling a surge of jubilation. “All ships accelerate to attack speed!”

The Kintark captains in the fleet interface acknowledged his orders with eager anticipation, each of them desperate to claim their revenge against the Brimorians.

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Shoal Master Kaelotegh flinched as another of his phalanx of battleships was blown to smithereens, falling before the Valkyrie’s unbelievable firepower. Seconds later, the Retribution from the Depths shuddered as its hull was peppered by debris fragments, the flagship’s armour plating now pockmarked with thousands of tiny craters from similar impacts.

He stared in disbelief at the System Map, watching as the dregs of the vaunted Enclave armada fled for their lives. The Invictus harried the scattered ships, mercilessly executing the pitiful remnants of his forces whenever it was close enough to open fire. Shuddering with despair, he realised that the white battlecruiser had the speed and range to track down and eliminate every last Brimorian ship before they could escape this terrible nightmare.

The invasion had started with such promise... how could it have come to utter ruin?

His bloodshot eyes glared with hatred at the Kintark flagship, knowing that the architect of his downfall was overseeing the slaughter aboard the Breklan'tohok. The Imperial battlecarrier was bearing down on his forces, safely protected by a vanguard of Kintark battleships and cruisers. They opened fire on the beleaguered Brimorians as they came within range, adding to the carnage inflicted on the Enclave fleet by the tiny Valkyrie.

The Enclave forces were badly outnumbered and pushed to breaking point after witnessing their friends and comrades annihilated before their eyes. The Brimorian gunners aboard their battleships and cruisers fired wildly at any enemy ships in range, their uncoordinated broadsides not even taking down the Kintark shields. Trying to hit the incredibly agile Valkyrie proved to be an impossible task and dozens of particle beams were wasted trying to swat that annoying fly.

Kaelotegh couldn’t even contact Deep Lord Athgiloi to warn him of the terrible fate that had befallen the armada, as the chain of comms beacons had been broken, cutting him off from the Enclave. He was no longer under any illusion that he would survive this debacle as he watched one of his battleships engulfed in a lurid green plasma storm. All the Shoal Master wanted now was revenge against his nemesis... and then he could face death with his head held high.

“Hail the Breklan'tohok,” he muttered to his frightened crew.

The Wave-squire sitting at the Comms Station nodded and opened a channel to the Kintark flagship, his clawed fingers trembling as he tapped the glyphs. The Kintark leader filled the holo-screen and Kaelotegh gazed upon the ugly reptilian face of the enemy commander who had been his undoing. The Kintark officer wasn’t physically imposing and by the grey tint to his scaly hide, Kaelotegh would’ve guessed that the commander was considerably older than he’d expected.

“So we meet at last,” Kaelotegh hissed, baring his needle-like teeth at his foe. Holding himself taller, his fins stiffened with pride. “I am Shoal Master Kaelotegh of the Brimorian Enclave. I would know the name of my opponent.”

“I’m High Prelate Zorlin of the Kintark Empire,” The Kintark officer replied, unimpressed by the Brimorian’s posturing. “It’sss not too late for you to sssurrender, Ssshoal Massster. By facing jussstice for your crimesss againssst my people, you may yet ssspare the livesss of your men.”

“There will be no surrender!” Kaelotegh snarled, making a chopping refusal with his clawed hands.

Zorlin shrugged. “Then you and all your comradesss will die a sssenssselesss death.”

As the Kintark officer turned to close the comms channel, Kaelotegh lurched forward in alarm. “Wait! I challenge you and your battlecarrier to single combat with my flagship! Let the victor determine the fate of my forces!”

“You’re already facing imminent destruction. What posssible incentive would I have for accepting sssuch an absurd challenge?” Zorlin asked, his brow furrowing in confusion. “I decline.”

Frantic with desperation, Kaelotegh blurted out, “How can you let Admiral Blake steal your victory like this?! You and I have been engaged in a battle of wits throughout this campaign!”

The High Prelate shook his head. “You are missstaken, Ssshoal Massster. I wisssh that I could claim credit for the defensssive measssuresss we prepared, but I wasss sssimply following orders.”

“What?!” Kaelotegh balked, clenching the armrests of his command chair. “Who was in command?! You owe me that much... I must know!”

Zorlin’s eyes turned cold and hard. “I owe you nothing, treacherousss Brimorian ssscum. But I will make you pay for the destruction you inflicted on Kinta. I hope Tiemeth the Dessstroyer burnsss you for eternity!”

The call ended abruptly, leaving Kaelotegh staring in impotent fury at the blank holo-screen.

Another explosion flared brightly on the Tactical map as the Valkyrie speared a Brimorian battleship through the Power Core. Kaelotegh turned to stare at what was left of his forces and was stunned to see that the last of his capital ship escorts had been destroyed, filleted by a tiny white mech only a fraction of their size. The cruisers arrayed at the forefront of his fleet were being savaged by the Kintark, plasma fires raging out of control as they incinerated the Brimorian warships.

The Retribution from the Depths shook violently from repeated impacts, then the Bridge was plunged into darkness. It was pitch black on the Command Deck, the emergency lighting failing to activate after the primary power had been disrupted. Kaelotegh was about to ask his crew what had happened, but he realised he already knew the answer. His flagship had been hit by a volley of EMP missiles, shutting down all power.

“Contact Engineering! Get power restored!” he yelled into the darkness.

His order was met with frightened muttering, until someone called out, “How?! Everything’s unresponsive!”

Kaelotegh stared into the gloom and began to laugh at the horrible absurdity of their plight, his shrill cackles echoing around the Bridge as he finally snapped under the strain. The battleship shook again and again as it was bombarded by Plasma Cannon volleys, the pride of the Enclave navy left ablaze from bow to stern. The Shoal Master’s crazed chortling only ended when the plasma firestorm melted the bulkheads, his laughter turning to agonised screams as ravenous flames immolated the crew.

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As the subterranean passage delved deeper under the palace, the broad tunnel plunged into absolute blackness. John paused to turn off his Paragon suit’s low-light amplification and activated the set of external lamps, flooding the corridor in bright light. Under normal circumstances, he would never have given away his position like this, but he needed speed over caution if he was to reach Tamolith and her brood in time.

Picking up the pace again, John renewed his pursuit of the Brimorian marines, his psychic speed allowing him to rapidly navigate the tunnels. The passageway descended through the granite plateau that supported the palace, heading in a northerly direction despite all the twists and turns.

He’d been running for several minutes, when the grey stone blocks were suddenly awash with colour. Brutally dismembered Brimorian corpses lay in broken heaps, the floor covered in dismembered limbs and splashed liberally in gore. Adding a worrying contrast to the blues, purples, and reds, were brighter sprays of yellow, the distinctive colour of draconic blood.

John heard the thrum of particle rifles further along the tunnel, followed by rumbling roars that sent a chill down his spine. He set off at a sprint, channelling his will into the runesword he clenched in his fist, the blade glowing with a brilliant sapphire radiance. It didn’t take long to catch up to his quarry and John grimaced when he saw the horrific scene ahead.

He knew that the Kintark dragons were capable of regenerating horrific injuries and apparently so did the Enclave forces. Scores of Brimorian marines were laughing and cheering as they fired at Tamolith, the huge red dragon slumped and lying helpless on the stone floor. The Brimorians were avoiding shooting her head, but the Empress’ body was pockmarked by hundreds of gaping wounds, the dreadful injuries leaving her weak and vulnerable. She raised a huge foreclaw to take a faltering swipe at one of her tormentors, but he easily avoided her slow and clumsy attack.

The glowing runeblade sliced through the air, projecting a shimmering arc of telekinetic force towards the Brimorian forces. John’s psychic attack carved into their lines with a cacophonous boom, eviscerating the aquatic soldiers as it sheared through their armour. The rest turned in shock to face this new threat, but John was already upon them, his sword rising and falling as he hacked the troopers apart.

