Three Square Meals Ch. 112

John hadn’t intended to fall asleep, but with Helene’s soft warm body cuddled up against him, he soon found himself drifting off into a soothing slumber. Instead of the blackness of unconsciousness, he found himself gazing up at glorious blue skies, the sight that greeted him every night since Alyssa had created her personal subplane. Lying down in the field of verdant grass outside Athena’s picturesque house, he sat upright, expecting to find the young woman kneeling beside him. When she wasn’t waiting to welcome him into her domain as she usually did, he looked around with a worried frown.

\*Athena?\* he called out to the house, rising to his feet.

\*The battlements, John,\* Athena replied, her voice uncharacteristically pensive as it drifted through his mind. \*Please join me.\*

Exiting the heart of the pocket plane just required concentration, so John closed his eyes and willed himself to leave. Feeling a dizzying rush as he departed, he was surprised to find himself inside a high-ceilinged room constructed of pale stone, rather than the vast open courtyard that had surrounded the portal before. The pastel pink sphere that led to the house in the meadow looked the same as before, but it seemed that Athena and Alyssa had been busy since his initial tour.

Striding out of the room, he walked into an airy corridor lined by a row of tall windows, all constructed from the same light-coloured stone as the battlements that protected the perimeter of the pocket plane. The medieval style architecture gave him the impression that he was inside some kind of fantasy castle and he half-expected to see knights in armour stride past. Walking over to the windows, he was amazed by the spectacular panoramic view, which overlooked the tall reinforced walls below.

A glowing figure stood atop the battlements of the barbican, which housed the enormous fortress gates. Athena turned and waved, beckoning him to join her. \*Over here!\*

John glanced both ways trying to find an exit. There were doors and passages leading off from the corridor, but it really needed some signs pointing to the way out. \*Where are the stairs in this place?\*

\*Turn right, second passage,\* Athena advised him, her worried tone temporarily replaced by amusement. \*You’ll find a stairwell there.\*

Activating his psychic speed, John followed her instructions, dashing down the corridor then darting down the steps, taking them three at a time. He descended through a dozen levels before reaching the ground floor and he exited the staircase into a broad corridor, unsure where to go next.

\*Right again, then through the big arch at the end of that corridor. You’ll be in the keep’s courtyard, so just turn left there, you can’t miss the entry hall.\*

Jogging down the spotlessly-clean stone passageway, John saw the grand entrance to the keep on his left. A splash of colour from a plush room to the right drew his attention and he hesitated for only a second before heading that way, curious to see what was inside. His jaw dropped when he looked through the broad doorway, discovering a plush throne room with lifelike portraits lining the walls. On a wide dais at the back of the room was a large ornate throne, embossed with golden lions that made it look suitably regal. To the right was a smaller throne with an unassuming elegant design, positioned within touching distance of its more imposing companion.

Covering the right wall were portraits of his crew aboard the Invictus, each girl looking back at him with dazzling smiles. Helene and the Nymphs were included too, as were Jehanna, Niskera, and Lynette. The left wall was likewise adorned with portraits, but these depicted the azure-skinned beauties that formed Edraele’s inner circle. Four of the Young Matriarchs gazed back at him with adorable doe-eyed expressions, a soft light illuminating each of their portraits. John had a pretty good idea what that signified, having seen those very same looks from Tsarra, Leena, Nyrelle, and Valani after their passionate rendezvous at the Maliri border.

Taking pride of place on the central wall behind the thrones was a portrait of himself, surrounded by a cluster of girls. He saw Alyssa of course, accompanied by several members of the Invictus crew, their portraits merged with his. Staring at it in fascination, he realised that this was a reproduction of the images that his blonde Matriarch had described to him over the last several months. Calara, Sakura, and the twins were all there, with Jade appearing as a new addition, the Nymph gazing at him reverently.

\*What is this place?\* he asked Athena, studying the intricate portraits and sensing there were additional meanings behind them all.

\*Just a place to while away eternity...\* Athena replied, being deliberately vague. \*A hobby room if you will.\*

\*You’re going to be difficult today, aren’t you?\* John groaned, as he strode back to the courtyard.

He could hear her laughter carrying from the battlements. \*Why, John, whatever do you mean?\*

Heading outside, he ran over to the barbican and jogged up the stairs at the rear of the fortifications, making his way up to the glowing figure waiting for him there. \*Hello Athena,\* he said with a smile as he finally reached the enigmatic guide.

\*You certainly took your time,\* she chastised him, raising an eyebrow in mock disapproval. \*Why didn’t you just fly down?\*

He gaped at her and blurted out, \*I can do that?! But you told me to take the stairs!\*

She wagged a finger at him. \*Actually, that’s not entirely accurate. You asked where they were... so I told you.\*

John sighed and sat down on a stone bench behind the battlement wall. Reaching for Athena, she came to him with a teasing smirk... until her expression turned to shock as he deftly put her over his knee. She squealed in outrage as he gave her a vigorous spanking, her firm cheeks rippling with each weighty smack. Athena soon stopped her struggling and it didn’t take long for her indignant cries to turn into lustful moans.

\*Now perhaps we can start again,\* John said as he helped her upright, smiling as she pouted and rubbed her bottom with both hands. \*If you’re a good girl and give me some straight answers, I’ll make it worth your while afterwards.\*

\*You’re no fun,\* she huffed, but the twinkle in her radiant eyes belied her indignant reply.

Rising to his feet, John glanced through the crenellations that lined the parapet. \*There’s a few things I want to discuss with you, but first and foremost, what’s the problem here? You sounded anxious when I arrived.\*

She stepped closer so that she was right beside him and pointed through the same gap in the stonework. \*We’re being hunted, John. Look...\*

He followed the line from her slender finger towards the horizon and he froze when he saw the massive six-legged beast striding ponderously through billowing mists. \*Damn! I hoped we’d seen the last of those bastards.\*

Athena glanced up at him, her beautiful face reflecting her concern. \*I’m afraid not. You destroyed the testing ground for neophyte Progenitors and vanquished the creature that ran it, but I’m sure it’s already been rebuilt. The overlord of that domain is... powerful.\*

\*Is that what that place was?\* he asked, looking down at her curiously. \*A testing ground?\*

\*I believe so,\* she replied, her expression grim. \*A place of temptation, which turned to terrible nightmares when you rejected that ancient horror’s offer. I’ve been thinking about all your encounters there and it’s the only explanation that fits.\*

\*I remember the eyes in the sky...\* John said quietly. \*I could feel its outrage when I refused its visions of conquest... and its disgust when I changed the husks of drained thralls into an image of the girls sleeping peacefully.\*

Athena gently stroked his face, a fond smile appearing on hers. \*You’ve always drawn your strength from them... but not the way a Progenitor abuses his thralls. Clearly that monster finds the concept of love to be utterly abhorrent.\*

He slipped an arm around her waist, holding her close. \*Are you in danger here?\*

Her brief hesitation spoke volumes. \*Not at the moment. But there’s legions of those creatures out there... they’re searching for this place.\*

John looked out through the battlements again at the colossal beast, watching it moving perpendicular to the wall rather than heading straight towards them. \*Why isn’t it heading this way? This fortress is vast... how can it not see us?\*

\*The Astral Plane doesn’t work that way... it’s not like a big field which you can roam around and see whatever there is to see,\* she patiently explained. \*You need to know the specific location of an ethereal construct before you can visit... it’s why the Ashanath subplane has stayed safely inviolate for all these millennia.\*

\*But those mist creatures have started looking for us in earnest,\* John said, turning his attention to the glowing girl beside him. \*And you would have mentioned it last night if you’d seen them before.\*

She nodded, brows furrowing. \*They only started homing in on our location today.\*

\*Alyssa...\* John said, his eyes widening as he connected the dots. \*Her confrontation with the Kirrix Hive Mind!\*

\*She’s grown incredibly strong, John. What she did took phenomenal amounts of power,\* Athena said, with no small amount of pride. Her expression darkened as she continued, \*But flaunting your psychic potency in such a fashion sends out echoes... deep into the Astral. We’ve seen it once before... and suffered the consequences.\*

He gazed out into the distance, his mind wandering. \*When I tried to bring back Catherine Voss... and that portal opened on New Eden.\*

\*You drew the creatures towards you like a lodestone,\* Athena said, confirming his suspicions. \*You only got away with doing the same thing for Sakura, because you must have caught the ancient beast by surprise. By the time it realised what you were doing, you’d already finished.\*

\*But that second time it was ready and sent one of its minions to attack,\* John muttered, nodding his agreement. He mulled that over for a moment, then looked into Athena’s glowing eyes. \*Karron?\*

\*I know how much you want to do that for her... but I have to advise against it,\* she said quietly, her voice full of sympathy.

John clenched his jaw and turned his baleful glare on the monsters lurking out there on the horizon.

Athena waited patiently, letting him get his anger under control. When some of the tension eased from his shoulders, she said, \*For the time being, I believe this place is safe from detection. However, another dramatic display of psychic power from here, would be like shouting our location from the rooftops.\*

He nodded his understanding. \*If you’re under any threat, let Alyssa know immediately and we’ll do whatever we can to protect you.\*

She stood on tiptoe and brushed her lips against his cheek. \*It’s lovely knowing you care. Thank you.\*

\*You must know how I feel about you?\* he asked with a warm smile, stroking her back.

\*Enough to keep me around long after I should have faded away,\* she replied quietly, gazing into his eyes. \*I truly appreciate everything you’ve done for me... and I’m sorry I leave you feeling frustrated sometimes. I don’t do it to deliberately provoke you, I just can’t help behaving that way, even when I know you’re desperate for clear answers.\*

\*I suppose I’ve only got myself to blame,\* he said, giving her an understanding smile. \*When I turned Alyssa into a Progenitor, apparently I decided her spirit guide should be mysterious and enigmatic.\*

She frowned and rubbed her bottom again. \*It seems you’ve found a way to correct those little character traits.\*

He joined her in stroking her firm rump, making her moan quietly as she responded to his touch. \*While you’re feeling particularly forthright, would you care to explain what happened with Alyssa’s ears? She only made a cosmetic change, but you altered her DNA...\*

Athena smiled at him and tapped a finger on the tip of his nose. \*Actually, you’re to blame for that.\*

\*Me?\* he asked in confusion. \*Why would you think that?\*

She looked at him with respect as she gently caressed his temple. \*Catching your guide by surprise the way you did was an inspired move. You forced him to relinquish control of numerous new abilities and you’ve experienced a significant increase in psychic strength.\* Tilting her head to one side, she continued, \*Then you simply... shared the wealth... amongst the girls.\*

\*But I didn’t even know Alyssa was making those changes to her ears,\* he protested with a frown of confusion.

\*No, but you gifted me with information on psychic runes and I enhanced Alyssa with those capabilities while she was modifying her appearance,\* Athena explained with a wry smile. \*She isn’t the only one you’ve been subconsciously upgrading on a regular basis.\*

\*Dana...\* John murmured, with sudden understanding.

She nodded, confirming he was correct. \*Keep feeding her regularly; it will pay dividends in the future as she gets exposed to more technology.\*

\*I’m sure she’ll be overjoyed to hear that,\* John said with a chuckle.

\*Was there anything else you wanted to discuss?\*

\*Actually, there is one last thing,\* he replied, remembering his earlier conversation with Alyssa. \*You know how much difficulty I normally have entering the Astral plane, with my guide constantly interfering, but he didn’t appear to offer any resistance to me being dragged in there for those nightmares. Was he powerless to stop the mist monsters from attacking me, or was there a more sinister reason why he didn’t fight to prevent it?\*

Athena appeared troubled and replied in a hushed voice, \*I think you’re right to suspect foul play. If Alyssa were to be killed on a Spirit Walk, her consciousness would be permanently destroyed. If that happened, I’d be free to take over complete control of her body. Considering the state of war between you and your guide, I can only assume that he was hoping for a similar outcome for you all along.\*

\*Then why did he help me last time?\* John asked in confusion. \*He grudgingly gave me that runic knowledge before I caught him by surprise and acquired much more by force. Without those runes, I would have stood no chance.\*

\*I’m sorry, I don’t know the answer to that,\* she replied, giving him an apologetic shrug.

John looked her in the eyes. \*Athena... do you feel any desire to control Alyssa’s body?\*

She didn’t blink as she met his probing gaze. \*No, absolutely not.\*

\*Why?\* he asked gently. \*The lure to be the dominant personality must be a powerful one, especially as you’d be able to live your life as you see fit.\*

Turning to look away into the distance, she said in a quiet introspective voice, \*Because that’s not my life to live. My purpose has always been to support Alyssa however I can and she’s been so kind to me in return, letting me share many wonderful experiences with her. Not only that, but I literally owe my continued existence to her decision not to absorb me. The thought of her dying fills me with absolute horror... I would sacrifice myself in a heartbeat to prevent such a tragedy from occurring.\*

John slipped his hand into hers and gave it an affectionate squeeze. \*I’m very glad she made that decision too.\*

Athena brushed her lips against his, a teasing sparkle in her eyes. \*If you’re in no hurry to leave, perhaps we might retire to the house for a while? I’m struggling to resist the urge to continue this discussion in vague Oracle-like pronouncements.\*

John gathered her into his arms, a playful smile on his face. \*That’s unfortunate. It sounds like I’ll need to take a firm hand with you to stop you falling into bad habits...\*

Athena nodded and shot him a smouldering look as they soared up to the keep’s parapet.

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Faye Primary withdrew from her physical presence and returned to the Cyber-Realm so that she could more efficiently monitor the rescue operation. Her avatars were all busy with various tasks, so she reviewed their operational effectiveness to make sure all was proceeding as expected. Faye Secondary was currently on the Bridge, manoeuvring the Invictus so that it was flush with the final hive ship. A feathering of retro-thrusters brought the white battlecruiser to a halt alongside the larger ochre Kirrix vessel. Once she was certain the two ships were correctly aligned, Faye deployed the umbilical, carefully connecting the Invictus’ hangar to the broad hull doors near the rear of the hive ship. The Kirrix had used that entrance to take their prisoners to the infestation chamber, which meant it was also the fastest egress point for the colonists.

Avatars Tertiary through to Senary were overseeing the maintenance bots, each avatar keeping a watchful eye on six of the robots as they operated the Sonic Cannons on the infested colonists. While people were wary of her holographic sprites, they found her considerably less alarming than the huge grinning automatons. By keeping her voice gentle and reassuring, Faye had managed to coax 99.8% of the infested colonists into being treated, leaving only 64 incidents where she needed to ask one of the girls to intervene and calm a panicked civilian.

Finally, avatars Septenary through to Duodenary were attempting to identify devastated parents amongst the most traumatised of the colonists. Faye Primary glanced through the images of grieving Terrans, feeling nothing but sympathy for those heartbroken souls. She couldn’t imagine the pain they must be feeling; to have experienced the wonder of bringing life into the Universe, only to have their loved ones so cruelly taken away from them was beyond horrifying. Those poor people were hardly in a receptive state to talk to anyone, let alone a perky winged fairy, so Faye accepted the occasional furious outburst from a grieving parent without complaint.

Her main concern was that she might be doing them more harm than good with her questions, so after a quick review of all the Lionesses to make sure they didn’t need her assistance, she returned to her physical presence. Faye opened her eyes, looking around her darkened quarters. She could see in the dark with a variety of optical enhancements, like infrared, mag-view, or low-light, but she had memorised the precise layout of her room as soon as it was given to her. Rising from her bed, she took fifteen steps towards the door, while sending an instruction through the Invictus’ digital network to open it remotely.

She timed her foot speed perfectly, so that when she arrived, the door had slid open just enough to accommodate the width of her shoulders. She sent the close command immediately afterwards, the door not having a chance to fully open before it was closing again behind her. Turning right, she strolled down the Deck Two corridor, heading towards the dimly lit Captain’s quarters. Alyssa had returned to the hangar to help with the relief effort, but John and Helene were still fast asleep in the middle of the bed. Faye padded inside the bedroom, taking a minor detour into the walk-in-wardrobe to retrieve some apparel for the aquatic beauty.

After draping the clothing across the high-backed chair, Faye walked silently over to the bed and sat down beside John. He looked so handsome lying asleep like that, a lovely smile on his face as he lay with an arm curled protectively around Helene. Faye was loathe to disturb him, but John had agreed to speak with all the colonists and request their cooperation with her holographic avatars. The girls had already started boarding the hive ship to rescue the last set of prisoners, so it wouldn’t be long before all the freed Brecken’s World colonists would be gathered in the hangar.

Faye watched via Sakura’s helmet camera as the Asian girl sprinted down the corridors of that hive ship at incredible speed, then barrelled through the open doors into the infestation chamber. The Hive Lord barely had a chance to react to her presence as she charged towards him, her twin ninjato rimed in ice. He started to open his maw to issue a defiant hiss, when she kicked off the ground, whistling winds lifting her higher to sail over his head. Sakura lashed out with both blades as she swooped past, decapitating and instantly slaying the monster. She skidded to a halt as she landed, the Hive Lord collapsing onto the deck behind her with a crash, green ichor spurting from its neck. Without giving the foul creature a second glance, Sakura raced through the room, looking for any sign of Kirrix troops.

Monitoring the helmet cameras built into the other Paragon suits, Faye could see Alyssa, Calara, and the twins striding down the corridor towards the infestation chamber. By the time they arrived at the entrance, Sakura had eliminated four Kirrix drones in attendance and had started slicing her way through the locks on the resin cages. Faye knew that Alyssa would be carefully monitoring Tashana for any signs of distress, but she couldn’t help checking on the Maliri girl just to be sure. Much to Faye’s relief, Tashana seemed to be calm and in control. The light from the Paragon HUD reflected off the source of that strength, the gleaming white collar encircling her slender neck.

Faye turned her attention back to the sleeping couple beside her and smiled as she began to sing. The song she had chosen was originally Terran, but she had translated it into ancient Maliri, the softer enunciation suiting its wistful nature. It didn’t take long for John to stir, his sharp hearing picking up her melodious voice as it echoed around the bedroom.

