Three Square Meals Ch. 143 – Part 1

John followed his Lionesses across the hangar towards the parked gunship, their armoured boots ringing with every step on the titanium deckplates. As he approached the Raptor, its Crystal Alyssium hull caught his eye, the flawless white surface sparkling under the bright glare of the overhead lights. He came to a halt under the chin-mounted Tachyon Cannon and studied the predatory assault craft with a speculative look.

Alyssa turned back to face him and nodded in agreement as she overheard his thoughts. “It’s been a while since we re-plated the Raptor. It couldn’t hurt to toughen up the armour.”

“Alright, I’ll reshape it, you lock the plates back into position,” John agreed, shouldering his rifle and removing his Paragon helmet.

“Ready when you are.”

John gestured towards the psychically responsive metal and beckoned it towards him, intending to strip the armour from the gunship in one go. To his surprise, it obstinately refused to move, so he frowned in irritation and concentrated his will. A blazing tapestry of Progenitor runes appeared across its surface, instantly changing the white hull into gleaming gold, and John flushed with embarrassment as he realised what had happened.

“Sparks?” he yelled to the redhead, who had already boarded the Raptor. “Can you deactivate your runes please?”

Dana staggered into view and stared at him with wide eyes. “Holy shit!”

“What’s wrong?” John asked when he saw her shocked expression.

She removed her helmet and winced as she rubbed her temple. “That was like being smacked in the face with a sledgehammer! What the fuck did you do?!”

“I’m so sorry!” he apologised, jogging up the ramp to join her. “I completely forgot you’d protected the Raptor with runes. I’ve got used to repairing the Invictus and not having to think about it. Are you okay?”

Dana nodded and stood on tiptoe to give him a reassuring kiss. “I’m fine, I just wasn’t expecting it. I could feel you pulling against the runes... then I got clobbered over the head with whatever you did to them.”

“In John’s defence, your runes are as tough as old boots. He got frustrated and cranked it up a notch,” Alyssa explained, walking up to hug her friend. “I’m sorry too, Sparks. I didn’t think that was actually going to hurt.”

“You remembered it was runed?” John asked with a disapproving frown.

“Of course, I’m not a goldfish,” she teased him with a playful smile. “I was curious to see if Dana’s runes could actually stop a fully-fledged Progenitor from stripping away our armour. Now you’ve absorbed your guide, you must be at least as powerful as they are.”

“Well, at least we know the runes work. I couldn’t even shift the armour plating an inch,” he admitted, giving Dana a congratulatory pat on the shoulder.

The redhead didn’t look particularly relieved. “If you’d kept that up, there’s no way I could’ve stopped you for long. You pushed those runes to breaking point; a few more seconds and you would’ve busted your way through.”

“Hopefully they’ll last long enough that any Progenitor will give up on trying to break them,” John said, remembering just how resistant the eldritch glyphs had proven to be. “At least you know what to expect if it happens for real.”

“Yeah, it won’t be such a shock next time,” she conceded, waving her hand towards the gunship’s hull. “There you go, I’ve deactivated them. Do you want to upgrade our Paragon armour too?”

“That would be sensible; it won’t take long,” he agreed, walking down the ramp and backing away from the Raptor to a better vantage point.

When he gestured to the armour plating again, this time it instantly obeyed his siren call, melting effortlessly into viscous streams. He drew them away from the gunship into a huge globe of liquid metal, the orb rotating slowly as it absorbed every last droplet of Crystal Alyssium. John concentrated on reshaping the metal into a series of geometric shapes, switching between cubes and spheres to toughen the Etherium lattice.

“What level of plating did we start with on the Raptor?” he asked the blonde and redhead, who were watching silently as he worked. “I’ve reshaped it quite a bit and it’s still pretty easy.”

“You’re already up to twenty-nine...” Dana replied in an awed whisper.

“Really?” He paused and looked at them in astonishment. “Should I stop or keep going?”

“Keep going!” Alyssa urged him excitedly. “Let’s see how far you can push it!”

John focused on the metal again, telekinetically reshaping it until he felt that familiar resistance start to build.

“That’s about my limit,” he muttered, frowning with intense concentration. “Any more and I’ll struggle to make the armour plating.”

“That’ll be thirty-five times!” Dana exclaimed, shaking her head in disbelief. “Wow!”

Alyssa bounded over to his side and give him a jubilant kiss. “That was amazing! Well done!”

“Thanks,” John replied with a proud grin. “It was so much easier without my guide dragging me down.”

He had memorised the blueprints for the Raptor months ago, so forming the correct sized sections of armour was almost instinctive now. John coaxed the liquid metal into the relevant shapes, then floated them over to Alyssa, who used telekinesis to attach each newly-forged panel to its corresponding location on the hull. She hummed a jaunty sea-shanty as she worked beside him, her infectious good mood bringing a smile to his face.

“You seem happy,” he noted, delighted to see how much of a difference her short vacation had made.

“I am!” she gushed, while attaching another panel to the Raptor’s tail. Her cerulean eyes sparkled mischievously as she added, “Now that you’re so much better at this than me, I can leave re-armouring the Invictus in your wonderfully capable hands.”

That wiped the grin off John’s face and he groaned at the daunting prospect of having to re-plate the entire battlecruiser.

Alyssa laughed and leaned over to give him a reassuring kiss. “Don’t worry, I’ll still help out however I can. You’re right about the holiday though; having a little break from everything really made a big difference. I hadn’t realise how tense I’d been until I spent a few days being pampered... then all the stress just melted away.”

“You’ve been through a hell of a lot recently, with no time to process everything,” John said with sympathy. “I knew it was all building up though... I could feel it back before Karron.”

“You were right,” she said, her eyes softening. “Thanks for always looking out for me.”

“It’s my job as a Progenitor to take care of my matriarch,” John said solemnly, as he turned to face her. He hesitated and his brow furrowed in mock confusion. “Wait... I think I might’ve got that a bit wrong.”

She giggled and gave him a loving hug. “Yeah, afraid so. You’d make a terrible Progenitor.”

“What am I supposed to do with my matriarch then?” he asked, holding her close.

“I can think of a few fun suggestions...” she purred, nuzzling into him.

“Look at you two flirting together without a care in the world,” Dana said, her voice drifting down from the gunship’s wing.

John glanced up and saw the redhead watching them fondly. “I’m just glad to be back. I really missed all of you.”

“Yeah, I know,” she said with a lopsided smile. Jerking her thumb towards the cockpit, she continued, “Do you want to head inside and make a start on upgrading the Paragon suits? I need to inscribe a fresh set of protection runes on the Raptor, then I’ll join you.”

“Alright, I’ll see you in a minute,” John agreed, holding out his armoured gauntlet for Alyssa as she fixed the final section of armour into place.

The blonde slipped her hand into his and they walked up the loading ramp to board the gunship. After taking the grav-tube to the upper deck, they found the rest of the girls waiting for them in the cockpit. Dana had pre-emptively removed her runes from their Paragon armour, so John was able to start work immediately.

“The Raptor’s prepped and on standby, Master,” Jade said, turning to greet him with a cheerful wave. “I’ll take off as soon as Dana’s inside.”

The Nymph was wearing a flowery sundress, which meant there was a grand total of seven Paragon suits that needed to be re-plated. Rachel, Helene, and the twins waited patiently as John upgraded their armour, after which he turned his attention to the suits worn by Alyssa and himself. There was considerably less surface area to cover than the Raptor, but the work was more intricate, with each piece of armour plating designed to perfectly fit the contours of the wearer.

“Done!” Dana called out, as she bounded into the cockpit with her helmet tucked under one arm.

They could hear the dull roar of retro-thrusters for a couple of seconds until the loading ramp closed, then the cockpit was immersed in serene silence. John worked quickly to complete his enhancement of their armour, then turned his attention to Jade as she nudged the throttle forward and the Raptor raced towards the hangar door.