Wading through the Brimorian force, John let his instincts guide his actions, the ensuing death and destruction feeling as natural to him as breathing. He drove the point of his sword through a Brimorian’s chest, then ignited the blade in eldritch flames, immolating the cruel alien solider in a pillar of azure fire. When John tugged the ancient Kyth’faren weapon clear, a flick of the wrist sent the burning trooper flying over the heads of his squadmates, leaving them terrified. Beheading one with a backhand swipe, John hacked another apart with a diagonal cross-slash, both blows leaving the Brimorians in two separate chunks.

Moving from one soldier to the next, he carved a bloody path through the squads, stabbing, slicing, and chopping the enemy as he darted deeper into their ranks. John paused for a moment, gripped the hilt of his sword with both hands and unleashed another blast wave, sending a dozen fleeing Brimorians cartwheeling into the unyielding granite wall. They smashed into the sturdy granite with a sickening crunch, the colossal impact shattering most of the bones in their bodies.

John whirled around to search for his next target and was startled to see that he was the only person left still standing. Over a hundred Brimorians lay dead or dying in the tunnel, leaving him alone with Tamolith. Turning his attention to the fallen dragon, he saw her try to scrabble upright, but she tottered over and collapsed with a heavy thump.

“Easy now,” John said, rushing to her side. “You’re too badly hurt to get up. Give yourself a chance to regenerate your wounds.”

She twisted her neck to look at him, her body trembling with the pain. “My babies...” she whimpered, her voice frail and weak. “Save them... please.”

John glanced down the tunnel. “How many Brimorians got passed you?”

Tamolith tried to claw her way down the tunnel. “Forty...” she wheezed. “Maybe fifty...”

Not wasting a moment longer, John set off again, moving in a blur as he sprinted along the subterranean passage. They were close to the exit and he could see the cheery glow of sunlight up ahead, brightly illuminating the end of the tunnel.

\*Alyssa, I need Rachel!\* he called out to his blonde matriarch. \*The Brimorians shot the hell out of Tamolith and she’s critically wounded. It’ll take her time to heal her body and she’s in a lot of pain.\*

\*I’ll send her down to you with Dana. I’ll stay up here with Jehanna and finish clearing out the lower levels... we shouldn’t be too much longer.\*

\*Fantastic, thanks,\* he said gratefully.

Bursting outside, he ran headlong into the Brimorians chasing after Tamolith’s whelps, smashing them aside like ten pins. The sunlight he’d seen back in the tunnel was actually the glare from the spotlights mounted on their armour. Knocked off-balance by the mighty impact, John threw up a telekinetic net to stop him sprawling face-first across the ground.

It only took him a moment to regain his footing, then he leapt on the offensive, taking advantage of the element of surprise against the stunned troopers. As John proceeded to tear apart the Brimorian squads, he kept a mental tally of the marines as they died, eventually reaching a final count of fifty-two. When the last tumbled across the ground in two separate chunks, he sighed with relief that he’d managed to intercept them in time.

That was when he heard the deep thrum of a particle weapon. Whipping his head around to trace the sound back to its source, John’s heart sank when he saw a squadron of Brimorian gunships circling the jungle like hungry vultures. They were firing their turreted Particle Cannons at an unseen target below, bursts of yellow bolts blasting through the leafy canopy and illuminating the gunships against the dusk sky.

“Oh, shit...” he muttered with dread.

He activated flight mode and leapt into the air, the Paragon suit’s thrusters launching him skyward on a pillar of golden flame. Whipping the sword around in a savage uppercut, he sent a vertical telekinetic arc towards the closest gunship. The scythe-like force projection penetrated the Brimorian shields and sliced the forty-metre spacecraft in half. Its front tumbled downwards, spilling out screaming crewmen before it crashed to the ground in a plume of dirt. The rear section performed several loops with the engines blazing on full power, until sparks ignited a severed fuel line and blew what was left of the gunship to pieces.

The rest of the squadron took evasive manoeuvres as they tried to work out what was attacking them, allowing John to destroy two more of their number before they spotted him. Banking around in his direction, the remaining three gunships opened fire with their turret-mounted Particle Cannons, pumping out streams of yellow energy bolts towards him. The gunners were surprisingly accurate and John’s personal shield took a hammering, the status display in his HUD dropping from green to dark orange. He made a sharp gesture and a shimmering blue hex-barrier popped into existence around him. The Brimorian’s continued to pepper the shield, but he was able to easily repair the damage to the rapidly rotating hexagons.

Holding up his hand, John pictured a solid wall of force in his mind, positioned directly in front of the nearest gunship. The Brimorian vehicle slammed into it at over 200 mph, but the telekinetic barrier refused to budge so much as an inch. The rules of physics proved to be quite unforgiving to the crewmen inside the gunship, their bodies suffering all the nasty consequences of conservation of momentum. Massive brain damage and ruptured internal organs meant that death was almost instantaneous.

John knocked the last two gunships out of the sky with identical impacts, the deafening clangs preceding booming crashes when they smashed into the ground. Angling his body in their direction, he ramped up the power to his thrusters, rushing to reach whatever the Brimorians had been firing at and desperately hoping he wasn’t too late.

Shining his suit’s spotlights onto the jungle below, he could see extensive damage to the vegetation, where the Enclave gunships had blasted their way through the leafy canopy. They’d been chasing something... and it didn’t take him long to find out what. John spotted a crumpled red form lying still on the ground and his heart sank like a stone when he dropped low enough to see what had happened to the young dragon.

Turning away from the grisly sight, he rocketed above the trail with greater urgency, dreading to think how he was going to tell Tamolith what he’d seen. When he finally reached the point he’d first seen the gunships, John’s face fell and he touched down beside the smouldering draconic corpses. It looked like the largest of the group had tried to shield the smaller ones with his body, but his heroism had been cruelly punished by the Brimorian gunners.

Three others had been killed as they huddled beside his body, their crimson scaled forms torn apart by powerful particle bolts. The final pair had tried to flee and John guessed that they had been the last ones to fall, lying motionless a few dozen metres away. He quickly checked them all for any signs of life, but they’d all been ruthlessly executed by the Brimorians, shot repeatedly long after their deaths. The six dead dragons stared back at him with lifeless eyes, their final moments filled with fear and pain.

\*I was too late,\* he murmured to his matriarchs, his heart heavy with guilt. \*They’re all dead.\*

\*I’m so sorry, John,\* Edraele said softly.

He slumped to his knees in the gruesome clearing, surrounded by senseless death on all sides. \*I could’ve stopped this...\*

\*Only the Brimorian’s are to blame, Master,\* Jade said, her voice quiet but firm. \*You are not responsible for their despicable actions.\*

\*She’s right,\* Alyssa agreed, although she sounded subdued, feeling all of John’s anguish. \*I know you’re going to blame yourself for this, but we can’t save everybody. You had good reasons for waiting before confronting your guide... and even if you did have access to all the Progenitor tech, it’s not like we could actually build a Wormhole Generator without using a Soul Forge.\*

John slowly nodded, knowing that they didn’t even have the means to construct such a device yet. \*What the hell am I going to say to Tamolith?\*

Alyssa hesitated for a long moment before replying. \*I don’t know, John. We’ll all join you as soon as we can.\*

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\*Over there!\* Dana called out, pointing to the site of a battle at the edge of the jungle.

Rachel nodded and shifted her body, angling down towards the edge of the cliff face. \*Tamolith should be a hundred metres back inside the tunnel.\*

The granite plateau formed a series of broad steppes down to the ridgeline below, which curved around the southern side of Xen-Martek. Both girls landed on the ground that was littered with butchered Brimorian corpses, then turned their attention to the gaping entrance in the rock.

“There she is!” Dana exclaimed in surprise, switching to normal conversation now they had touched down. “Oh shit, look at her! Those fucking Brimorian bastards!”