“I didn’t know you were a dreamer, Faye,” he said with a smile, referring to the lyrics as he opened his eyes. “What does your heart desire?”

She blushed, having forgotten that he was fluent in Maliri. “If I tell you, my wish won’t come true.”

“We wouldn’t want that.” John stretched, being careful not to wake Helene. “Everything okay?”

“I’m sorry to disturb you. I just wanted to let you know that we’ve docked with the final hive ship and the girls are evacuating the last set of prisoners,” she explained, appreciating the opportunity to change the subject.

He grimaced, looking guilty. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep, I should be down there helping them.”

She placed a purple hand on his arm and stroked him soothingly. “Don’t worry, everything’s under control. I just wondered if you could vouch for me with the colonists? We can project your image into the Primary Hangar so you can address all of them at once.”

“Of course, I remember you asking,” he agreed, sliding away from Helene and gently transferring her head from his shoulder to the pillow. John climbed out of bed then looked down at the sleeping girl. “Could you keep Helene company for me please? I don’t want her to wake up alone.”

Faye bobbed her head in agreement. “No problem at all.”

John gave her a grateful smile, then glanced at the wardrobe. “Full-dress uniform or my Paragon suit?”

“I’d recommend your Lion armour,” Faye replied, after giving his question 0.156 second’s thought. She counted off the reasons with her fingers. “With the gold embossing on your body armour, there’ll be no mistaking your identity. The girls are already wearing their Paragon suits, so you’ll be coordinated with them, presenting a unified image of the Lion with his Lionesses. The colonists are scared and traumatised, so seeing you geared for battle will be a comforting reminder that you’re there to protect them. Finally, the colonists will have seen the video of you annihilating the Kirrix on Khalgron, so that will subconsciously remind them of the fate of their tormentors, hopefully giving them some closure.”

He looked at her in surprise, before breaking into a fond smile. “All excellent points, thank you.”

“You’re welcome!”

John disappeared into the wardrobe, returning a minute later in a fresh form-fitting body suit. He spotted the clothing Faye had picked out for Helene draped across the chair and chuckled. “Nice choice.”

“It’s customary,” Faye replied, with a twinkle in her luminous eyes.

“Thanks for looking after her, honey,” he said, leaning down to give the purple girl a tender kiss.

Her cupid-bow lips responded to his, with Faye activating dozens of subroutines to perfectly mimic the lessons she’d received from Rachel. She kept her jaw relaxed but her lips firm enough to provide pleasing resistance for John. The tip of her tongue flickered out as if to taste him, as well as offering the invitation to escalate the clinch if he chose. John deepened the kiss and Faye responded with a soft moan, the streams of tactile data she was receiving making her circuits tingle with the increase in bandwidth.

“You’re a hell of a kisser, Faye,” he marvelled when he pulled back, gently cupping her face as he kissed the tip of her nose.

She giggled shyly, gazing back at him with big eyes. “I can’t wait to show you what else I can do...”

“We’ll have that second date soon, I promise,” he said, stroking her head before waving goodbye and entering the express grav-tube.

Faye returned his wave and watched him leave, tracking him on the security cameras as he put on his armour and headed down to the Primary Hangar. When he reached Deck Nine, she met him with a holographic avatar and the two of them watched the stream of bedraggled prisoners emerging from the final hive ship via the umbilical. Faye spoke quietly with John, discussing the best way to address the colonists, until they decided to use the audio amplification from his suit, accompanied by an enlarged holographic projection. He gave her a grateful nod, then joined the girls in bringing the last Terrans aboard the Invictus.

Helene turned in her sleep, drawing Faye’s attention. The aquatic girl rolled over so that she was lying on her back, the covers slipping down to reveal her rounded tummy. With a wistful look on her elfin face, Faye reached out to gently stroke Helene’s curved stomach, her fingertips brushing ever-so-lightly over soft teal skin. She could only imagine what it must be like to experience that level of intimacy with John; to willingly swallow his cum, knowing that doing so would let him change her body and mind however he saw fit. It was an act of absolute trust that she longed for desperately, but she knew it was something she would never be able to experience... except in her wildest dreams.

“Mmm, that feels wonderful,” Helene murmured, a contented smile on her face when she eventually stirred.

“I’m so sorry!” Faye blurted out. “I didn’t mean to disturb you!”

Helene caught her dainty purple hand before the sprite could pull it away. “There’s no need to apologise, it was a lovely way to wake up. Please continue if you want to.”

Faye nodded, then sat closer and followed the curve of the aquatic girl’s belly with her hand. “Does that feel okay?”

The young woman nodded, gazing at Faye with her inquisitive baby-blue eyes. “Faye... you looked so sad when I woke up. What’s the matter?”

The purple girl winced, annoyed at herself for letting her expression reflect the melancholy nature of the data she had been processing. Faye decided she’d build a failsafe subroutine, so she could keep her face neutral when she was experiencing anything that could be interpreted as a negative emotion. After all, avoiding upsetting the crew was of paramount importance.

“Nothing’s the matter, I’m fine!” she replied with a bright smile.

“You should be able to tell a friend if something’s upsetting you,” Helene said earnestly, looking up at the petite girl. Her face suddenly shadowed with concern. “We are friends aren’t we, Faye?”

Faye narrowed her eyes as she looked at the aquatic girl’s artfully-innocent expression. “You’re playing dirty!”

Helene smiled and placed her hand atop Faye’s. “Only because I care about you. You’ve been so kind to me since I arrived here, I’d feel terrible if I wasn’t able to help you in return...”

With a groan, Faye held up her hands in surrender. “Okay, stop... You win!”

Opening her arms to the diminutive girl, Helene embraced the purple sprite when she lay down beside her. “Good. Now, tell me what’s wrong...”

Faye was quiet for a long moment, then said softly, “Nothing’s wrong... I just feel a bit sad.”

“Why’s that?” Helene asked, brushing her fingers through Faye’s mane of dark-purple hair.

Reaching down to place her hand on Helene’s swollen tummy again, Faye replied, “You’ve only known John for a week, but you’ve already become lovers and he’s fed you several times. He’s about to gift you some of his psychic strength to give you special abilities, because he cares about you and wants to make you happy. That’s what Alyssa meant when she said that you’d carry a part of him with you forever...”

“I didn’t know!” the Abandoned girl exclaimed, her eyes going wide in alarm. She started to sit up as she continued, “I have to find him, tell him to stop before it’s too late!”

Quickly shaking her head, Faye held Helene back, surprising the taller woman with her formidable strength. “I’m not sad because you’re getting psychic powers! Calm down and relax; John fully understands the cost and he’s paying it willingly.” When Helene settled back on the bed again, Faye continued, “I envy you, Helene... that’s all.”

Startled by Faye’s forlorn tone, Helene looked at her with sympathy tinged by confusion. “You’re absolutely amazing! Why would you envy me? You can do things I could only dream about, like helping all the girls when they fight and assisting them with everything else they do. I know John and the girls have nothing but the greatest respect and love for you.”

“You’re so sweet,” Faye said, gently caressing her cheek. “I can see why John fell for you so quickly.”

Helene blushed then shook her head. “But I still don’t understand why you’d be envious of me?”

Faye let out a heavy sigh. “I’ve known John for months and had my body for a couple of weeks, but so far we’ve only kissed a few times.”

“I’ve heard the girls talk about your date with John,” Helene said, giving her an encouraging smile. “From what I’ve heard, it sounded magical! Every girl aboard the ship wishes that she’d gone out for dates with John before falling into bed with him. They think you’re very sensible asking to take things slowly, so you can enjoy every moment of the courtship first...”

“You’re right, the date was very special,” Faye said with a wistful look in her eyes. “But I’m not taking things slowly for my benefit... it’s all for John.”

Shaking her head, Helene frowned. “Sorry, I’m confused again. He seems to be very attracted to you... why would you want a longer courtship solely for him?”

“If I was an organic girl like you, I have no doubt that John and I would’ve become lovers long ago,” Faye replied, her hand caressing Helene’s cum filled belly. Her voice was filled with yearning as she continued, “I’d have spent weeks on my knees, relying on John to take care of me as I was reshaped into his ideal of a perfect woman. I’d look lovingly into his eyes as I swallowed his cum, knowing that he was making me healthy and fertile so that I could carry his children...”

“That sounds wonderful,” Helena murmured with a breathy sigh.

“It would be lovely... but I can never share that with him.” Faye’s voice caught and she looked away, her expression shadowed with pain. “And I still have to take things slowly; I can’t take the chance that John might suddenly find himself repulsed by my artificial nature. I don’t think I could survive that kind of rejection... not from him.”

“Oh, Faye... I’m so sorry,” Helene said, holding the petite girl close. “Have you told John any of this?”

“He knows I’m worried about unsettling him, but there’s nothing he can do... he can’t change my nature.” Faye rested against the soft swells of the aquatic girl’s full breasts and a tear rolled down her cheek, splashing on Helene’s teal skin. “Don’t mind me, I’m just being greedy. What John and I already have together is wonderful.”

“I wish there was something I could do to help,” Helene said, stroking Faye’s back.

Lifting her head up, the purple girl gave her a wistful smile. “I know I want the impossible. Thank you for listening though, it felt good to talk about it.”

“Any time,” Helene said, giving her friend a comforting squeeze.

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John activated his Paragon suit’s flight mode and lifted off the deck, rising several metres so that he was overlooking the thousands of colonists sitting in the Hangar. “Hello everyone. Could I have your attention for a few minutes please.”

A hush descended in the vast room, with over 50,000 colonists gazing up at the white-armoured figure who hovered above them. A holographic depiction of him appeared at his side, magnified so that it was easy to see his face and the Lion iconography on his Paragon armour.

“My name’s Admiral John Blake and I’d like to welcome you aboard the Invictus, although I’m sorry it’s under such terrible circumstances. We’re heading back to Brecken’s World now and in roughly ten minutes, we’ll land at the starport in Valley Falls City so that residents can disembark. I know many of you are from outlying settlements, so my plan is to visit those towns and make drop-offs for the people who live there. We’ll let you know the list of destinations and will announce the name of each town as we arrive.”

“Many of you have suffered unspeakable horrors, with thousands infested by the Kirrix.” Gesturing towards the treatment area, he continued, “We have developed a method of destroying those eggs, which is completely safe, quick, and painless. It will take time for us to treat everyone, but I’ve been assured that we can completely cure every infested colonist within a day.”

“You will have seen my Lionesses assisting with the evacuations from the Hive Ships. One of them is called Faye and she’s been using a number of holograms to oversee the treatment process.” He beckoned to the purple sprite waiting on the deck, and her iridescent wings fluttered as she rose to join him. “Faye helps with the day-to-day running of the Invictus and knows everything that’s going on around here. If you have any questions at all, speak to one of her holograms and she’ll be happy to assist you. Otherwise, feel free to speak to myself or one of the other Lionesses and we’ll do our best to help.”

John’s expression was deeply troubled as he continued, “Finally, I just want to say how saddened I am for everything you’ve been through in the last few days. I know my condolences mean very little, but to all those who lost loved ones to the Kirrix, we’re all deeply sorry for your loss. I fervently wish I could have prevented the attack on your world, but unfortunately, I can’t undo the terrible hardships that you’ve endured. I’m not a doctor, who can help take away your pain. I’m a soldier... so I wiped out the Kirrix forces that attacked Brecken’s World to avenge what they did to you. It’s not much, but I hope that brings you at least some small measure of comfort.”

Moved by his sincerity, most of the colonists began a quiet round of applause, which he acknowledged with a respectful salute. Some appeared too traumatised and numb to participate, but that had never been the purpose of his impromptu speech. John descended to the deck as the clapping died out and he was soon surrounded by civilians who wanted to thank him personally for his kind words.

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The Invictus glided through the cloudbanks above the lush green planet known as Brecken’s World, heading towards the capital, Valley Falls City. The white battlecruiser levelled out as it cleared the cloud cover, flying above the tall forests that blanketed the surface of the world, until it reached the rolling valley where the starport was located. The forests had been cut back there, allowing the settlement plenty of room to expand.

Faye guided the Invictus towards the largest docking bay in the starport, which was lit up like a beacon, standing out amidst the darkened city. She guided the battlecruiser towards the marked landing area, retro-thrusters blazing orange against the white hull as she eased the Invictus down to the deck. Faye had broadcast a planetary-wide announcement declaring their return, so a crowd of colonists was waiting impatiently for their arrival. Many thousands more had escaped the Kirrix occupation by fleeing into the dense forests surrounding the city, and while word had spread of the liberation, those colonists had a long trek ahead of them to return.

When the Invictus had landed safely, Faye opened the massive hull doors, allowing the crowds of civilians to rush inside. The hangar was soon filled with tearful reunions as friends and family hugged those they thought they’d lost forever. John watched the embracing people with a smile, glad to see those moments of joy after being surrounded by so many traumatised colonists. He felt a hand touch his arm and turned to see Alyssa accompanied by an older, weather-beaten man in a dishevelled suit.

“John, this is Stefan Vaughn, the planetary governor,” Alyssa said, introducing her companion.

“It’s an honour to meet you, Admiral Blake,” the governor said, sticking out his callused hand. “I can’t thank you enough for getting here in the nick of time.”

John carefully shook the man’s hand with an armoured gauntlet. “No thanks necessary, Governor Vaughn.”

Stepping closer, the grey-haired governor whispered in a quiet voice, “I saw with my own eyes what those goddamn Kirrix monsters were doing to people. Those fuckers had me lined up next... until one of your Lionesses swooped in like an avenging angel and gutted that rapist sonofabitch. Believe me, I’ll be grateful to that little lady until my dying day!”

Nodding his understanding, John glanced over at the treatment area. “I just wish we could’ve got here fast enough for them too...”

Vaughn shook his head. “I heard some of my people demanding to know why you didn’t get here in time, but Alyssa set them right. She said you weren’t even in Terran Space when we got attacked.”

\*Everything okay?\* John asked Alyssa, glancing in her direction.

\*Some colonists were hurt and angry after what the Kirrix did to them... they were just lashing out,\* Alyssa replied, her eyes meeting his. \*Most of the resentment is directed at Buckingham for recalling the border fleet and leaving them exposed.\*

“We rushed to the border worlds as fast as we could,” John explained with a rueful frown. “But first we had to save Terra and the Federation fleet from the Kintark invasion, otherwise everything would’ve been lost.”

“Fucking Admiralty!” Vaughn sneered and spat on the deck. “Maybe you should’ve let those bastards burn. I always suspected they never gave a shit about people out on the rim... this just proved it.”

“That might’ve been true in the past,” John said, giving him a sympathetic look. “But things are very different now.”

“I grew up on Karron, so I know exactly what you mean,” Alyssa interjected, a flare of anger in her eyes as she turned to face the Brecken’s World governor. “That’s why we brought a shitstorm down on High Command and fucked up all the corrupt Admirals!”

“You don’t look like a worm girl,” Vaughn said, eyeing her appraisingly. He broke out in a smile. “But you sure sound like one.”

Alyssa winked at him as she calmed down. “Fleet Admiral Devereux is very different from Buckingham. Give her a chance, she might surprise you.”

He nodded, looking thoughtful. “Maybe I will... she can’t be any worse.”

John caught the man’s eye and said, “We could really use your help, Governor. The Invictus isn’t equipped to cater for this many people; would you be able to arrange food and drink to be brought here for everyone waiting to be treated for egg infestation?”

Vaughn gave him a warm smile. “It’s the least I can do. You just concentrate on getting that Kirrix shit out of my people; let me and my boys take care of the rest, okay?”

“Will do,” John replied, returning his smile.

The governor turned to face the crowd and putting two fingers in his mouth, let out a piercing whistle. He managed to get the attention of most of the colonists, and a dozen men moved to join him, obviously used to being summoned in such a fashion. Vaughn nodded to John and Alyssa, then walked away to join his team, who listened attentively as he explained what he needed from them.

\*I like him,\* Alyssa said, slipping her arm around John’s waist. \*His heart seems to be in the right place.\*

John watched as the governor and his team spread out to get more volunteers to assist with gathering supplies. \*He does seem to care about his people... but there’s a lot of resentment here towards the Admiralty.\*

\*I’ve kept Lynette informed. She was expecting this kind of backlash,\* Alyssa said, glancing up at him. \*She hopes the planetary infrastructure improvements she has planned will show that Terra really does care about the border worlds.\*

\*I hope it’s enough,\* John said, his gaze sweeping over the crowds as he looked for distinctive figures in white armour. He froze when he saw Irillith being confronted by several angry-looking men and quickly strode in that direction. \*Have the girls send any disgruntled colonists to me, okay? I don’t want them bearing the brunt of any misplaced anger.\*

\*Alright, will do,\* Alyssa agreed, smiling when John appeared at the Maliri girl’s side and the colonists immediately backed down.

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Helene studied the holographic Empire Map and frowned as she focused on the region of Terran Federation space known as the Outer Rim. She stared at the border with Kirrix Space, which was clearly marked with an ominous red line. “Faye, why would people settle this far away from Terra and so close to the Kirrix if it’s that dangerous?”

“Brecken’s World is a frontier colony and the land is cheap because it’s lacking in settlement facilities. The threat of Kirrix invasion makes buying land even cheaper,” Faye explained, showing her a zoomed in view of Brecken’s World. “Only 12% of this moon has been settled by the colonists. If Lynette is able to secure the border to prevent further Kirrix raids, as well as improve the infrastructure here, this world will become highly sought-after. The existing colonists will become very rich selling off land for highly-inflated prices that they bought cheaply.”

Frowning as she examined the map, Helene said, “It seems foolish to risk your life like that. Is money really that important?”

Faye smiled at her indulgently. “Some people seem to think so. I take it you didn’t use money in Neptra village?”

The aquatic girl shook her head. “Everybody worked on whatever tasks they were assigned by the Elders. Shelter, clothing, and food were given to all.”

“It gets a bit more complicated when your village gets really big, with too many people for the elders to keep track of the tasks they’re supposed to be doing,” the sprite gently explained. She paused for a moment before continuing, “Perhaps it might be useful for me to tell you about Terran civilisation and how it developed over the millennia. Humanity began with tribes of people living in villages, much like yours.”