Instead of emerging into the unending darkness of space, a majestic nebula of rich purples swept across their view through the Raptor’s crystal canopy. John was already familiar with the Mists of Loralar after watching Tashana’s holographic simulation, but seeing it with his own two eyes was a breathtaking sight. He glanced at the local System Map that was floating above Jade’s console, but their sensors were unable to penetrate the inhospitable stellar hazard.

“Alright, take us in, Jade,” he said to their Nymph pilot. “We’ll hold position on the periphery to see how badly we’re affected by the Mists and give Helene a chance to get comfortable protecting the girls.”

“Will do,” the verdant-hued beauty agreed, pushing the throttle forward.

They all held their breath as they crossed into the nebula, with everyone glancing apprehensively at each other. When nothing happened after thirty seconds, there was a collective sigh of relief, quickly followed by nervous laughter.

“Are any of you feeling anything yet?” John asked, checking each of his companions for the slightest sign of distress.

They all shook their heads and the tension eased in the cockpit.

“Valada’s records reported that the Maliri who entered the Mists started to experience feelings of unease almost immediately,” Rachel informed him.

“Let’s just wait a few more minutes to be sure,” John said, pleased that everyone seemed to be unaffected.

“We’ve all been psychically enhanced,” Rachel mused aloud. “I wonder if that made us strong enough to resist the debilitating mental affects of the Mists?”

“If the thrall races are all essentially identical to each other, then none of the crew on a Progenitor dreadnought would be psychic,” Tashana said thoughtfully. “It wouldn’t matter if a Progenitor was immune to the anxiety the psychic field generates if his thralls were still prevented from approaching Kythshara. Keeping the thralls away would mean that a rival Progenitor who wanted to investigate the planet would have to do so alone.”

“Where is Kythshara?” John asked, turning back to study the purple expanse.

“It’s on the second orbital path around the star,” Alyssa explained, leaning over the console to tap a series of buttons. “Valada created an algorithm to plot the planet’s approximate position, so that her scouts wouldn’t have to waste time trying to locate it.”

A holographic map of the system appeared, showing the orbiting planet and a green flight path that would take them directly to Kythshara.

Irillith shivered involuntarily as she stared at the map. “Maybe this was a bad idea. Mael’nerak probably had a very good reason for keeping Valada and the Maliri away from this place. I mean... it might be dangerous down there.”

John shot a concerned glance at Rachel, immediately recognising the symptoms she’d warned them about.

The brunette reached out to Irillith, a grey mist swirling along her arm to envelop the hacker. “Adrenalin levels are spiking...” Rachel said, her brow furrowing as she gave the Maliri a thorough examination. “I’m seeing elevated activity in her Amygdala.”

“I’m fine!” Irillith protested indignantly, starting to look agitated. “I just think we should pull back and investigate the bunker under Saelihn Immanthe first!”

John placed his hand on Irillith’s shoulder to calm her. “Take it easy, honey. We’ll leave as soon as we can.” He glanced meaningfully at Helene and continued, “Are you able to sense whatever it is that’s affecting her?”

The aquatic girl closed her eyes and concentrated, pushing out with her subconscious to make contact with their minds. She sensed John and the girls immediately, each one shining brightly like a beacon in the Astral plane. What was disturbing however, was that the Astral itself seemed to have changed, the featureless plane now tinged with a murky purple that Helene found deeply unsettling.

“There’s definitely something there... but I don’t know how to protect us from it,” she said, looking at Irillith with concern.

 The Empath quickly explained what she’d seen on the Astral plane to her captivated audience.

“Do you remember how you kept Tamolith stable? Try to picture us as islands like you did with her,” Alyssa urged the pensive mermaid.

“But that was for her internal emotions...” Helene said with a bewildered frown. “Tamolith’s grief was overwhelming and I just tried to keep her from drowning in it. I don’t know how to block whatever the mist is doing!”

“It’s the same idea,” the blonde persisted. “You just need to find a way of picturing the problem, then you should be able to come up with a way to deal with it.”

John nodded his agreement. “How you visualise anything on the Astral is completely up to you. Your imagination is given free rein there, so you can create any solution you like... but please hurry. If you’re not able to protect Irillith, just let us know, and we’ll think of another plan.”

Helene took a deep breath and spent a long moment trying to create a picture of the problem in her mind. It came to her in a flash and she pushed out with her will, altering her perception of how she viewed the Mists eroding their sanity. In a flash the scene before her on the Astral Plane changed. Helene used a similar metaphor as before, but instead of an atoll of islands, she imagined John and the girls as a range of cliffs. Instead of the ocean threatening to wash over exotic sandy beaches, stormy waves were crashing into the rocky crags.

How each of the crew was faring under the psychic onslaught varied dramatically. She pictured John as a towering granite bulwark, the surging waves proving as ineffective against that immutable obstacle as if they were ripples in a puddle. Next was Alyssa, her metaphysical representation formed of the same unyielding rock, but her cliff face was substantially smaller. Jade came next in terms of stature, but the ocean was calm and placid along her section of the coastline, as if Poseidon himself had given up any hope of reclaiming that land.

The cliff formations underwent a change at that point, the igneous rock that represented John and his matriarchs shifting to sedimentary. Looming high above the others was a majestic escarpment of red sandstone, the crashing waves simply polishing the rock to a vibrant scarlet sheen. The sandstone shifted colours further along the coastline, the crimson rock changing to sturdy grey, then a stretch of sandy gold, before finishing with a low-lying ridge of pale violet chalk.

It was the last section of coastline that worried Helene the most. As she watched, the waves smashed into the base of the cliffs, constantly eroding the foundation and weakening it further. A crack formed near the raging sea, then widened with a horrible groan, the newly formed crevasse reaching up towards the clifftop. With its surface fractured, a section of the cliff broke away and crashed down into the ocean with a mighty splash.

Helene knew she needed to intervene immediately and pushed out with her will to support Irillith’s besieged subconscious. The tidal water reared back to crash against her mind once again, but the wave faltered, holding in place for a moment before collapsing in on itself. The psychic waters swirled in a furious spray of white foam, then a yawning whirlpool appeared in the ocean’s surface, reversing the inexorable tide. Robbed of their strength, the waves petered out entirely, sucked into the hungry maw of that maelstrom. The sea even receded from the cliff edge, giving the crumbling coastline some much-needed respite from the relentless psychic onslaught.

When Helene reopened her eyes, she focused on the Maliri hacker who was now swathed in a soothing teal glow. “Does that feel better?”

Irillith sagged with relief and gave her a grateful nod. “It crept up on me... I didn’t even realise I’d been affected. It feels like a huge pressure’s been lifted now though. Thank you, Helene!”

She smiled graciously, overjoyed to see her friend had recovered. “I was very glad to help.”

“What’s the situation, honey?” John asked with a worried frown. “How are the rest of the girls holding up?”

“They’re all okay for the moment,” she explained, giving him a reassuring smile. “Irillith was the most vulnerable to mental attack by the mists, so she started getting scared first.”

“It must be because I’m a Maliri... a thrall species,” Irillith said, nodding as her suspicions were confirmed. She darted a worried glance at her sister and added, “You better brace yourself Shan, you’ll be next.”

Helene shook her head. “I don’t think your species has anything to do with it. Aside from those three...” She pointed to John, Alyssa, then Jade. “Tashana seems to be the least affected out of the rest of you. Dana’s actually the one I’m concerned about now.”

“Me?!” the redhead squeaked, her eyes widening in alarm.

Helene nodded. “I’m afraid so. Don’t worry though, I can deaden the effects of the psychic waves, so you shouldn’t suffer from any side-effects.”