Tamolith was crawling towards the light, bleak desperation on her draconic features. Her flanks were covered in gunshot wounds, hundreds of blasts from particle rifles leaving her scales a shattered, bloody mess.

Striding into the tunnel, Rachel carefully approached the grievously injured dragon. “I’m here to help, Tamolith. Please hold still and I’ll help you heal your wounds.”

The Empress was about to object, but she took one look at the brunette’s glowing eyes and stayed silent. Tamolith sagged onto the ground, her chest heaving as she sucked in lungfuls of air.

Rachel extended a hand towards the dragon’s flanks and shrouded Tamolith in her misty grey aura. “Just give me a couple of minutes,” she murmured, her tone kind and sympathetic. “I’ll be able to take all your pain away... but you’re going to need lots of rest to fully recover.”

“Thank you...” Tamolith wheezed, her lip curled back in a feral grimace.

“There’s the Raptor,” Dana said, watching the gleaming white gunship swing around to hover low above the jungle.

Tashana was standing on the lowered landing ramp and she exchanged a friendly wave with the redhead.

They were joined a minute later by Alyssa and Jehanna, who touched down at the edge of the battlefield. Dana grinned at the new arrivals, then studied the blonde with concern when she saw Alyssa’s tense expression.

\*Hey, what’s up?\* she asked her oldest friend, hurrying over to see what was wrong.

Alyssa let out a forlorn sigh, then spoke to all the girls at once. \*John didn’t make it in time. The Brimorians murdered all of Tamolith’s children... but she doesn’t know yet.\*

\*Fuck me...\* Dana breathed, her heart aching for the dragon.

“Oh no...” Jehanna murmured, her face falling.

The blonde nodded in confirmation. \*He’s on his way back. Let John break the news to Tamolith and we’ll all be there to support him.\*

The girls turned towards the jungle and saw the flare of John’s Paragon suit thrusters as he flew back to join them. He landed nearby, then greeted his Lionesses with a strained smile as he headed for the tunnel.

Tamolith emerged before he could go inside, her thick scales covered with congealed yellow blood, but otherwise the dragon had been brought back to full health. Her fearsome draconic features were twisted with anxiety as she hurried to be reunited with her family.

Stifling a yawn, Tamolith glanced at the dozens of cleaved Brimorian corpses that lay hacked to pieces around her, then broke into a toothy grin of relief. “Ah, tiny Progenitor,” she said to John, nodding to him with respect. “I should have known better than to doubt your prowess. Where is Zulkayr and the rest of my precious darlings? Are they returning this way?”

John shook his head sadly. “I’m so sorry, Tamolith. I tried to get to them as fast as I could... but the Brimorians had called in gunships.”

Tamolith reared back, a look of sceptical disbelief on her face. “No... that can’t be true.”

“They’re all gone, Tamolith,” he said quietly, his eyes filled with sorrow. “I would’ve done anything in my power to save them... but I can’t bring them back.”

“No...” she gasped, shaking her head in denial. “No!”

She lurched forward, ready to charge into the jungle after her family, but John moved to block her path.

“Please, Tamolith... don’t go in there. Remember them as they were... you shouldn’t see them like this.”

“Get out of my way!” she rumbled, baring her huge fangs in a feral snarl.

John hesitated then stepped aside. He watched the furious red dragon gallop into the tropical forest, her massive bulk smashing aside trees as she barrelled her way through. It didn’t take long for them to hear her thunderous cry of grief, Tamolith’s anguished wail shaking the jungle around the heartbroken mother.

Seeing his guilt-stricken expression, Alyssa walked over and removed John’s helmet then her own. “Just remember that this wasn’t your fault,” she said, before giving him a tender kiss.

The rest of the girls gathered around, echoing her sentiments. They all flinched a moment later when they heard a second tortured howl, the terrible desolation in Tamolith’s inarticulate roar bringing tears to their eyes.

Rachel glanced over at the jungle, an ambivalent look on her face. “What are we going to do now?”

John let out a heavy sigh. “We need Helene.”

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Calara leaned against the Tactical Station and gave Marika an encouraging nod. “There... that’s perfect.”

The tabby catgirl carefully squeezed the trigger and the fleeing Brimorian cruiser was cored through by a dozen tachyon beams. An instant later the hollowed-out wreck was ripped apart in a massive explosion as the Tachyon Lance salvo ruptured the warship’s Power Core.

“I got him!” Marika exclaimed, looking pleased. Turning to look up at her mentor, she continued, “I see what you mean about the slight delay before firing.”

“You won’t have to worry about that with the Tachyon Cannons, they’re easy to shoot... just point and click,” Calara said with a smile. “The Tachyon Lances are incredibly powerful though, so it’s important to keep practicing until you get used to them.”

\*What’s the situation up there, gorgeous? Are you nearly done?\* Alyssa enquired, unable to hide the anxiety in her voice.

\*We’ve finished off the stragglers on our side of Kinta and Sakura’s hunting down the last few on her side,\* Calara quickly replied. \*You sound worried. What’s wrong?\*

\*We need Helene down here as soon as possible,\* her girlfriend explained. \*The Brimorians slaughtered thousands of civilians, including women and children... but they also murdered Tamolith’s family.\*

The aquatic girl gasped when she heard Alyssa’s telepathic message. “Oh, how awful...”

Calara darted a worried glance across the Combat Bridge at their novice pilot. “Can you handle an atmospheric landing, Leylira?”

The tiger-striped catgirl shook her head. “No, I haven’t been taught that yet. Jade wants me to fly the Invictus into orbit, then she’ll rendezvous with us there in the Raptor.”

“Oh, okay,” the Latina said, with relief. “That sounds perfect.”

“Was my flying really that terrible?” Leylira asked, giving the brunette a crooked smile.

Calara quickly walked over to give her an apologetic hug. “Not at all! You did amazingly well.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” the tigress said self-consciously. “This one was worried about letting you down.”

“Not at all. I’ll be sure to tell John what a wonderful job you did flying for me,” Calara said, giving her a gentle squeeze.

Leylira looked delighted and beamed at Calara before focusing on the flight controls as she guided the Invictus towards Kinta.

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John walked through the lush jungle, the sultry heat of the day cooling as night fell on Kinta. Accompanying him were Alyssa, Rachel, and Helene, the three girls looking as subdued as he felt. The reason for their melancholy expression was Tamolith’s agonised cries, her roars of grief echoing around the tropical forest as she mourned for her slain children. He could see her huge crimson form up ahead, the draconic Empress’ massive shoulders shaking as she sobbed inconsolably.

He turned to face the trio accompanying him. “I’ll try to speak to her on my own first. If I can’t reach Tamolith, I might need you to intervene.”

“Just let me know when you want us to help,” Alyssa replied, giving him a supportive smile.

Drawing his sword, John drove it point first into the ground. After handing his Paragon helmet over to the blonde, he cautiously approached the grieving red dragon.

“Tamolith... It’s me... John,” he announced, loud enough to be heard over her wracking sobs.

The Kintark Empress didn’t appear to have heard him, or was so immersed in her own suffering that she was oblivious to all other concerns.

John’s heart went out to the devastated dragon... a loving mother who had lost everything that mattered to her. Placing his hand on her scaly forearm, he said with sympathy, “I’m so sorry for your loss, Tamolith.”

He hesitated for a long moment, but got no reaction. “Please forgive me for intruding like this. I wish I could leave you to mourn in peace, but I really need to speak with you before we depart.”

Her bulky head turned to look down on him, tears rolling down her scaly cheeks. “What could you possibly have to say to me that I would care about?!”

John didn’t back away from her angry retort. “I’m worried about you... and I’m worried about your people. The Brimorians devastated Kinta with their orbital bombardment and your citizens desperately need assistance.”

Tamolith’s lip curled back into a sneer of contempt. “Let them burn... I care nothing for any of them! They failed me! They failed to protect my precious darlings!”