“That sounds fascinating!” Helene enthused, sitting up straighter.

John stepped out of the grav-tube, greeting Faye and Helene with a weary smile. “Hi ladies. I’m sorry I’ve been gone so long, I didn’t mean to keep you waiting.”

“Hey John!” Helene replied, brightening as she turned to him. “It’s okay, I’ve been having a nice time with Faye. She’s been teaching me more about the Terran Federation; it’s been really interesting learning about its colonies and history.”

“I was about to go and make dinner for the girls, and just wondered if you wanted to join me? But don’t let me interrupt if you’re at a good bit,” he said, glancing at the image of Brecken’s World.

Helene darted a conflicted look at Faye, who laughed and shooed her on. “Go and have fun with John. You can learn about Terran history any time.”

“Thanks Faye!” Helene said with a smile, hugging her petite companion.

Faye patted her back, then gestured to the clothing draped over the chair. “I thought you might like to wear one of John’s shirts; it’s become a bit of a custom when a new girl joins the crew.”

“Oh, thank you!” the aquatic girl gushed, sliding off the bed and reaching for the white shirt.

Turning to look at John, Faye said gratefully, “Thank you for speaking with the colonists. People are really starting to open up to my avatars.”

He nodded and gave her an amiable shrug. “I thought they’d come around. I just had to explain that they needed to indulge our resident psychotic AI and her intrusive questioning, otherwise she’d go on a murderous rampage.”

“There’s no guarantees... that’s still the best way to deal with impudent organics,” Faye said with a wicked grin, rubbing her hands together as if plotting their doom.

John laughed until he saw Helene’s look of horror. “It’s just a running joke, honey.”

Faye slipped off the bed and gave him a hug. “John’s only kidding, he said nice things about me.”

“Oh, okay,” the aquatic girl said, looking at them in confusion. She slipped John’s shirt on and did up a couple of buttons. “This material feels lovely, but it’s much too big...”

Studying the outfit with an appraising eye, Faye frowned and nodded her agreement as she glanced at John. “You took a lot longer to return than I anticipated. She’s already absorbed your last load.”

“Perhaps you should fill me up again?” Helene asked seductively, padding over to John with a hungry gleam in her eyes.

Faye stood on tiptoe to give John a peck on the cheek. “I’ll give you two some privacy.” She turned to waved goodbye to Helene as she headed for the grav-tubes. “Thanks for the chat, I really enjoyed it.”

“Me too,” the young woman agreed, returning Faye’s wave before she descended out of sight.

John brushed the backs of his fingers against Helene’s cheek. “I’ve made all the changes to your DNA and given you a third helix. How are you feeling now?”

She leaned into his hand, looking up at him adoringly. “The same as before... except now I feel full of energy!”

“That’s great to hear; I’m glad there were no side-effects,” he said with a tired smile.

Helene looked at him with concern. “Are you okay? You seem... sad.”

He nodded, putting on a brave face. “I’m alright, it’s just been a long day.”

She gave him a gentle kiss and looked into his eyes. “Please tell me what’s wrong, I’m worried about you...”

John let her guide him to the bed where he lay down beside her. “It has been a long day, but the last few hours were tough going. Lots of colonists are very upset about what the Kirrix did to them... and they’re looking to blame someone for what happened.”

“But you just saved them all!” Helene protested, looking bewildered. “Why would they blame you?”

“They don’t really blame me personally, but I am an authority figure that represents the Terran Federation... and they need to vent their anger at someone.” He rubbed his face, then folded his hands behind his head. “The truth is that High Command let them down very badly and it’s perfectly understandable that they’re furious about it.”

Helene gave him a look of sympathy and stroked his chest. “It still doesn’t seem very fair to me.”

“If it makes them feel better, I’m happy to listen to their complaints,” he said, closing his eyes and enjoying her loving touch.

She leaned in and kissed him. “You just relax. I’m going to give my hero his proper reward...”

John helped her strip off his clothes and smiled when he felt her soft lips envelop his cock. He then did as she asked, resting comfortably on the bed as Helene gave him a slow, sensuous blowjob. She took her time worshipping his shaft, gradually building up his pleasure until he was pumping a heavy load into her empty stomach. Helene sucked him gently until he’d completely finished, then eased off before he got too sensitive.

When he finally opened his eyes, he saw her watching him with a contented smile on her face, her hands slowly caressing her impressive new curves. “That was amazing,” he said with a smile, brushing his fingers over the soft cotton stretched taut over her swollen belly. “And you look absolutely gorgeous... come and see for yourself.”

He led her into the wardrobe and showed her a mirror, the white shirt making her look pure and innocent, despite her rounded tummy proving the contrary.

“I love seeing myself like this,” Helene said in a hushed voice. She ran a hand over her stomach. “I look like a woman should... bringing life into the world.”

Standing behind her, John pulled aside her long green hair and whispered in a teal-hued ear, “Dana started this tradition. She loves the idea of belonging to me... and wearing one of my shirts made her feel that even more. When she’s carrying my baby, she wants to wear my shirts throughout the pregnancy.”

“That’s a lovely thought,” Helene murmured, leaning back against him and sighing as he wrapped his arms around her.

John gently kissed her neck, enjoying hearing her quiet moans as she responded to his caring touch. He suddenly paused, feeling a light flutter of contact against his mind.

“Mmm, don’t stop,” she breathed, nuzzling back against him.

“Don’t stop kissing you?” he asked, lightly brushing his lips across the sensitive skin around her gills, making her shiver in delight. He cradled her curves and opened a door into the mental fortress protecting his mind. “Or don’t stop talking about what it’ll be like when you’re pregnant with my baby?”

John didn’t hear her reply, he was too overwhelmed by the sudden onrush of sensation as he experienced Helene’s feelings of absolute devotion to him. He’d underestimated just how powerful her need to feel like a “complete” woman was; her sense of elation at the thought of being fertile and ready to have his children left him breathless.

\*Wow!\* Alyssa gasped, reeling from the surge through his mind. \*That’s what I’ve been feeling over her empathic bond... but nowhere near as strong!\*

\*And I thought I was yearning to have your babies,\* Edraele murmured in a daze. \*That was thrilling to say the least...\*

Jade sounded overjoyed as she exclaimed, \*You should get her pregnant now, Master! She wants it so much and she’ll be such a lovely mother to your children!\*

John composed himself and smiled as he said, \*I’m sure she’ll be amazing, but I’m not rushing into a decision like that.\*

\*But she’ll look so sexy when she’s pregnant and babies with her skin-tone would look adorable...\* the Nymph persisted.

\*Quiet now, let me concentrate,\* he replied gently, as he tried to adjust to the surges of emotion he was feeling from the aquatic girl in his arms. Kissing Helene’s ear he whispered, “I felt that... Did you realise you were sharing your emotions with me?”

She blinked in surprise, then turned to look at him with big eyes. “What do you mean?”

He cupped her face in both hands, gently stroking her temples with his fingertips. “This is your gift... to share your emotions with people.” John felt a burst of shock that quickly turned to joy. “Careful now, I’m feeling everything you feel...”

She hugged him tight and the outpouring of love he felt from the joyful girl left him unsteady on his feet. “Woah!” he gasped, holding onto her to stop them both from toppling over.

Helene giggled, her blue eyes sparkling. “I’m sorry! I love you and I’m just so excited!”

He laughed, holding onto her for support. “I know, I can tell.”

She took a deep breath and made a visible effort to calm down, the tidal wave of bliss slowly receding until it felt like she had wrapped his mind up in a loving hug. “Is that better?”

John smiled at her and nodded. “That feels wonderful, thank you.”

\*The girls didn’t feel anything,\* Alyssa informed him, sounding thoughtful. \*Is Helene just targeting you? Or does she have limits to her range?\*

\*We’ll test it at dinner tonight,\* John replied, before focusing on Helene again. “We met someone before who could do the same thing and it’s a powerful ability to have. You can share positive emotions or very negative ones... so you need to be careful.”

“Who was this person?” Helene asked, looking at him with concern. “Did something bad happen?”

He felt a shift in his mind, her sudden sense of anxiety flitting through his subconscious. “Just relax... there’s nothing to worry about,” he murmured, his voice soothing. When she calmed down, he took her hand and led her back into the bedroom. John sat beside her on the end of the bed and continued, “Her name was Nkkrrit and she was the last surviving member of her species; a benevolent race of arachnids called the Vulkat. She was lost in her grief and when we boarded her spaceship, we felt her overwhelming sorrow and despair. Nkkrrit had been alone for thousands of years, guarding the graves of her people to prevent anyone looting whatever was left of the Vulkat.”

“That’s so sad,” Helene said, her eyes tearing up as she gazed at him. “To outlive everyone you ever cared about... I can’t even imagine how awful that must have been for her.”

John closed his eyes as he felt the accompanying wave of sorrow sweep over the connection. “I can feel how upset that makes you... and you’re right, it was heartbreaking.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to share that too!” she exclaimed in alarm. Her brow furrowed and Helene looked at him in confusion. “How do I stop doing that?”

\*Think of John as an Island, with you controlling the waves washing up on the beach,\* Alyssa suggested to them both. \*Just pull back the tide.\*

Helene closed her eyes and concentrated, trying to picture that image.

John nodded, a smile of relief on his face as the waves of emotion receded. “That was excellent, honey. Well done.”

Looking at him again, she beamed in delight. “I can’t believe how easy that was! Are psychic powers really that effortless to control?”

\*Telepathy in particular works best by using metaphors like that,\* Alyssa replied, her tone calm and patient. \*Complex tasks can be made very simple, if you use familiar images to let your mind understand a problem. John isn’t really an island and the emotions you were projecting aren’t waves from the sea, but thinking about them like that let you picture both and control the way your powers affected him.\*

“You’re right, that did make it easy to understand,” Helene said thoughtfully.

Alyssa gave her a flirty grin. \*And it helps you’re full of John’s cum... that’ll give you a big boost when you’re using your abilities.\*

Helene glanced down at her rounded tummy then turned to look at John. \*So you were helping me?\*

John shook his head and gave her an encouraging smile. “Only by amplifying what you were doing. Getting your abilities to work was all down to you... and it seems you’re a natural at this.”

She gave him a look filled with wonder. “I can’t remember the last time anyone was genuinely impressed by anything I’d done...”

“The girls manage to amaze me on a daily basis,” he said pulling her in for a hug. “I’m sure you’ll eventually get bored of me telling you how incredible you are...”

“Never!” she exclaimed with a happy laugh.

Releasing her from his embrace, John quickly dressed then offered her a hand. “Come on, let’s go make some dinner for everyone. Feel free to practice your abilities on me while we’re cooking.”

She slipped her slender hand into his and followed him out of the bedroom into the corridor beyond. John felt a light touch on his mind again and a soft swell of contentment swirled through his thoughts, Helene darting a joyful smile at him as she did so. He led her through the Officers’ Lounge to the kitchen, holding the door open so that she could glide through. Helene seemed to have no trouble adjusting to the extra weight she was now carrying, but he realised that unlike the other girls, she had experienced this once before with her pregnancy.

“I wish I could hear your thoughts,” Helene murmured, entranced by his expression. “You looked sad for a moment... what were you thinking about?”

John gave her a rueful look. “I don’t want to dredge up bad memories.”

“It’s okay, I’d rather I know what upset you,” she said, looking up into his eyes.

Placing his hand on her tummy, he said, “Normally the girls take some time to adjust to carrying this much extra weight, but I noticed that you didn’t have that problem... and then I remembered why.”

Helene interlaced her fingers with his. “I wish that my baby could have survived, but she wasn’t fated for this world. I won’t ever forget her, but I’ll honour her memory by being the best mother I can be for the children we have together.”

“That’s a lovely way to remember her,” John replied, stroking her hand. “I didn’t know you were expecting a girl.”

“Elder Myrna said that the shape of my belly made her sure I was having a daughter,” Helene murmured, gazing into the distance as she was lost in her memories. “When I lost my baby, she confirmed it.”

John concentrated on the emotions she was sharing with him. “You seem much calmer now, when you talk about what happened. I can feel a kind of sad acceptance...”

She nodded, meeting his curious gaze and giving him a brave smile. “That’s thanks to you and the girls. When I lost my baby and couldn’t have any more, it felt like my life was over... but now I have a future here with all of you.”

“You do, and we’ll make sure it’s a very happy one,” he agreed, feeling an upswell of joy from her. “Now, what shall we make everyone for dinner?”

“Does anyone have any favourites?” Helene asked, following him into the pantry.

“Well, Dana and Alyssa will eat anything, Jade loves Maliri food, Rachel enjoys more exotic dishes, the twins like trying different Terran food, Calara’s favourite is spaghetti carbonara, and Sakura’s is Okonomiyaki,” he replied, his eyes scanning through the ingredients.

“Can we make everyone’s favourite?” she enquired hopefully.

John laughed and shook his head. “That’s a nice thought, but no, we’d be cooking all night to prepare all those different dishes. I’d like to try my hand at Maliri cuisine one day, but the twins are the real experts.” Making a decision, he continued, “I know, we’ll make carbonara tonight; it’s a filling meal and the girls must be starving. Then we can make Okonomiyaki for lunch tomorrow, and I’ll prepare a Maliri banquet for the evening, that way we’ll keep everybody happy.”

She nodded enthusiastically. “That sounds perfect!”

Working quickly and efficiently, John gathered the ingredients from the chilled shelves, handing over large packets full of spaghetti and pancetta to Helene. He then scooped up the pecorino cheese, parmesan, eggs, garlic, butter, salt, and pepper. “Okay, that’s everything.”

Helene watched him in fascination as he began boiling a pan of water, then started chopping the pancetta.

“Do you want to help?” he asked, smiling at her over his shoulder.

“I do, but I’m also enjoying watching you work,” she replied, her eyes riveted to the flashing knife.

“Okay, you sit this one out,” he said, picking up a bowl and cracking open the eggs. “Maybe you can chat and keep me company instead.”

“Is there anything you’d like to talk about?” she enquired with a smile.

He nodded as he grated black pepper into the bowl. “There was something I was curious about. I just wondered how you feel about the Brimorians?”

Helene frowned and leaned against the counter beside him. “They executed a young man for falling in love with a headstrong girl; after what they did to Firon, I knew they were a cruel people with no compassion in their hearts.”

John turned to stroke her arm in sympathy. “Were there many other incidents of them persecuting your people?”

She pondered that for a moment, before replying, “We didn’t see them very often inside the village; our harvests of kelp fronds were taken away by teams of Abandoned workers. I remember about five years ago, a sickness swept through Neptra and our workers were too ill to bring in the kelp harvest... so the Brimorians executed the headman for not meeting our quotas. That was the last time I saw them actually visit Neptra.”

“What about outside the village?” John asked, noting she’d made the distinction.

Her voice turned sombre as she replied, “Out in the kelp beds you had to be careful. Sometimes groups of Brimorians would pass by and they were usually looking for trouble. The women would flee to the village and the men would continue to work the kelp beds... and sometimes, not all of them would return home.”

“It must have been awful having that threat hanging over you.” He glanced at her as he began to beat the eggs. “What about the history of your people? Do you know much about the Abandoned’s distant past?”

She fidgeted and he could feel her anxiety over the connection. “The Elders told us to never talk about that inside the village... but they would come out to visit us in the kelp beds. There they would teach us the old tongue and tell us their stories.”

“What did you learn?” he asked quietly.

Helene hesitated for a long moment, obviously torn about how to answer. Finally, she replied, “Long ago, the Brimorians used to often come to the villages, to take away unmated women... who would never return. We were warned that the Brimorians would know if we spoke in the village about forbidden things, that they would make an example of those who broke their laws.”

“The Brimorians probably have surveillance equipment monitoring your village, so they can see and hear what’s happening,” John said, his eyes narrowing. He put down the mixing bowl and glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. “It felt like you were going to say something else. Why did you hesitate?”

Helene looked at him with a conflicted expression on her face. “I was going to tell you some of the old stories, about the ancient heroes in their sky-chariots. I used to think those stories were make-believe, but I see them very differently now. They’re based in reality, aren’t they?”

John nodded, adding the pancetta and the garlic to a pan. “That’s right.”

“And that first day on the Invictus, when I met the girls for dinner... all of you got upset when you were talking about the Abandoned, but you weren’t angry at me. Then you told me that the Brimorians did something very bad to my ancestors...” She placed her hand on his arm. “What happened to them, John?”

He turned to her and clasped her hands. “This might be difficult for you to hear. Are you sure you want to know?”

Helene bit her bottom lip and looked worried. “I’ll be brave... I promise.”

After turning down the heat on the pans, he picked Helene up and sat her on one of the worktops. Stepping closer, he wrapped his arms around her, feeling the curve of her tummy nestled against him.

“In the Brimorian Enclave, near the border with the Terran Federation, are dozens of star systems known as the Callopean Shoals. Have you ever heard of it?” he asked, curious how much she might already know.

“The old legends talk of Calypsha, the fabled promised land...” she replied in a hushed voice. “That must be the same place!”

He nodded, recognising the phonetic similarities. “Roughly a hundred years ago, before first contact was made with the Brimorians, Terran explorers stumbled across the Callopean Shoals and discovered many beautiful atoll planets. That triggered a huge rush of Terran colonists, with hundreds-of-thousands of people eager to make planetfall and settle on those unclaimed worlds.”

Helene was spellbound, hanging on his every word. “But the Brimorians had already claimed them!”

“That’s right. Their cities were deep underwater and weren’t detected by the planetary surveys. When the colonists landed, the Brimorians attacked, capturing all the Terran civilians,” John confirmed, his voice turning sombre. “The Terran Federation declared war in retaliation, but their fleets were too evenly matched with the Brimorians and the war ended in a stalemate.”

“What happened to the colonists?” she asked, her eyes going wide.

He gave her a look filled with sympathy. “The Terran Federation abandoned them...”

Helene froze and he could feel the shock radiating off her. “My ancestors...”

