Three Square Meals Ch. 142 – Part 1

Tashana bounced up and down, her eyes alight with excitement. “Valada must have built a secret bunker under the palace!”

“It certainly looks like it,” John agreed, squinting in the direction of the study. “The lift shaft starts from a room concealed within the cavity wall.”

“Let’s go!” the Maliri archaeologist exclaimed, turning on her heel to rush to the study.

John caught her hand and pulled her back. “Hold on a second. I know you’re excited but we need to be careful; Valada might have rigged all sorts of traps to stop anyone from breaking into her secret bunker... if that really is what’s down there.”

She paused and gave him a bashful smile. “You’re right. We should wear Paragon armour while we explore.”

“Definitely,” he agreed, before glancing at their captivated audience. “Before we go spelunking, there’s one last order of business we need to conclude with our guests. I want to know who won the quiz!”

Alyssa rose to her feet and Rachel handed her a tablet. “We’ve tallied up the results and there was a clear winner for each contest. For the matriarchs, with an astonishing 48 out of 50 correct answers, the winner was... Faranise Eshenestria!”

The young Maliri looked thrilled, her face lighting up in anticipation.

“Do you want to tell her what she won?” the blonde asked her Maliri counterpart.

“Congratulations, Faranise,” Edraele said with a warm smile, beckoning her to join them. “Your prize is a state visit from Lord Baen’thelas to your homeworld. This will be his first public appearance as official leader of the Maliri, so we want to broadcast the event across the entire Protectorate!”

Faranise gasped in astonishment, her eyes locking with John as she beamed with joy. She ran into his open arms and let out an elated laugh as he twirled her around.

John set the overjoyed young woman back on her feet and exclaimed, “Congratulations, honey! I can’t wait to see your home.”

“I can’t believe it!” she gushed. “There’s so much I need to plan to make this perfect!”

“Don’t worry, we’ll give you plenty of assistance,” Edraele said, giving her a congratulatory hug.

The rest of the matriarchs were doing their best to hide their disappointment with varying degrees of success.

Edraele turned and gave the despondent Maliri a look of sympathy. “There’s no need to look so heartbroken. The trip to Eshenestria will be the first of many official state visits that Baen’thelas will be making.”

“Eventually, I’d like to visit all of your homeworlds,” John explained, smiling as he saw the matriarchs perk up at this announcement. “I want to see for myself where each of you grew up and spend that time really getting to know you.”

The atmosphere in the dining room changed in an instant, with all of the matriarchs now picturing themselves showing Baen’thelas their homes and introducing him to their people.

Putting his arm around Faranise’s shoulders in a sideways hug, John glanced at Alyssa. “So who won the Lioness contest?”

“Well... first of all, the prize for the Lionesses is a date with you... where the winner gets to plan out your day together. I volunteered to sit this one out, as did Rachel and Sparks.”

“Really?” John asked, looking at the trio in surprise.

Alyssa brushed his hand with her fingertips. “We had our special evening in the Lagoon.”

“And we had that amazing picnic together on Arcadia,” Rachel replied with a fond smile.

John raised an eyebrow when he saw Dana’s pout.

“Blondie said I was banned!” she protested indignantly. “She reckons I’ve been hogging too much of your time already!”

“That’s probably true, Sparks,” John admitted, giving her a conciliatory smile. “I’m sorry you missed out on a chance at a date. We’ll still be working together a lot on the tech upgrades, but keeping you topped up won’t exactly be romantic.”

She broke into a delighted grin. “Yeah, that’s a real shame. It was totally the romance I was missing.”

Alyssa rolled her eyes at her friend. “It wouldn’t have made any difference if I had let you join in. The lady in question was highly motivated to win.” She turned to meet the look of eager anticipation from a pair of dark-brown eyes. “Congratulations, Sakura... you deserved this.”

The former assassin padded across the dining room and into John’s arms. “I wasn’t taking any chances,” she admitted with a playful smile. “I probably should apologise to the matriarchs for interrogating them.”

John brushed her jet-black hair away from her lovely face, then cupped the back of her head and gave the Asian girl a tender kiss. “Alyssa’s right, you really do deserve this. I can’t wait to spend some time alone with you.”

“I hoped you’d win. We all owe you a huge debt of gratitude for the way you supported John when he needed you the most,” Edraele said earnestly, leaning in to kiss Sakura on the cheek. She stepped back from the blushing girl and smiled wistfully at her wards. “Now that we have our winners, I’m afraid that’s our cue to leave, ladies. Baen’thelas and the Lionesses will be scouring the palace for artefacts left behind by Valada, and for safety reasons, the rest of us will be returning to Genthalas.”

The matriarchs reluctantly rose from their seats and each thanked their hosts for the wonderful party before departing from the dining room. Edraele was the last to leave and as John finished saying his goodbyes to the noblewomen, he reached out to clasp the Maliri Queen’s hand.

“The last few days have been amazing, Edraele,” he said sincerely. “Thank you for going for making such an incredible effort to make us all feel at home.”

“Did it work?” she asked, turning to face him with an affectionate smile.

“It really did. I’ve been roaming among the stars for years now, and it’s just not the same as having a planet you can call your own. I felt like I could actually settle down here with you and the girls... and that’s not something I’ve been fortunate enough to experience before.”

“That’s all I wanted,” she said softly, giving him a tender kiss. “To give you a glimpse of the future you could have with all of us... when you’re finally free from your duties and obligations.”

“It was a lovely vision. Definitely something worth striving for,” John agreed, giving her a grateful hug. “I’ll see you later this evening, honey. Have a safe flight back to Genthalas.”

“I’ll look forward to your return, my Lord,” Edraele said, then waved goodbye to the girls and glided away. Her faithful bodyguard was waiting at the doorway and Luna fell into step beside her as they left the room.

There were several servants clearing up after breakfast and John spotted the majordomo watching over proceedings. “Good morning, Yelamha,” he greeted the senior servant. “We’re planning on investigating what might be a concealed facility underneath the palace. Please could you gather the staff and have them accompany us to the Invictus; I’d like to make sure you’re all safe in case we accidentally trigger any defences.”

She acknowledged his order with a respectful bow. “Of course, John. We’ll join you immediately.”

“Thanks,” John said before turning to his Lionesses, who were all ready to depart. “Alright, let’s head back to the Invictus.”

“Everyone’s curious to see what’s under the palace,” Alyssa informed him, as they took the gilded steps down to the subterranean passage that led to the hangar. “Who do you want to take with us?”

The way Alyssa framed the question made it quite clear that she would be one of the girls accompanying him.

“There won’t be enough room in the elevator to bring the whole team,” he replied, thinking about the skills they might require. “We’ll definitely need Tashana as she’s the most familiar with ancient Maliri facilities. If there is a secret bunker down there, we should try to avoid using brute force to break in; I don’t want to accidentally destroy anything useful inside. That means we’ll need Dana and Irillith to crack any defences... and we should probably take Rachel with us as well, just in case anyone gets hurt.”

There were mild groans of disappointment from those girls that John hadn’t mentioned.

“The rest of you can have a look around as soon as we’re sure it’s safe,” he said, giving them a reassuring smile.

When they reached the hangar housing the Invictus, the battlecruiser’s airlock door was already open. Daphne was waiting for them outside and greeted the returning crew with a friendly wave.

“Hey, Daph,” Dana said, giving the synthetic girl a quick hug as she reached the airlock. “I hope your boys got a good rest, we’ve got a shitload of work to do!”

“They’ll be delighted to hear that, Dana,” the automaton replied, sounding greatly relieved. “I’ve received 22784 queries from the maintenance robots asking if you were back at the Invictus yet.”

She laughed and patted Daphne on the shoulder. “It won’t be long before they start begging you for some time off. You already know I’m planning a massive refit for the Invictus, but we also need to build a few dozen Paragon suits.” The redhead glanced at John and added, “I’m guessing you want to keep the matriarchs as safe as possible, right?”

He nodded in confirmation. “Definitely. We’ll be heading to Genthalas this evening, so we can restock on all the materials we need for Crystal Alyssium.”

“There’s no need to restock, father,” Daphne interjected, accompanying John through the airlock. “Maliri freighters have delivered substantial quantities of raw materials over the past three days. The cargo bay is now fully loaded with ore crates.”

“That’s great news,” John said, entering the Secondary Hangar with the synthetic girl at his side. \*Thanks, Edraele. That was good thinking.\*

\*I thought it prudent to resupply the Invictus while you were preoccupied with the matriarchs. Based on your past history, there was a very high likelihood that you’d need to depart in a hurry to deal with yet another emergency.\*

\*Yeah, that’s usually the way it goes,\* he conceded with a wry smile.

“You’re in charge until we get back, Captain Fernandez,” John said to Calara. “Please can you make the palace staff feel at home until it’s safe for them to return.”

“Of course. We’ll be glad to return their hospitality,” the Latina replied, with the rest of the girls echoing their agreement.

She leaned in to give him a kiss. “Good luck! I hope you find something useful.”

“Yeah, me too,” he agreed, knowing how much was riding on them finding Mael’nerak’s hyper-warp gate to secure Larn’kelnar’s fleets.

John followed Dana into the express grav-tubes and soared up through the decks to the Armoury. The twins had already donned suits of Paragon armour and were now stepping away from the armour-equipping frames to retrieve their guns from the weapon racks. With the quiet hum of robotic arms sliding Crystal Alyssium plates into place, John, Alyssa, Dana, and Rachel were soon similarly attired and reaching for their own weapons.