“How long can you keep that up?” John asked the empathic mermaid.

“I’m sorry... I don’t know for sure,” she said, giving him a helpless shrug of apology. “This is much harder than trying to soothe somebody’s feelings of grief or shame.”

“Helene’s using a lot more psychic energy than normal, but we’ve got plenty in our reserves to keep her going for at least a couple of hours,” Alyssa interjected.

“Are you shielding all of us?” Tashana asked, her curiosity piqued.

“The four of you don’t need my help,” Helene replied, her glance encompassing John, Alyssa, Jade and the Maliri archaeologist. She then gestured towards Irillith, Dana, and her girlfriend. “I’ve managed to hold back the psychic waves from wearing down their resistance.”

“What about you, Helene?” Rachel asked, concerned for the selfless empath.

Helene hesitated for a moment before answering. “I don’t feel like I’m being attacked, or at least, I’m not feeling anxious or frightened.”

“You should be far more resistant to this kind of psychic aura because of your runic affinity,” John explained, before blinking in surprise, startling himself with that sudden flash of insight. “We’ll keep a close eye on you to be careful, but let us know if you feel anything unusual.”

“I will,” she said earnestly.

John looked around at the group. “The clock’s ticking, so we better get moving. Unless any of you have any objections?”

There were none, so Jade swivelled around to sit back down in the pilot’s chair and ramp up power to the engines. She banked the Raptor to starboard and set a course which would closely follow the flight path that Alyssa had uploaded to the gunship. As they flew closer towards the star in the centre of the system, the occasional glance at the holographic map showed no new information, their sensors blocked by the Mists.

“I hate flying blind,” Tashana muttered, grimacing as she stared out into the swirling purple nebula. “You never know what’s lurking out there in wait.”

John slipped his arm around her shoulders. “Are you feeling alright? Is this anxiety from the Mists?”

She turned to give him a self-conscious smile. “No, just my time as a smuggler. In that profession you had to be wary of law enforcement, crime lords, double-crossing clients, your own crew... it’s not paranoia when everyone’s out to get you.”

“The offer’s still open to remove those memories,” John said, looking at her with sympathy.

Tashana considered it for a moment. “Not right now... but later maybe? When the war is over, I think I’d like to put all that behind me. As terrible as my time in the Unclaimed Wastes was, I learned some sneaky tricks that might come in useful against the Progenitors.”

“Just let me know whenever you feel ready.”

They turned back to the view, watching and waiting for any sign of Kythshara.

“We’re getting close to the outer ring of defences,” Alyssa warned her fellow matriarch. “I’ve plotted a course that should take us through one of the gaps Valada identified in the turret grid.”

“It seems a bit sloppy leaving holes in the defences,” Dana said with a frown. “I thought Mael’nerak was supposed to be super smart?”

“The area these gun emplacements are covering is vast,” Alyssa explained. “There’s just way too much space to cover at this distance from the planet unless he built tens-of-thousands of turrets. This is like an outer layer of defences intended to slow down invaders and make them cautious; it’s the inner rings that Calara’s really worried about.”

Everyone was feeling on edge as the Raptor continued onwards, but it had nothing to do with the aura from the Mists. They all knew that dozens of gun turrets might already be tracking their approach, ready to open fire with lethal weapons that were designed to eviscerate powerful thrall ships. Their suspicions were confirmed when the pilot’s console chimed and an icon flashed on the comms interface.

“Incoming hail,” Alyssa said, reaching over to acknowledge the call.

A deep baritone voice rang out around the cockpit. “El Nareith hae’em dargonath.”

“What did he say?” Dana asked in a hushed voice.

“The light in the darkness,” Tashana translated, before glancing at John. “Is this some kind of riddle?”

“Maybe if we answer correctly, we can deactivate Kythshara’s defences?” Irillith said hopefully.

“Hold here for a second, Jade,” John said, patting her on the shoulder.

She did as he requested, bringing the Raptor to a halt.

“Any idea how we should respond?” John asked, looking around at the girls.

“Maybe he’s referring to the Shroud?” Dana suggested. “As far as we know, this is the only area in the galaxy that isn’t ruled by Xar’aziuth.”

“Even if that is the correct answer, it’s highly unlikely that Mael’nerak referred to it as ‘The Shroud’,” Irillith said, looking sceptical. “A direct translation into ancient Maliri would be ‘Ta’mariksha’ but he could’ve called it anything.”

“What about Valada?” Alyssa said, staring out into the nebula. “We know Mael’nerak loved her and she had a dramatic impact on his life.”

John nodded thoughtfully. “True... and it’s highly unlikely that an invading Progenitor would know the name of Mael’nerak’s matriarch.” He glanced around at the girls and continued, “Have you got any other suggestions? If not, then I think we should go with Alyssa’s suggestion.”

Nobody volunteered any other ideas, so John activated the comms interface and sent out a system-wide broadcast. “Valada,” he declared solemnly.

They waited for a couple of minutes but there was no other response.

“Shall I proceed, Master?” Jade asked, waiting for his permission to continue.

“Go ahead. We can’t afford to waste any more time.”

She powered up the engines and the Raptor surged forward, heading towards the heart of the nebula. They had only resumed flying for thirty seconds, when there was a sudden flicker from the System Map, the sensors finally close enough to an object to detect it.

“Debris...” Irillith muttered, staring intently at the shattered remnants of a spacecraft. “It’s a Maliri destroyer.”

“One of Great Grandmother’s scouts,” Tashana added, moving closer to the cockpit canopy to get a better look.

“Damn...” Dana said quietly, shocked by the extent of the destruction. “Those poor bastards were torn to pieces!”

The wreck looked like it had been hit by scores of beams, each one burning straight through the hull.

“Stay over to the port side,” Alyssa advised their Nymph pilot. “We don’t want to get anywhere near that turret.”

Jade made the course correction and they passed more obliterated hulks as they proceeded in-system. Each vessel had been blown to pieces the moment they were within range of a gun emplacement, giving the Raptor’s crew a macabre way of detecting a nearby turret whenever they drew near to its position. The final graves of those brave Maliri allowed them to serve their people for a final time and Tashana bowed her head with respect to each one they passed.

“We’re reaching the limit the scouts were able to penetrate,” Alyssa said, squinting into the purple gloom. “No ships returned from exploring any closer than this.”

Less than thirty seconds passed before a strobing white light lit up the cockpit. The shield status display registered hits a second later and the protective barrier began to drop at an alarming rate.

“Evasive manoeuvres!” John ordered, tightly gripping the back of Jade’s chair.

“On it, Master!” she replied, slamming the flight stick to the left and pushing it forward.

The Raptor performed a diving barrel roll, which the Nymph smoothly corrected as she brought the gunship back towards their destination. She flipped and spun the nimble assault craft, making it perform a chaotic dance to avoid the deadly incoming fire.

Dana rushed over to the canopy to get a better look at whatever was shooting at them. “They must be using some kind of rapid fire weapon in a fast tracking turret! It hits like a fucking truck!”

“John... take a look at this!” Alyssa exclaimed, pointing towards the holographic map.

He could see the beams thrumming past the Raptor, their wake crisscrossed by a forest of white columns. With the gunship’s incredible speed combined with Jade’s supernatural agility, Mael’nerak’s defences found it impossible to keep up with her chaotic manoeuvres. She performed the intricate ballet for the next several minutes, long enough to pull away from the turret that had initially fired on them. Just when they had cleared its field of fire, a second turret renewed the barrage, forcing Jade to frantically evade more beam volleys.

“Nice flying!” John said with admiration, rubbing the Nymph’s shoulder when they cleared the second emplacement. He glanced at the shields that had regenerated to a pale green. “You can ease off on the dodging now, at least until we come under attack again.”