“Were those Terran colonists,” he confirmed, watching her intently.

She shook her head in denial, lifting a teal-skinned forearm to show her delicate fins. “That’s not possible! I’m not a Terran!”

His expression became very bleak. “This is where your peoples’ past takes a very dark turn. The Brimorians traded the male colonists as slaves to the Kintark, in exchange for genetic modification technology which they then used on the female colonists. I don’t know how many of those women died in the experiments, but the survivors were changed... so that they could breed with the Brimorians. They were then raped repeatedly for years, forced to give birth to thousands and thousands of hybrids... which became the first generation of the Abandoned.”

Helene looked at him in horror. “No! That can’t be true!”

“I’m afraid there’s no doubt. Rachel looked at your DNA and found a mix of Terran and Brimorian genes; she’s quite certain what I told you is the truth,” he replied grimly. “The Brimorians wanted to create a slave race and that’s exactly what they’ve been doing for the last century. They encouraged the Abandoned to have as many children as possible to breed a vast workforce; we believe there might be billions of your people enslaved throughout the Enclave.”

Tears rolled down her cheeks as she sagged against him. “How could they do that to those poor people?!”

“I don’t know, honey,” John said, slowly rubbing her back. “But I believe you were right about the Brimorians. They must be very cruel to do something so horrible.”

She sobbed quietly for a few minutes, overwhelmed by the enormity of everything he’d revealed. John just held Helene as she wept, whispering loving words in her ear to comfort her.

With a final shuddering sigh, Helene pulled back and stared at him with a troubled look in her eyes. “You said the Brimorians had been bad and you were going to punish them... What are you going to do?”

He brushed the tears from her cheek, caressing her flawless teal skin with his thumb. “I haven’t decided yet. What I do know is that I’m going to liberate the Abandoned... I won’t leave them as slaves to the Brimorians, they’ve suffered for far too long already.”

Her intense gaze softened and she leaned in to give him a tender kiss. “Thank you for caring about my people.”

“When we return to Maliri Space to refit the Invictus, we’ll decide exactly how we’re going to handle this situation,” John said, giving her a supportive smile. His expression darkened as he added, “I’ve got a score to settle with the Brimorians too... they betrayed us to the Kintark in the Battle of Terra. If it wasn’t for Dana finding the hidden cut-off in the shield generators, you could have been killed, along with Calara, Irillith, and Faye.”

“I slept through the whole thing... I had no idea,” she said with a shiver.

“It was a vicious fight, probably one of the closest we’ve fought so far. If the Kintark had been able to deactivate the Invictus’ shields at the start of the battle, we would have had to withdraw far sooner and Terra would have certainly been lost.” He encircled her in his arms, so that she would feel safe in his protective embrace. “I’m actually glad you were asleep though. All the girls were heavily involved in the fighting, so you would’ve been left worrying on your own. As it turned out, you were busy doing something far more important.”

Helene snuggled into him. “Connecting myself to you for eternity...”

“Exactly,” he agreed, enjoying holding the contented young woman in his arms. They hugged for a couple of minutes, with John experiencing waves of tender emotions pouring off Helene until he reluctantly pulled back. “This feels lovely, but I need to finish making dinner. Are you feeling alright now?”

She gave him a reassuring smile. “I’ll be fine, go ahead. It was upsetting to find out what really happened to my people... but I’m very glad you told me.”

John scooped out the pasta into a huge serving tray, then added most of the cheese and the eggs to the water left behind. He began mixing it in, then glanced at Helene out of the corner of his eye. “I’m amazed how well you’re coping with knowing the truth; most people would have fallen apart after a shock like that.” His glance turned into a look of admiration. “You’re even stronger than I expected... Edraele and Alyssa were right.”

\*We usually are,\* Alyssa said with a teasing lilt to her voice.

\*Dinner’s nearly ready, can you gather the girls please,\* he requested, finding no reason to disagree with her.

She blew him a telepathic kiss. \*We’re on our way!\*

Helene blushed at his praise. “I can’t wait to meet Edraele. From everything I’ve heard about her, she sounds like an incredible woman.”

“She really is,” he said, adding the final touches to the meal. “And I know she’s looking forward to meeting you too.”

\*We all are,\* Edraele said with amusement. \*The Young Matriarchs are just as eager as I am to get acquainted with the latest girl who’s caught your fancy.\*

When John told Helene that, she gave him a playful grin. “I plan to have a long chat with the Maliri. I need to find out how they persuaded you to get them pregnant!”

John was busy serving up, but he stopped to look her in the eye. “I know how much you want a baby, Helene. If you’re willing to stay on Genthalas with Edraele and her girls, you won’t have to wait until we’ve finished the fight with the Progenitor. I just don’t want to put you and our future child at risk by bringing you into battles with me.”

Her expression mirrored the conflicted thoughts racing through her mind. “I want that so much... but to be apart from you for months... I don’t know if I could stand it.”

“Have a think about it but there’s no rush. You won’t need to make any decisions until we’re about to leave Maliri Space.” John smiled indulgently as he continued, “At the very least, you should wait to meet Edraele and her entourage first. You might decide you can’t stand them and that living on Valaden for months would drive you crazy.”

She laughed and shook her head. “If those Maliri are anything like the girls on the Invictus, they’ll all be wonderfully kind and I’ll end up loving them like sisters.”

He looked wistful as he nodded. “They’re all really lovely young women. I miss them a lot.”

Helene gave John a sympathetic hug, then helped him to carry the plates and cutlery into the dining room. By the time they’d finished setting the table and brought out the steaming bowls of pasta, the girls had started to arrive. Despite greeting him with warm smiles, it was obvious how weary they all were, having fought two intense battles in one day, then spent several harrowing hours taking care of distraught colonists. Even the four Nymphs seemed a little more subdued than normal, but whether that was due to them sensing the quieter mood, or because they were reflecting on the plight of the people in the hangar, he wasn’t completely sure.

John felt Helene slip her hand into his and squeeze it to get his attention. When he turned to look at her, he saw the concern on her face... and a question in those soft blue eyes. It only took him a moment to realise that she was asking for permission. He gave her a subtle nod as the exhausted women approached the dining table.

Taking a deep breath, Helene closed her eyes and imagined a chain of beautiful tropical islands surrounded by a tranquil aquamarine sea. She pushed gentle waves towards those pristine beaches, the water lapping over golden sands. Jade and Alyssa were the first to react, looking at Helene in fascination as they felt the fluttering contact against their minds. Knowing what John had been planning, they let her into their subconscious, feeling a lovely welcoming sensation envelop them. The rest of the girls were oblivious, but the effect on them was immediate and dramatic. As they took their places around the table, they began to relax, with smiles appearing on their faces.

“Oh, this is just what I needed!” Calara exclaimed, her brown eyes lighting up when she saw what they were having for dinner. “I love your carbonara, it’s the best I’ve ever tasted!”

“All his cooking is awesome,” Dana agreed between mouthfuls, having wasted no time tucking in. “I prefer getting a big load, but this is a close second!”

The girls laughed as they started eating, with John circling the table to pour glasses of red wine. “Helene chose what we’re having for the next couple of days. We wanted to spoil all of you after the amazing job you’ve been doing.”

Calara blew a kiss to the aquatic girl. “This was a wonderful choice, thank you!”

“I’d like to try preparing a Maliri meal tomorrow evening,” John said, looking at the twins. “Would either of you be willing to share your secrets?”

“I think we can be persuaded,” Tashana readily agreed.

Irillith nodded, giving him a coy look under her long lashes. “I’m sure you know what our fee will be.”

“The sacrifices I make to expand my culinary repertoire,” he replied with a broad smile, letting Helene’s congenial ambience affect him too.

Soon the dining room was filled with light-hearted chatter, the girls savouring their dinner, the wine, and the exceedingly pleasant company.

Alyssa caught Helene’s eye and gave her a look of gratitude. “This is just what we all needed. Thank you for looking after everyone.”

Helene face lit up with a bright smile. “It was the least I could do.”

Darting a glance at John, the blonde continued, \*How long will this last for?\*

\*Only temporary, I’m afraid,\* he replied. \*Do you remember how eerie and unsettling it was being on the Vulkat ship? As soon as you spoke to Nkkrrit and she stopped channelling her abilities, it wore off immediately.\*

Alyssa nodded, looking thoughtful. \*Either way, a brief break like this was perfect.\*

They finished dinner, with plenty of compliments given to the chef for the excellent meal. After clearing the table, they retired to the sofas with drinks in hand, pairing off and chatting together.

John had Helene sit sideways across his lap, with one hand around her shoulders, the other resting on the slowly diminishing curve of her stomach. He stroked her soothingly as she snuggled into him, savouring the feeling of intimacy with the lovely girl. “You did brilliantly,” he said, giving her an encouraging smile. “Was it difficult reaching out to touch that many minds at once?”

She shook her head. “I just imagined everyone as islands, with me as the sea. I was worried about accidentally hurting anyone, so I tried to make the waves as gentle as possible.”

“The effect was nice and subtle,” Alyssa said, leaning against John and resting her cheek on his shoulder. “I feel all happy and contented now. I needed that after all the shit we’ve been through today.”

“Me too, but I think it’s time to let the girls in on the experiment.” John looked around at his companions and realised that they’d stopped talking to focus on him, Alyssa alerting them telepathically that he wanted to speak with them. “Ladies, I’m really glad you enjoyed the meal, but I’d like to make a confession. The good mood you’re experiencing right now isn’t because of my cooking... we’ve been testing Helene’s new psychic powers.”

Rachel’s grey eyes widened as they darted to Helene, her suspicions confirmed. “I thought something felt a little off! I went from feeling drained after healing wounded colonists for hours, to happy and contented in just a few seconds!”

“It was awful seeing all of you upset,” Helene blurted out, looking anxious. “I just wanted to try to help you feel a bit better. Please forgive me for not asking you first.”

“You sneaky little minx,” Dana said with a grin. “I never felt a thing!”

Calara laughed and nodded. “I normally feel this way when we get together; I never noticed you influencing me either.”

“Helene spent an hour practicing on me, but I wanted to see how she’d cope with a group of people who were unaware,” John explained, looking around at the girls. “It really should be me apologising for not asking your permission first.”

Tashana waved away his apology. “You know we all want to help each other get stronger. Practicing our abilities is the only real way to do that.” She smiled at Helene. “So you’re an empath now... that should open up some interesting possibilities.”

“I asked John for a way to help the colonists,” the aquatic girl explained, giving him a look of gratitude. “Now perhaps I can take away some of their pain, even if it’s just for a little while.”

Sakura’s eyes darted towards John, an unreadable expression on her face. “Have you thought about the kind of combat applications Helene’s new abilities might have?”

He met her gaze and nodded. “I’d still like to keep Helene out of the fighting where possible.”

“I wasn’t even aware she was doing anything,” the Asian girl said quietly, sounding perturbed. She looked around the group. “Did anyone other than Rachel notice?”

The rest of the girls shook their heads, with two exceptions.

“I could feel her caressing my mind,” Jade replied, with an affectionate smile for Helene. “You have a lovely gentle touch.”

“I felt her reaching out too,” Alyssa replied, brushing her fingers through the aquatic girl’s light-green hair. “But we both heard John’s thoughts beforehand, so we knew what to expect.”

“You’re both strong telepaths,” Tashana said thoughtfully. “Maybe that gave you some form of innate resistance to mental manipulation?”

“We had no way of resisting the crippling fear we experienced in the Astral nightmares either,” Irillith said with a shudder. “Being dragged in there was absolutely terrifying.”

John shared a glance with Alyssa. “That feeling of terror was overpowering, but we both managed to shake it off...”

Tashana studied the newest member of the psychic club with a speculative gleam in her eyes. “Maybe Helene can help the rest of us train to build up our resistance?”

Helene looked thrilled. “If there’s any way I can help all of you, I’ll gladly do it!”

“Easy there, Mistress Wizard,” John said, smiling at her affectionately. “Just focus on helping the colonists for now, we can get into training with the girls later.”

She swooned in his arms, a look of disbelief on her face. “Y-you’re right! I can do magic now!”

He nodded, fascinated by the change in her expression at that realisation. For a girl who had been so lacking in self-esteem, it was wonderful to see a new sparkle of confidence in her beguiling eyes. John held Helene close while she mentally readjusted to her new talents, then turned to look at the girls who were all watching her with indulgent smiles on their faces.

“We better head back down to the hangar again in a few minutes. While you’re interacting with the colonists, I’d like you all to keep wearing Paragon suits, just in case. I know some of those people have been getting agitated and it’s easier for me to spot you in the crowds when you’re wearing armour.” He glanced down at Helene and added, “That goes for you too, honey. I’ll stay with you, but if there’s any trouble I want you to be protected.”

“Okay,” she murmured, still shocked at the thought of having magic of her own.

He glanced at the ship’s chronometer, noting that it was eight in the evening. “I think we should work shifts, with half of us getting some rest, while the others keep an eye on the colonists overnight.”

“My sisters and I don’t need as much sleep,” Jade said, putting her arms around the Nymphs snuggled up with her. “We’ll be happy to keep the colonists company until they leave.”

“Is that okay with you four?” John asked the luscious green-skinned nurses.

Leylira gave John a smouldering look. “I could feel all those men staring lustfully at me, Master. It made this one want you so much...”

“Plenty of the women seem quite intrigued too,” Neysa noted, arousal glinting in her emerald eyes.

John smiled affectionately at the Nymphs. “I’m definitely going to have to reward all of you for being so helpful when the colonists leave.” He looked at the girls and continued, “So, do I have any volunteers for a night shift?”

“It means getting loaded up...” Alyssa added with a coy smile.

Immediately all the girls raised their hands, broad grins on their faces.

John laughed at their eagerness. “Okay, how about me, Helene, Rachel, and the twins for the first shift, while the rest of you get some sleep. We’ll call it a night at 2:00am, then Alyssa, Calara, Sakura, and Dana can take over.”

Rachel nodded decisively. “That sounds perfect. I should be able to heal all the wounded by then.”

Dana sprang to her feet. “Right, I’m off to bed! Soon as I wake up, it’ll be time for a snack!”

The brunette rolled her eyes fondly at her lover, while the rest of the girls laughed.

John helped Helene off his lap, then rose to his feet and offered Alyssa a hand. “Have a good rest, beautiful, you’ve earned it.”

“I had that nap earlier, so I’m actually not feeling all that tired. I’ll stay awake for a while and focus on channelling energy to the girls that need it,” she said, giving him a kiss. Putting her arm around Calara, she gave him a coy smile. “And I think I’ll enjoy a bit of girl time too...”

The Latina hugged her back, then blew John a flirtatious kiss as they sauntered away. Dana and Sakura trailed after them, but they were both tired after exerting themselves in the fighting and ready for some sleep.

John followed the girls out of the Officers’ Lounge and reached out to clasp Rachel’s hand, falling into step beside her. “How’ve you been getting on with the healing?”

Her bright smile of greeting faded as she replied, “The Kirrix used their salve to treat the injured, which stopped any gunshot wounds from getting infected. I haven’t come across any really severe injuries, but you know what the Kirrix do to people they think won’t survive the two week incubation period. I’ve heard from multiple colonists that critically injured friends and family members were dragged away... and haven’t been seen since.”

“I just hope Alyssa’s peace treaty holds... for the Kirrix’s sake,” John muttered, grinding his teeth in anger. “Because I’m sorely tempted to deal with them permanently.”

Rachel brushed her thumb against the back of his hand. “I can’t even imagine the crushing weight of responsibility hanging over you, when you have to make a decision of that magnitude. One thing I want you to always remember, is that we’ll back you whatever you decide... without a moment’s hesitation.”

Touched by her words, he looked into those sharp grey eyes that saw too much. “Thank you. It makes a huge difference knowing that I won’t have to deal with any recriminations or condemnation from the girls... and you in particular. You know how much I admire you, Rachel... I’d be devastated if I thought I’d lost your respect.”

“That’ll never happen,” she said, bumping hips with him as they walked towards the bedroom.

Taking the express grav-tubes down to the Armoury, John led Helene over to one of the armour-equipping frames. She watched the twins step into armoured boots and walk away fully sheathed in crystal Alyssium plating a few seconds later.

He saw her anxious expression and said, “There’s no need to be nervous. It’s really very simple to operate. The armour might be a little too large for you, but it should still be comfortable.”

She turned to face him and shook her head. “I’m not scared, I know you’d never put me at risk. It’s just that I want to help those poor people and I don’t think I’ll seem very sympathetic if I’m hidden away behind a suit of armour.”

John thought about that for a moment and was reluctantly forced to agree. “Okay, but I’ll be staying beside you the entire time.”

Helene hugged him. “Thank you.”

Glancing up at an overhead camera, he called out, “Faye, please could you start asking any of the grieving parents you’ve identified to meet with us?”

She appeared beside him in a burst of light. “Hey, John. I’ve actually spent the last few hours offering those colonists grief counselling. They were quite receptive after you informed them that I was another of your Lionesses. The colonists seem to think that my physical presence is the real me and that I’m some kind of exotic alien who uses holograms to keep an eye on the maintenance robots.”

“I should have spoken to them earlier,” he said, relieved to hear that she was no longer being treated with suspicion. “We’ll have to remember that with the colonists from the rest of the border worlds.”

“Please do, I’ve been getting loads of hugs!” Faye exclaimed with delight. “Apparently, the colonists think that I’m ‘cute as a button’.”

“They’re not wrong,” he said with a chuckle, as he walked into his armour equipping frame and donned his Lion embossed Paragon suit.

They descended to Deck Nine, where the twins said their goodbyes and left to check on the colonists waiting to be treated for Kirrix infestation. Rachel returned to her triage area to continue healing the wounded, so John and Helene followed one of Faye’s winged sprites over to a gathering of haggard civilians. It only took one look to confirm who these people were, as the parents had a hollow emptiness in their eyes, which were reddened from crying.