By the time they returned to the hangar, wide-eyed Maliri servants were being welcomed aboard the Invictus by Calara and the rest of the girls. They waved him goodbye as John set off towards Saelihn Immanthe and whatever secrets might lay hidden beneath its ancient foundations.

“So how do we get in there?” Dana asked, when they returned to the study.

Rachel studied the imposing fireplace that dominated the northern wall. “I believe tradition dictates that we’re supposed to pull a candlestick on the mantelpiece? Or press a hidden button on the engravings?”

“No candlesticks... and no engravings,” Alyssa said, turning to frown at the twins. “This isn’t fair. Your great-grandmother isn’t playing by the secret door rules!”

Irillith rolled her eyes at their banter. “John, can you see the outline for a doorway?”

“It’s right here,” he replied, his eyes glowing with a deep blue light as he traced the edges with an armoured fingertip. John pointed to a nondescript section of the wall that was a little lower than his head height. “I can also see some kind of mechanism off to the side...”

“Maybe it’s a retinal scanner? It’s perfectly positioned for it,” Dana suggested, drawing a direct line from her eye-level to the centre of the device. “Can you see any cabling leading from there? We might be able to find the switch that activates the scanner.”

John squinted at the wall, then followed an embedded cable around to a window overlooking the grounds. The cabling snaked up the golden frame to the top, ending beneath an engraved cornice. “It stops right here.”

Tashana had eagerly followed his progress and she stood on tip-toe to firmly press the cornice. “Allow me!”

It sank into the wall with a satisfying click, then a panel slid back beside the concealed door.

“Nice,” John said with a look of surprise. “How did you know how to activate it?”

“I’m guessing that this leads to Valada’s panic room,” the Maliri archaeologist replied as they walked back to the doorway. “If she built this to survive a planetary bombardment by a Progenitor, she’d need to be able to access it quickly.”

Dana leaned over to study the gleaming golden panel, while being careful to avoid triggering the retinal scanner. “Do you want me to try hotwiring this thing? I might be able to bypass the identification signal.”

Irillith quickly shook her head. “Let me try. If I can locate the data repository, I can use Valada’s personal records to replicate her retinal scan and grant us full access.”

 “Go for it,” Dana replied, stepping out of the way.

With a violet light blazing in her eyes, the Maliri hacker studied the featureless wall before her. Now that she knew where to look, Irillith was able to clearly make out the digital access point integrated into the retinal scanner and the data stream that trailed away from view. She took a deep breath and focused her will inwards, peeling away her spirit form and fully immersing herself in the Cyber-Realm.

The study lit up with virulent colours, as data streams from Saelihn Immanthe’s open network flowed overhead. A data probe launched across those feeds was unable to locate the retinal scanner, confirming Irillith’s suspicions that it was located on an isolated subnet. She approached the access port and hijacked the data stream, letting herself be drawn into this completely new network.

As the momentary disorientation faded, her eyes snapped open and Irillith found herself hovering a few inches above a glimmering golden platform. Data paths stretched away into the distance from the starting node, but deeper access to the network was blocked by a translucent barrier. She immediately recognised the obstacle, despite it being ancient in design, as it shared the same rudimentary traits as the firewalls used throughout the Maliri Protectorate.

Irillith prepared a logic probe and began interrogating the barrier, searching for weaknesses that she could exploit to slip into the network undetected. She began her patient vigil, but it only took a few moments for the probe to emit a satisfying chime. The device had found a redundancy loop in the code, which could be triggered to create an error that would momentarily deactivate the barrier. The hacker shook her head at the sloppy coding, having anticipated that breaking through the firewall would be a long and arduous process.

She triggered the error loop and the barrier flickered for a second before it vanished, granting her uninhibited access to the network. Irillith glided ahead, sailing smoothly across the data platform, then launched a score of probes to search for the archive containing the optical records for the scanner. Her programs sailed out into the Cyber-realm, following streams of data to the brightly lit nodes that illuminated the deeper reaches of the network.

With her eyes locked on her status display, Irillith watched as the team of digital spies began to search for their quarry. The structure of the network was fairly rudimentary, with a dozen interconnected nodes arrayed in a simple subnet. Her probes were careful to avoid detection as they tried to locate the security archive and only scanned the surface index of any repositories they found. One of the probes soon reported success and emitted a tracking signal that led directly into the centre of the network.

Irillith followed that path, pleased at how quickly she was making progress. She felt a momentary flicker of doubt, that perhaps this was all just a bit too easy... but repeated status checks with her probes showed no signs of any internal defences. Soaring above the glowing paths that connected the nodes, she noticed that the network shared many similarities with Maliri training simulations, being simple and straightforward in design. Judging by the lack of sophistication, she concluded that this golden network must have been built in the years after Mael’nerak had abandoned Valada, programmed by one of the Maliri he had left behind.

Upon reaching the highlighted data repository, Irillith delved deeper into the security archive to find the optical records. She located the relevant file and found Valada’s iris pattern, then transmitted that data to the retinal scanner, which immediately acknowledged her identity. Smiling in satisfaction that the whole process had been so painless, Irillith was about to exit the archive when she noticed an intriguing file. She accessed the data log and found thousands of records tracking Valada’s visits to the facility; the entries started 10,097 years ago and spanned the next two centuries.

Eager to share her discoveries, Irillith withdrew from the archive, then let out a startled cry as her levitation abruptly cut out and she stumbled to the floor. Blinking in surprise, she tried to ascend once again, but remained standing on the golden platform. A quick check of her passive subroutines showed that the network had established an artificial gravity, the environmental constraint overriding her ability to fly. As she was reeling from that shocking revelation, Irillith felt an unsettling sensation of dread, the oppressive sensation akin to being confined against her will in a tiny room.

Her surroundings suddenly began to glitch, the visual data flickering and melting away. It seemed like the entire network was being plunged into a nightmare, as the gleaming golden platforms were revealed to actually be sinister black ledges, the bright lights replaced by a ghastly crimson pall. It was a setting she knew all too well, having encountered a Progenitor network on Larn’kelnar’s dreadnought.

Irillith stumbled backwards across the platform, and summoned a sphere of hexagons into existence around her, the protective field crackling with arcs of electricity. She activated her defences just in time, as a pair of massive onyx sentinels emerged from the gloom, rising higher until they towered above her. Panels had slid back to expose huge gun barrels, the formidable looking weapons tracking her as she turned and fled.

\*What the hell’s going on?!\* Alyssa demanded, her voice edged with worry. \*Are you okay?\*

There was a dull boom and a purple beam lanced out of the darkness to obliterate the platform behind Irillith. Jagged fragments exploded outwards and her hex-shield was pounded by a dozen heavy impacts, the hexagons shattering with the force of each blow. She quickly reinforced her glowing barrier then ran for her life, weaving from side to side to avoid being hit.

\*It was a trap!\* Irillith cried out in alarm. \*I’m trying to get out!\*

Virulent purple streams lanced past on either side of her as she sprinted back down the pathway, the height differential between herself and the sentinels making her a hard target to hit. The downside was that those blasts kept striking the data path, blowing huge holes in the connecting ribbon that she was forced to leap across to keep going. She reached the next platform and a new barrier materialised into existence, blocking her escape route. Irillith slammed into the security gate and darted a fearful glance over her shoulder, to see the Sentinels bearing down on her current position.

The Maliri hacker looked up at the imposing obstacle and realised that it was a mirror of the bewilderingly complex node wall she’d encountered on Larn’kelnar’s dreadnought. Irillith saw a flickering hex-shield protecting the portal and one missing hexagon that shifted in the blink of an eye to another point on the barrier. With no need to covertly breach the code this time, she ordered her double-pronged data probe to burrow its way to the access subroutine she’d previously exploited, and prayed that this barrier had the same vulnerability.

A blast from a sentinel forced Irillith to leap to one side, the column of energy slamming into the hex-shield behind her. She glanced back at the wall, hoping that the sentinel might have blasted a hole in it, but the formidable shield absorbed the hit without buckling. Irillith had to dodge another shot from the second sentinel, scrabbling to safety as a deep boom echoed around the Cyber-realm. The probe chimed in triumph and the wall flickered for a second before dissipating, letting her dart across the platform towards the final data path.

Irillith renewed her frantic escape, running as fast as she could towards the starting platform. The firewall had reformed and now blocked her exit from the network, forcing Irillith to summon another logic probe to activate the backdoor trigger. It rushed ahead of her to begin interrogating the firewall, searching through the code for the same redundancy loop. As she caught up with the device, it reported an almost instantaneous failure, unable to make any progress on the task it had been assigned.

Irillith took one look at the code it had encountered and felt a shiver of fear run down her spine. The simplistic code had disappeared, just like the golden platforms that existed there when she first entered this network. In its place was staggeringly complex three-dimensional subroutines, and she knew from frustrated experience just how difficult it was to even interpret that code, let alone find a vulnerability she could exploit. Instead of just one rotating hex-barrier protecting the firewall there were a dozen, each stacked layer of defences rotating in opposite directions.

\*Are you in trouble? Do you need more power?\* Alyssa asked, her voice now calm and steady.

Before Irillith could answer, she was knocked sprawling as her shield took a direct hit, the dome bowing inwards as it struggled to contain the energy of that deadly blast. With her heart hammering in her chest, she poured huge amounts of power into her hex-shield, desperately reinforcing hexagons that were cracking under the strain. Abruptly the beam cut out and she staggered to her feet, then was forced to leap aside to narrowly avoid a blast from the second sentinel.