That outburst prompted more shuddering sobs of grief, Tamolith’s deafening roars of anguish hurting his ears with their gut-wrenching intensity.

Realising that it was futile trying to talk to the heartbroken dragon when her pain was so raw, John glanced back at Alyssa and nodded. Helene’s eyes begin to glow with a soft teal light, the aquatic girl tapping into her empathic abilities as she reached out towards Tamolith. Her brow furrowed in concentration as she touched the Empress’ mind, projecting waves of soothing calm to ease the black swathes of despair that overwhelmed Tamolith’s subconscious.

Raising her scaly neck, Tamolith growled in confusion, then shook her massive head as if to clear it. The all-consuming sense of loss was slowly fading away, in a manner that felt most unnatural.

Turning to glare at John in suspicion, she snarled, “Are you meddling with my mind?!”

Before he could answer, Tamolith spotted the trio of girls at the edge of the clearing, her attention drawn by the bright teal radiance shining from Helene’s eyes. Baring metre-long fangs in a feral snarl, Tamolith dug into the ground to launch herself at the psychic intruder.

Before she could pounce, John was standing before her, travelling so fast he moved in a blur. “Stop it, Tamolith! We don’t mean you any harm... I just need to talk to you.”

She snarled and took a swipe at him with a forepaw as big as a hovercar, her lethal claws fully extended. Tamolith was startled when her blow slammed into something rock-solid... like she’d just struck the ground. Pulling back she prepared to attack again, then blinked in amazement as she saw John growing in size before her disbelieving eyes. Scrabbling backwards, Tamolith found herself soon at eye level with him, then looked up in awe as he towered over her... vast in his immensity.

Dropping to one knee in front of Tamolith, John met her astonished gaze and said quietly, “Please, Tamolith. Just give me a few minutes to talk, then I promise I’ll leave you alone to grieve in peace.”

The dragon gulped, then nodded, too shocked to dwell on her receding tide of grief.

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John sat beside the subdued dragon, watching as Alyssa reverently levitated the crumpled draconic form onto the funeral pyre with his smaller siblings.

“Zulkayr was very brave,” John said quietly. “Your son shielded his brothers and sisters with his own body for as long as he could.”

“I told him it was his duty to protect them...” Tamolith replied, her voice breaking. “He was always so eager to make me proud.”

She began to tremble violently and raked at the ground with a heavy foreclaw.

\*Careful, John,\* Alyssa warned him. \*Tamolith is absolutely devastated... Helene’s barely able to keep her stable at the moment.\*

John put his arm around the dragon’s shoulders and gave her a supportive hug. “I really am sorry.”

Tamolith turned to look at him, the pain dulled but still present in her hollow gaze. “Say what you will... then leave me to my misery.”

He nodded, then turned to face her. “The Kintark Empire is on its knees. Your fleets have taken a battering and you’ve barely got enough ships left to patrol your borders. The Imperial homeworld has been devastated by the Brimorians and your citizens need urgent support. I understand how much you’re suffering... but there’s billions of Kintark lives at stake right now. The Empire desperately need strong leadership to prevent its total collapse.”

The dragon’s lip curled back into a sneer. “What does it matter to you, Lion of the Federation? You slaughtered millions of Kintark during the invasion... I imagine you’re gloating now at how far we’ve fallen.”

“I don’t bear you any ill will,” John replied, shaking his head. “I liked dealing with the Kintark during my trading days; your merchants were fair and treated me with respect. It was tragic that Baledranax listened to Larn’kelnar and let himself be manipulated into that dreadful war. Nobody regrets what happened between the Terrans and the Kintark more than I do.”

“Save your platitudes... the worthless chattel mean less than nothing to me,” she rumbled, her eyes narrowed with bitter resentment. “They all failed to protect the only thing I cared about.”

John glanced back at the dragon whelp corpses and let out a heavy sigh. “You’re wrong about your people, Tamolith. High Prelate Zorlin led a suicidal charge against the Brimorians in an attempt to save you and the homeworld,” He hesitated for a moment, then added, “And I’d bet anything that the commander of your ground troops begged you to let him contest the drop zone?”

“Yes... what of it?” Tamolith glowered, narrowing her eyes. “The coward wanted to hide in bunkers instead of protecting the Imperial family’s escape!”

“I realise how much pain you’re in at the moment, but you’re doing your troops a terrible injustice by blaming them for this tragedy. The palace garrison would have inflicted horrific casualties on the Brimorians if they’d been able to occupy fortifications around the drop zone. Instead of slaughtering hundreds of invaders and giving you plenty of time to escape, your troops got butchered trying to hold an indefensible position.”

Tamolith’s face twisted in horror as the dragon realised that she was partially to blame for her own family’s dreadful fate.

\*John!\* Alyssa warned him again.

Collapsing with a wail of horrified desolation, Tamolith cried out, “Please... I can’t take this pain! Just kill me and end it now!”

John glanced over at Helene who was sitting cross-legged at the edge of the clearing. Her eyes blazed with a brilliant teal light as she attempted to soothe the dragon’s trauma, her beautiful face twisted into a taut mask of concentration.

Turning his attention back to the tormented dragon, he saw her gradually regain control of her raging emotions. “I don’t want to end your life, Tamolith. As Empress, you’re in a unique position to do a great deal of good for the Kintark people. They need you now more than ever before.”

Tamolith hung her head, broken and subdued. “You are sorely mistaken if you believe an appeal to my sense of civic duty will inspire me in any way. I dreamed of establishing a dynasty that would last for millennia, but the Brimorians have ruined everything. There is no future left for me now... I am the last of my kind... I face inevitable extinction alone and bereft of all hope.”

Realising that he was making no headway, John grimaced and glanced across the clearing towards Alyssa. When he looked her way, he saw that the blonde was already walking in his direction with Rachel at her side. The brunette walked straight up to the devastated dragon, so confident in John and Alyssa’s ability to protect her that she showed no trace of fear.

“Hello, Empress. My name’s Doctor Rachel Voss,” she announced, inclining her head in a respectful bow. “I overheard what you said to John. I was just wondering why you can’t simply restart the genetic engineering program to repopulate your species?”

Tamolith didn’t bother to raise her head to acknowledge the brunette. “No... that’s impossible now. As soon as Baledranax was fully grown, he killed the research teams and destroyed all their work. He didn’t want to risk them creating any rivals that might dare to challenge him.” She let out a humourless chuckle as her eyes flicked to John. “The fool was convinced he would live forever as the Kintark’s immortal Emperor... you soon corrected him of that misguided notion.”

Rachel looked at the dragon speculatively. “If you let me take genetic samples, I should be able to reverse-engineer the process used to create your species. It might take me a few months of focused research, but I’m sure I’d be successful.”

“You actually believe you could recreate decades of dedicated research by the finest minds in the Kintark Empire... in a matter of months?” Tamolith asked, looking deeply sceptical.

The brunette nodded confidently. “Yes.”

The dragon studied her for a long moment, then snorted. “Even if that were possible, it would take at least a century for a new mate to be fully grown. I have neither the patience nor the inclination to pursue that onerous course of action.”

Alyssa walked over to stand beside Rachel. “What about getting revenge against the Brimorian Enclave? Wouldn’t you like to see Deep Lord Athgiloi get utterly destroyed?”

Tamolith’s pupils flared with hatred. “I would see him suffer an eternity of torment for what he did to me!” Rearing up, she growled, “Where are the Brimorian vermin that killed my precious darlings? I will make them rue the day they befouled my planet with their presence! They will beg for mercy... and receive none.”

“They’re already dead, Tamolith,” John said quietly.

Alyssa nodded, looking up at her with sympathy. “There are no Brimorians left alive in the Kinta system. We wiped them all out.”