“I guess the answer wasn’t Valada,” Irillith noted glumly.

Jade returned them to the original flight path, which would led directly to Kythshara’s projected location. Their rapid progress was interrupted once again as another turret opened fire, with the Nymph reacting immediately and avoiding the worst of the initial salvo. She ducked and weaved, making the Raptor an impossible target, as they steadily proceeded towards the second orbital path around the star.

“There it is!” Tashana blurted out, pointing excitedly at the canopy as the gunship yawed wildly to starboard. With the Raptor’s nose flipping around in response to Jade’s wild dodging, the field of stars whirled past in a dizzying blur. “I definitely saw Kythshara!”

John and the girls were all on the lookout for the elusive planet now, but they saw only fleeting glimpses of a green world as it flashed past the window. When they were finally clear of the turret’s field of fire, Jade straightened out the Raptor and ramped up its engines, rushing onwards towards their destination. Kythshara was now directly in front of them, growing larger by the second as they closed the distance. The planet had a mystical feel to it, the verdant paradise like a gleaming emerald presented on a rich purple cloth.

“It looks so beautiful,” Helene whispered, staring at the planet in wonder.

“I can’t believe we actually found Mael’nerak’s homeworld,” Tashana said reverently. “Do you remember much about living there, Jade?”

There was no answer from the Nymph, so Tashana turned to see Jade’s reaction to setting eyes on her home for the first time in over 10,000 years.

“Jade!” she gasped, rushing over to their stricken pilot. “John, something’s wrong with her!”

The Nymph’s features were contorted in a silent scream of anguish, her body frozen in place with her eyes locked in terror on Kythshara.

John darted around the pilot’s chair to see for himself, and recoiled in shock at the dreadful expression on her face. “She must have reacted to the Mists! You need to shield her, Helene! Now!”

Helene’s eyes glowed with a soft teal light as she reached out to her friend. “I don’t think it’s the Mists,” she said fearfully, after hastily checking her on the Astral. “Nothing’s changed... the psychic ocean isn’t even trying to wear her down!”

The cockpit lit up with another staccato pulse of bright light, signifying that the Raptor had reached the final line of defences positioned around Kythshara. Their shields were hammered by energy beams, the dazzling white light immediately followed by a succession of bright colours, as the gunship’s shield status dropped from green to orange in a matter of seconds.

Tashana reacted first, lunging for Jade’s hands to yank back the joystick and avoid the incoming fire. To her surprise she couldn’t move those lithe green limbs even a millimetre, the Nymph’s fingers clenched in a death grip around the Raptor’s flight controls.

“She’s much too strong! I can’t budge them!” she cried out in alarm. “John, you’re the only one that’s stronger than her!”

He reached for Jade’s hands and hesitated, darting a worried glance at the paralysed Nymph. “If I use too much force, I’ll break her arms!”

“Leave her!” Alyssa shouted, as she dove for the co-pilot’s seat. “I’ll take over!”

A crimson flash illuminated the pilot’s console as the shields were overwhelmed, then the Raptor juddered as it was struck by coruscating beams. There was a dull boom as the gunship was rocked by an explosion, the damage display lighting up like a Christmas tree.

“They took out our starboard Tachyon Cannon!” Dana reported, before rushing over to the canopy and peering outside. “We’ve lost the entire right wing!”

Alyssa’s hands flew over her console. “Transferring flight control...”

She gripped the secondary joystick and shoved it forward and to the right, the retro-thrusters along the port flank flaring at full power to flip them into a dive. John glanced at the System Map and saw the next spray of shots go wide, unable to track the agile craft as it made the violent turn.

“Shit... we must’ve lost half the starboard retro-thrusters!” Alyssa snarled, her face twisted into a grimace of intense concentration.

“Just get us down to the planet!” John urged her. “We can’t call in the Invictus until we knock out whatever’s powering the Mists.”

“I’m trying,” she replied, desperately fighting the controls. “If I try to level us out with only half the thrusters, we’ll be a sitting duck for that turret!”

John turned to Rachel, meeting her worried gaze. “Can you shield us? We just need long enough for Alyssa to change course and clear the turret’s field of fire.”

“Shield the Raptor?!” Rachel exclaimed, gaping at him incredulously. “But it’s huge! I’ve never shielded anything that big before!”

“The principle’s the same... just build it with more hexagons!” John urged her. “I’d try it myself but you’re much better at making hex-barriers than me.”

“Alright... let me just think about how to do this,” she agreed, closing her eyes to concentrate.

“You don’t need to write a thesis on it, babes!” Dana blurted out, looking at the damage status with mounting alarm. “I hate to pile on the pressure, but that explosion ruptured a fuel line to the manoeuvring thrusters. If I don’t shut them down asap, they’ll bleed us dry!”

“Can you repair it from here?” John asked, turning to face the redhead.

She blinked in surprise. “What, you mean psychically?”

“I’ve seen you do it before with the Invictus. This should be easy in comparison.”

“Sparks uses shitloads of psychic energy doing that,” Alyssa warned them, not taking her eyes off her instruments for a second. “You’ll cut down on the amount of reserves we have for Helene.”

John didn’t hesitate and immediately replied, “Energy reserves won’t do us much good if we get shot out of the sky. Do it, Sparks. Just repair the worst of the leaks; anything to reduce the fuel loss.”

“A quick and dirty patch job... that used to be my specialty,” she said with a strained smile. Her eyes began to glow with a gleaming golden light as she hurried over to the starboard wall.

“Okay, I’m ready,” Rachel declared, taking a deep breath before holding out her arms. “I don’t know how long I’m going to be able to hold this shield. It’s going to require four-hundred times more hexagons to complete.”

“Four-hundred hexagons!” Helene exclaimed. “That’s a huge amount!”

The brunette shook her head as she focused her will. “No, you misunderstand. A standard spherical hex-shield has a one-metre radius and is constructed from 558 hexagons. To protect the Raptor, I’ll need to create a shield with a twenty-metre radius... which will require 223,200 hexagons.”

John stared at her in disbelief. “Goddamn... I had no idea. Alright, we’ll figure something else out.”

“I’m willing to try,” Rachel said solemnly, her eyes shining with a smoky grey light. “Get ready to make your manoeuvres in ten seconds, Alyssa.”

“Got it,” the blonde agreed, tightening her grip on the flight controls.

The lights flickered as Rachel drew more power, her face showing the strain as she channelled all that eldritch energy into a massive hex barrier. “Now!”

Alyssa pulled back on the stick and levelled out the one-winged Raptor, the manoeuvre much slower to complete with so many damaged retro-thrusters. When the gunship was pointing towards Kythshara again, she shoved the throttle forward, accelerating the Raptor up to maximum thrust.

“Brace yourself,” John warned Rachel. “Incoming fire!”

He watched the holographic map as the gun emplacement strafed its beams onto the rear of the fleeing Raptor. The gunship’s sensors were unable to interpret Rachel’s rotating hex barrier, but John could see the shots striking its curved surface, only for each dazzling blast to dissipate harmlessly.

“It’s working!” Tashana exclaimed, grinning at the brunette. “You actually did it!”

Rachel groaned with the effort, her hands trembling as she rebuilt hundreds of shattered hexagons every time they absorbed each beam. The barrier rotated as fast as she could spin it, always making sure that fresh tiles were facing the next salvo. Seconds ticked by as the Raptor roared towards Kythshara, the planet looming larger and larger until it encompassed the entire view from the canopy.

Beads of sweat appeared on Rachel’s brow and she wavered unsteadily as she withstood the onslaught.

“She can’t hold it much longer!” John warned Alyssa, poised to catch the Terran girl if needed.

“Just a few more seconds...” Alyssa muttered, darting a pensive glance at the system map.