\*Focus, Irillith!\* Alyssa barked at the terrified hacker. \*Do you need more power?\*

Irillith darted a frightened glance at the probe’s status panel and was dismayed to see that it was totally overwhelmed by the radically advanced code.

\*Yes! Give me everything you can!\* she gasped in desperation.

Irillith felt her connection to Alyssa being thrown wide open, then the usual flow of energy to her matriarch abruptly reversed. Eldritch power coursed down that link like a lightning strike, the sizzling influx of energy electrifying every sinew of her body. The Maliri let out a strangled shriek, her senses overloaded with an intoxicating surge of euphoria that swept through her mind.

Arcs of power crackled down her body and Irillith laughed in delight as she rose into the air, runic glyphs overwriting the environmental constraints that had anchored her to the ground. She gestured towards the barrier and a dazzling bolt blasted out from her fingertip to strike the rotating hex-shields. Electricity crawled across the outer barrier, then surged through the gap in the hexagons, like a ferret invading a rabbit warren. It ripped through layer after layer, obliterating each one in succession until all of the hex shields had been burn out. The barrier disintegrated in a dazzling explosion of violet motes, leaving nothing impeding Itillith’s exit from the network.

There was movement in her peripheral vision as two more sentinels closed on the platform from the flanks. Irillith knew that she should flee while she could, but she was giddy with power, and felt an overwhelming urge to strike back at the sentinels that had hounded every step of her retreat from the network. Another blast struck her shield, but this time the barrier didn’t waver, the hexagons sparking in fury as they repelled the attack.

“It’s my turn now...” she growled, her lip curling into a wicked smile.

With electricity crackling over her fingertips, she thrust her hands towards the closest sentinel and unleashed a massive bolt of lightning, the jagged stroke hitting it dead centre. Dancing arcs spread out across it’s hulking frame, making its targeting lights flicker wildly. Acrid smoke poured from its cracked frame in grey pixelated blocks, then the sentinel emitted an anguished whine as it tilted over. The security program crashed through the data pathway between the platforms, then sank out of sight into the murky gloom below.

Irillith grinned in triumph, then turned her vengeful gaze on the other three sentinels. They paused in their pursuit as if shocked by her devastating assault on their cohort, then began a hasty retreat, reversing course and descending into the darkness that had concealed them. With her way clear, Irillith nodded in satisfaction and stepped back through the gateway to emerge from the secret subnet. She let her spirit form be drawn back to her body, then inhaled deeply as the reunification was complete.

“Are you alright?” John asked with concern.

She nodded, opening her eyes to look up at him with excitement and relief. “It was a trap, but I managed to fight my way out!”

The Maliri hacker quickly explained everything that had transpired in the Cyber-realm, and her elation at managing to defeat one of the Progenitor Sentinels.

John patted her on the shoulder. “You did an incredible job, well done.”

“Thanks!” Irillith gushed, before hugging Alyssa. “I couldn’t have done it without you! Holding that much power was such a rush!”

“I could feel how frightened you were when the sentinels attacked. I’m just glad you weren’t hurt,” the blonde replied, returning her smile.

Irillith glanced at the secret doorway which was now wide open. “After I triggered the door mechanism, I found the archived entry logs. The records showed that Valada entered here thousands of times, so there must be something very important down there.”

“Awesome!” Dana said with a grin. “Hopefully there’s a map to Kythshara!”

“Shall we get started?” Tashana asked impatiently, peering into the concealed room beyond.

John glanced at Rachel, then frowned at her pensive expression. “You’re very quiet. What’s the matter?”

The brunette studied Irillith for a moment. “Something about this doesn’t add up. You said that breaking into the subnet was easy, but when you triggered the sentinel ambush, trying to hack the barriers blocking your escape was nearly impossible?”

The hacker nodded. “That’s right. The first barrier was identical to the one I deactivated on Larn’kelnar’s dreadnought and the last one was probably built be Mael’nerak himself. The code was incredibly complex and very similar to Faye’s core programming. If Alyssa hadn’t charged me up with power, I never would’ve been able to break out of there.”

“But why wasn’t the retinal scanner data protected by one of the most sophisticated barriers?” Rachel asked, before pointing to the open doorway. “Which then makes me wonder why you were allowed to open the door and why is it still open? You triggered an alarm; surely that should’ve locked down the facility?”

Irillith froze, a look of consternation on her face. “Shit!”

“What’s wrong?” John asked the deflating Maliri.

“Rachel’s right, this wasn’t just a simple trap designed to kill invaders,” Irillith glumly admitted. “The only reason I can think of for escalating the complexity of the defences, is if they were testing my abilities and prepare measures to counter them. Now I think about it, the sentinels missed with 90% of their shots; they must’ve just been toying with me.”

“You make it sound like they’re thinking for themselves,” Dana said, looking at her curiously. “The sentinels protecting the Invictus aren’t self-aware are they?”

Irillith hesitated, then shook her head. “I... don’t think so. I’ve reviewed their code and it’s incredibly advanced, but nowhere near the complexity of Faye’s core programming.”

Dana’s eyes lit up with excitement. “Maybe they’ve evolved, like the Collective!”

“Hold on, let’s not get carried away with wild speculation,” John said, before he gestured towards the darkened doorway. “Why don’t we just head down there and see what we can find?”

The Maliri hacker grimaced and gave him a guilt-ridden look. “I made a terrible mess of infiltrating the network. If there are physical defences, I’m sure they’ll all be on high alert now.”

He placed his hand on her shoulder and looked the despondent Maliri in the eyes. “From what you’ve told us, it sounds highly likely that Mael’nerak designed this network. He spent tens-of-thousands of years perfecting his skills in programming and it would be absurd for me to expect you to counter traps designed at that level of expertise. Don’t be upset about what happened in the subnet... look at this as an opportunity to learn from a master.”

Irillith blinked in surprise, then broke into a smile. “You’re right... this is an incredible opportunity!”

“John, what’re we going to do if there are active defences down there?” Dana asked, darting a worried glance at the door.

He unslung his sword and the runes along the blade began to shine with a fierce blue light. “Then we deal with them like we would any other threat. Let’s go and see what brought Valada back here so many times.”

With the runeblade lighting the way, John strode through the door and into the concealed room. The smooth floor was featureless, showing no sign of any entryway for the lift that they all knew must be there.

“I can see the outline for the elevator shaft,” John said, gesturing with his blade. He raised the tip towards a section on the wall. “And there’s a device hidden there.”

Tashana activated the external lights on her Paragon suit, then stepped closer to study the wall. “Is it another retinal scanner?”

“No, it looks different... simpler,” he explained, studying it with his enhanced vision.

The Maliri archaeologist paused with a thoughtful look on her face, then tapped the left side in a staccato sequence before pushing down on the right. There was a click and a hum, then a square section of the floor sank an inch into the ground. At the same time, a panel emerged from the floor, rising up to hand height from the corner of the elevator.

“How the hell did you know how to do that?” Dana marvelled, staring at her in awe.

“There’s a hidden bunker beneath mother’s palace in Melfalas that uses exactly the same method to open it,” Tashana explained. “Valada must have designed it to mirror this one.”

Irillith approached the raised panel and studied the glyphs. “Up and down,” she said with a shrug. “Looks straightforward enough.”

“Alright then,” John said, walking over to the elevator. “Everyone activate flight mode on your Paragon suits. If Mael’nerak has trapped the lift shaft we don’t want to take any chances.”

The girls moved into position beside him and after a nod from John, Irillith tapped the appropriate rune. There was a soft chime, then the platform began to descend, gradually picking up speed as the seconds rolled by.

“500 metres below surface level,” Dana called out, reading their depth from her suit’s HUD.

“1000...”

“1500...”

“2000...”

“Why so deep?” Rachel asked quietly as they continued their descent.

“Maybe to keep Valada safe from an orbital bombardment?” John suggested, before glancing at Dana. “How long would it take a dreadnought to blast a hole this deep?”

Her brow furrowed as she considered the variables. “We’re so deep now, we’re out of beam range for a Quantum Devastator, so they’d have to rely on Quantum Flux Cannons. They’d also have to blast a really wide hole to stop landslides from backfilling any progress they made. It wouldn’t be easy... at least half-an-hour.”

“Which would give Valada plenty of time to evacuate by an escape tunnel,” Tashana said, her eyes gleaming with excitement.

Dana glanced at her HUD again. “2500.”

“This place wouldn’t protect her if they destroyed the planet,” Alyssa said softly.

“If an invading Progenitor brought a Quantum Annihilator to Valaden, the Maliri would be doomed anyway,” John said, his expression grim.

“We know that Mael’nerak dismantled his and buried it in Terra’s moon,” Tashana said thoughtfully. “I wonder what happened to your father’s Quantum Annihilator? He must have had one to destroy all those Trankaran worlds.”

John’s expression darkened further. “I don’t know... he never told me.”

Tashana heard his bleak tone and flushed with embarrassment. She reached for him and said, “I’m sorry, John. I was just thinking aloud.... I didn’t mean to upset you.”

He shook his head and gave her a strained smile. “There’s nothing to apologise for. Rahn’hagon obliterated billions of people... he’ll get what’s coming to him eventually.”

“3000 metres,” Dana declared, shaking her head in awe. “Holy shit! I wonder how deep this goes?”