The dragon’s shoulders slumped, her furious rage guttering out like a dying flame. “So I cannot avenge my children... I have failed them even in this.” As she settled on the ground again, her big amber eyes fixed on Alyssa. “As satisfying as it would be to see you bring ruin to the Deep Pool, revenge is a hollow, empty thing. Destroying the Enclave will not restore what I have lost... there is no longer any purpose or meaning to my existence.”

Rachel bit her lip, then said quietly, “John could give that to you.”

“I highly doubt it,” Tamolith muttered, studying the brunette with vague disinterest. “His attempts to motivate me thus far have been a dismal failure.”

“So you wouldn’t be interested in true immortality, more power than you can imagine, an unbreakable alliance with the Maliri... and the opportunity to found a new dynasty?” Rachel asked, her grey eyes sparkling with excitement.

John gaped at her in disbelief. “What?!”

Tamolith raised an eyebrow, suddenly looking intrigued. “Alright, Doctor Voss... I confess that you have piqued my interest.” Turning to study John with an appraising reptilian eye, she continued, “Is your consort speaking the truth? Are you actually capable of fulfilling her fanciful claims?”

He raised a hand towards the dragon. “Hold on a moment please, Tamolith. I need to have a little chat with Rachel.”

Stepping away from the draconic Empress, John beckoned the girls to follow him as he shrank down in height until he was back to his normal size. They walked across the clearing until they were out of Tamolith’s earshot, then he rounded on the brunette.

“You can’t possibly be serious!” he exclaimed, looking at her incredulously. “You want me to recruit Tamolith?!”

“Oh, I’m deadly serious,” Rachel replied, meeting his accusatory glare. “In one stroke, you can give Tamolith back everything she’s lost.”

“It usually takes more than one stroke,” Alyssa observed, her lips twitching into a coy smile. “Nobody could accuse John of having a hair trigger.”

“This isn’t funny, Alyssa,” John said, turning to face the blonde. He rolled his eyes and added, “Who am I kidding? You’re loving this, aren’t you?”

The blonde raised her hands defensively. “Hey, this is nothing to do with me. I know you’re not into waifs and like your women to be a good healthy weight... but you usually prefer them under a metric ton.”

He groaned at the grinning teenager.

\*Actually, the idea does have merit,\* Edraele said thoughtfully. \*If you were to bring Tamolith into the fold, we wouldn’t have to worry about the Kintark causing problems in the future. You could use your newfound influence over the Empress to encourage her to rebuild a benign and prosperous Kintark Empire. Niskera, Lynette, and myself are all working to achieve similar goals.\*

“But she’s a dragon!” John protested aloud. “How do we know the Change wouldn’t just kill her?”

Rachel shook her head, the eager gleam back in her eyes. “I believe she will be quite safe... although Tamolith would likely undergo the most dramatic transformation yet.”

“Did you suggest this just to satisfy your professional curiosity?” he asked, giving the brunette a perceptive look.

“I will admit that I’m fascinated to see how the Change will affect her,” Rachel replied, having the good grace to look guilty. She quickly continued, “But you can’t deny that Tamolith becoming one of us would ensure the absolute best future for the Kintark. You said yourself that there are billions of lives at stake.”

John hesitated, unable to deny the point he’d raised with the Empress only five minutes ago.

Alyssa gazed into his eyes and said quietly, “Tamolith’s not a good leader, John. I’ve seen inside her mind: she’s vain and arrogant, and looks at the Kintark people with utter contempt. You heard her earlier... Tamolith blames them for failing to protect her children. Leaving her as Empress will be a recipe for disaster.”

With a troubled frown he replied, “So what are you saying? I’ve got no choice here?”

She shook her head, golden blonde locks swishing across her shoulders. “Not at all, you’ve got several options. We can just walk away and let Tamolith take out her rage and grief on her citizens. She was already murdering palace officials with casual indifference, so what does it matter if she slays a few thousand more? You can try to talk her into abdicating... but she’ll never willingly give up the throne. Finally, you can just put Tamolith out of her misery... which would be a mercy considering the agony she’ll be in as soon as Helene stops suppressing her grief.”

John groaned and ran his fingers though his hair. “Some choices...”

“You can intervene or chose not to,” Alyssa said with a shrug. “We’ll all support your decision, whatever you decide to do.”

He turned to look across the clearing at the reclining dragon, watching Tamolith in silence for several minutes as he considered the various consequences of the choices available to him.

Finally, he let out a sigh of resignation. \*Jade... I’m definitely going to need your help.\*

\*I’m on my way, Master!\* she gushed, an edge of excitement to her voice.

“I’ll let you two go over the details with Tamolith,” John said to the waiting girls. He glanced at the funeral pyre. “Afterwards...”

\*\*\*

John stood beside Tamolith at the edge of clearing, the girls fanned out at his side. It would have been pitch black in the Kinta jungle, but a dozen flame sprites cast their flickering firelight across the foliage, adding a mystical air to the sombre scene.

“Are you ready?” John asked the pensive dragon.

Tamolith shuddered, then slowly nodded, her intense gaze fixed on the seven draconic bodies laying atop the pyre.

At a glance from John, his empathic Lioness released the tide of grief she’d been holding back inside the dragon’s mind. As the teal glow faded from Helene’s eyes, Tamolith’s expression contorted in anguish, her fearsome features reflecting the terrible agony she endured.

Tashana gestured towards her procession of flame sprites who glided over to the stacks of timber in the centre of the clearing. They knelt down reverently around the pyre, before lowering their heads in grief for Tamolith’s fallen brood. Reaching out towards the log piles, their fiery touch ignited the dry wood, quickly spreading out to engulf the entire structure. As the flames rose higher, the amber glow obscured the dead dragonlings from sight, immolating them in their final resting place.

Throwing her head back, Tamolith roared with grief, lamenting the devastating loss of everything she held dear.

Despite everything the girls had said to John to alleviate his guilt, he still couldn’t help feeling responsible for the indescribable pain the Empress was suffering. He’d made a terrible mistake underestimating the Brimorians, never imagining that they could be so vicious towards a former ally. It was harrowing listening to Tamolith’s wails of grief, the dreadful sound of a heartbroken mother mourning for her dead children something that he never wanted to hear again.

He felt a slender hand slip into his and give it a gentle squeeze. When he glanced at Alyssa, he saw his feelings reflected in her cerulean eyes, tears rolling down her smooth cheeks. They exchanged a long look that conveyed a host of emotions, along with an affirmation that they were lockstep in purpose with one another.

Ease Tamolith’s suffering.

Avenge this atrocity.

Wipe the galaxy clean of monsters that revelled in this kind of cruelty.

\*\*\*

Jade had made her own clearing in the jungle, using the Raptor’s Tachyon Cannons to topple any trees in the way and give her plenty of room to land. John strode over to the gunship, then walked up the loading ramp where the Nymph was waiting for him.

“Hello, Master,” she said softly, greeting him with a gentle kiss.

John propped his runesword up against the wall, then dumped the stack of Paragon armour he was carrying on the floor. Gathering the green-skinned girl in his arms, he nuzzled into Jade’s mane of long dark hair and leaned into her supportive embrace.

When he finally pulled away, John gave her a grateful smile. “I really needed that.”

She looked at him with sympathy in her emerald eyes. “I know... I could feel how hard the funeral was for you.”

“I was able to cut down hundreds of Brimorians without feeling a flicker of remorse, but seeing Tamolith grieving and in so much pain... it was awful.”

“You hate to see innocents suffer, especially when you feel powerless to help them,” Jade explained, tracing his jawline with a finger. “Tamolith is no innocent... but her children were. Despite everything that she’s done, I would never wish that kind of suffering on any mother. Together though, we can alleviate some of her pain.”

“Am I doing the right thing here?” John asked, his brow furrowing with concern. “According to Alyssa, Tamolith has murdered hundreds of Kintark civilians. It feels like I’m rewarding her for the terrible things she’s done.”