They were now close enough to Kythshara for the inhibited sensors to finally locate the concealed planet, depicting Mael’nerak’s home as a huge Gaia-class world. Energy signatures had been detected and cities were marked on the surface, a bright sprinkling of lights revealing their location on the hemisphere shrouded under nightfall. Amidst all those signs of civilisation, a dazzling light blazed like a beacon, marking a source of massive power usage.

Rachel’s swaying became more pronounced, her arms drooping as if the effort to hold them up was beyond her flagging strength. She staggered back a step, then collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut, falling into John’s waiting embrace as he scooped her up in his arms.

“Shit!” Alyssa cursed, tugging the flight stick to the side to trigger a spin.

The Raptor began the turn, but the gun emplacement was already locked onto the evading ship. As soon as Rachel’s barrier collapsed, the next volley of beams struck the Raptor’s stern, obliterating the tail and blasting the engines. The gunship lurched violently, the inertia dampeners doing their best to limit the effect on the passengers, but it couldn’t prevent them from being knocked down by the impact.

Plunging into the upper atmosphere, the gunship spiralled out of control, flames and smoke trailing in its wake. Energy beams lanced down all around them, lighting up the cockpit with searing flashes as they continued their rapid descent.

“Right engine’s gone... left is badly damaged!” Dana called out, staring up at the damage report in shock, the gold glow fading from her eyes. “We’re down to 17% thrust!”

There was a lull in the barrage of beams, ending the frenetic light show and filling the cockpit with an ominous silence.

“Why isn’t it finishing us off?” Irillith asked in a hushed voice, her eyes like saucers as she waited for the kill shot.

“We must’ve cleared max range,” John replied, carefully lowering Rachel so she was resting on the deck.

“Rach! Dana blurted out, scrabbling across the deck to her unconscious girlfriend. “What the fuck happened?!”

Remembering that the redhead had been distracted with ship repairs at the time, John quickly explained, “She put herself under a huge strain trying to maintain that shield.”

Alyssa glanced back at them over her shoulder. “She’s okay, Sparks... just exhausted.”

John crouched by the co-pilot’s chair and looked up at Alyssa. “Can you still land the Raptor or has it taken too much damage?”

She grimaced and gave the scarlet damage status display a meaningful glance. “I don’t know... we’ve been shot to hell. Even with a wing gone I should still be able to bring us down just using the thrusters, but the Raptor’s handling like a brick!”

Alyssa fought valiantly to correct the death spiral, the retro-thrusters blazing away on the port side to bring the gunship back under control. Below them, Kythshara spun like a wheel, making anyone who looked at it feel dizzy. Gradually she managed to correct the rotation, but they were still dropping at an alarming rate.

Dana scrambled over to the console and started scrolling through the endless damage report. “Shit... this is bad. We lost the vertical stabiliser and most of the tail. 62% of our ailerons are gone and we lost all the retro-thrusters on the back third of the Raptor. The engine explosion must’ve also breached the cargo bay, because the rear of the gunship’s been depressurised.”

“We’re dropping like a rock,” Alyssa informed them. “We’ve got about three minutes before we make a very big crater on Kythshara!”

“Alright, what’re our options?” John said, turning to get everyone’s input as they regained their footing and quickly gathered around. “I’m thinking that if it’s impossible to land the Raptor, we should abandon ship and use the Paragon suits to fly down.”

“But what about Jade and Rachel?” Tashana asked, gesturing to their incapacitated crewmates.

“Rachel’s fine, she’s just exhausted,” Alyssa called back over her shoulder. “But I don’t know what happened to Jade.”

John gently stroked the Nymph’s dark hair. “Did you sense anything from her before she froze like this?”

“Nothing... nothing at all... but I was pretty distracted at the time,” the blonde admitted, darting a worried look at her fellow matriarch. “Jade doesn’t really get very emotional, so it’s possible she was in distress but I missed the warning signs.”

“It wasn’t an emotional reaction that caused this,” John said with certainty. “We need Rachel to perform a comprehensive health check on her and find out exactly what’s wrong. For now, let’s focus on getting down to Kythshara and neutralising whatever’s generating the Mists.”

Tashana cleared her throat and said, “I actually meant: how are we going to bring them with us if we do have to jump?”

“Alyssa and I can carry them using telekinetic nets,” John replied, having already anticipated that question. “They’ll be perfectly safe.”

“I haven’t done anything like that before,” Helene said with a worried frown. “Is it difficult to learn how to fly in this armour?”

John hesitated and couldn’t help chuckling at the absurdity of trying to teach someone how to operate a Paragon suit in the middle of their first orbital drop.

She blushed and looked embarrassed. “I’m sorry, I know I’m causing you more problems.”

“I wasn’t laughing at you, I promise... just this crazy situation,” John said, giving her an apologetic smile. “Don’t worry, I should be able to carry you down safely too.”

“Actually, we might not need to abandon ship...” Dana murmured, lost in thought.

“What do you mean?” he asked, looking at her quizzically.

“I can’t replace the missing thrusters, but we could rebuild the Raptor’s superstructure... or at least you can. If you strip whatever’s left of the rear armour, you could use that to make another wing. We’ll be horribly exposed in a firefight, but at least Alyssa can glide us down to the surface.”

John glanced around at the rest of the girls. “Any other ideas?” When they all shook their heads, he continued, “Okay, let’s do it.”

With their helmets securely in place, John accompanied Dana out of the cockpit and sealed the door behind them. They descended in the grav-tube and walked to the door leading into rear loading area.

“Brace yourself,” John warned Dana, activating the magnetic clamps on his boots and locking himself to the deck.

She slipped her arms around him and held on tight, locking her own boots to the metal deck plates. John held her close and activated the door, which slid open to a whistling roar. The buffeting was intense as the corridor decompressed, the air sucked out in a matter of seconds.

“You okay?” John asked glancing down at the redhead.

She nodded giving him a brave smile. “Yeah... I’m with you.”

De-clamping themselves from the deck, they walked through to see the ragged rear of the gunship. When the starboard engine had been destroyed, the explosion had ripped the loading ramp from the hull, leaving a gaping hole. There were also melted patches on the starboard side, where beams had blasted the Raptor’s flank at an oblique angle.

Warning icons flashed on the Paragon suits HUD, alerting John to the climbing temperature.

“Heat from re-entry burn,” Dana explained. “It’s friction from the Raptor hitting the atmosphere.”

“Cruising along at 2000 mph in a balmy 500 degrees... perfect psychic shaping conditions,” John remarked with a wry smile. “How do you want to do this?”

“Most of the armour protecting the cargo area is still intact. If you strip all the plating, you should have enough Crystal Alyssium to make a wing,” Dana replied in a rush. “It doesn’t need flaps and shit like that... just the basic shape should keep us stable, and give us enough lift for Alyssa to glide us down.”

“Right... but what about actually attaching it to the Raptor?” he asked, walking over to the starboard airlock. “It’ll be like trying to thread a needle in a wind tunnel.”

Dana gave him a rueful shrug. “I was hoping you might be able to think of something.”

“Right,” he muttered with a grimace, placing his hand on the DNA reader.

Opening the airlock, the howling roar intensified as did the external temperature. He edged near to the open portal and looked up at the jagged remains of the wing jutting from the fuselage. John knew that he’d have to create some kind of barrier that would shield a newly formed wing, to stop it being torn away with the wind until he’d attached it to the Raptor.

“Got it,” he said in a moment of inspiration.

Gesturing outwards he projected a telekinetic barrier, the translucent construct hard to spot against the pale blue sky. The wall of psychic force wasn’t constrained by the normal rules of physics, so he was able to position it thirty metres ahead without worrying that it was about to be ripped away. Abruptly the shrill scream of the wind cut out to a high-pitched whistle and the scorching temperature began to drop.