Before anyone could answer, the elevator noticeably slowed, before smoothly stopping in a large room.

“I think you have your answer,” Rachel murmured, sweeping her suit’s shoulder-mounted lights across the objects concealed in the gloom.

“The architecture is different down here,” Tashana noted, an edge of excitement to her voice as she studied the arched columns supporting the engraved ceiling. “I’ve seen this style before... in the recruitment facility where I found Valada’s message warning future generations about Progenitors.”

“You mean the hacking deck?” Irillith asked, giving Dana a meaningful look.

“Holy shit!” the redhead exclaimed, her eyes widening. “Maybe there’s another one here? We could use it to bring back Faye!”

John patted her on the shoulder. “Easy... don’t get your hopes up just yet. Let’s keep our eyes open and see what we find.”

“It looks like there are two ways out,” Rachel said, having completed her sweep of the room. “This main passage here and another over there.”

Tashana glanced at each, then frowned and walked over to the smaller tunnel. “This was built much later. You can see where they excavated through the original masonry.”

“Which way first?” Rachel asked, turning to look at John.

“Let’s take a look at this new addition,” he said, standing beside Tashana and gazing down the darkened passageway. “If it was built later, it might be a way of circumventing the facility’s defences.”

The girls began to follow him, until Dana paused and looked back over her shoulder. “C’mon Alyssa, stop dawdling,” she said with a cheerful grin, which froze when she saw the look on her friend’s face. “Hey, what’s wrong?!”

“Valada...” Alyssa murmured, her expression one of profound sympathy. “She was heartbroken...”

“Psychic echoes?” John asked, moving to check on her. “Is it bad?”

“They’re a lot stronger down here,” she whispered, her cerulean eyes welling up. “I’ve felt this pain before... but nothing compared to her suffering.”

“When we were cut off from John?” Rachel asked, putting an arm around the blonde.

Alyssa nodded and let out a mournful sigh. “I don’t know how she survived it.”

“Maybe you should head back to the Invictus,” John said, looking at her with concern.

“No, I’m staying... I’ll be alright,” she insisted, giving him a brave smile. “It’s just... what Valada went through hits a bit too close to home. Mael’nerak cut her off, then sacrificed himself to protect her, leaving Valada to live without him for hundreds of years. Even thinking about losing you is horrible, but she actually went through my worst nightmare.”

“I’ll never do that to you, I promise,” John said, removing his helmet then hers to give Alyssa a reassuring kiss. “Just let me know if it becomes unbearable down here. We can take a break, or figure something else out... but I don’t want you upsetting yourself trying be stoic... okay?”

“Alright,” she agreed, giving him a hug before replacing her Paragon helm.

They headed into the tunnel, which proceeded for twenty metres before ending in a T-junction. There was nothing buy murky darkness to the left, but directly ahead, the beams from John’s searchlights picked up the alluring glint of gold.

“Let’s take a closer look,” John suggested, continuing onwards towards the gleaming reflection ahead.

The passageway continued straight for thirty metres and ended with a very familiar golden doorway.

“This looks just like one of the doors in mother’s palace,” Tashana murmured, brushing her armoured fingertips across its surface.

“It’s not opening automatically like Maliri doors normally do,” Dana interjected, studying the sealed portal with a frown. “Can you see any hidden mechanisms, John?”

“Yeah, right there,” he replied, pointing towards the centre of the door at head-height. “It looks similar to the retinal scanner upstairs... but there are some differences.”

Alyssa grimaced and placed a hand on John’s shoulder. “The echoes are much stronger here. Valada visited this place a lot... I can see her image over and over again.”

“Alright, let’s come back later and check out the other tunnel first,” John said, clasping Alyssa’s hand and leading her back to the T-junction.

The tunnel leading to the golden door had masonry walls and paved floors, but the adjoining one was hewn directly out of the rock. They began exploring the other passage, which continued onwards for fifty metres before widening into a much larger excavation. For the second time, John’s searchlights reflected off something in the gloom, but this time it shone with a pale white light instead of the previous golden glow.

“What the fuck is that doing down here?” Dana blurted out, staring in disbelief at the glistening white metal.

“Is that... Crystal Alyssium?” John marvelled, darting a shocked glance at the redhead.

“It sure as shit looks like it,” Dana muttered, a dour expression on her face as she reached for her scanner.

Dana walked around several large machines of Maliri construction and approached the wall. She began to scan the mysterious metal, her frown deepening as the seconds rolled by.

“Fucking useless piece of crap!” she suddenly snarled, twisting to hurl the scanner into the darkness.

“Whoa!” John exclaimed, astonished by her irate reaction. “What the hell?”

“Why are you so bent out of shape, babes?” Rachel asked, her voice calm and soothing as she put her arm around her girlfriend.

“Do you know how many hours I put into researching the formula for Crystal Alyssium?!” Dana exclaimed, clenching her fists in indignant fury. “It was the one thing I was sure had nothing to do with Progenitors and I’d actually created it by myself... but no, apparently I had to be led by the fucking nose through that as well!”

John turned to look at the flawless white surface which still looked as new as the day it was made, which he knew must have been at least 10,000 years ago. “Do you know how many times Mael’nerak folded the metal?”

Dana gave him a guilty look. “I dunno, I couldn’t get a proper reading. The structure is crystalline alright, but the scanner readings were all fucked up.”

“So this might not be Crystal Alyssium after all?” he asked, turning to face his Chief Engineer.

She snorted and waved a hand at the wall, with its distinctive glistening white sheen. “Of course not. It’s just a total fluke that it looks exactly the same, right? What are you always telling us about coincidences?”

“Hey, there’s no need for sarcasm,” John said, meeting her troubled gaze. “We all know how hard you worked on Crystal Alyssium and I understand how frustrated you must feel. You were justifiably proud of what you’d accomplished, but finding this doesn’t make the slightest bit of difference towards the respect I have for your intellect and expertise.”

She blushed and looked down in contrition. “I’m sorry, John... I didn’t mean to take it out on you.”

“That’s okay,” he replied, pulling her into a hug. “Exactly how you developed Crystal Alyssium isn’t important. It was all an invaluable learning experience, which you’re definitely going to need to rely on to research tech beyond anything Progenitors have developed.”

Dana nodded and gave him a bashful smile. “Yeah... you’re right. Sorry I had a meltdown.”

“You’re forgiven... but I am going to have to tan that ass until it’s the same colour as your hair,” he said, playfully smacking her armoured rump.

She laughed, an impish sparkle in her eyes once more. “Maybe I should throw my toys out of the pram more often!”

The scanner floated out of the darkness under Alyssa’s telekinetic control. “Here’s your naughty scanner, I think it’s learned its lesson now,” she said, smirking as she returned the device. “Do you want to give it another try?”

Reattaching the scanner to her belt, Dana shook her head. “Nah, it won’t work; I don’t think the scanner’s powerful enough to penetrate the metal’s surface. There is something else I can try though...”

She handed her Tachyon rifle to Rachel, then turned back towards the wall and focused her will inwards. Dana tapped into her psychic reserves, eager to find out the composition of this mysterious metal... but nothing happened. She frowned and tried again, but no matter how hard she strained, her psychic abilities were completely unresponsive.

“I’m being blocked!” the redhead gasped in surprise.

“There must be a psychic dampening device inside,” Tashana murmured, placing her hand on the wall. “I can’t access my abilities either.”

John glanced at the rest of the girls, who quickly checked to see if they’d also been affected. Irillith, Alyssa, and Rachel then shook their heads as they realised that they’d been rendered powerless too.

“I can’t even use telepathy,” Alyssa said in a hushed voice, unsettled by the eerie silence.

“What about you, John?” Rachel asked, looking at him curiously.

He closed his eyes and tried to access his innate psychic abilities, but it felt like fumbling to light a torch while being submerged in molasses.

“You’re being suppressed too?” the brunette asked when she saw his expression shift into a frown.

“Yes... but this is different from before,” he replied, driving the point of his sword into the ground and leaning on the pommel of his runeblade as he steadied his breathing. “Just give me a moment.”

Clearing his mind of distractions, John focused on the unlit torch he’d pictured in his subconscious. Falling into a familiar Zen state, he felt sharper now, and the cloying field that had trapped him in its grasping clutches started to lose its tenacious hold on him. He fought even harder, revelling in the sense of elation and freedom that brought, letting him surge towards his destination. With his arm outstretched, he touched the torch with a fingertip and it blazed to life, brilliant blue flames roaring upwards in response to his psychic call.

And just like that the barrier snapped, freeing him from its insidious clutches.

John let out a shuddering breath, then opened his eyes, and was delighted to see his runeblade swathed in the same azure blaze as the torch he’d ignited in his mind.

“Holy shit!” Dana stared at him wide-eyed. “You actually beat it!”

He studied the dancing flames until he extinguished them with the blink of an eye. “On Larn’kelnar’s dreadnought I couldn’t even sense the dampening field, but this time I was actually able to picture it stifling my psychic abilities. It wasn’t easy to break free, but when I was able to visualise the problem, I could fight against its effects.”

“We all suspected that defeating your guide and unifying your mind had made you stronger, but this is definitive proof,” Rachel said, smiling at him in admiration.

John nodded, then turned to look at the wall. “Maybe I can just hack my way through...”

“Hold on,” Tashana objected, holding up her hand. “I thought we were going to only use brute force as a last resort?”