Jade tilted her head to one side as she considered his question. “I wouldn’t look at it as a reward... more of an opportunity to change Tamolith into someone good who shares your values.”

\*Don’t forget that I was far worse than Tamolith,\* Edraele reminded him, an ambivalent undercurrent to her voice. \*My predecessor was a sadistic tyrant, who revelled in the suffering of others. I even tricked you into helping me exterminate the Fulmanax... and that wasn’t my first genocide. If someone like Edraele Valaden can be reformed into a leader that truly cares for her people, I think it would be unfortunate to not take the opportunity to guide Tamolith onto a better path.\*

“Alright... I can’t really argue with that,” John conceded, holding out his hand for Jade.

She took it, then accompanied him towards the grav-tube that would take them to the upper deck.

“Hi, John!” Betrixa exclaimed, flashing him a mischievous smile as she sprang out of the co-pilot’s chair. “Want some more company? I promise you’ll have fun!”

He paused by the cockpit door and cupped her face as he looked into her sparkling sapphire eyes. “Under normal circumstances, I’d never be able to turn down an enticing offer like that... but after the evening I’ve just had, I’m not really in a fun kind of a mood right now.”

The cheetah catgirl stepped closer, her expression turning serious. “I know what happened, Master... and it was tragic... but this is precisely the time you should be celebrating the joy of being alive.”

“I’m sorry, honey... I just don’t feel like celebrating,” he said ruefully, brushing his thumb against her cheek.

Betrixa pouted, then not to be deterred, she pressed her nubile body against him. “I can do intimate too... if that’s what you’d prefer?”

Jade caressed his arm as she hugged him from behind. \*Trust her, Master,\* she urged him telepathically. \*Betrixa wants to share herself completely with you... and this might be her last opportunity.\*

He turned to look at Jade over his shoulder and saw her troubled frown. Having free access to his mind, she knew he planned to confront his guide the following afternoon.

“Alright, you can join us,” he said to Betrixa, suddenly wondering if this was the last time he’d ever be with the effervescent Nymph.

“Yay!” she exclaimed, giving him a joyful smile.

She skipped ahead to the cabin, then darted inside and shut the door behind her. “Just give me a few seconds, Master!”

He turned to look at Jade and couldn’t help chuckling. “This wasn’t really what I had in mind.”

“The two of us can still be together if you prefer,” Jade said, studying his face. “But this means a lot to Betrixa...”

He held up his hand to forestall any further pleas. “It’s alright, I understand why it’s important.”

“Okay, you can come in!” came the muffled invitation from behind the door.

John entered the cabin and blinked in surprise as his eyes adjusted to the sensual ambience. Betrixa had lit a dozen candles, softly illuminating the bedroom in flickering candlelight. The blonde catgirl reclined naked on the bed, looking deliciously exotic in the alluring setting.

“See... I can do intimate,” Betrixa purred, crooking a finger towards him.

Jade gave him an indulgent smile when she saw John’s intrigued expression and helped him quickly remove his clothes. John then climbed onto the bed to join Betrixa, while his Nymph matriarch watched with interest from the long shadows.

Lying down beside the cheetah-spotted girl, John brushed his fingertips over her pale tawny-hued stomach. “You look very beautiful, Betrixa.”

“Thank you,” she murmured, looking touched by his sincerity. “You look super handsome too.”

He inclined his head. “Thank you.”

Betrixa smiled, then said earnestly, “Now, before you give my cute butt the pounding it deserves, I think we should have a little chat.”

He laughed, caught by surprise by her abrupt shift in mood. “Okay.”

“I know the main reason you’re reluctant to get it on with Tamolith,” Betrixa said, giving him a very perceptive look. “Aside from risking getting your dick bitten off, obviously.”

“Obviously,” he agreed, smiling at the cheerful catgirl. “Let me guess... is it because she’s a dragon?”

“Surprisingly... no,” she replied, with a smirk. “It’s because you’re not going to get a chance to indulge your favourite kink... not for years probably.”

John glanced down at Betrixa’s stomach and brushed his fingertips in a circle around her navel. “She’s too big to get a full tummy?”

Betrixa shook her head, her gaze turning coy. “Nope.”

“Come on, you’re not going to make me guess, are you?”

“It depends... do you give up?” she teased him.

“Alright, I give up. What’s my biggest kink?” John asked with a smile.

“You like dominating brilliant, powerful women,” Betrixa explained, watching him intently.

He froze, looking at the Nymph in shock. “What?!”

“It makes sense considering your background,” she replied with a blasé shrug. “But you added a special little twist: We have to fall in love with you first.”

He shook his head in denial, lost for words.

Betrixa locked eyes with him and nodded insistently. “Think about it... your girls are the most powerful women in the galaxy. Did you pump them up with crazy psychic abilities to help you fight bad guys? Sure. But it also made them ridiculously powerful... and it totally gets you off that women that strong are head over heels in love with you.”

John sat back, as if he was recoiling from the Nymph.

She sat up in a smooth action, then brandished her arm in front of him, turning the slender tawny-coloured limb so that it caught the light. It shimmered in a soft blue haze, then reappeared as a heavy paw complete with razor-sharp claws. Just as quickly, Betrixa shimmered again and reverted to her previous appearance.

“I’d shift into a 900lb tiger to prove my point, but I don’t want to wreck the bed. You’ve spent weeks loading me up, making me as strong and tough as you possibly can. At this point, the only males in the galaxy strong enough to take me are other Progenitors and I’d bite their cock off if they tried it. Trust me... never try to force fuck an angry shapeshifter!”

He winced at that hideous bit of imagery, then smiled as he relaxed. “Good advice.”

“Not that you need it,” Betrixa murmured, drawing closer. “You made me fall completely in love with you, John. Not the fake adoration we’re forced to feel for a new master... but the real deal. When I saw the way Ailita was with you, I realised the difference immediately... all my sisters did... and it feels wonderful.”

John leaned in to give her a tender kiss. “I’ve been so proud of the way you’ve developed over the last few weeks, Betrixa. It’s amazing to see you overcome your limitations.”

She crossed her wrists behind his neck and kissed him back passionately, her lithe body moulded against his. When they parted to draw breath, Betrixa gave him a shy smile, looking at John with stars in her eyes.

“That was really lovely... but how is this related to Tamolith?” John asked curiously.

“Well, she’s so huge, it’d take you at least a couple of months of special attention to push her through the Change, right?” Betrixa replied, waiting for him to nod in confirmation. She reached down to gently cup his quad. “And there’s no way you can spare that much cum at the moment. You’ll be pumping those tasty loads into sexy Maliri tummies... and the rest of us... for the foreseeable future.”

“Which means leaving Tamolith in limbo for months... maybe even years,” he said with sudden understanding.

“Yep. She can’t fall in love with you while she’s ruling the Kintark and you’re busy fighting the Progenitor War,” Betrixa agreed. “Which means you’re not exactly thrilled by the idea of turning her into a thrall.”

John grimaced. “Domination... that’s really my biggest kink?”

The Nymph nodded, then lowered her gaze submissively. “As long as it’s completely consensual... and the girl adores you.”

Betrixa lay back on the bed and rolled over onto her stomach, then waited passively for him to respond. John repositioned himself beside her and placed the palm of his hand on the small of her back. The Nymph’s body was warm to the touch, her normally cool flesh heating up with her arousal as he moved his hand in slow circles. John used his fingertips to trace the cheetah markings on her back, gliding over the dark patterns on her satiny-smooth skin. He enjoyed the delicious softness of her flawless body and the contrast with the powerful muscles beneath.

She looked at john over a shoulder through her voluminous blonde mane. The hooded gaze was filled with promise... and a willingness to do anything he desired. That single glance had him as hard as steel and he shared a smile with the Nymph as he covered her spectacular prone form.