Reaching out with his mind to the Crystal Alyssium coating the rear half of the Raptor, John liquefied the metal and drew it away from the hull, then gathered the sparkling material off their starboard flank. He knew the dimensions of the gunship by heart, having helped repair the armour so many times over the last six months, and the metal obediently flowed into the shape he pictured.

“How’s that look?” he asked, rotating a fully formed wing for Dana to study.

“That looks perfect!” she said enthusiastically. “Stick it on!”

John stripped the armour from the damaged hull, then shaped the wing’s Crystal Alyssium a final time as he inserted it into the gunship and welded it in place. Satisfied that it was secure, he dismissed the force barrier and watched the wing for a few painfully-long seconds to look for any signs of structural weakness. To his relief, it seemed to be stable and safely secured in place.

“Awesome job!” Dana crowed patting him on the back.

Reaching out with his mind, he informed Alyssa, \*The new wing’s attached. You’re good to go.\*

He could feel her shock over their bond, the blonde stunned by his declaration.

\*Oh, ye of little faith,\* John teased his matriarch, as he followed Dana back to the grav-tube. \*If you thought I had no chance of repairing the Raptor, why didn’t you say anything?\*

\*It’s not that...\* she replied, her voice rapidly fluctuating from bewilderment to elation. \*You’re pushing your thoughts to me!\*

\*What do you mean?\* he asked, floating up in the blue anti-gravity field beside his Chief Engineer.

\*I’m not reading your mind... you’re actively using telepathy!\* Alyssa exclaimed sounding thrilled.

Now it was John’s turn to be surprised. \*I guess it was inevitable after merging with my guide. Contacting you that way felt instinctive.\*

They had to wait a few more seconds for the corridor to regain atmospheric pressure before Dana opened the cockpit door. She hurried over to Rachel and knelt beside her girlfriend to check the brunette was still comfortable.

\*Can you hear me like this too, Edraele?\* John asked his Maliri matriarch, projecting his thoughts to her the same way.

\*Loud and clear,\* she responded, sounding equally pleased for him. \*It is a little disconcerting, as I’m hearing your telepathic voice a split second after you think about what you’re about to say. I would wager a sizeable sum that Progenitors don’t encounter this problem, because they never grant their matriarch’s unfettered access to their mind.\*

\*Yeah, true. I’ll just stick to letting you read my thoughts for now; we can fine-tune any changes later.\*

\*Speaking of which, I’ve been listening to your predicament with mounting dread,\* Edraele continued, letting her worry seep into her voice. \*Is there anything I can do to help?\*

\*With Jade out of action, I’m going to have to rely on you for psychic energy,\* John replied, walking over to the co-pilot’s chair.

\*Of course. I’ll endeavour to supply you with enough energy so you shouldn’t need to use your own psychic reserves. If I start running low, I’ll give you plenty of advance warning.

\*Perfect, thanks, \* he replied. squatting down beside Alyssa. “How’s the Raptor handling now? Can you bring us down safely?”

“The new wing works fine; we should be able to glide down to the surface without any problems. I’ll just use the thrusters to help with manoeuvring instead of trying to keep us airborne,” she said, leaning over to tap an icon on the console. “I’m heading for this energy source. It’s generating more power than any reactor I’ve seen, so I figured it’s got to be connected to whatever’s generating the aura in the Mists.”

“Yeah, agreed,” John said, staring at the map of Kythshara’s surface. “It’s possible that the two are unrelated, but I highly doubt it. That’s an enormous energy signature... it has to be providing power to something important.”

Alyssa had eased the angle of their descent, weaving through the clouds as she brought the gunship closer to their target. The ancient cityscape should have been shrouded in darkness, but as the gunship approached, John could see thousands of twinkling lights illuminating the slender buildings.

“There’s still power in the city,” John said, staring out the cockpit window at the gleaming spires. “I’m amazed everything’s working after all this time.”

“Leaving the lights on for ten-thousand years... Mael’nerak must’ve racked up one hell of an electricity bill,” Dana said with a wry smile.

“That energy signature is coming from over on the far side of the city,” Alyssa said, glancing at the holographic map of the planet’s surface. “I’ll circle around and we can check it out.”

“I can’t believe we’re actually about to land on Kythshara,” Tashana murmured, gazing at the Maliri city in awe. “We’ll be the first living souls here for millennia.”

Alyssa banked the Raptor around in a smooth turn, circling the forest of tall spires that reached majestically towards the sky. The golden buildings were all in remarkably good condition, with no sign of derelict areas anywhere within the city limits. There was an eerie sense of familiarity to the ancient settlement, with the architecture similar in style to buildings John had previously seen in Melfalas, the capital on Valaden. Tree-lined boulevards bracketed city blocks that were regularly interspersed with verdant parks, in what seemed to be a well-planned and beautifully designed metropolis.

“It’s almost as if Mael’nerak and his thralls only left yesterday,” Tashana marvelled, peering down at the immaculately preserved city. “It’s like looking through a window into the past...”

John stood beside her, equally fascinated by the view of Kythshara’s capital. “How did it stay in such a pristine state? After all this time, I would’ve expected the city to be swamped in vegetation.”

“Maybe there are energy fields around the parks that keep them confined?” she suggested, giving him a helpless shrug.

“Wow! Take a look at that!” Irillith gasped, pointing towards a massive construction that dominated the skyline on the outskirts of the city.

Unlike the surrounding buildings that were coloured the traditional Maliri gold, this new one was a glistening white. It looked something like a pyramid, but with each of its four corners separated into quadrants and split down the middle. In the gaps between each sloped surface was an ascending series of pylons, the ziggurat illuminated by jagged bursts of purple lightning that arced up to the summit.

“What do you think, Sparks?” John asked the redhead, who had hurried over to look for herself. “Is that what we’re looking for? If we do land here and that’s not the device that controls the Mists, then we could be in big trouble.”

“I don’t know for sure,” she admitted, staring wide-eyed at the huge edifice. “You haven’t given me blueprints for anything exactly like that... but we have seen something very similar before”

“The Quantum Annihilator that Nexus was controlling on the moon,” Irillith murmured, nodding her agreement. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

John stared at their destination in disbelief. “You think Mael’nerak built a Quantum Annihilator here to defend Kythshara?”

“No... I don’t think it’s a weapon,” Dana hesitantly replied, leaning closer and squinting as she studied it. “If I had to guess, I’d say that Mael’nerak modified the energy capacitor system from a Quantum Annihilator to give this device all the power it needed. There’s something else about it though... it looks vaguely familiar... but I can’t figure out why.”

“We’re on the clock,” Alyssa warned them. “Should I land here or do we want to keep looking? Mael’nerak’s palace must be around here somewhere as well.”

“Well that’s the biggest energy source on the planet,” Dana said, jutting her chin towards the huge reactor. “If Mael’nerak did build a device that projects a psychic field over an entire star system, I bet it would need a massive amount of juice to keep it going. I reckon this must be it.”

As John gazed at the lightning seething across the top of the pyramid, his eyes felt heavy and unfocused. He rubbed at them for a moment and when he looked again, it was like gazing at the pyramid through a filter. Streams of energy were pouring out from the sunken dish at the centre, the chaotic eldritch maelstrom making him wince against the glare.

“John?” Tashana asked with concern. “Are you okay?”

He nodded and looked away, blinking to shake off the momentary blind spots. “That’s it alright. I could see psychic energy pouring off the top.”

Alyssa stopped staring at the device and turned to look at him. “Are you sure you want to handle this as a ground mission? Instead of trying to shut it down from the inside, we could just shoot it with the Raptor’s Tachyon beams.”

Tashana looked at her in horror. “But the explosion would take out the entire city!”