“The Maliri obviously tried it but didn’t get anywhere,” Dana noted, jerking her thumb towards the ancient machinery. “If I’m not mistaken, that’s a cutting beam, and that one over there is a diamond-edged drill. It looks like they exposed this side of the bunker and were trying to break inside, but I can’t even see any burns or scratches on the wall. It must be as tough as old boots!”

“Shall I see if I can at least make a dent in it?” he suggested, glancing around at the girls.

“Yeah, go for it!” Dana exclaimed with an eager grin. “The ultimate showdown... Crystal Alyssium vs whatever-the-fuck that is!”

Tashana hesitated for a moment, then stepped aside to watch with the rest of the girls.

John faced the gleaming wall in a combat stance, holding his runeblade in a two-handed grip. He took a deep breath, then turned his body into the strike, rotating his hips as the sword whistled through the air. It slammed into the wall with a deafening clang and John grimaced at the bone-rattling vibrations that shook his hands and arms.

Darting forward, Dana leaned down to take a closer look at the impact point. “Goddamn... you only managed to cut a few inches through!”

“I wonder how thick it is?” Tashana murmured, gazing at the white wall in fascination.

“Thick enough to make manually hacking through it a bad idea,” John said, rolling his aching shoulder with a frown. “It’s hard to tell for sure, but I think it’s at least as tough as Larn’kelnar’s armour. I was able to chop through a vambrace to sever one of his hands, but that metal was much thinner.”

Rachel walked over to the abandoned machinery, a thoughtful look on her face. “Can we go back to investigate the main entrance? I’m curious as to why the Maliri tried to drill through the wall.”

“Because they couldn’t get in,” Dana said, rolling her eyes as she stated the obvious.

“Exactly... but why couldn’t they?” the brunette persisted. “Irillith was able to bypass the retinal scanner in the palace using Valada’s personal data... so why would the Maliri go to these lengths to access a secret bunker designed for her personal protection?”

“Maybe they weren’t able to access the bunker after she died?” Dana suggested. She tapped the cutting beam with a knuckle. “Maybe they figured the only way in was to try drilling through the walls?”

Rachel shook her head and turned to Irillith. “The final entry records you found only showed Valada accessing this facility, correct? And the last of those records was two centuries after Mael’nerak sacrificed himself to defeat Rahn’hagon?”

The Maliri hacker nodded. “It certainly appears so. No normal person would be able to hack the security subnet and make it out of that ambush alive, which means Valada was the last person to come down here.”

“What are you thinking, Rachel?” John asked the perceptive doctor.

“I have several theories, but they’re all speculation at this point,” she replied, lost in thought.

“Alright, let’s head back to the main entrance,” he said, holding his hand out for Alyssa, who accepted it with a grateful smile. “Were there any psychic echoes in here?”

“No, nothing I could sense,” she replied as they walked back to the other tunnel.

“Hold on!” Dana suddenly called out, beckoning John to return. “I just thought of something!”

“What’s up?” he asked, returning to her side.

“I can’t use my abilities to scan the metal because there’s a psychic dampening field stopping me, right?” she asked, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “So if you can chop out a bit of the wall, we can just move away from the field and I can check it out properly!”

John gave her a dubious look. “You saw what happened, I barely made a dent in it.”

She quickly shook her head. “You hit it hard enough to make a cut a few inches deep. I don’t need a big bit, just a tiny fragment will be do.”

“Alright,” John agreed, moving back into position and readying another blow.

His runeblade whipped around and slammed into the wall again and again, the massive impacts sending booming retorts echoing around the chamber.

“Stop!” Dana called out, darting over to the wall.

“Got what you need?” John asked, leaning on his runeblade’s pommel.

She picked up a sliver of glinting metal and held it up in triumph. “This is perfect!”

The redhead bounded ahead as they returned to the tunnel, her eyes suddenly blazing with a golden light when they’d moved sufficiently far away from the ancient facility.

“Just give me a second, I’ll take a quick look,” Dana called back over her shoulder, as she skidded to a halt.

John braced himself for another furious outburst from his Chief Engineer, but when he caught up to Dana, her expression had shifted to enraptured fascination.

“So I’m guessing that’s not Crystal Alyssium after all?” he asked the captivated redhead.

“No, it’s something totally new,” Dana replied in an awed whisper. “The arrangement of atoms in its atomic structure is similar to the Progenitor black metal, but the element composition is completely different.”

“What does that mean?” Tashana asked, leaning in for a closer look.

“I think this was forged in the same way as Progenitor metal, but Mael’nerak used different materials to make it,” she murmured, lost in thought.

“No... that definitely wasn’t made using a Soulforge,” Alyssa interjected quietly. “Just look at the colour... and there’s no residual psychic echoes.”

“I don’t mean Mael’nerak sacrificed thralls to infuse it with psychic energy,” Dana explained. “But the wave patterns left behind in the metal are very distinctive.”

“That’s fantastic news,” John said, slapping Dana on the back. “If Mael’nerak found a way to replicate Progenitor metal without using a Soulforge, there’s nothing stopping you from doing the same.”

She nodded, a newfound spark of inspiration in her eyes. “I need to get working on this asap!”

“As soon as we’ve finished investigating down here, we’ll head straight back to the Invictus and you can get started on your research.”

The girls accompanied John down the tunnel, taking the right turn that would lead them back to the room with the elevator. They crossed the large chamber and took the only other exit, which led into a high-arched corridor that matched the previous architecture. The passageway was long and perfectly straight, stretching on for a hundred metres towards a doorway set at the end on the right-hand side.

There were a few objects scattered across the floor outside the doorway as well as another piece of abandoned Maliri machinery. As John drew closer, he could see charred holes bored through the wrecked device, and the items on the floor were actually pieces of scorched armour.

“They must have triggered some kind of defensive countermeasures,” Tashana murmured, eyeing the smooth walls with trepidation. “I can’t see any sign of gun turrets though.”

When the group were only twenty metres away, they were bathed in a soft blue light that swept along the corridor.

“What was that?” Irillith asked, her eyes widening in alarm. “Some kind of scan?”

Before anyone could reply, a stern voice boomed along the corridor. “Irin’brogari, lieth amest tel’kaintir mir vaharillian!”

They all froze and Dana whispered fearfully, “Did he just tell us to get the fuck out of here?”

Tashana nodded, sharing a worried glance with her sister. “That was ancient Maliri. He just said: ‘Interlopers, flee this place or face annihilation!’.”

“Fall back, everyone,” John ordered, beckoning the girls away from the door.

Before she retreated down the corridor, Tashana grabbed one of the shattered armour fragments, then hurried to join the others. They regrouped in the main room by the elevator, darting concerned glances back towards the doorway.

“Now we know why they started drilling over there,” Dana muttered, jerking a thumb towards the other tunnel.

“Why did you stop to take that?” John asked, pointing towards the scorched piece of armour.

Tashana unclipped a golden device from her belt. “I wanted to check how old it was. I can scan the bloodstains and use carbon dating to calculate their age.”

“Nice,” John said with a nod of approval. “It never crossed my mind to bring one of those.”

The Maliri archaeologist gave him a wry smile. “It’s a very convenient way of dating finds. You’d be surprised how often I’ve stumbled across ancient corpses during excavations.” Her smile faded as she continued, “Or maybe not, considering the Maliri’s bloody history.”

The carbon dating device emitted a soft chime, alerting its owner that the scan was complete.

“10,100 years old,” Tashana informed them.

“I thought Valada’s first recorded entry to this facility was 10,097 years ago?” Rachel asked, frowning in confusion. “How did that Maliri die three years beforehand, when there’s no record of her entry?”

“This device is only accurate to the closest decade,” Tashana explained. “The dead Maliri must have been part of a group accompanying Valada.”

“Ah, that makes more sense,” the brunette said, nodding as her suspicions were confirmed.

John looked curiously at the doctor. “Have you figured out what happened here?”

“Yes, I think so,” Rachel replied, her smile of satisfaction fading into sadness. “Shall we go and visit Valada’s tomb?”

“Her tomb?!” John blurted out, looking at her in astonishment. “How did you leap to that conclusion?”

“I need to check one last thing to confirm my hypothesis,” she replied, nodding towards the smaller tunnel. “I’ll explain everything if I’m correct.”

“Let’s go,” John agreed, eager to get some answers.

They approached the golden door at the end of the corridor and everyone turned to look at Rachel expectantly.

“This section was constructed much later than Mael’nerak’s bunker and isn’t part of the main facility,” the brunette said, gesturing towards the gleaming metal. “You should be able to easily bypass the door, Irillith.”

The Maliri hacker’s eyes began to glow and she delved into the Cyber-realm to investigate the closed portal. John had previously found the scanner built into the door, so Irillith simply transmitted the digital image of Valada’s retinal pattern to the device, and it spiralled open without any problem.

“I thought you said this was her tomb?” Dana said, peering into the room beyond. “It looks more like one of the guest suites on Genthalas to me.”

“We know Valada visited this place thousands of times,” Rachel replied as she stepped into the lounge, studying the gilded Maliri furniture arrayed tastefully around the room. “She’d want to be comfortable while she was down here.”

There were doors leading off from the Lounge and a quick exploration revealed that there was a dining room, a study, a kitchen, and all the amenities you’d expect in a luxury suite. One of the doors led into a relatively small room, the far wall of which was dominated by what appeared to be a Maliri airlock.