“You’re really turning me on,” he murmured as he pushed his way into her slick depths. Her ass was tight and hot, gripping him as he penetrated deeper. “Looks like you’re as smart as Neysa.”

“Nah, I’m not clever like her,” she replied, closing her eyes in bliss as he settled his weight down on her. “But I am an expert on all kinds of kinky shit...”

John reached out to clasp her hands, then intertwined his fingers with the Nymph’s as she stretched out on the bed. “Yeah? Like what?” he whispered in her ear.

Betrixa undulated underneath him, the smooth rocking motion feeling incredible. “You’ll have to wait and see... Master.”

He kissed her cheek, then settled down to get more comfortable, thrusting forward against the yielding flesh of her rump. Betrixa matched his rhythm and they were soon pistoning away in perfect synchronisation, wet smacking sounds echoing around the bedroom as his full quad slapped against her sopping pussy. The blonde catgirl had a playful naughtiness to her that made bedding Betrixa a real thrill... a wonderful distraction that he needed that evening more than ever.

“Have you decided what you want to do in the future?” he murmured, before kissing the tip of her ear.

“Uh huh...” she moaned, her eyelashes fluttering as she bucked against him. “Gonna pledge the rest of my life... to your cock.”

He looked at her in surprise, then burst into laughter at her flippant reply.

“What? I’m totally serious,” she said, tossing her hair back and grinning. She lovingly squeezed his shaft with her internal muscles. “Who else is going to have me cumming my brains out?”

“Good point,” John agreed, pumping into her with more force.

Betrixa’s pupils flared and she let out a low cry as she climaxed, bucking wildly underneath him. John was merciless, pushing the Nymph through several more back-to-back orgasms without any time to recover. Her gorgeous blonde mane was wild and dishevelled as she humped back at him, her breath coming out in uneven pants.

“I’m not going to last much longer...” he grunted. “Feels too good...”

The Nymph immediately slowed her pace, but added a corkscrewing twist. “But we haven’t even got to the good part,” she moaned, her thighs quivering as she rode the crest of another big climax.

John rolled over onto his back, hugging the horny Nymph so she stayed with him. Now Betrixa was lying back against his chest, her thighs splayed wide as he stroked into her from below.

He glanced at the third person on the bed, who was watching them through heavily-lidded eyes. “Jade... want to give me a hand?”

His Nymph matriarch growled with lust as she crawled across the bed to join them. Jade lay down on top of Betrixa between her parted thighs, then leaned down for a loving kiss. Dark-green lips met rosy red, the alien temptresses sighing as they pressed themselves together in a sensual embrace

“That’s it... good girls,” John murmured, cupping and squeezing their squashed breasts.

Betrixa suddenly arched her back and cried out in ecstasy as Jade eased a tentacock into her wet sheath. The throbbing shaft matched the tempo of John’s thrusts as it pushed deeper into the Nymph’s belly.

John shared a smile with Jade, then whispered in Betrixa’s ear, “So what was the good part, my sexy little Nymph?”

She mewled and writhed between them, eagerly thrusting back against both girthy cocks that were stretching her wide.

“Talking about you making me as powerful as Jade,” the catgirl panted, turning to give him desperate kisses. “Then turning me all... doe-eyed and broody... just like Marika.”

Now it was John’s turn to groan and he placed a possessive hand on Betrixa’s stuffed tummy. “Would you like that, honey?”

“Are you gonna keep me knocked up forever?” Betrixa panted, her whole body shaking now, she was that turned on.

“Yeah... you and all your sisters,” John agreed, squeezing Jade’s taut asscheek with his other hand.

Both Nymphs came together, feeding off his arousal and revelling in the thought of carrying his babies. Hearing their ecstatic cries pushed John over the edge and he held onto Betrixa’s hips as he pumped long spurts of cum into her body. She groaned, trembling with her release as her abdomen swelled to take his load, her internal muscles massaging his pulsing shaft. Jade cooed over Betrixa’s growing belly, stroking the curved dome as her sister milked John’s quad of every drop of spunk.

With a final groan, John sagged back on the bed, too exhausted to even speak as Jade helped move Betrixa onto the covers beside him. He managed to roll over to spoon her from behind, cuddling the comatose catgirl who lay insensate with a blissful smile on her lovely face.

“Thanks for talking me into that,” John said, reaching over Betrixa to caress Jade’s verdant body. “The two of you were incredible.”

“You needed the distraction, Master,” the Nymph murmured, a glazed look in her emerald eyes. “And Betrixa loved it.”

“Did you enjoy yourself too?” he asked, watching her in fascination.

“It was wonderful,” she agreed, letting out a breathy sigh.

His softening cock was nestled between Betrixa’s trembling buttocks, the head still slick with cum. Jade carefully slipped two fingers behind his glistening shaft and pushed them into the unconscious catgirl, ready to siphon out his precious load. John cradled Betrixa’s stomach and felt the taut dome begin to shrink, while Jade’s tummy expanded to carry all his cum, trapping his hand between them. For a moment half-way through, he imagined that this would be what it’d be like when both Nymphs were several months pregnant. It was a very pleasant image.

When Jade was done, John reluctantly climbed out of bed. “We better head back to Tamolith... assuming Rachel and Alyssa managed to convince her to go ahead with the Change.”

\*As if there was ever any doubt,\* the blonde protested, with a mock pout. \*We’re back in the palace now; I’ll give you directions to Tamolith’s quarters.\*

\*We’ll grab a quick shower first,\* John replied, offering Jade his hand. \*See you in a few minutes.\*

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Walking from the landing pad into the Imperial palace was a sobering experience. John and Jade descended from the rooftop to the deserted lower corridors, where the floor was carpeted in hundreds of butchered corpses. The Brimorian marines had received the same mercy they’d shown the Kintark, brutally hacked to pieces as they fled in terror from Alyssa’s legion of telekinetic blades.

Upon reaching the lower levels, they ran into the first Kintark survivors, the dazed courtiers staring in horror at the carnage that surrounded them. John’s sudden arrival was met with startled surprise, but none of the lizardmen raised any objections about his presence in the palace. Picking his way through the bloodstained hallways, he followed Alyssa’s directions to the Imperial throne room.

John pushed at the massive portal, then strode inside, to find the Kintark Empress reclining on the dais at the far side of the vast chamber. Accompanying Tamolith were all the girls from the ground mission, standing in quiet discussion with the massive crimson dragon. Helene sat to one side, the blazing teal light from her eyes giving John an idea of the Empress’ emotional state.

“Hello again, Tamolith,” John said as he approached the leader of the Kintark Empire. “Alyssa tells me that she explained the details of what the Change involves. Have you made a final decision?”

The dragon turned to face him. “Your consorts have been most enlightening,” she replied, her brow quirking as she studied him. “It appears that to have all my desires fulfilled, you must become my mate.”

“Eventually... yes,” John agreed, coming to a halt before her.

“I must admit that the logistics of such a union are... highly implausible,” Tamolith said, her long serpentine neck causing her to tower over him.

“We’ll use Jade as a proxy at first,” he said, eyeing her huge fangs. “You’ve been trustworthy with your dealings with me in the past, Tamolith... but I must admit that there are limits to my bravery.”

Rumbling laughter reverberated deep in her chest. “I can understand your caution, tiny Progenitor,” Tamolith said, before hesitating and looking at him curiously. “I suppose I shall have to stop calling you that now, after your impressive demonstration earlier.”

He nodded, then walked closer and beckoned her down. Tamolith lowered her huge head to the same level as his, gazing at him with curiosity in her big amber eyes.

“This is a one-way process, Tamolith,” he said quietly. “I don’t expect any dramatic changes after the first time, but if I keep feeding you for a couple of months, you’re going to look and behave very differently. Do you truly understand what you’re signing up for here? If Rachel is correct, you’ll eventually end up taking on the proportions of a Thrall, just like the rest of the girls.”