Before he could reply, John noticed Dana shaking her head. “You don’t think it would be that bad?” he asked his Chief Engineer.

“Oh it definitely would; the blast on the moon wiped out everything in at least a 30 mile radius,” the redhead blithely agreed. “I just doubt we can shoot it. Mael’nerak must’ve gone to a lot of effort to build something that huge and I’d be amazed if it’s not protected by immense shield projectors. They’d have to be super strong to shrug off an orbital barrage from a Progenitor dreadnought.”

“You’re right,” John said, before placing his hand on Alyssa’s shoulder. “Take us down. If Mael’nerak’s palace is nearby, we can’t risk it being obliterated in an explosion. The Nexus files showed that the lab was near the city... and that’s our best shot at bringing back Faye.”

“Alright, will do,” she agreed, turning her attention back to the holographic projection of the city. “I’ll bring us down on that street; it’s the closest I can get to the pyramid.”

“Perfect.”

She eased the flight stick to starboard and began a gentle turn as they descended, bringing the Raptor around for an easy landing on the long, straight road. When the Raptor flew over the outskirts of the city, they were at a much lower altitude this time, approaching at just over five-hundred feet. Being closer to the ground gave John and the girls a clear view of the elegant buildings and empty streets below... as well as the streams of tachyon bolts clawing into the night sky around them.

“Incoming fire!” John warned his pilot, as the cockpit was illuminated by staccato purple flashes.

“Where’s it all coming from?” Dana blurted out, her gaze sweeping over the ground for the source. “Are there automated turrets in the city?!”

“I spotted movement!” Tashana shouted in alarm, pointing out the window to their left. “There are troops in black armour down there... they looked like thralls!”

“That’s not possible!” Irillith protested, shocked at the possibility. “How could they have survived exposure to the Mists?!”

John rushed to the cockpit window and followed the streams of purple energy bolts down to their source. Sure enough, there were squads of black-armoured soldiers firing up at them using long-barrelled underslung guns.

“Could another Progenitor have beaten us here?” John asked, tensing up at the thought of confronting someone as strong as Larn’kelnar without having time to properly prepare for battle. “He must have found a way to shield his thralls from the side-effects.”

The Raptor’s shield status was darkening from green to orange as the gunship took sustained fire from the troops below.

Dana glanced at it with a worried frown. “We’re taking a lot of hits. Can’t you speed up or dodge some of this shit?”

Alyssa grimaced and shook her head. “I’m gliding in with one barely functional engine and half my thrusters missing. I can barely keep us in the air, let alone do any aerobatics!”

Dropping lower, Alyssa began her final approach to the pyramid. It loomed ahead of them, lighting up the darkness with dazzling bursts of electricity that crackled along the delicate pylons. The Raptor was getting hit from all directions now, the troops positioned along both sides of the street spraying tachyon bolts towards the damaged gunship.

“Shields out,” Dana warned her friend.

“Yeah, I know,” the blonde said through gritted teeth as energy bolts started to hit the hull. “You better get strapped in... this might be a rough landing!”

John checked that Jade was still buckled to her seat, then scooped up Rachel and placed her in the chair beside him. As Dana fastened her safety straps, the twins hurried to the seats opposite, sitting next to Helene.

“You doing okay, honey?” John asked the teal-hued mermaid as he buckled her in.

She nodded, her eyes sparkling as she looked up at him. “Are your missions always this exciting?”

“Things do tend to get a bit hectic,” he conceded, double-checking that she was secure.

There was a sudden thump from behind them and the Raptor juddered, the vibrations going up through their boots.

“What the hell was that?” John asked, hurrying over to the spare seat next to Dana.

“We stripped all the armour off the rear,” she explained, giving him a worried frown. “We’re totally exposed back there!”

Alyssa tapped a button on her console. “Shit... they hit the undercarriage. Brace yourselves, this is going to be a rough landing!”

She lifted the Raptor’s nose as they glided down to the street, then there was a horrible grinding as the gunship’s belly skidded along the road’s surface. The tough metal hull ploughed a furrow through the ancient Maliri infrastructure, until they were brought to a lurching halt in a shower of dirt and chunks of fractured concrete.

The crew sat in dazed silence for a moment as they recovered from the impact, then John and the girls sprang into action, knowing speed was of the essence. They had been brought down in a war zone and it was only a matter of time before they were overrun by hostile forces.

“Helene, stay with Rachel and Jade,” John said firmly as he headed for the cockpit door behind the twins. “We’re going to defend the crash site. We’ll be back for you as soon as it’s clear.”

“Come home safe with a full net,” she replied earnestly. When Helene saw his look of surprise, she blushed and explained, “It’s what we used to say to the fishermen when they left Neptra village.”

“I will,” he said, waving goodbye.

Alyssa caught up to John as he reached the grav-tube and they stepped into it together. \*We need to keep an eye on the twins,\* she warned him. \*You remember how Tashana reacted when she met your dad... well they were just as bloodthirsty against Larn’kelnar’s thralls.\*

\*We could be in serious trouble if there’s a Progenitor with them.\*

\*How do you want to handle it?\* the blonde asked, looking as worried as he felt. \*Wearing him down would be a bad idea without Jade. She’s got huge energy reserves, but I don’t want to tap into her at the moment, not when she’s like that.\*

\*Yeah, we shouldn’t disturb her until Rachel’s given her a full physical,\* he agreed. \*If we do get attacked by a Progenitor, let’s just hit him with everything we’ve got right out of the gate. No holding back from any of us.\*

\*I almost feel sorry for the poor bastard,\* Alyssa said with a wicked grin.

The front of the Raptor was buried in a pile of dirt and broken road, so they turned right to follow the rest of the girls into the rear cargo area. It had only been a few minutes since John was last there, but the floor and walls had been devastated by gunfire from the thrall troops, with dozens of scorched holes melted through the deckplates.

“I’m not seeing much on infra-red,” Dana said, peering out into the gloom beyond. “There’s movement, but it’s not clear at all. Maybe they’re using upgraded armour that masks their heat signatures?”

“It’s not like Progenitors to innovate,” John said dubiously.

“I’ll check out a thrall suit after the battle to make sure,” she said, looking excited by the prospect.

“Fan out, ladies and we’ll cover all the angles of attack,” John ordered his team. “I’ll stay here with Dana. I want the twins on either flank, and Alyssa can watch the pyramid reactor for reinforcements. The troops attacking along our flight path are already on high alert, but we might get attacked from any direction.”

The girls acknowledged his orders with a nod, then spread out to set up a defensive perimeter.

\*I’ll watch Tashana. Let me know if Irillith goes on a rampage,\* he requested, as Alyssa shouldered her rifle and floated up into the air, her body shrouded in a soft white glow. \*Hey, where are you off to?\*

\*I’m just getting us a bit more firepower,\* Alyssa explained, landing on the Raptor’s hull.

“Here they come!” Dana warned, dropping to her knee and aiming out into the night. “Switch to mag-view, you can’t miss ‘em!”

John activated the enhanced view with his optical HUD and saw hundreds of armoured figures shining brightly against the darkness. He raised his rifle and aimed the crosshairs at centre-mass, steadying his breathing to take the long shot. The targeting reticle measured the distance to target and activated auto-zoom, making the thrall appear larger as she approached. John’s crosshairs swept over her breastplate, the form-fitting thrall armour making the woman’s gender abundantly clear.

His finger touched the trigger and John knew that the gentlest squeeze would bring a brutal death to that thrall.

He heard the bark of Dana’s underslung railgun, the heavy slug rocketing out across the deserted city. There was a faint thrumming sound far off in the distance as the round was harmlessly deflected by a thrall’s personal shield.

“Shit...” she muttered under her breath, sounding embarrassed. A second later, she broadcast a message to the team, her image appearing on his HUD. “Don’t forget they’re shielded guys!”