Tashana walked over to the runic control panel and studied the data on the display. “The atmospheric status is showing that the next room has been depressurised. Is this it? Is this Valada’s tomb?”

“Yes, but that wasn’t its original purpose,” Rachel said quietly.

John glanced at Alyssa and saw a tear roll down her cheek. “Are you okay?”

“This place echoes with her grief,” she replied in a haunted whisper. “So much pain... the loss more than she could bear...”

“Come on, let’s get you out of here,” he said with sympathy, putting his arm around her shoulders.

Alyssa shook her head and looked up at him imploringly. “Please don’t make me leave, John. I need to see this.”

“Okay,” he reluctantly agreed, seeing how much it meant to her. “Open it up, Tashana.”

The Maliri archaeologist touched several runes on the panel, and the light shining on the display shifted from red to green. Now that an atmosphere had been re-established inside, the door cracked open with a quiet hiss, then spiralled up into the ceiling.

“Wow...” Dana murmured, gazing wide-eyed into the huge room beyond. “What is this place?”

There were scores of display tables set up around the vast chamber, with countless small objects neatly arrayed on each one. Lining the edges of the room were clothes rails, with hundreds of outfits filling every inch of available space. John noticed that many of them appeared to be suits, designed in the style favoured by ancient Maliri... and the man who had inspired that trend.

“This is Valada’s shrine to Mael’nerak,” Rachel said softly, as she led them inside.

Tashana picked up a golden goblet and studied it reverently. “I’ve seen this before on the Nexus files! It belonged to Mael’nerak, didn’t it? These are all his personal possessions...”

“She gathered every last memory she could,” Alyssa whispered, her fingers brushing across the suits. “Anything to help her remember what it felt like to be loved by him...”

They watched in silence as Alyssa mimicked lifting one of the suits from the rail, copying a psychic echo that only she could see. Lost in the grief-stricken memory, she glided slowly towards the rear of the chamber, then over to an oval archway in the far corner. There was a large bed in the adjoining room, and when Alyssa gently pulled back the silken drapes, they could see its solitary occupant. The Maliri noblewoman lay perfectly preserved, curled up on the covers with one of Mael’nerak’s suits clutched to her chest. Her final expression reflected the serenity that had eluded her for the last two centuries of her life.

“Valada...” Tashana said in a hushed voice, removing her helmet and bowing her head in sorrow.

Irillith removed her own helmet to brush away her tears, then slipped an arm around Tashana to comfort her sister.

A grey mist slowly enveloped Valada as Rachel approached the bed. She studied the ancient Maliri for a long moment, then let out a melancholy sigh.

John walked over to join her, looking down at the woman who had made such a huge impact on Maliri society. “Did you find the final answer you were looking for?”

Rachel nodded as she turned to face him. “She was dying from a malignant brain tumour, just like those we healed in Edraele and the twins. The pain must have been excruciating towards the end and she chose to be surrounded by her memories of Mael’nerak in her final moments.”

Reaching down, she picked up the remote device that Valada had used to seal herself inside the vault.

“Why build this shrine here?” John asked, glancing at the brunette. “Is it to do with the facility Mael’nerak constructed?”

Before she could reply, Alyssa spoke up, gazing sorrowfully at the deceased matriarch. “Mael’nerak told Valada that if she was ever in danger, to come down here to be safe. When he cut her off, she felt so alone... and desperately wanted to feel safe in his arms again. Valada was a good matriarch and faithfully followed her Progenitor’s orders... but she couldn’t get into the bunker, the DNA scanner didn’t recognise her.”

“Mael’nerak must’ve made some last-minute changes to help her survive without him,” John reasoned, looking at Valada with newfound sympathy. “He enhanced Valada before sacrificing himself against Rahn’hagon... which permanently altered her DNA.”

“And he forgot to update the security system,” Dana added, leaning heavily against the door. “We’re always forgetting to do it and we’ve got no excuse. That poor bastard was just about to blow himself to pieces in a suicide mission... no wonder he forgot with that on his mind.”

“Mael’nerak must have been feeding Valada regularly before they were separated, which would’ve maintained her physiology as a thirty-year-old Maliri maiden,” Rachel continued. “After he died, she lived on for another two hundred years before the pain from the brain tumour became insufferable.”

“It’s all so sad,” Tashana sobbed, brushing her eyes. “Valada never knew the truth about why Mael’nerak abandoned her... and she never got over him.”

“She loved him with all her heart,” Alyssa murmured, eyes glassy with unshed tears. “How could he expect her to go on living without him? It would’ve been kinder to let her spend their last moments together.”

“He loved her, Alyssa,” John said, feeling an outpouring of sympathy for Mael’nerak. “He wanted her to live... to raise their children so she’d always have a legacy to remember him by. The last thing he would’ve wanted was for Valada to spend the next two centuries grieving for him.”

Alyssa shook her head and said with conviction, “You can’t love someone as much she adored him and ever get over it. Mael’nerak was the centre of her universe; when he died, her life ended too. Valada loved her twin daughters and clung on as long as she could to be there for them... but it meant two-hundred years of suffering with a broken heart that would never heal.”

“I hope you were reunited with him in the end, great grandmother,” Irillith said in a choked voice. “He never stopped loving you... I hope you know that now.”

They stood together in silence, paying their respects to the tragic matriarch whose influence over Mael’nerak had altered the course of billions of lives.

\*\*\*

Admiral Charles Harris entered the reception area for his office on Olympus and nodded to his assistant. “Good morning, Victor. Any priority messages this morning?”

The young lieutenant rose from his seat to follow Charles into the office. “Nothing urgent, sir. You’ve been sent the latest productivity report from the Voss Corporation, Admiral Caldwell is requesting a status update on the Brimorian situation, and there was a message from the Fleet Admiral.”

“What’s happening on the Outer Rim?” Charles asked, his moustache twitching with concern.

“I didn’t check the contents, sir. As it wasn’t marked as urgent, I assumed it was a personal message from your fiancée.”

“Alright, thank you,” the Admiral said, sitting behind his desk and activating the comms interface. “Could you make me a coffee please... I’m going to need the caffeine to get through a Voss productivity report without nodding off.”

“Certainly, sir,” Victor said, but made no move to leave. “You also received a meeting request from Admiral Van Den Broeck. I checked today’s calendar and your only available timeslot is at nine o’clock. After that, you’re scheduled to inspect the drydock until midday, you have performance reviews all afternoon, then this evening-“

“Nine o’clock is fine,” Charles interrupted, grimacing when he glanced at the time. “You better make that two coffees.”

Victor grinned and nodded. “Very good, sir.”

Charles snorted at the young officer’s smirk of admiration, then waved him out of the office. “Let me know when Admiral Van Den Broeck arrives.”

When Victor closed the door behind him, Charles opened up the message from Lynette, eager to hear how she was doing. Reading through the update, her journey to the Outer Rim had proved uneventful so far, but he knew that was all about to change when she arrived at Brecken’s World later that evening. Charles flushed when he read her sign off, knowing exactly what she meant about them having breakfast together. Lynette had only been gone from Olympus for a few days, but he was already really missing the vivacious brunette.

Rising from his chair, he walked over to the sweeping window that gave him a panoramic view of Olympus and the vast fleets gathered at the shipyard. A colossal dreadnought was currently undergoing repairs in the drydock, the Odin’s Thunderbolt having sustained significant damage in the Battle of Terra. All along its three-kilometre flank, welding torches flickered like fireflies as hundreds of engineers laboured to rebuild sections of exposed superstructure.

Rather than focusing on the massive Terran Federation capital ship, Charles gazed beyond it at a cluster of faint stars, which he knew was Lynette’ final destination. She was already hundreds of light years from Alpha Centauri and moving further away from him by the second. Her flagship, the Aphrodite, was one of the most powerful battleships in the Terran Federation navy, but that offered little comfort to Charles. He knew what horrors lurked out there in the endless darkness of space.

There was a quick knock on the door before it swung open and Admiral Van Den Broeck breezed into his office. “Morning, Charlie!” she greeted him cheerfully.

“Good morning, Lina,” he replied, turning to smile at the sultry redhead, who seemed to have regained all her previous confidence.

“I’m sorry, sir,” a flustered Victor apologised, glaring at Lina as she sauntered over to the sofas. “I was about to let you know that the Admiral had arrived, but she was most insistent.”

Lina took a seat and demurely crossed her legs, managing to look alluring despite her iron-grey Admiralty uniform. “I know you’re a busy boy today, Charlie. I didn’t want to waste a minute I could be spending in your scintillating company.”

Charles rolled his eyes and walked over to join her. “It’s fine, Victor. Thank you.”

The assistant nodded and flicked one last irritated glance at Lina before quietly shutting the office door.

“You’re mean tormenting him like that,” Charles admonished the grinning redhead.

“He deserved it. I can feel him staring at my ass every time I come to visit you.”

Charles was about to make a raunchy quip, but coughed and said roughly, “I’ll have a word with him, if he’s making you feel uncomfortable.”

Lina looked delighted and leaned forward. “What were you just about to say then?”

Blushing furiously, Charles was about to stammer a denial, then abruptly changed his mind. He sat up straighter and looked her directly in the eye. “I was going to say that you’ve got a magnificent ass and I can’t blame him for taking a second look. Besides, you love the attention, don’t you?”

Lina laughed, her green eyes sparkling. “You do have a naughty side to you, don’t you, Charlie?”