John pulled off his Paragon helmet and tucked it under one arm. “Hello everyone, thank you for meeting with us.” Glancing to his right, he continued, “This is Helene. She wanted to speak with you to offer her condolences and share some of her own experience with the kind of dreadful loss you’ve suffered.”

He saw her draw a deep breath, then a moment later felt a tentative contact touch his mind.

“Six years ago, I lost my baby girl,” Helene began in a quiet but steady voice, a hush descending on the group as they listened to her attentively. “I still remember that terrible time as if it happened yesterday...”

The emotions seeping into John’s subconscious were tinged with such heartfelt sadness that a lump formed in his throat. The parents hugged each other, tears filling their eyes as they shared that same sense of desolation with this enchanting, but forlorn young woman. Not a person amongst them doubted her sincerity, and as Helene continued to talk, they found themselves immersed in her story. People openly wept as she talked about her dreams of a happy future for her daughter, and how she’d despaired as her hopes had been cruelly dashed. How she’d cried out at the universe for taking away an innocent, who never had a chance to experience life for themselves.

There was a subtle shift in the emotions brushing through John’s mind, with despair fading into sad resignation. Helene described how light had gradually returned to the darkness of her existence, as she came to terms with the loss of her baby girl. She finished by describing her vow to honour her daughter’s memory, by being the best parent she could be to the children she hoped for in the future. A gentle flicker of hope had reignited amidst her grief and it was enough for her to cling to and rebuild her life.

By the time she was done, John found himself feeling numb after hearing her tale of sorrow. It had been a rollercoaster of emotions, with heartbreaking loss eventually softening to sad acceptance. Looking around at the colonists, he could see that Helene’s tale had affected them far more profoundly, with many of them gathering to thank her for telling them her story. The aquatic girl was happy to accept their hugs, the sharing of her grief bringing a sense of fellowship with these people.

Finally, the last of the colonists enfolded Helene in a grateful embrace, the middle-aged brunette whispering her thanks before returning to her waiting husband. Helene watched them leave, then turned to John with a haunted expression on her face. “They’re all in so much pain. I remember what that was like... I just wanted it to be over.”

He slipped his arms around her. “I think what you told them really helped.”

“I hope so,” she murmured, leaning into his embrace. “Hopefully they’ll understand that the feeling of loss might never truly go away, but it does get easier to live with it.”

“It must have been hard reliving all that again,” John said, remembering the pain he’d heard in her voice and with the projected emotions she’d shared. “Do you want to head up to the room and get some rest?”

Helene shook her head and turned to look at the treatment area, where the maintenance bots were using Sonic Cannons to liquefy Kirrix egg infestations. “I’d like to stay and see if I can ease those people’s suffering. I’m not sure what to say to them, but I know I can help them to feel a bit better, if only for a short time.”

“Okay, but don’t overdo it,” John cautioned her as they walked that way. “Using psychic powers takes energy and you can burn yourself out if you try to draw too much. If you find yourself getting tired, I want you to stop immediately.”

Helene nodded her understanding. “I’ll be careful.”

\*Actually, she’s not even started using her reserves yet,\* Alyssa quietly informed him. \*I’m tapped out after my little chat with the Hive Mind, so I’ve been feeding her power from Jade... Helene can keep going for a while.\*

\*Alright, but she needs to learn her limitations,\* John said, glancing at the teal-skinned girl who had a determined look on her face.

\*Let her have this moment,\* the blonde gently requested. \*It was very difficult for Helene to talk about losing her baby, so she wasn’t able to fully appreciate how much she was consoling those grieving parents. This will just be about helping people in pain... and she really wants to feel like she’s giving something back.\*

John gave his silent consent, then watched Helene walk amongst the colonists on the treatment tables. He could feel the gentle waves of sympathy and comfort radiating out from her, washing over the dozens of anxious people being treated. Her presence had an immediate effect and the infested colonists relaxed, the tension and embarrassment easing from their faces as they calmly waited for their ordeal to be over. Helene turned back to look at John and he saw a look of sincere gratitude on her face as well as a newfound sense of purpose.

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Senior Councillor Ularean walked across the huge drydock, crossing under the shadow of the enormous Maliri battleship known as the Entheas Alari. He knew how powerful that vessel was, with its endless banks of Beam Lasers and Pulse Cannons, culminating in the devastating pair of Nova Lances that jutted from the bow. The warship was also a breathtaking sight, encased as it was in resplendent golden armour, with sparkling crystal domes dotting its length. However as spectacular as the battleship looked, he knew its armour was but a pale shadow of the incredibly resilient plating that John Blake’s legendary Chief Engineer had developed... hence the Maliri’s visit to Ashana.

Dozens of Ashanath Engineers had started to mix orbs of Crystal Alyssium, using enhanced psi-shapers to manipulate the psychically responsive metal. Their progress was being watched by a cluster of golden-armoured Maliri women, who stood by Councillor Rathus and his coterie of silver-garbed technicians. As Ularean approached, he saw streams of liquid metal filtering off from the white orbs, slowly forming the first set of armour plating that would be used to cover the battleship’s hull.

\*How goes your interactions with the Maliri?\* Ularean asked his fellow councillor.

\*Wonderfully, Senior Councillor!\* Rathus gushed, sounding delighted. \*They have brought sizeable quantities of rare and precious metals with them, intended for use on the refit of their vessels and the construction of our advanced warships.\*

Ularean felt the tension ease from his shoulders. \*That is excellent news, Rathus.\*

The white-robed Ashanath turned to face the leader of the Maliri, the Fleet Commander easily identifiable by the ornate suit of armour she wore. “Amlaril, I would like to introduce you to Senior Councillor Ularean.”

She turned to face the leader of the Ashanath High Council and inclined her head respectfully. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Senior Councillor. Queen Edraele asked me to send you her kindest regards.”

Ularean bowed to her and said in his eerie, whispering voice, “The pleasure is mine, Fleet Commander Amlaril. We have long awaited your arrival.”

Amlaril tilted her head to one side as if looking at him quizzically. “My apologies for keeping you waiting. Due to unforeseen circumstances, the original fleet that was dispatched to the Ashanath Collective had to be diverted to the Trankaran Republic.”

Letting out a frustrated sigh, Ularean murmured, “I meant no slight. My intent was simply to say how much we have looked forward to your presence on Ashana. Unfortunately, my voice modulator cannot convey the emotion accompanying those words.”

“In that case, I’ll try to regard everything you say in a positive fashion,” Amlaril replied, nodding her understanding. “I can empathise with your communication difficulties; hiding behind a suit of armour can prove similarly frustrating at times.”

He looked up at her, studying the Maliri’s opaque faceplate. “Allied as we both are with JohnBlake, perhaps one day such a precaution will no longer be necessary.”

“I’d like that,” she said, the sincerity in her voice quite clear.

“As would I,” Ularean agreed. He gestured with his spindly grey hand towards the armoured plates being stacked on the deck. “Working together as we are, can only build trust and further understanding between our peoples.”

Amlaril nodded. “Collaborating to upgrade the fleet will prove to be an interesting challenge.” She glanced up at her battleship, where Maliri in anti-grav harnesses were busy removing armour plates. “My orders are to complete the refit, then provide border security for the Collective while you rebuild your forces. Do you have any idea how long it will be before I can begin patrols?”

“I will defer to Councillor Rathus’ expertise to answer that question,” Ularean replied, glancing at the other robed Ashanath.

“At our current rate of production, we should be able to fabricate enough armour plates to fully clad your complement of battleships in two days,” he murmured, studying the teams of engineers using the psi-shapers. “We have already completed modification of our manufacturing facilities and have started building new components from the schematics broadcast to us after the Battle of Terra. The first of the advanced Kintark heatsinks will be delivered here tomorrow morning and can be installed immediately. Construction of the Brimorian Shield Generators proceeds apace and I anticipate the first battleship-class device to be ready for installation in two days’ time. The Entheas Alari will be spaceworthy in 54 hours.”

“Outstanding!” Amlaril exclaimed, no mistaking her elation. “By the sound of it, the entire refit shouldn’t take long at all.”

“Three battleships, three carriers, twenty cruisers, forty destroyers, and 300 fighters,” Councillor Rathus said, reading the Maliri fleet composition from a holographic display mounted on his wrist. “My preliminary estimate indicates it will take seventeen days to completely upgrade all your vessels.”

Ularean turned to smile at their honoured guest. “With new shields, armour, and heatsinks, you should see an unprecedented increase in survivability and firepower.”

Amlaril put her arms around the robed Ashanath and hugged them both. “Gentlemen, I believe this could be the start of a beautiful friendship.”

Neither were capable of replying, pressed as they were against her glorious curves. Rathus’ eyelids fluttered as he blinked rapidly, trying not to stare at the ample globes on her armoured chest.

Finally, Ularean managed to stammer, “As do I, Fleet Commander. As do I...”

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John stirred from sleep and found himself sandwiched between two soft warm female bodies. A quick glance down at the girls draped across his chest revealed the identity of his luscious companions, their faces concealed behind light-green and tawny-brown manes of hair. He smiled as he remembered Leylira riding him to completion in the early hours of the morning, the lust-crazed tiger Nymph eager to take his load and feed the girls about to start the night shift. After that he’d collapsed into bed with Helene and Rachel, the two girls falling asleep within seconds, both exhausted after pushing themselves to the limit to help the colonists.

\*I’m very proud of them too,\* Alyssa said softly, as she sat on the bed.

He craned his head up to smile at the blonde. \*Good morning, beautiful.\*

She blew him a kiss. \*Join me for a shower?\*

John carefully untangled himself from his sleeping bedmates, managing to slide out of bed without waking them. A quick glance at the chronometer revealed that it was eight in the morning and he knew the girls that had kept the colonists company through the night would be coming to bed in a few minutes. He followed the toned teenager into the bathroom, Alyssa having stripped off her clothes already.

“Any problems last night?” he asked, walking into the cubicle and turning on the shower.

“The colonists were good as gold,” she replied, joining him under the soothing jets of hot water. “Most of them managed to get some sleep until it was their turn to be treated.”

He relaxed, the tension easing from his shoulders. “That’s a relief. I was worried they were going to give you girls trouble.”

She gazed into his eyes and linked her wrists behind his neck. “I know... but you worry too much.”

John let his hands glide over her smooth slippery skin, wrapping her in a tight hug. “The last thing I wanted was you or the girls getting yelled at by frustrated colonists.”

“We all appreciate you looking after us... but you can’t protect us from everything,” she said, looking at him with concern. “I don’t want you giving yourself a nervous breakdown.”

“Don’t be silly, I’m fine,” John said, with a dismissive chuckle.

Edraele’s anxious voice echoed through his mind a moment later, \*She’s not joking, John. You let yourself be used as an emotional punching bag by those disgruntled colonists last night and were exhausted when you finally came to bed. That might help alleviate your misplaced guilt about their plight, but you’ve shouldered the burden of so many problems already.\*

Alyssa could see he wasn’t convinced. “Still don’t believe us?”

He frowned sceptically. “It’s not that bad...”

“Really?” the blonde asked, raising an eyebrow. “How about a quick recap of everything troubling the mighty Lion of the Federation at the moment. You’re constantly worrying about: what Larn’kelnar’s planning next, the astral nightmares and the thing running that place, what to do about the monsters stalking the astral plane... and how long Athena will be safe. Whether we can rescue the Outer Rim colonists in time and if they’ll rebel against Federation rule after being left so exposed. Can we save the captured Trankarans, should you exterminate the Kirrix and will that lead you down a dark path. Now we’re actually close to the border, you’ve started worrying what answers you might find on Arcadia...”

“Yes, but-”

“Hold on, I’m just getting started,” she interrupted with a stern look. “You can’t stop thinking about how to deal with the Brimorians and the Abandoned, if we can upgrade the Maliri fleets to face thralls, and how much tech we should give to our allies. Then on top of the usual self-inflicted guilt about ‘corrupting’ the girls, you’re worried we’ve been exposed to too much fighting and are suffering from combat fatigue... and that might have caused my ‘anger issues’. Was giving Helene psychic abilities the right thing to do and does she have the maturity not to accidentally burn herself out. You’re unsure if the twins really have dealt with Tashana’s past, whether Sakura’s over her guilt, and if you’re doing the right thing with the Nymphs...” She paused to make sure he understood. “I could keep going, John...”

He slumped and rubbed a hand over his face. “Alright... when you put it like that, I must admit I do have a fair bit on my mind at the moment.”

\*You’ve carefully nurtured the girls to make them extremely capable, they can handle those traumatised civilians,\* Edraele said gently. \*You should be focusing your mental energy on decisions that will have galaxy-wide consequences. I’m sure we can’t stop you worrying about everything, especially the wellbeing of the girls, but you must learn to prioritise what you burden yourself with.\*

“You’re right, I’ve been doing all of you a disservice,” John admitted, letting out a sigh. “I just find situations like the colonist rescue incredibly frustrating. I want to help them, but there’s so little I can actually do.”

Alyssa gave him a supportive smile. “That’s not true. You made those people feel safe aboard the Invictus and you got Governor Vaughn to assist with providing supplies. Healing the wounded is Rachel’s forte and now Helene can ease their suffering... the rest of us can offer emotional support and a sympathetic ear where it’s needed.”

He looked at her quizzically. “So while you’re hard at work, what am I supposed to do this morning? Sit back and twiddle my thumbs?”

She gave him a beaming smile as she shook her head. “XO is temporarily relieving you of command. You’re taking a break... and going on a date!”

Her eyes darted towards the door, where Faye was waiting with a hopeful look in her luminous eyes. The purple sprite was wearing a light-cotton summer dress and had her arm tucked through the wicker handle of a picnic hamper.

“Is that okay, John?” Faye asked nervously.

He relaxed, putting his trust in the girls. “That sounds like a wonderful idea. Just give me a moment and I’ll get dressed.”

“Yay! I’ll meet you in the Raptor!” she gushed, waving goodbye and skipping towards the grav-tubes.

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Jehanna Elani left her suite and smiled at the security guards standing at attention in the corridor. “Good morning, Bill. Hello, Darius. How are you two today?”

“Just fine, Ma’am,” Bill replied, his mouth twitching as he tried not to smile back at her.

Darius gave her a flirtatious grin, his white teeth all the brighter against his dark skin. “All the better for seeing you, Just Jehanna.”

She laughed and waved goodbye, still finding it hard to believe that she had unrestricted access to such a protected area of Olympus. When Jehanna returned to the orbital shipyard after her visit to Terra, she’d been invited to a stern security briefing given by Colonel Fiske and was under the distinct impression that he wasn’t happy about the arrangements. Fortunately, a Fleet Admiral trumped a Colonel by half-a-dozen pay grades, leaving him powerless to countermand Lynette’s orders; one of the many benefits of having a secret-Lioness in very high places.

Jehanna walked down the corridor to the next suite, then pressed the button by the door, a melodious chime reaching her ears. “Hello, Fleet Admiral Devereux,” she said, smiling at the camera above the DNA reader. “I’m not disturbing the lovebirds am I?”

Lynette’s laughter echoed from the intercom. “It’s okay. Come on in.”

The door slid open, admitting the reporter to the private residence of the most powerful woman in the Terran Federation. Jehanna walked through the lobby, then into the main living area where she found Charles sitting on the sofa watching the Holonet.

“Ah, Jehanna,” Charles said, greeting her with a warm smile. “It’s lovely to see you again. Lynette will be out in just a moment.”

She stepped forward for a hug and a friendly peck on the cheek. “I hear congratulations are in order!”

He looked at her in surprise, then gave her a self-conscious grin and tapped a finger against his temple. “I keep forgetting that Alyssa’s in contact with you both...”

“Yes, it’s surprisingly handy,” she agreed, with a conspiratorial wink.

“I’m so glad you’re back,” Lynette said as she walked out of the bedroom, a bright smile on her exquisitely beautiful face. “Sorry I wasn’t able to see you yesterday, Charles took me shopping on Gravitus...”

“Let me see the ring!” Jehanna squealed, rushing over to give her a hug.

Lynette held up her hand, the light reflected off the big sparkling diamond adorning her finger.

“Wow! What a rock!” Jehanna exclaimed, whistling appreciatively. “Congratulations!”

“Thank you.” Lynette smiled lovingly at Charles. “I wasn’t intending to pick anything quite so ostentatious, but my darling fiancé insisted.”

“I didn’t want there to be any doubt I was staking my claim,” he said, returning her smile. He walked over and they shared a tender kiss, pulling back to look deeply into each other’s eyes. Charles turned to Jehanna and continued, “If you’ll excuse me, I better get to work. The new boss is a real ball-breaker and I wouldn’t want her to find out that I’m not in the office yet.”

Lynette leaned forward and whispered conspiratorially, “I’ve heard it said on good authority that she’s got quite the crush on you. I think you’ll be able to sweet talk your way out of trouble.”

“Good to know, thank you,” Charles said with a grin, before reluctantly heading towards the lobby.

“I’ll see you this afternoon,” she called after him. “Thanks for breakfast, it was delicious!”

Charles shared a flirtatious smile with her, then blushed furiously when he remembered they had company. With a hurried wave goodbye to his fiancée and her guest he strode out of the suite.

“He’s so in love with you,” Jehanna said wistfully, watching him leave.

“The feeling’s mutual,” Lynette said, with a contented sigh. She turned and gestured to the sofa. “Please take a seat and make yourself comfortable. Would you be terribly offended if I checked a few status reports while we catch up? Taking yesterday off has left me with a bit of a backlog.”

Jehanna sat down, slipped off her high heels and tucked her long legs under her. “I don’t mind, go ahead.”

Lynette joined her on the plush sofa and activated the comms interface built into the armrest. Holographic screens appeared in front of her and she scrolled down through the scores of messages, searching for anything that might require her urgent attention.

“The Kintark fleet are nearing the Dragon March,” she said to Jehanna, her eyes darting through the progress update.

“The captured ships you’re returning to Empress Tamolith?” The reporter leaned forward, her eyes alight with interest. “I’d love to do a story about them.”

