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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Latina grinned in agreement. “Exactly.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

John eyed her speculatively for a long moment.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Do you need my help?” John offered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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