“Apparently so,” he conceded with a wry smile. “So what brings you here this morning, Lina?”

She twirled a finger in a lock of her auburn hair. “I was hoping you’d come to see me while Lynette was away, but it’s been days and still no sign of Charles Harris knocking on my door.” She pouted playfully. “Are you avoiding me?”

Charles hesitated, unsure how to reply, then Victor entered the office, granting him a temporary reprieve. The young lieutenant was carrying a tray with two steaming cups of coffee and he carefully transferred them to the table between Charles and his guest.

Lina waited patiently until the assistant had left, then raised an eyebrow. “Well?”

Cracking under her intense scrutiny, Charles confirmed her suspicions with a nod.

“Why?” she asked, looking a little hurt by his reply. “I thought we’d got closer after the attack on Olympus? I know Lynette doesn’t mind us keeping each other company... far from it in fact.”

Charles picked up his coffee to delay having to answer for a few moments longer, then took a sip of the dark drink and winced when he scalded his lip.

“Serves you right for stalling,” Lina said, her lips quirking into a smile. “Now, tell me why you’ve been avoiding me.”

He let out a sigh of resignation. “Because I find the whole process of you becoming a secret Lioness awkward and embarrassing. I haven’t even decided how I feel about it yet, so I had no clue what to say to you if you asked for my advice.”

Lina’s gaze softened and she moved over to sit beside him, slipping her hand into his. “I’ve been thinking about it too. I haven’t thought about much else actually.”

“Have you made a decision?” Charles asked, trying not to get distracted by the way she was gently stroking his hand.

“Can we speak freely here?” she replied, darting a quick glance upwards as if searching for listening devices.

He nodded. “The Lionesses swept my office for bugs and made sure we can’t be spied on in here. It’s safe to talk.”

Lina was quiet for a long moment, her flirtatious demeanour shifting into thoughtful introspection. “At face value, it’s an incredibly tempting offer. Most women would sell their soul to have a body like Lynette, but it’s not just an aesthetic change, I really would be twenty again... physically at least. It’s like being given a do-over, letting me focus on the parts of my life I neglected, without having to give up anything I’ve worked so hard for.”

“Such as having children?” Charles asked, listening to her with interest.

She nodded, giving him a self-conscious smile. “I intended to have kids eventually, but I didn’t think it was practical to start a family while I was still in the military. It always seemed like I had plenty of time to find a good husband, settle down in a lovely home, and have 2.4 children... until I suddenly hit forty and realised I’d left it too late. Now I’m being offered a chance to have it all, and as I said... I’m tempted.”

“You mentioned this being a good offer at face value,” Charles noted. “Does that mean you’re having second thoughts about the... side effects?”

“Yeah, you could say that.” Lina laughed and gave him a lopsided grin. “I do like you a lot, Charlie, but when I started flirting with you, I was just thinking about us having a fun little fling... not some lifelong commitment.”

Her smile faded as she continued, “Honestly, I’m not good at long-term relationships. I get bored quickly and miss the excitement of being with someone new... then it all falls apart. No offence to you, but the idea of settling down with one person for the rest of my life feels so claustrophobic...”

“Two people,” Charles reminded her, chuckling at how strange it was to be having this conversation.

“Right... you and Lynette,” Lina agreed, a whimsical smile returning to her face. “I’ve had affairs with men and women in the past, but both at once? That’s something I haven’t tried before... maybe that might make a difference?”

“Is that what’s worrying you the most? That you might not be able to handle that kind of commitment ten or twenty years from now?”

“More like two or three years... but yeah,” she said, giving him a strained smile.

“Three years? Is that the longest relationship you’ve had?”

She nodded, biting her lip and looking more vulnerable than he’d ever seen her before.

Charles hesitated, unsure whether to ask what happened. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Lina shook her head, then paused and deflated a little. “My first boyfriend... it was a bad breakup.”

He rubbed her back in sympathy. “I can understand why you’re nervous, but from what John said, I don’t think you have anything to worry about...” Charles blushed and his voice trailed off into silence.

“Why’s that?” Lina asked him curiously.

Charles reached for his coffee cup, desperate to avoid answering the question.

“C’mon Charlie, tell me!” she pleaded, giving him a winsome smile.

He sighed in defeat and reluctantly replied, “John told me that the Lionesses are fiercely loyal and that Lynette will never be tempted to cheat on me. He also said that if we do decide to go through with this, then you’ll become like that too.”

“Really?” she asked, looking intrigued. “Alyssa mentioned some side-effects, but nothing about that. She talked about being bisexual and feeling no jealousy towards other women... neither of which seemed like a big deal because I’m quite open minded anyway.”

“So that doesn’t bother you? The thought of having your personality changed?” Charles asked with interest.

The redhead thought about it, then shrugged. “If John’s able to help me get over my commitment issues, then isn’t that a good thing? I’m not a cheater, but I’ve had a string of disastrous relationships that have all ended badly. If I’d met John twenty years ago, he could’ve saved me thousands of credits I wasted on therapy!”

Charles chucked at her joke. “I suppose that’s one way to look at it.”

Lina studied him for a moment, then asked quietly, “What’s really bothering you about this, Charlie? Most men would jump at the chance of having two beautiful young women besotted with him.”

He rubbed his moustache and grimaced. “It’s... the mechanics of it. John’s one of my oldest friends and it’s uncomfortable to think of him being involved with Lynette... or you... in that way.”

“But they both said that nothing intimate happened between them and I’m sure they’re telling the truth.”

“I believe them too... it’s just the idea of Lynette swallowing... you know. If you become a Lioness, then you’ll have to do the same thing as well.”

She smiled at him affectionately. “This might come as a shock, Charlie... but I have been with a man before.”

He blushed, feeling embarrassed. “I know it’s not rational. John changed Lynette before we even started dating, but I can’t help the way I feel. I don’t have any right to get jealous and possessive over you either, but the thought of you and him... it still makes me uncomfortable.”

Lina was quiet for a moment. “Perhaps that’s the best way of handling this... just not think about it?”

“The ostrich approach?” Charles said with a chuckle. “Well, that’s definitely easier.”

She turned to study him, her expression pensive. “Okay... but what about the rest. How do you feel about being in a long-term relationship with me?”

He hesitated, unsure how to frame his reply.

Smiling in sympathy at his discomfort, Lina gave his hand a supportive squeeze. “This is important, Charlie. We’re planning to make a huge commitment to each other, so you need to be sure you actually want that kind of relationship with me. Would it be easier if I go first?”

“Yes... please,” he said gratefully.

“Alright,” she agreed with a coy smile. “Well, I think you’re a handsome man... and I love the moustache, it makes you look very distinguished. You also seem like a really sweet guy, who’s devoted to his fiancée. You’re just the kind of man I’d be looking for to fall in love with and start a family.”

“Thanks for the compliments,” Charles said with a bashful smile. “Have you got any reservations?”

Lina brushed his hand with her fingertips, then said softly, “I get the impression that you’d be perfectly happy with just you and Lynette. I think you’re only going ahead with this because it’s something she really wants.”

Charles’ smile faded and he reluctantly nodded. “That’s no reflection on you, Lina. You’re a beautiful woman... very confident and charming. You’re the kind of woman I’ve always been attracted to, but I’ve never had any luck with because you’re out of my league.”

“Charlie, that’s not true,” the redhead protested.

He shrugged. “I’m just being honest. I’ve never been a ladies’ man... and I still find it hard to believe that Lynette’s fallen in love with me.”

“Is that why you’re even considering this?” Lina asked quietly. “Because you’re afraid that if you say no to her, she might ‘come to her senses’ and leave you?”

Charles let out a heavy sigh and shook his head. “I’m 52 years old. Lynette used to be the same age as me, but now she’s been given a 20 year-old body. By the time she’s your age again... I’m going to be an old man.”

Lina’s eyes widened in understanding. “So you’re worried that she might leave you for someone younger?”

He considered that for a moment, then shook his head. “Under normal circumstances I would be, but I’m sure John was telling me the truth; I don’t think Lynette’s capable of being unfaithful now.”

“So what’s the problem then?” the redhead asked in confusion.

“I don’t want to die of old age and leave her a widow for the next forty years,” Charles admitted quietly. “If the three of us are in a relationship together, then you can be there for her when I’m gone...”

“Oh, Charlie...” Lina murmured, leaning into him and resting her head on his shoulder.

He put his arm around Lina as she snuggled closer, and kissed her on top of her head. Her presence was comforting as he gazed out the sweeping window, focusing on the distant cluster of stars he’d been staring at before, and missing his fiancée more than ever.

\*\*\*

“A bunker built by Mael’nerak himself...” Calara said quietly as she stared down the long corridor. “I wonder what secrets it holds?”

“It might just be an impregnable panic room,” John said, standing beside her with his arm around Alyssa. “But on the off-chance that Mael’nerak did leave anything valuable behind, I think we should think very carefully about how we go about opening it. I don’t want another repeat of what happened to the Kyth’faren citadel.”

“I think that’s very wise,” the Latina agreed. “I know I keep saying it’s urgent that we capture Larn’kelnar’s fleets, but I don’t want to inadvertently destroy anything that could give us an edge in the war. So if we’re not going to try breaking in now, are we just going to assume that the Mists of Loralar are concealing Mael’nerak’s throne world and investigate that next?”