Lynette frowned, darting a cautionary look at the younger woman. “I’m not sure that’s wise. Tempers are running pretty hot after the Battle of Terra; returning prisoners and giving 300 ships back to the Kintark Empire would probably be seen as a gross betrayal of all those Federation personnel who lost their lives.”

Jehanna tilted her head to one side as she considered it. “We could go for a ‘benevolence of the Federation’ angle, focusing on the prisoner exchange and your eagerness to return captured Terran personnel to their loving families. Of course, I’d highlight the fact that the Kintark crews were all captured at Regulus and had nothing to do with the atrocities at Port Medea or Unity City.”

“I think the general public tend to view the Kintark as all being as bad as each other,” the admiral said, with a wry smile. “Our propaganda campaign during the war was a little too effective.”

“How about I write up a story, then we hold onto it until Terran prisoners start returning from the Kintark Empire?” Jehanna asked, her mind racing. “I’ll only run the exclusive If you think the tone is appropriate and the public might be in a more receptive mood. We could even link it to a piece about the execution of Kintark war criminals, just to help differentiate the two in the public mind.”

“That sounds perfect,” Lynette said, nodding her approval. “We probably won’t see any liberated prisoners for at least a couple of weeks, which should fit with the scheduling of the war crimes tribunals.”

“I’ll make a start on it this afternoon,” Jehanna said, with a bright smile. “Okay, what’s next?”

Lynette returned her attention to the comms interface and frowned as she read through a message from Admiral Morgan. “Still no answers regarding the Brimorian fleet movements along the border.”

“Could they be planning an invasion?” Jehanna asked, her eyebrows climbing.

“The Brimorians have never tried invading our territory before,” Lynette replied, her brow furrowing with worry. “But we’ve never been this vulnerable before either. I’m planning to dispatch a fleet under Vice Admiral Dacres to reinforce the border, but his ships are being upgraded with Brimorian Shield Generators and advanced Kintark Heat Sinks at the moment.”

“Is there an angle I could cover regarding the Brimorian situation?” the reporter asked, understanding how sensitive this information was.

“Not yet,” Lynette replied, lost in thought. “But some anti-Brimorian propaganda pieces might be helpful if the situation deteriorates. I know John plans to confront the Brimorians about the Abandoned, so in a few weeks’ time these border tensions will probably be a moot point.”

Jehanna cupped her chin in a hand as she thought it over. “If John demolishes their fleets, would some anti-Brimorian propaganda be helpful anyway? It wouldn’t hurt to have public backing if you’re in a position to acquire more territory...”

Looking at her in surprise, Lynette chuckled as she nodded. “Very astute, Miss Elani. If you could have something prepared, I’d really appreciate it.”

“It’s no trouble at all,” the reporter said with a grin.

Lynette caught her eye and said firmly, “Please avoid any mention of the Abandoned for the moment. Their Terran ancestry is a very sensitive subject and we’ll need to handle that revelation to the public with great care.”

“Of course, I’ll be very careful. I’m here to support a fellow Lioness however I can,” she said, stroking the Fleet Admiral’s arm. “Speaking of which, how are John and the girls doing?”

Turning away from the comms interface, Lynette smiled as she listened to Alyssa’s summary. “They’ve already annihilated the Kirrix forces that attacked Carolus III and Brecken’s World, and are treating the infested colonists. The Federation forces under Admiral Zelig intercepted the Kirrix fleet retreating from Tasmaris Prime and those colonists are now being returned to the planet. That only leaves the citizens on Menganus IV, Valia Gate, and Karron to be rescued.”

“That’s wonderful news!” Jehanna gushed. “Would you like me to do another ‘heroic victory’ piece?”

Lynette paused, then slowly shook her head. “We need to handle the Kirrix invasion of the Outer Rim very delicately. Alyssa mentioned that there’s a lot of resentment over the way Buckingham left the borders undefended. I don’t want to stir up any more trouble by appearing overly triumphant when hundreds-of-thousands of colonists have been brutally raped and infested with Kirrix eggs.”

Jehanna’s face fell and she nodded. “Sorry, of course you’re right.” She gave her friend a rueful look. “I lose any sense of objectivity where John is concerned; I imagine I’m even worse than usual at the moment.”

“I understand,” Lynette said, reaching out to squeeze her hand. “Alyssa mentioned that you’ve been feeling a bit down over the last couple of days. Is everything alright?”

“A girl has no secrets when she’s a Lioness, does she?” Jehanna replied with a wry smile.

Lynette gently stroked her arm and said, “It’s better that way. You know she just wants to help.”

The dusky girl nodded and took a deep breath before replying, “I’ve found it really hard, being separated from John... much harder than last time. Now that we’re connected, I find myself constantly thinking about him.”

Lynette looked startled as she thought about her own feelings. “I’m connected to him too, but it’s been quite different for me. I do think about John, but more in terms of how I can help him prepare the Terran Federation to face a Progenitor invasion.” Her hazel eyes lost focus as she thought about her fiancé. “I’ve not thought about John romantically since I became involved with Charles.”

Jehanna smiled as she admitted, “I wasn’t really talking about romance... my thoughts tend to be quite a bit naughtier.”

“I know what you mean. John warned me about possible side-effects from being changed by him, but he didn’t tell me just how much my libido would increase, or the thrill I’d get from being submissive. Charles thinks he’s died and gone to heaven since we got together, but when I’m on my knees, swallowing down that wonderful man’s cum...” Her eyelids fluttered and her hand drifted to her stomach.

Jehanna found herself licking her lips and groaned in frustration. “God, I wish John was here now...”

“You got very close to the twins too, didn’t you?” Lynette said, giving the younger woman a knowing look.

Nodding, Jehanna blushed as she replied, “I was absolutely wanton with them... I’ve never been so sexually uninhibited before. They were so loving with me and I’ve been missing them so much; it’s made being apart from all of them incredibly difficult.”

Turning away from the holo-interface, Lynette listened to her Matriarch’s telepathic instructions then opened her arms to her friend. “Come here, beautiful.”

Jehanna gladly embraced the nubile brunette, cuddling up against her on the sofa. She let out a quiet sigh as Lynette slipped a hand inside her blouse to stroke her trim stomach.

“There’s a good girl,” Lynette whispered in her ear, making the reporter quiver with delight. “Does that feel nice?”

“God, yes...” the dusky girl moaned, the gentle caresses driving her wild.

Lynette looked down at her with concern. “Alyssa said that they can come back to collect you if you’re really struggling with being separated from them.”

Jehanna gazed up at her with a terribly conflicted expression on her face. “If it was just my career I was giving up, the decision would be so much easier to make. The problem is that I can’t just abandon my family. I usually visit my parents every couple of weeks and if I leave to have a family with John, I’ll be so far away from them in Maliri Space. I wouldn’t get to see my parents for months, or even years at a time...”

“Family certainly complicates matters for you,” Lynette said, brushing aside a strand of Jehanna’s dark hair. “What have you told your parents about your relationship with John?”

“My mother knows I’ve started dating someone, but she has no idea who he is,” Jehanna replied, enjoying the comforting embrace. Ruefully shaking her head, she continued, “But if I reveal who he is and they see the video of him on Olympus kissing Calara... that conversation would be awkward to say the least.”

“I don’t envy you that kind of discussion, I remember how protective my parents could be. I’m sure they only want the best for you though,” Lynette said, her voice turning wistful. “My parents tried to hide it, but I know they were disappointed that I never found someone to settle down with.”

“They must have been incredibly proud of you when you were promoted to Admiral?” Jehanna asked, studying her friend’s troubled face with sympathy.

“Oh they were,” the older woman replied, remembering her parents’ joy when she told them about her promotion. “But they were also worried about me being left alone when they passed.” Her expression shadowed with pain. “I can’t help feeling like I let them down terribly with the choices I made; they would have loved to have had grandchildren, but I was too obsessed with my career to get married. Now I have another chance at having a family, but it’s too late for them...”

“I’m so sorry, Lynette,” Jehanna said softly, hugging the brunette.

Tears rolled down Lynette’s cheeks as she clung desperately to the younger woman. “I miss them so much...”

Jehanna held Lynette as she sobbed, comforting her as she let out years of bottled-up grief. She murmured supportive words until the brunette’s outpouring of loss had run its course, Lynette trembling in her arms until she finally calmed.

Brushing the tears away, Lynette let out a choked laugh. “I’m so sorry... I get incredibly emotional now over the slightest thing. I wasn’t expecting that at all.”

“Don’t be silly, I’m glad I was here for you,” Jehanna said, stroking her arm. She hesitated then added quietly, “I can’t imagine how hard it must be, losing your parents.”

Lynette inhaled deeply as she got herself under control, then turned to give the dusky reporter a knowing look. “But it’s been on your mind, hasn’t it?”

Jehanna bit her lip, then nodded. “I’ve been thinking about them a lot, especially now there’s a possibility that I might live forever. My parents are Hindus, so they believe that they’ll keep being reborn until they’ve earned enough good karma. When they reach a state of enlightenment the next step from there would be... heaven. They’d say that if I become immortal with John, I won’t be part of the rebirth cycle anymore, so I’ll be parted from them forever.”

“And what do you believe?” Lynette asked softly.

“I honestly don’t know,” Jehanna admitted, her brown eyes filled with uncertainty. “I’ve always tried to be a good person... kind of hedging my bets, I suppose. But the idea of my soul being constantly reborn? I’ve never really given it much thought until now... I was too preoccupied with everything else going on in my life.”

“It seems like not many people have time for spirituality these days,” Lynette said, brushing her fingers through Jehanna’s dark hair. “Perhaps this is a conversation you should have with John? You’ll find he’s surprisingly insightful.”

“You’re right, I’ll speak with him about it when I next get a chance.” Jehanna leaned into her hand. “Are you religious, Lynette?”

“I used to be Catholic,” the brunette replied, gazing off into the distance.

“Used to be?” the dusky young woman asked, picking up on the past tense. “If it’s not too personal a question, why’s that?”

Lynette let out a heavy sigh and couldn’t meet Jehanna’s curious gaze. “I lost my faith the first time I had to order an orbital bombardment.” Her voice turned bleak as she added, “Because if there is a heaven and hell, I know where I’ll be going...”

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John stepped out of the grav-tube and walked into the Raptor’s cockpit. “A girl’s never asked me out on a date before,” he said, smiling at Faye.

She bounded over to greet him with a hug. “Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“No, of course not. I’m flattered and relieved,” he replied, glancing through the cockpit canopy as the gunship lifted off the hangar deck.

“Relieved?” Faye asked, looking at him curiously.

“You have no idea how long I spent coming up with ideas for our last date. You’ve saved me hours of meticulous planning,” he confided in her with a playful wink.

She let out a happy sigh. “I adored every minute of it.” Her serene expression suddenly turned pensive. “But now you’ve got me worried that I haven’t put enough thought into this...”

“I’m sure whatever you have planned will be amazing,” he said, stroking her back. John glanced over her shoulder at the empty pilot seat and frowned as the Raptor raced low over the treetops. “Could you at least pretend you’re flying this thing?”

Faye giggled and put her hands over her eyes. “Oh no! I can’t even see where we’re going!”

The Raptor dipped, then executed a precise roll before racing between two huge trees.

He wagged a finger at her. “You’re a very naughty girl.”

Faye grinned as she sat down in the pilot’s seat, grabbing the flight stick and staring at the instruments with a look of intense concentration. “Better?”

He laughed and leaned against the back of her chair. “I give up, the illusion’s been shattered. So where are you taking me anyway?”

“We’re going for a picnic,” she replied, nudging the wicker hamper with the toe of her tiny wedged sandal. “Deep in the uninhabited regions of Brecken’s World.”

John’s stomach rumbled its hearty approval.

“It sounds like you’ve worked up an appetite,” Faye said with a smile. “Don’t worry, it won’t take long to get to the spot.”

He leaned down to plant a kiss on top of her head, Faye’s voluminous purple hair tickling his nose. “I can’t wait to see where you’ve picked out for us.”

After several more minutes flight time, Faye rose from the pilot’s chair and scooped up the picnic basket. “We’re nearly there! Let’s head down to the lower deck, so you’re not tempted to peek as we begin our final approach.”

John took her hand and accompanied her out of the cockpit as they headed down to the forward loading area. He deliberately turned away from the ramp when he heard the hydraulics start to whine, so that he wouldn’t spoil her surprise. Gently taking the picnic basket from her unresisting fingers, he said, “Let me carry that for you.”

Faye stood on tiptoe and gave him a tender kiss. “What a gentleman. Thank you for playing along.”

The sound of well-maintained hydraulics came to an end and despite the soft purr of retro-thrusters on low power, John heard the distinctive babbling of a stream.

“Okay, you can look now,” the purple girl said, her luminous eyes sparkling with anticipation.

Turning around, he gazed in wonder at the picturesque scene of natural beauty before him. The Raptor was hovering in the centre of a small glade, with sunlight streaming through the leafy forest canopy surrounding them. He followed Faye down the ramp onto the grass and turned to look at the rest of the clearing as the gunship lifted off. A stream ran through the grassy meadow, with tiny insects that looked a bit like dragonflies hovering above the water.

“This place is beautiful... how did you find it?” he asked, glancing at his petite companion.

She reached for the blanket folded on top of the hamper and unfurled it with a decisive flick of her wrists. “We started dropping off the colonists at the outlying towns while you were asleep. I used the Invictus’ advanced sensors to perform a number of planetary scans until I found the ideal location. We’re over 800 miles from the closest Terran settlement, so you’re probably the first person to ever see this place.”

“Our own private picnic spot... I love it,” he said with a smile, helping her smooth out the blanket.

Faye let out a happy sigh as she sat down, then reached for the wicker basket and started pulling out plates and cutlery. “I brought some local delicacies for you to try,” she explained, pulling out a bowl with a variety of exotic-looking fruit. “Apparently they’re perfect with pancakes, so I made you some too.”

John sat cross-legged facing her and could smell the delicious aromas as soon as she opened the heated container. Taking one of the pancakes from the pile, he sprinkled on some of the sliced fruit and took an experimental bite. “Wow! This tastes fantastic! You really made these yourself?”

She nodded, her eyes sparkling with delight. “I’m so glad you like them! It only took 57 iterations before I was satisfied with the result.”

He laughed and shook his head. “57! You must have been cooking for hours!”

“It was worth it,” she said fondly, stroking his thigh.

John paused between bites and gave her a grateful smile. “Thank you for going to so much effort. These really are excellent.”

Faye grinned at him, then poured out a glass of fruit juice and handed it over. She was content to simply watch him eat, pleased to see John enjoying his breakfast. “I can see why you like cooking so much. It’s incredibly satisfying seeing someone take pleasure from a meal you’ve prepared.”

“That’s what got me hooked,” he agreed, sipping his drink and finishing off the pancake. He had two more, then reluctantly declined another. “I feel stuffed already. I think that’s got to be one of my all-time favourite breakfasts.”

“Really?” Faye asked in delight.

“Absolutely,” he confirmed with a smile. Putting his plate and cutlery by the hamper, he stretched out on the blanket and looked around the meadow. “It’s so peaceful here... especially after dealing with thousands of people in a crowded hangar.”

She nodded, then patted her lap in invitation. “Why don’t you lie down and have a rest while you digest your breakfast?”

“I can hardly say no to that, can I?” he replied with a grin, shifting on the rug so that his head was resting on her soft thigh.

Faye brushed her fingers through his hair and gently massaged his scalp. “Does that feel nice?”

“It feels amazing,” he agreed, closing his eyes and savouring her skilled touch. It was almost like he could feel any remaining tension oozing out of him as he relaxed in that serene woodland glade. “You’re really spoiling me, honey. Thank you.”

“We’re not in any rush,” she murmured indulgently. “You had a long stressful day yesterday. If you want to take a nap, I’ll watch over you.”

John looked up at the beautiful petite girl and studied her caring expression. “The conversation in the shower this morning... I thought it was Alyssa pushing me to take a break, but this was all your idea, wasn’t it?”

She nodded, looking down at him with concern. “I’ve never seen you looking more weary than when you met Helene and me in the bedroom yesterday evening. I started making preparations immediately, then asked Alyssa for her assistance while you were asleep. I was sure you’d want to stay with the girls to look after the colonists and I didn’t think I’d be able to convince you to take the morning off without her help.”

“She did a good job,” he said, feeling a surge of gratitude towards his blonde matriarch. “Truthfully, it was quite a relief letting the girls handle the situation. It was awful seeing all those traumatised people, especially the grief-stricken parents. I felt powerless to help them, which made it even more upsetting.”

Faye gazed into his eyes and nodded. “I’m sure it must have been uncomfortable for you. It’s very rare that we stick around for the relief operations after a battle...”

“But that’s usually because we’re rushing to deal with the next disaster.” John looked at her quizzically. “Do you think I deliberately avoid these kind of humanitarian operations?”

“I’m not judging you,” she said gently, her soft fingers caressing the side of his face. “But there are certain situations you’re comfortable with... and others that make you very uneasy.”

His eyes widened in shock as he thought back over the dozens of combat encounters they’d had over the last 6 months. He lost count of the times they’d wiped out pirates, marauding aliens, or some other kind of unspeakable threat, then rushed to hand over any freed prisoners to the local authorities. “We sail in, slaughter any enemies, then I just dump the people we rescue in someone else’s lap and run away...”

“I didn’t mean to imply you’re lacking in compassion... You’ve proven time after time how caring you can be with the girls,” Faye reminded him.

John groaned and rubbed his hands over his face. “Great... So I’m only interested in fighting and women? I’m just a chip off the old block aren’t I?”

She quickly shook her head. “No, I’m definitely not saying that. Rather than seeking conquest, you’ve focused on protecting people and saving lives... but I noticed a pattern and just thought you might be interested.”

He was quiet for a long moment, staring up at the rays of golden sunlight shining through the verdant foliage high above them.

“I didn’t upset you, did I?” Faye asked, the tense expression on her pretty elfin face reflecting her concern.

“No... everything you said was true, it just came as a bit of a shock,” he admitted, turning to look at her. “I thought I was forging my own path and rejecting everything about being a Progenitor. Now I realise how fine a line I’m actually treading.”