To John’s left and right, blue tachyon bolts set the night ablaze as the Maliri twins opened up on the incoming thralls.

Tashana’s twin pistols strafed fire in two directions, hammering multiple squads and savaging their shields. “Don’t worry, we didn’t forget,” the Maliri said with a reassuring smile. Her face broke into a teasing grin as she added, “I can’t imagine anyone letting something so important slip her mind.”

Irillith’s face appeared alongside her sister, violet eyes sparkling with amusement. “That was the main reason you built us a double-barrelled Tachyon rifle wasn’t it? How could we possible forget after you showed such diligence to our mission?”

“Yeah, yeah... you two are hilarious,” Dana snorted, her cheeks reddening at their teasing.

There was a pulsing flash of light that illuminated her beautiful face, quickly followed by another angry bark from the railgun. Dana’s embarrassment shifted to professional pride and she nodded in satisfaction.

“Incoming thralls from the pyramid,” Alyssa informed them.

“Do you need help?” Tashana asked, glancing behind her.

“Nah, I’ve got this,” the blonde nonchalantly replied.

The high-pitched scream of a Tachyon Cannon tore through the night’s sky, followed a moment later by a second in close proximity. Their multiple barrels spat an unending stream of tachyon bolts towards the approaching thralls, hammering shields and blasting glowing holes through armour.

“Hey!” Dana protested, turning to look up at the floating support weapons. “You swiped the Raptor’s guns!”

“Yep,” Alyssa agreed. “It’s not like we can use them on the gunship at the moment.”

The two Tachyon cannons were still connected to the Raptor by snaking power-couplings, but the long-barrelled weapons were floating clear of their weapon turrets now. They moved as if possessed of their own malevolent will, making rapid shifts to track new targets and cut them down.

\*The twins seem fine,\* Alyssa said, before a lengthy pause. \*But you don’t. What’s wrong, John?\*

His crosshairs was still lingering over the thrall’s chest as she jogged towards the Raptor. The woman was three-hundred-metres away, but was quickly closing the distance on their position along with the rest of her squad.

\*I can’t do it...\* he said, his finger stubbornly refusing to clamp down on the trigger. \*She’s his victim... they all are.\*

\*You can’t think that way, handsome,\* Alyssa said, her voice gentle and sympathetic. \*That woman’s a stone-cold killer. She wouldn’t hesitate for a second to gun down Sparks, or Helene, or any one of us.\*

\*But if we can take out the Progenitor, we could save them... save all of them,\* John said, flinching as the twins opened up with their railguns, blasting gaping holes through exposed thralls.

\*That’s true... but until we nail that bastard, all his thralls are our deadly enemies. It’s kill or be killed with every thrall we encounter, which is why it’s so important we assassinate each Progenitor before they can drag us into a bloody war of attrition with their armies. I’m sorry, John, that’s just the way it has to be.\*

John stared at the thrall in his crosshairs, wondering what had led her up to this point. Was she a young woman like Kali Loraleth? An innocent that hadn’t chosen this fight, but was lured into it by a Progenitor’s irresistible allure.

\*Picturing Kali’s face on her isn’t helping,\* Alyssa said with a wry smile.

\*I know what you’re saying is true... it just feels fundamentally wrong,\* John said sadly.

“What the fuck?!”

John glanced to his side at Dana, who was staring in open-mouthed astonishment into the distance.

“What is it, Sparks?” he asked the stunned redhead.

“I cut that thrall in half and she’s still coming after me!” Dana explained, pointing to their rear. “See for yourself... 250 metres in that direction.”

He aimed his Tachyon rifle at her target and was just as shocked to see the thrall dragging her disembowelled torso towards their position. A dozen metres behind her, two severed legs twitched erratically, a trail of brightly glowing blood the only thing connecting them to what was left of the thrall.

John frowned in confusion, then zoomed in closer to maximum magnification. The glowing blood turned out to be a trail of small objects, but he couldn’t understand why internal organs would be highlighted on mag-view... unless they were made of metal.

“It’s a robot!” he exclaimed, sagging with relief. “That’s why they weren’t affected by the Mists!”

Swinging his rifle around, he took careful aim at the thrall who had put him in such a moral quandary. He had no hesitation about squeezing the trigger this time, firing a stream of azure energy bolts towards the jogging automaton. The shields flared brightly as they absorbed the first dozen bolts, but the pulsed beams from the Tachyon rifle were relentless and soon the personal field collapsed. John switched to the railgun and after readjusting his aim, fired a 10mm slug at the thrall’s arm.

The slug hit the black suit of armour in the bicep, completely severing the limb with the overwhelming force of the impact. Knocked sprawling backwards, the thrall staggered to her feet, with chunks of metal cascading down from what should’ve been a bloody wound.

“A robot? Really?!” Dana asked, looking at him with a euphoric mixture of hope and joy. “That must mean Mael’nerak left an AI running this place! That’s why the city was so squeaky clean! John... if we can study it, we could bring back Faye!”

He laughed too, sharing her happiness. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, honey. We still have to shut down whatever’s generating the Mists, then dismantle or deactivate all these robot troops. We’ll also have to disable the defence grid around Kythshara so the girls can join us with the Invictus.

“All just a mere technicality,” she said with an optimistic grin.

They turned their attention back to the army of robots and John had no compunction about destroying them. “I’ll strip the shields, you finish them off,” he suggested to Dana. “That’ll save us having to switch gun barrels for each one.”

“Good idea,” she said, aiming at the black-clad figure that John was strafing with blue energy bolts.

Working as a pair was much faster, with John quickly overloading their shields and leaving the synthetic troops vulnerable to a slug from Dana’s railgun.

“Where do you think they got all this armour?” she asked after finishing off a flailing robot. “Did Mael’nerak have it made for a robot army, or did the AI loot a barracks for spare suits?”

“He probably had it specifically made for them,” John said after giving her question some thought. He jerked a thumb towards the lightning-shrouded pyramid behind them. “You don’t build something like that on a whim. Mael’nerak must have carefully planned out these defensive measures, then spent months, if not years, building them all.”

“And left a super-smart AI in place to oversee it all?” Dana said with a grin.

“Anything’s possible,” he agreed, before glancing her way and made eye-contact. “I’m not trying to rain on your parade, but I don’t want you to get your hopes up and be disappointed. Nexus went completely haywire after being left alone for thousands of years. If there is an AI here, who knows what kind of state it’s in.”

“Nexus only turned homicidal because T-Fed scientists took him apart, then fucked up putting him back together again. Any AI on Kythshara has been completely undisturbed since Mael’nerak left.”

“Alright, fair point,” he admitted, strafing energy bolts over an approaching squad. Activating the Paragon suit’s comms interface, he continued, “How are the rest of you doing? Having any trouble?”

“Nothing’s attacked from the flanks yet,” Irillith replied. “We’ve been assisting you and Dana because Alyssa clearly doesn’t need our help.”

\*How’s it looking back there, beautiful?\* John asked the blonde.

\*No problems so far, but we’re fighting over open ground with a massive range and firepower advantage,\* the blonde readily admitted. \*Rachel just woke up by the way. She seems fine, just very tired.\*

\*Thanks for letting me know. I’ll go in and see her when we’ve finished off these robots.\*

The steady waves of robotic soldiers started to ease as they crashed against the impenetrable line of defenders surrounding the Raptor. Soon there were high piles of mangled corpses strewn over the battlefield, with fragments of shattered armour carpeting the ground.

“The twins have volunteered to be on sentry duty while we check on Rachel,” Alyssa said, stepping off the Raptor’s broken fuselage and floating down to land beside John. “Are you joining us, Sparks?”

“Yeah of course!” she exclaimed, ejecting a spent magazine and slotting in a new one.