“We don’t need to assume anything; that’s exactly where it is!” Irillith called out, as she emerged from the other tunnel. The Maliri hacker triumphantly brandished a data crystal as she jogged over to join them. “I searched through all the files on the computer in Valada’s study. She was obsessed with the nebula and spent years trying to find a way back into the system. I downloaded all her maps and notes on trying to return to Kythshara.”

“Excellent work, honey,” John said, pulling her into a celebratory hug. When he pulled back, he looked into her violet eyes. “How are you and your sister doing now?”

Irillith gave him a wan smile. “We’re okay...it just came as a shock finding Valada like that. She was so perfectly preserved, it looked like she’d died only a few hours ago. It made it seem like everything she went through just happened yesterday, instead of 10,000 years in the past.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” John said, giving her an understanding look. \*Jade, are you ready to go?\*

\*We’re already on our way out,\* she immediately replied.

Jade soon appeared along with Tashana and Jehanna, the normally cheerful Nymph looking uncharacteristically sombre.

“Thank you for letting me pay my respects, Master,” she said gratefully. “Valada looked much older than I remembered, but that was definitely her. The last time I saw her, she was with Mael’nerak, and looked so happy. Valada was proud of him for giving the Nymphs our freedom and releasing us on Lenarra.”

“Did you ever visit this place with him?” he asked, glancing down the other corridor towards Mael’nerak’s bunker.

“No... I don’t remember visiting any underground facilities,” she replied, shaking her head.

“Alright, let’s head back to the Invictus,” John said, gesturing towards the lift.

They all stood on the platform and Irillith activated the controls, launching them skyward. Everyone stood quietly as the lift ascended, each of them moved by the discovery of Valada’s final resting place. John watched Tashana with concern, until she looked up and made eye contact with him, then gave him a forlorn smile.

John beckoned her over, then slipped an arm around her shoulders. “How are you holding up?”

She leaned into him and sighed. “I just feel so sorry for Valada. We already knew that Mael’nerak left her behind, then sacrificed himself to stop Rahn’hagon... but I never guessed that she’d still be grieving for him until the day she died.”

“We all knew... we just didn’t want to face it,” Alyssa said softly. “How would you feel in her position?”

Tashana glanced up at John and her face twisted with anguish.

“Yeah... exactly,” the blonde said, her voice full of sympathy for the first Valaden matriarch.

No one was in the mood for further conversation after that and they stood quietly as the elevator rose up to ground level. After shutting the secret door behind them, John followed the girls back to the Invictus, where Yelamha and the serving staff were just disembarking.

“It should be perfectly safe for you now,” John said to the palace’s majordomo. “If you do see or hear anything unusual, contact Edraele and let her know immediately.”

“We will, John,” she said, with a respectful bow. “When will you be returning to the palace?”

“Either tonight, or in several days’ time, depending on what happens in the Mists of Loralar,” he explained. “Edraele will keep you informed.”

Yelamha’s expression shifted to a worried frown. “Please be very careful, my Lord. There are terrible stories about what happens to anyone that tries to encroach within the Mists of Loralar.”

“I will. Thanks for the warning,” he said, smiling at her gratefully.

The Maliri inclined her head, then excused herself to accompany the rest of the servants back to Saelihn Immanthe. He watched them leave, then turned around to enter the Invictus. When John stepped through the airlock, he found Alyssa and Jehanna waiting for him in the corridor beyond.

“Dana is asking for you in her Workshop,” his blonde matriarch informed him. “There’s something important she wants to show you.”

“Sure, I’ll head up there as soon as I’ve stowed away my gear,” John said with a nod. He glanced at Jehanna and frowned. “Sorry to keep you waiting. I know I said I’d help you practice your psychic abilities this morning.”

“That’s okay,” the reporter said, giving him an understanding smile. “Alyssa said she’d give me some training.”

“I’m going to up to the Bridge first to plot a course for the Mists of Loralar, then we’ll be in the dojo for the rest of the morning,” Alyssa explained, as they entered the Secondary Hangar. “Feel free to join us whenever you’re finished with Sparks.”

“Will do,” John agreed, returning their wave goodbye as they parted ways at the Raptor.

He jogged inside and entered the gunship’s armoury, then slotted his runeblade and Tachyon rifle on the weapon racks. When he moved beneath the armour equipping frame, the robotic arms waited for the rippling clicks that signified he’d unlocked his Paragon suit, before they swung down to remove the armoured plates. His shoulder still ached from trying to batter his way into Mael’nerak’s bunker, reminding him just how resilient that metal was.

As he left the gunship and took the Invictus’ grav-tubes up to Deck Seven, he wondered if Dana had already made a breakthrough with fabricating the Progenitor black metal. She had certainly looked inspired when he gave her permission to race back to the Invictus’ Engineering Bay and start working on her research. Developing a material that tough, which they could easily fabricate, would be the key to unlocking all the Progenitor technology they had discovered so far. Unfortunately, that also meant that until they were able to build those components, the Invictus would be massively outclassed in a fight with a Progenitor dreadnought.

With those worrying thoughts in mind, he strolled down the corridor to the Workshop and hurried inside. “Hey Sparks,” he called out to the redhead. “Alyssa said you wanted to show me something?”

Dana was standing on the Engineering Podium, multiple holo-screens floating in the air above her console. She was engrossed in the information displayed and didn’t take her eyes off the complex geometric shapes as she half-turned to wave at him.

“Hey John... that was quick,” she murmured, sounding thoroughly distracted.

He walked up the illuminated steps then hugged her from behind. “What are you looking at?” he asked, kissing her cheek. “Have you made a breakthrough with the black metal already?”

“Yeah... kinda,” she muttered, turning to quickly return his kiss. “I’ve just been running an analysis on the elements used in Mael’nerak’s alternate metal. It’s crystalline in nature and uses Onyxium and Etherite crystals, just like my Crystal Alyssium... but it’s actually a simpler formula.”

“Really?” John said in surprise. “I was expecting it to be much more complex.”

“Yeah, me too,” Dana agreed, nodding exuberantly. “But I gave it some thought, and I think I figured out why that is. I was trying to create an alternative to Etherium, which we could psychically reshape ourselves, but that also used Onyxium to make it much stronger. Mael’nerak’s version gains most of its strength from the initial forging process and it’s not intended to be reshaped, just like Progenitor black metal.”

“There’s no way we could’ve survived the last six months without personally making all those repairs and upgrades aboard the Invictus,” John said, giving her a grateful hug. “If we had to rush back to the drydock every time we need to fix anything, we’d have been totally screwed.”

“Yeah, I know... it was pretty awesome to find out that my version is actually more sophisticated,” Dana admitted with a lopsided grin. Her smile faded and she darted another glance at the holo-screen. “The problem is that this forging process makes a massive difference. It was really interesting finding out about the metal’s properties, but it doesn’t actually bring us any closer to replicating what the Soulforge does when it psychically smelts metal.”

“True... but the real win here is finding out that it is actually possible to create an alternative,” John reminded her. “Now you know that your goal is definitely achievable.”

“That’s a good point,” she conceded, brightening considerably.

John gave her a supportive squeeze. “It sounds like you’re making some excellent progress already. Thanks for showing me what you’ve discovered so far; I’ll leave you in peace to focus on your research.”

“Hey, wait a minute!” Dana protested, turning around in his arms. “I didn’t ask Alyssa to get you up here just to show you this!”

“Oh... okay,” John said in surprise. “So what did you want to show me?”

She wriggled out of his embrace and bounded down the steps. “Come and check this out!”

John followed her across the Engineering Bay, then froze when he saw what she’d really brought him there to look at. “Holy shit!”

Dana grinned and nodded. “Yeah, I know... pretty awesome, right?”

The redhead had stopped in front of the wide cultivation beds that they were using to grow eternity crystals. The last time John had seen those trays was a week ago, when he’d poured in some fresh gel solution to replace the previous crop that had been ruined by Larn’kelnar’s ambush. He’d expected to see a delicate forest of tiny beautiful crystals, but the latest crop had grown at an astonishing rate, with the one in the centre growing so huge that it had pierced through the titanium ceiling tiles.

“How the hell did it grow so fast?” John marvelled, staring at the massive crystal in fascination. “Did you use miracle grow or something? Wasn’t it supposed to take at least a month to grow crystals big enough to use in a Nova Lance?”

“I didn’t do anything,” Dana replied with a smirk. “This is all on you, buddy.”

“What do you mean?” John asked in surprise.

“That cultivation bed over there is Alyssa’s,” the redhead explained, pointing to a much more reasonably sized crop of crystals. “The one that’s gone berserk belongs to you. Maybe crushing your guide and becoming Kyth’vindathys, Vengeance of the Kyth’faren reborn might have had something to do with it?”

“Wow...” John murmured, staring at the huge crystals towering over the crop bed. “I wasn’t even paying attention; I was just growing them in the background.”

She shrugged and walked over to give him a hug. “I thought you’d be interested to see concrete proof of how much more powerful you’ve become recently.”

“Thanks, Sparks,” he said, stroking her back. “I’m glad you showed me that.”

“No problem,” she said with a beaming smile. “Now, can you harvest all those crystals for me and set up the cultivation bed again please? And make it snappy!”

John laughed and swatted her rump as she giggled and skipped away. With the skilful use of telekinesis, It didn’t take him long to dislodge all the crystals from the bed, then pour in a a fresh batch of gel.

“Same again please,” Dana said with a twinkle in her eyes. “If you’re going to keep making eternity crystals that huge, I better start designing guns big enough to take these bad boys!”