“You’re not a bad person, John,” she said anxiously, cradling his face in her hands. “I’m really sorry if I accidentally implied you were. You must know that’s the last thing I ever meant to do.”

He reached up to hold one of her hands and gave her a sad smile. “I know, honey. You haven’t got a mean bone in your body. It’s just that... with all the talk of the Kirrix and what to do about them, I remembered that this isn’t the first time I’ve been involved in wiping out an alien species.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, frowning in confusion.

“The Fulmanax...” he replied, his voice quiet and introspective.

Faye narrowed her eyes and said firmly, “That wasn’t deliberate. It was Edraele’s plan and Irillith tricked you into it.”

“They would never have succeeded if I’d been more diligent. At the very least, I could have asked Dana to examine the Maliri bomb to check if the story about a sonic device checked out; if Irillith refused, then I should have just walked away.” His eyes shadowed with shame as he continued, “And it’s not like I’ve lost any sleep over what happened. It’s been several months since we obliterated the Fulmanax and I’ve barely thought twice about them in all that time.”

“But that’s not your fault either!” she objected, circumventing her tact-verification sub-routine in her rush to console him. “You know you struggle to empathise with non-thrall-type species!”

John’s face fell and Faye froze in horror.

“Oh fudge! Everything I’m saying is coming out wrong!” she wailed, looking mortified.

He sighed and gave her a sad smile. “It’s alright, I’m not upset with you, honey. You were just being honest with me.”

“But I didn’t mean to imply you’re some kind of xenophobic monster... that’s not true at all! You’ve done so much to help the Ashanath and the Trankarans, and they look nothing like thralls!” Faye protested, her purple hair whipping around as she shook her head. Looking dejected, she whimpered, “All I’ve done is upset you. This is the worst date ever...”

John propped himself up onto an elbow and pulled her down into a hug. “It’s okay, Faye, honestly. I’m just a bit sensitive about a few of these things... but it is helpful to talk about them. The more I understand my nature, the better I can try and rise above it.”

She snuggled into him and caressed his cheek. “Please don’t feel bad about yourself or the things you’ve done. You’re a wonderful person and I know how hard you strive to do the right thing.”

“Thank you, Faye,” he said, rolling her over onto her back and giving her a gentle kiss. “I think you’re pretty wonderful too.”

Her face brightened with a warm smile and she put her arms around him to give him a tight hug. “You make it look so easy when you talk to the girls to make them feel better. It’s actually a minefield of conversational mishaps that can quickly spiral into disaster!”

He laughed and nodded. “It can be a bit tricky sometimes, especially when the person you’re speaking to takes everything the wrong way. I’m sorry about that, I just have a lot on my mind at the moment.”

“Like the decision about what to do with the Kirrix?” she asked him with sympathy.

“Amongst other things, yes,” he replied with a nod.

“Maybe talking about it might help?” she offered. “We discussed the Kirrix briefly a couple of weeks ago and that seemed to ease your mind. I promise I’ll try not to say anything tactless this time.”

“There’s no need to tread on eggshells,” he said affectionately. “But I’m more than happy to discuss it with you... the truth is that I’ve no idea how to handle this situation.”

“What do your instincts tell you is the right thing to do?” she asked, giving him a perceptive look. She raised a hand defensively and added, “I know the answer already, but you feel the way you do for a reason... I don’t think it’s wrong to acknowledge that.”

He drew in a deep breath, then let it out in a heavy sigh. “I think we should wipe them out. Every fibre of my being is repulsed by what they’ve done to millions of innocent people over the last god-knows-how-many thousands of years.”

Faye’s eyes sparkled with a sudden epiphany. “Oh, that’s brilliant!”

“It is?” he asked her in bewilderment.

“Don’t you see?” she asked, her excitement mounting. “You don’t want to exterminate them just because they’re big bugs! You’re appalled by the way they’ve murdered sentient creatures! Does that sound like typical Progenitor behaviour to you?”

He paused and thought about it for a moment. “You’re right; this isn’t just about physical appearance at all. I’ve been uncomfortable around the minor empire species, but I didn’t feel the slightest antipathy towards any of them.”

“Exactly!” Faye enthused. “And the Bract, Nethrilla, and the Elmoq look about as far removed from the Maliri as any organic life we’ve encountered!”

He nodded, thinking about the beetle-like insects, the gas-filled fungoids, and the slime-coated molluscs. “Maybe I’m not such a slave to my nature after all...”

“So with that in mind, do you think the Kirrix’s crimes justify a species-wide death sentence?” Faye asked him, keeping her expression deliberately neutral.

John lay down beside her, propping himself up on an elbow again and resting his other hand on her svelte stomach. “I feel a certain amount of sympathy for them, in that they’ve been forced to take drastic measures to save their species. But there’s no way I can condone the horrific choices they’ve made.” His eyes darkened with anger. “They rape people and their grubs chew their way out of their victims; I wouldn’t wish that kind of agonising death on my worst enemy!”

“What they do to anyone unsuitable as a host is just as appalling,” Faye quietly reminded him, thinking about the Terran and Trankaran children.

He nodded, his expression bleak. “I don’t know how much self-awareness the Kirrix drones have, but from what Alyssa has told me, the Kirrix Hive Mind was unanimous in their decision to prey on other species. At the very least, their entire ruling cast is responsible for what they’ve been doing.”

“What about the non-aggression treaty Alyssa negotiated with them?” Faye asked, studying his face. “If the Kirrix return the colonists they captured, then leave Terran and Trankaran territory... would you still want to destroy them?”

He frowned and mulled that over. “If they do stick to her terms and stop the raids, I don’t want to break her agreement. But I don’t feel the slightest inclination to help the Kirrix resolve this ‘Shroud’ problem. If the Ashanath were suddenly affected by something like that, I’d bend over backwards to help them deal with it... but the Kirrix? Those bastards can rot as far as I’m concerned.”

“So the Kirrix deserve punishment, but you’re reluctant to break the non-aggression treaty?” she summarised, bemused by the conundrum.

“That’s about the size of it, yes,” he agreed, pondering that for a moment. “Perhaps that’s actually the answer to this situation...”

Faye raised an eyebrow. “Inaction is the answer?”

“If the Kirrix can’t solve the problem with the Shroud themselves, they’ll eventually face extinction,” he said quietly, his eyes narrowing. “There’s a certain karmic justice in that. It’s the fate they’ve been trying to avoid for thousands of years... and they would have died out long ago if they hadn’t sacrificed innocent creatures to survive.”

“That means we don’t need to actively destroy them or obliterate Kirr-Inax,” Faye said, nodding her approval.

John smiled, feeling at peace with the decision. “Exactly. If the Kirrix start raiding again, we can intervene and wipe out their fleet capabilities, basically keeping them quarantined inside Kirrix Space.”

She gave him a hug. “And it avoids putting you and the girls in a morally repugnant position! I think it’s a perfect solution!”

“Maybe not perfect, but it’s a decision I feel comfortable with,” he said, feeling like a huge weight had lifted off his shoulders. “It was really helpful talking that through. Thanks, honey.”

She quivered with joy, giving him a dazzling smile. “So not the worst date ever?”

He laughed and gave her a big hug. “Not even close.”

Faye gave him an innocent look. “What would you like to do for the rest of our date? I was enjoying giving you a head massage until our conversation went off the rails, would you like me to continue?”

“That sounds lovely, but first, I’d like some kisses,” he declared, leaning down and brushing his lips against hers.

“Oh, I was hoping you’d say that,” she murmured with a breathy moan, kissing him back passionately.

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Chancellor Niskera walked the vaulted halls of the palace on Trankara, the heavy thump of Fleet Warden Thandrun’s boots providing a steady unwavering rhythm as they ascended through the upper levels. The guards they passed bowed reverently when they saw the glowing orange lines curving over Niskera’s head, looks of adoration on their awestruck granite faces. She inclined her head politely to acknowledge them, but such deference made her uncomfortable, having done nothing that could possibly warrant it.

Sensing her discomfort, Fleet Warden Thandrun gave her a reassuring smile. “Be at ease, my Queen. The Maliri commander seemed to be both intelligent and reasonable, I am sure our meeting will be a productive one.”

She glanced up at him and ruefully admitted, “I am not apprehensive about meeting with the Maliri... in truth I still find it unsettling to be treated with such adoration by our people.”

“You are the prophet of the Great Protector... connected to one of the ancient gods; how else should your revered presence be acknowledged?” he asked, a flicker of amusement in his amber eyes.

“With a friendly smile?” she suggested, her expression troubled. “I used to feel that I had earned the respect of our people by my actions, be it by kind words or deeds, but to be revered in such an unwarranted manner makes me feel like a charlatan.”

Thandrun placed a heavy hand on her shoulder and patted her gently. “Niskera... I cannot deny that your new appearance has a dramatic influence on our people, myself included. However, I believe that you have more than earned such displays of respect. I greatly admired your dedication to the citizens of the Republic long before you became the Glowing Queen... since then you have galvanised the Senate, uniting us to stand together against the Kirrix menace. For that act alone, you will always have my eternal loyalty and respect.”

“You are a good friend, Thandrun,” she said affectionately, linking arms with him. “I freely admit that I would be lost without your support.”

He gave her a broad smile as they walked through a set of huge rune-inscribed doors, which led out of the palace onto a broad platform covered in landing pads. The view from up here was breathtaking, allowing them to see for miles over the volcanic surface of the Trankaran homeworld. Rivers of magma flowed languidly from seething volcanoes, the molten streams smouldering with a fierce orange glow as they spread out into bubbling lakes of lava.

“Here they come,” Thandrun rumbled, drawing Niskera’s attention away from the dramatic vista.

Sweeping through black ash clouds, a golden-hulled shuttle approached the palace, moving with an elegant grace that enchanted the eye. The slender nose of the Maliri vessel lifted at the last moment, a bright flare from the retro-thrusters making the metallic hull gleam as it touched down on the platform. A crystal door on the flank of the ship lifted up, allowing a trio of female figures to disembark.

Niskera recognised the bejewelled golden armour of the Maliri fleet commander at their forefront, but the two women who accompanied her were wearing sparkling white Paragon suits. She felt a flutter in her chest as she recognised that armour, her mind casting back to the terrifying escape through the tunnels underneath Khalgron. If it had not been for John and his Lionesses, she would have died an agonising death at the hands of the Kirrix, along with the diplomats from the neighbouring minor empires.

She bowed respectfully to the three women. “I am delighted to welcome you to Trankara, honoured guests.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you in person, Queen Niskera,” the Maliri Fleet Commander said, returning her bow.

“The feeling is mutual, Fleet Commander Lilyana,” Niskera replied with a warm smile. She looked quizzically at the Lionesses, noting their opaque faceplates. “Irillith? Tashana? Is that you?”

The white-armoured woman on the right shook her head. “This is the first time we’ve met, Queen Niskera. My name’s Ilyana and my companion is Almari. We serve as bodyguards to Queen Edraele, but she assigned us to protect Fleet Commander Lilyana while she wages war against the Kirrix.”

“I assure you that your Fleet Commander is quite safe on Trankara,” Thandrun rumbled. “I give you my personal guarantee that she will come to no harm.”

“I believe you, Fleet Warden,” Lilyana said, looking up at the huge Trankaran warrior. “But Ilyana and Almari are not here for my protection.” She glanced at Niskera. “They are here to expedite communication with our mutual friends...”

An instant later, Alyssa’s telepathic voice echoed through Niskera’s mind. \*Ilyana and Almari are both bonded to Edraele. That means they can speak directly to her with telepathy and she can pass their messages on to John, allowing him to listen to your meeting. Edraele just has a basic connection with Lilyana, so she’s only able to sense her emotions, in the same way that I am connected to you.\*

“Ah, I understand. Your presence is welcome indeed,” Niskera said, giving the two assassins a grateful smile. Gesturing towards the huge door behind her, she continued, “Please accompany us into the palace. The views from this platform are spectacular, but it’s hardly the most comfortable of venues for such an important meeting.”

Lilyana fell into step beside her as the Glowing Queen guided them into the monolithic Trankaran fortress.

Thandrun lengthened his stride so that he flanked the golden armoured Maliri. “I received word that your fleet has docked with our orbital shipyards and that you have begun installation of the new shield generators in your battleships. We have hundreds of engineers standing by to assist, so please let them know how they can best serve you in the refit operation.”

Considering that for a moment, Lilyana replied, “My personnel are focusing on my battleships first, but we would certainly appreciate your help with upgrading the rest of the vessels in my fleet.”

Thandrun gave her a knowing grin. “Protecting the secret of your Nova Lances, Fleet Commander?”

Lilyana turned to look at him, hesitated for a moment, then nodded. “Please accept my sincere apologies; despite how it may look, I mean no disrespect. I wish such precautions were unnecessary, especially considering how supportive you’ve been... but I’m not at liberty to share that technology with you.”

He shrugged, his blocky features lifting with a disarming smile. “After the wealth of new technology given freely to us by John Blake, to expect more would be the height of ingratitude. Although, if you do happen to have a change of heart, I certainly would not object!”

“I’ll bear that in mind, Fleet Warden,” she said, laughing lightly as she walked alongside the huge Trankaran.

“I am pleased to inform you that we were able to complete construction of all the shield generators you requested,” he said, with no small amount of pride.

“For our fighters too?” Lilyana asked in surprise.

“All 300 of them,” he replied with a nod. “The star forges are running at full capacity. Their manufacturing capabilities are unsurpassed.”

“That’s excellent news!” she said enthusiastically. “If you focus on refitting my cruisers, and transfer the strike-craft shield generators to the carriers, we can refit our fighters and bombers en-route to the Kirrix forces. I’d like to depart for the front lines as soon as possible.”

Niskera walked up to a set of double doors and smiled as she pressed the rune embedded on the wall. “At this rate, we shall have nothing left to discuss when we start the meeting.”

“Don’t worry, there’s a number of interesting developments we still have to talk about,” Lilyana said, with an unreadable note to her voice.

The two Trankarans exchanged a curious look, then followed the three Maliri into the meeting room.

When they had shut the door behind them, Lilyana glanced at the assassins. “Ladies, if you would be so kind as to sweep the room.”

They nodded, producing small black devices from their belts and began scanning the interior of the audience chamber for surveillance equipment.

“This is a secure room, we are not being observed or overheard,” Niskera said, watching the Maliri in bemusement. “I would not breach your trust in such a manner.”

“I regret the insinuation that you can’t be trusted, but we can’t take the risk that others might have bugged the room. Please believe me when I tell you that it’s imperative that we take these extra precautions. In just a moment, you’ll understand why we’re going to such lengths,” Lilyana said, sounding apologetic.

“Take whatever measures you believe are necessary to feel at ease,” Niskera replied magnanimously. She gestured towards the low table in the centre of the room and the chairs in two different sizes surrounding it. “Please make yourselves at home.”

Lilyana sat in a smaller seat, while the Trankarans made themselves comfortable in the larger ones. It took a couple more minutes for the assassins to finish their electronic surveillance of the room, but they eventually nodded to each other with satisfaction and joined the others at the table.

\*Do you trust Thandrun, Niskera?\* Alyssa asked the Trankaran Queen, an uncharacteristic intensity to her voice. \*Just let the Maliri know if you do...\*

Niskera stared at the two white-armoured women sitting to either side of Lilyana. “Fleet Warden Thandrun is a steadfast ally and my closest confidant. He is one of the most honourable citizens I have had the pleasure to know and I trust him with my life.”

Thandrun looked at her in astonishment when he heard her unprompted declaration of admiration for him. “Why thank you, my Queen!”

She darted a shy smile at him, then returned her focus to the Maliri. “Does that answer your question?”

The assassins exchanged a glance, then nodded to Lilyana. The Maliri Fleet Commander raised her hands to her helmet, then with a soft hiss, the seals unlocked and she slowly lifted it from her head.

Thandrun gaped in open-mouthed astonishment as she revealed her azure skin and a short shock of white hair. “By the Great Maker! The Maliri are blue Terrans?!”

Almari and Ilyana removed their Paragon helmets too, revealing beautiful blue faces with dazzling smiles, framed by long snowy-white manes.

“Our species are... distantly related,” the Maliri Fleet Commander said with a wry twitch of her sensuous lips. “I hope you can forgive our precautions now; revealing our true appearance to non-Maliri is a crime punishable by death. Fortunately for us, Queen Edraele made an exception in this case.”

\*John thought it would make the meeting go more smoothly,\* Alyssa clarified for Niskera. \*But we still want to keep the Maliri’s true appearance a secret.\*

Thandrun’s expression was earnest as he said, “I am truly honoured that you would trust me in this fashion. I swear to you that I will never betray your confidence.”

Lilyana smiled at the Fleet Warden. “Niskera is a... kindred spirit... with her link to Alyssa and John. If she believes you to be trustworthy, then so do I.”

As Thandrun was recovering from discovering the truth about the Maliri, Niskera poured a thick purple liquid out of a decanter into goblets and placed them in front of her guests.

“This wine was brewed locally. The volcanic soil is wonderfully fertile and supports many vineyards growing Kharlagh berries.” She raised her own goblet and continued, “I would like to commemorate this special occasion with a toast. To the first official visit from the Maliri Protectorate to the Trankaran Republic. May our friendship endure for eternity.”

Lilyana placed her golden helmet on the table, then reached for a goblet, her actions mirrored by the two assassins. She locked eyes with Niskera, the sparkle in her angular aquamarine orbs acknowledging the second meaning behind the Glowing Queen’s warm words. “To our eternal friendship...” Sipping the wine, she savoured the earthy taste for a moment before nodding her approval. “Quite delicious, thank you.”

Niskera smiled as the three Maliri enjoyed the beverage, tasting her own drink to complete her part of the toast. “You mentioned that there were other important matters that we needed to discuss? I hope all is well with Queen Edraele and your people?”

“Edraele and the Maliri Protectorate are in fine health,” Lilyana replied, toying with her goblet and swirling the wine. “The new development I mentioned concerns the Kirrix. Has Alyssa informed you of her latest exploits?”