“I would have dismissed the idea as preposterous only yesterday... but I’ve seen too much today that I cannot explain.” There was a flicker of apprehension on her draconic features. “In truth I have no desire to lose my stature and majestic appearance. However, if that is the sacrifice I am forced to make in exchange for everything promised in return... so be it.”

“I have no control over the side-effects, I’m afraid. You can’t have one without the other,” John said with regret.

“Then I choose to accept your offer, John Blake. I have no future like this... none worth living for at least,” the dragon rumbled. Tamolith had a disquieted look in her eyes as she continued, “It strikes me as a peculiar twist of fate that it was I who convinced you to slay Kindralax... and now that the dragon that sired my children is dead, my only chance of another family rests with you.”

John could see the grief haunting Tamolith’s eyes, only held at bay by Helene’s gentle support. He reached up to stroke the dragon’s muzzle, feeling a surge of sympathy for Tamolith no matter what she’d done in the past.

“For what it’s worth, I’m very sorry for the way events panned out. I would have done anything I could to save your family, Tamolith.”

She nodded mournfully, then gently brushed her huge head against him in a simple gesture of gratitude. “I believe you tried your hardest, John... but let us say no more about the matter. I will have sorrow enough to face when I awaken tomorrow.”

John glanced at the round stone plinth. “Are you sure you’ll be okay sleeping here unguarded?”

“I have spoken to High Prelate Zorlin and he is dispatching a new garrison of troops to secure the palace. He understands that I will be grieving for a period of time and wish to be left alone and undisturbed until then.”

“What about the cities the Brimorians bombarded?” he asked, wanting to make sure they were being provided for. “Have you done anything to help them?”

“The High Prelate has his orders,” the Empress replied. “He will lead the relief effort until I awaken.”

“Thank you,” John said, pleased that she had taken steps to aid her people. “There’s one last thing we need to discuss, Tamolith. I want you to stop taking out your anger and frustration on your citizens. No more random murders.”

The dragon looked somewhat abashed and glanced at Alyssa. “Your consort has already made it quite clear that my undergoing this transformation is contingent on my future conduct.”

John nodded in confirmation. “We’re allies now and I’ll do my best to support you in any way that I can. However, it could be many months until I can return to Kinta and give you the dedicated attention necessary to complete the Change.”

“I will await that time with eager anticipation,” Tamolith said, nodding her understanding.

“Alright then... are you ready?” he asked, giving her a final chance to back out.

“I am ready to proceed,” Tamolith declared, before holding herself up with pride. “Congratulations, tiny Progenitor, you are about to add a dragon to your harem of consorts.”

John had a wry smile on his face as he glanced at his Nymph Matriarch. “Go ahead, Jade.”

Jade slipped her dress over her cum-packed tummy, then her statuesque form was obscured by a verdant haze. The shimmering grew larger and larger... expanding to immense proportions, until she solidified into a vast green dragon that dwarfed the Kintark Empress. Gasping in shock, Tamolith’s claws scrabbled on the stone plinth as she instinctively backed away from the colossal predator.

“I actually have a dragon already,” John said, patting Jade’s scaly foreclaw.

She dipped her long graceful neck and gently nuzzled him, a rumbling purr sounding deep in her enormous chest.

Tamolith stared at the Nymph in stunned fascination. “How is that possible?!”

“Jade’s a very talented and powerful shapeshifter. Don’t worry, she won’t hurt you,” John replied, giving the shocked red dragon an encouraging smile.

“It might be less intimidating if we lie down?” Jade rumbled, following her own suggestion.

After watching the Nymph rest on the flagstones floor, Tamolith copied her, curling up on the stone plinth that overlooked the throne room. Jade dipped her neck so that her head was low to the ground, then gently brushed her muzzle against Tamolith’s. The Empress relaxed, sensing that Jade meant her no harm, and returned the friendly gesture. Jade extended her long forked tongue and licked the smaller dragon’s maw, encouraging Tamolith to open her fang-filled jaws. When she did so, Jade gave her a draconic kiss, her tongue curling around Tamolith’s.

From where he stood, John could hear the sudden gurgle of liquid as Jade fed his load to the huge dragon. Tamolith’s pupil dilated in surprise as her tastebuds were bathed in his sweet aftertaste, then those amber orbs glazed over, her mind reeling from the overwhelming contact with his subconscious. She continued to swallow by reflex now, scaly throat flexing repeatedly as Jade filled her up. It went on for sufficiently long that John glanced at Tamolith’s stomach and was astonished to see a noticeable swell with all the cum she had swallowed.

Rachel moved to stand beside him, watching the dragon in fascination. “Glazed eyes, the suckling trance... it’s identical to the effect you have on any normal woman.” She turned to grin at John, her grey eyes sparkling with excitement. “These are all excellent signs, John!”

“I can sense her in my mind, handsome,” Alyssa said with satisfaction. She walked up to the dazed dragon and patted her scaly head. “Welcome to the family, Tamolith.”

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Matriarch Sarinia Baelora paced back and forth in her study, her nerves frayed after long days spent in confinement. She’d been expecting Baen’thelas to arrive this evening, but with Edraele announcing his delay, her fate was to be decided another day. Being left in this limbo state, waiting to be judged for her supposed crimes, was like torture for the Maliri noblewoman.

Sliding into her chair, she brought up the comms-interface again and scowled when she saw that her access had been restricted. Being cut off from outside contact made the situation even worse, as Sarinia knew the new matriarchs would be arriving at Genthalas that very evening. This was the perfect time to influence those women, who would all be profoundly grateful to her for enabling their abrupt promotion to leader of their House.

Sarinia froze as she was struck by a sudden moment of inspiration. Logging out of the comms interface, she attempted to access the system using her youngest sister’s credentials, which Tehlariene had previously shared with her. As she suspected, the account administrators had not updated their records to reflect the youngest Baeloran noblewoman’s unexpected demise.

There were scant few contacts of any use in Tehlariene’s account, but Sarinia had already memorised the details of the person she needed to speak to urgently. Updating the information, she held her breath and waited for the comms message to go through. The twin moons icon of House Loraleth appeared, the two spheres waxing and waning as Sarinia waited for an answer.

The House sigil disappeared in a flurry of pixels and a sleepy young woman gazed bleary-eyed at the holo-screen. “Hello? I don’t think we’ve met, Tehlariene...”

“Kali!” Sarinia gushed, feeling a surge of relief. “It’s me... Sarinia!”

That woke the House Loraleth Matriarch in a hurry. “Oh, I’ve been so worried about you! Are you alright?! Did your mother hurt you again?”

“I’m fine, Kali,” Sarinia said with a broad smile. “I’ve really missed you though.”

“What happened?” Kali asked in bewilderment. “I went to the arboretum for our meeting and waited for hours!”

“I’m so sorry about that,” Sarinia apologised, trying to look as contrite as possible. “Have you really not heard about what’s been happening?”

“Only Queen Edraele seems to know... but she won’t tell me a thing!” Kali blurted out in exasperation.

Glancing furtively to either side as if to check she wasn’t being overheard, the House Baelora Matriarch said, “Can you come to visit me? I’m being held in my mother’s quarters. I’d love to tell you everything... but I don’t want to discuss this over the comms network.”

Kali giggled nervously. “I’m not sure if I should. Edraele asked me not to investigate...”

“But you’re not investigating. I contacted you, remember?” Sarinia said with a sly grin. “Please come and visit me, Kali... I haven’t had any friendly company in days!”

Nibbling pensively at her lower lip, the young noblewoman made up her mind. “Okay... I’ll come.”

“You promise?” Sarinia asked, a pleading look in her golden eyes.

Kali broke into a friendly smile and nodded. “I promise.”

They ended the call and Sarinia sank back into the comfortable chair, a triumphant smile spreading across her beautiful face. She felt immensely relieved that the naive Loraleth Matriarch could be so easily manipulated.