The Trankarans glanced at each other, then shook their heads, both equally intrigued.

“She has confronted the Kirrix Hive Mind,” Lilyana said, leaning forward with an intense expression on her face. “Alyssa demanded that they release all your captured citizens and retreat from Trankaran Space without delay, threatening the Kirrix with extermination should they refuse. They have grudgingly agreed to her terms.”

Thandrun and Niskera were both stunned by this announcement, the shock even greater than the revelation of the Maliri’s true appearance.

“Then the invasion is over!” Niskera exclaimed, her amber eyes widening with joy. “We must dispatch our fleets to the liberated worlds at once and tend to all those citizens who have been violated by the Kirrix!”

Lilyana didn’t reply and darted a cautionary glance at Thandrun, who nodded, sharing her sense of trepidation.

“I would advise a more measured approach, my Queen,” he said, his voice sombre. “At present the Kirrix greatly outnumber our forces; we cannot afford to expose our fleets to attack, not when the majority are still awaiting upgrades.”

“But our rock-brethren are running out of time!” Niskera protested, her face twisted with anguish. “Every day that we delay, more citizens will be torn apart by Kirrix spawn. We must get relief fleets out to those besieged worlds as quickly as possible to save our people!”

Lilyana gave her a sympathetic look. “I concur with the Fleet Warden’s wise words, Queen Niskera. I’ve been informed that Alyssa forced the Kirrix to accept this treaty using threats and intimidation; they must deeply resent having to return their haul of captured hosts. Until we can confirm that the Kirrix are adhering to Alyssa’s demands, caution is the prudent response.”

Niskera forced herself to unclench her fists and reluctantly nodded. “I can see that your advice is well-considered. The fate of the entire Republic is at stake... we cannot afford to make any rash decisions.”

Thandrun placed a comforting hand on hers. “I share your concern for our citizens, Niskera. Perhaps we could order Warden Brokurlun’s advanced fleet to reconnoitre the invasion corridor? At present he is guarding the border of the Yelneg Dominion, but Dun Gerluhr and Negbhaldum are only a few hours away with his new tachyon drives.”

“Please could I see a map showing the location of the worlds you’re discussing?” Lilyana requested, steepling her fingers.

The Fleet Warden nodded, pressing several runes on the table with a stubby finger. A holographic map depicting the Trankaran Republic appeared, with their present location on the capital marked, as well as the Kirrix invasion corridor. Near the tip of that ochre wedge was the small cluster of systems owned by the fungoid species known as the Yelneg.

“Installing our new shield generators shouldn’t take too long,” Lilyana said thoughtfully, studying the map. “As soon as the refit is complete, I believe we have two options for my fleet. The first would be for me to work independently and set course for Theg Haldrim, as it’s some distance from your forces in the Yelneg Dominion. Our second option would be for me to rendezvous with your fleet at Dun Gerluhr.”

Niskera looked at the two different worlds. “What are the ramifications for each option?”

The Maliri Fleet Commander smiled at her and patiently explained, “Working independently, we can observe more of the Kirrix operations, doubling the rate at which we can confirm they have withdrawn from each of your worlds. However, if we’re assuming that combat is a distinct possibility, then combining our forces would be the more sensible choice.”

“Warden Brokurlun’s fleet possesses upgraded heatsinks, improved sensors, and faster FTL drives, but they have not yet had Brimorian shielding installed,” Thandrun advised them. “If his forces engage the Kirrix in combat, they would undoubtedly suffer heavy losses, but he would be able to scout their lines very effectively.”

“An excellent suggestion, Fleet Warden,” Lilyana agreed. “Your fleet would reach the Kirrix invasion corridor at least six hours before my own. Depending on Warden Brokurlun’s observations, we can determine if I need to launch an attack and where my strike would be most effective.”

“You are willing to engage the Kirrix alone?” Thandrun asked in surprise.

“If it becomes necessary... yes,” she replied, looking each of them in the eyes. “However, I am under orders not to recklessly endanger my forces. I’d request that you expedite the refit operations for the rest of your fleets, so that they can join me at the earliest opportunity.”

Niskera frowned and asked quietly, “Are we so certain that combat with the Kirrix is inevitable?”

“It is always wise to plan for the worst-case scenario, my Queen,” Thandrun explained, receiving an approving nod from the Maliri Fleet Commander. “If disaster strikes, you are prepared for such an eventuality.”

“I shall pray that such precautions are unnecessary,” she said, lifting her head with hope. “If the Kirrix have taken heed of Alyssa’s warning, the war will already be over. Many thousands of citizens might be spared that we would not have had time to otherwise save.”

Lilyana gave her an encouraging smile. “I admire your optimism, Niskera. There’s certainly no harm in hoping for the best possible outcome. I would prefer to avoid a battle too, but I’ll do whatever I can to protect your people.”

Touched by her sincerity, Niskera reached across the table to touch the Maliri’s gauntleted hand. “We will never forget your assistance in our time of direst need. If there is anything the Trankaran Republic can do for the Maliri, simply name it and we will do everything in our power to fulfil your request.”

Looking down at that stony grey hand covered with glowing lines, Lilyana removed her gauntlet and interlaced her slender blue fingers with Niskera’s. “We’re friends and allies, Glowing Queen. There’s no need to keep tally of favours freely given.”

There was a quiet moment of understanding between them, the budding friendship cemented with a shared smile.

Niskera sat back, gently separating her fingers from Lilyana’s. She turned to her hulking companion who had been watching them both in fascination. “Thandrun, perhaps now would be a good time to share the tactical briefing you have prepared for our friends?”

He quickly nodded as he composed himself, tapping runes on the desk to activate a dozen holo-screens displaying reams of data. “I have gathered as much pertinent information for you as possible. This briefing covers the systems in the invasion corridor, astronomical features in that region of space which might be used to your tactical advantage, and everything we know about the Kirrix fleet compositions.”

Lilyana studied the detailed reports on the Kirrix, which had been transmitted by besieged worlds right up until communications were severed by the invaders. “Outstanding work, Fleet Warden. Your people’s stoicism under terrifying circumstances is impressive to say the least. I’m astonished that they continued to gather data on the invaders when they could have been fleeing for their lives.”

His expression was grim as he nodded. “They understood that sometimes an individual must make the ultimate sacrifice for the good of the many.”

She stared at him in silence for a moment, then said ruefully, “That lesson is one long forgotten by the Maliri. For millennia our civilisation has regressed, becoming increasingly egotistical and self-centred.”

Ilyana patted the Fleet Commander on her armoured vambrace. “That might have been true of the Maliri Regency, but the Maliri Protectorate is guided by very different hands.”

Almari had a fervent gleam in her eyes as she declared, “Baen’thelas brought light into that darkness! For the first time in millennia, we have ventured beyond the borders of Maliri Space and are conversing freely with non-Maliri... a fine testimony to the changes he’s already wrought.”

Niskera smiled at the three blue-skinned women. “I find there is already much to admire about the Maliri. If your society reflects the three of you, I suspect that your people will become a beacon of inspiration to us all.”

\*Not yet,\* Alyssa murmured. \*But we’re working on it...\*

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John closed his eyes and listened attentively as Edraele recounted the details of the meeting between the Maliri and the Trankarans. When Thandrun’s long briefing came to a close, John requested that Almari have a moment alone with the Glowing Queen.

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Niskera gave Thandrun a reassuring smile as she watched him leave the room, the big Trankaran accompanied by two of the three Maliri, who were concealed behind their armour once again. When the door closed behind them, leaving Niskera alone with Almari, the Maliri assassin removed her helmet and walked around the table to stand before the Trankaran Queen.

“Baen’thelas wanted to take this opportunity to talk with you personally, Queen Niskera,” Almari said, with a hint of reverence to her voice. “I’ll be repeating his words, and Edraele will tell him whatever you say to me.”

“I understand... and thank you so much for facilitating this conversation,” Niskera said gratefully.

The Maliri nodded to her, then cleared her throat. “Niskera, I’m very proud of you for what you’ve achieved so far. You’ve rallied your people and the Republic is now rapidly regaining its strength.”

If she could have blushed, the Trankaran Queen would have done so at hearing his warm praise. “Thank you for your kind words, John. To see the rock-brethren united at long last was a dream that I despaired would never come to pass.”

“And how are you coping with the changes to yourself?” Almari asked softly, hesitating for a moment, then reaching out to trace a finger along the glowing lines covering Niskera’s forearm. “Alyssa told me that recently you’ve been feeling... isolated.”

Niskera gave the Maliri a brave smile. “It was a little strange to see the effect my appearance has on my people. I am sure I will get used to it in time.”

“I want you to be honest with me if you’re feeling unhappy, Niskera,” Almari said, with a look of sympathy.

Leaning heavily against the desk, Niskera looked away from those concerned cobalt eyes. “It has been harder than I anticipated,” she finally admitted. “Thandrun is the only one who sees me as anything other than the Glowing Queen and even he looks at me in awe for the first few minutes of every day. At first it was flattering to be looked upon with such wonder... but the novelty has passed.”

Almari put her arm around the troubled Trankaran’s shoulder. “Alyssa said you were very happy for a while... she thought you might have begun a relationship?”

Niskera nodded and let out a forlorn sigh. “His name was Orinaden... one of the most handsome Rock-brothers I have ever laid eyes upon. To have such a male as my mate was glorious, especially when he gazed upon me with such adoration. However, I quickly came to realise that he only had eyes for the Glowing Queen... and was incapable of seeing me as anything beyond that.”

John was quiet for a moment then said through his Maliri spokeswoman, “I was worried that something like this might happen. Perhaps Rachel can research a way to reverse the transformation to your appearance...”

“No!” Niskera said sharply, locking eyes with Almari. “I said that I would pay any price to unite my people and would pay it gladly. My feelings have not changed on the matter... in fact, after witnessing the profound impact I made on the Senate, I am more resolved than ever to do whatever I can for the Republic. We can leave a lasting legacy for the Trankaran people that will endure for thousands of years. What is my life in the face of such overwhelming good for so many citizens?”

“I think you’re amazing,” Almari whispered, leaning in and giving her a gentle kiss on the cheek.

“Thank you, John,” Niskera said with a shy smile, her hand lifting to her face where those soft blue lips had brushed her rough skin.

The Maliri shook her head. “That was from me.”

Niskera looked at her in surprise, then she frowned as she squared her shoulders, standing up straighter. “I apologise for wallowing in self-pity like this, it besmirches the wonderful opportunity I have been given.” She gently clasped Almari’s hand and continued, “I shall simply work harder for my people so that I feel I have earned the affection they lavish upon me. There have also been many positive outcomes from the changes I underwent which I have not mentioned; to see centuries of petty rivalries in the senate wiped away filled me with a sense of elation that cannot be put into words.”

Almari squeezed her hand as she repeated John’s words, “You have nothing to apologise for, I’m just sorry that you’ve been left feeling isolated. I know that Alyssa would like to strengthen your connection into a telepathic bond, and when the comms beacons are rebuilt, Edraele wants to establish regular contact with you. I promise you’ll have a support network you can rely on, it’ll just take us a little time to get everything in place.”

The Glowing Queen nodded, appearing thoughtful. “This feeling of detachment from my people might actually be a positive thing. The Republic has always had a tendency to look inward, focusing its attention on our own citizens. Perhaps I can help change that insular viewpoint and encourage my fellow Trankarans to become more open to other civilisations and cultures...”

“That sounds like a worthy goal,” Almari agreed with a smile. “Once we’ve dealt with the Kirrix threat, I’ll be working to bring the allies closer together. You should see improved relations with the Maliri, Terrans, and the Ashanath, as well as an increase in trade and military collaboration.”

Niskera inhaled deeply, a newfound light of inspiration in her eyes. “To be part of building a stronger galactic community is an honour not to be taken lightly. I will make sure that the Trankaran Republic is viewed as an invaluable member of our alliance.”

“You already are,” Almari said with conviction.

Opening her arms for a hug, Niskera embraced the slender Maliri assassin. “Thank you for speaking with me today, I feel so much better.”

Almari turned and whispered in her ear. “I really miss him too.”

Niskera reached up and very gently brushed her hand through the Maliri’s long silky hair, the pulsing light from her fingers giving the white tresses a golden glow. Almari traced her hand along the lines tracking over the Trankaran woman’s arm and they shared an intimate smile, acknowledging the changes that John had made to each of them... and how those changes came about.

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“Is Niskera okay, John?” Faye asked, looking down at him where he rested his head in her lap.

He opened his eyes and nodded. “It’s been hard for her since she became the Glowing Queen. It can be lonely being in a position of authority; both Lynette and Edraele experienced much the same problem. It’s even more pronounced for Niskera because her new appearance has dramatically changed the way the Trankarans interact with her.”

She nodded, her expression showing her concern. “Do you think she’ll eventually move to Maliri Space with us?”

“The invitation is always open, but she’s a very determined woman and fiercely loyal to the Republic. Trying to convince her to retire is going to be an uphill struggle,” he conceded with a frown. “With a bit of luck, she might find a Trankaran male who’s able to see past her new appearance. If she can’t adjust to the changes and isn’t able to settle down with anyone, I’ll have to do something to help her. I’m not going to let Niskera be lonely for years, no matter how stubborn she is about doing her duty.”

“I love how much you care about her,” Faye said, gently tousling his hair. “You’re so kind to all the girls... me included.”

“You make it very easy,” John said, giving her a fond smile. “And talking about being caring, don’t think I don’t appreciate all the effort you went to on our date.” He glanced at the empty picnic hamper. “I can’t believe you brought lunch too, I felt so looked after.”

“Did you really enjoy everything?” she asked, her eyes lighting up.

John nodded, reaching for her hand and brushing his thumb over her dainty fingers. “It was really special, Faye, thank you. The location was beautiful, the food delicious, the conversation thought provoking, and the company delightful... especially the kisses!” He shook his head in admiration. “You definitely got top marks for this one.”

She beamed at him joyfully. “I’m so glad you had a good time! I was so pleased to be able to help you with some of the things on your mind.” Faye blushed, a dark bloom in her purple cheeks. “And I really enjoyed the kisses too.”

He pulled her in for a hug, wrapping his arms around her petite body and holding her close. They shared a long, sensual kiss, with Faye melting into his arms, making her appreciation clear with a soft moan of arousal.

John was achingly hard and he groaned when they separated. “So... can we schedule our third date for this afternoon?”

Faye giggled, knowing he was referring to her three date rule. She reluctantly shook her head and whispered, “I’d like to savour the anticipation for a little while first. Perhaps we can arrange another date in a few days’ time?”

“I know, honey, I was only kidding,” he said, stroking her back. “I’m not going to rush you into anything.”

She gazed at him with her big luminous eyes, a flicker of uncertainty there until she finally made a decision. “I’d like to wait until the third date until we... go all the way... but I was wondering if you’d like to return the favour?”

“Return the favour?” he asked with a playful smile. “I’m fairly sure I initiated some of those kisses too.”

Faye blushed and said quietly, “I wasn’t talking about kisses. I just thought that since I fed you...” Her hand lowered to her stomach, and she traced a slow circle around her navel.

His eyes widened as he caught her meaning and was unable to tear his gaze away from her slender purple fingers. “You want me to... feed you?” he faltered, caught entirely by surprise.

Her hand froze and she looked at him anxiously. “I didn’t want to suggest doing anything you’re not ready for! You just seemed to be very aroused and I wanted to-”

He interrupted her panicked response with a kiss, gently lowering her back onto the blanket. When she relaxed and looked up at him starry-eyed, he gave her a reassuring smile. “You read the mood just right, Faye. There’s nothing wrong, I just wasn’t expecting you to be ready for that yet, that’s all.”

She looked greatly relieved and her cupid-bow lips lifted into a coy grin. “So... is that a yes? I don’t want you to feel like I’ve taken advantage of you afterwards...”

John laughed and quirked an eyebrow at her. “Hey! Isn’t that my line?”

Faye reached out and brushed her fingers over his trousers, caressing his stiffening shaft through the material. “I’d really like to do this, John. I’m ready, but I want to make sure you feel... completely comfortable.”

“Oh, I see...” he said with sudden understanding. “You’re worried about your synthetic nature being off-putting?”

She nodded, studying his face carefully. “Is it a problem?”

He shook his head, letting his hand rest on her slim abdomen. “You know... I’d completely forgotten. To me, you’re just... Faye... a beautiful, adorable, smart, funny girl. I care about you a great deal as a friend, but I think you’re very sexy too.”

“Oh, John...” she murmured with a breathy sigh. “I think you’re wonderful.”

He leaned down to taste her velvety lips again, marvelling at the softness and the lovely way she responded to his kiss. Within seconds any thought that she wasn’t a gorgeous girl in his arms had vanished from his mind, dispelled by the overwhelming authentic feel of her physical form.

When they parted, her eyes twinkled as she asked, “Naked or with clothes on?”

“Definitely naked,” he replied, feeling the anticipation rising... amongst other things.

Rather than stripping off her clothes, Faye helped him remove his first, until he sat before her without a stitch on him. She rose to her feet and gave him a coy smile as she slowly peeled the straps of her dress off her shoulders. Taking her time, she slid the light fabric down her body, revealing inch after inch of her slender purple form. When the dress pooled on the ground, she posed nude for him in all her glory.

“Do you find me attractive, John?” she whispered, watching his eyes roaming over her body.

He nodded, unable to stop admiring her beautifully proportioned figure. “You’re gorgeous. You look just like the girls... only purple.”

“And miniature,” she said with a flirtatious giggle.

“Small but perfectly formed,” he corrected her, leaning forward to place a loving kiss on her stomach.

Faye caught her breath and looked into his eyes as he followed up his initial kiss with several more. “I want to be one of your girls... so much.”

“I’ve been thinking about you that way for weeks,” he said, his hand following the curve of her calf, up to the soft warmth of her thigh, the muscles pleasingly firm to the touch.

“When did your feelings change?” she asked, mesmerised by his eyes.

He gave her a self-conscious smile. “When you danced for me... I stopped thinking of you as a cute little fairy and started to see you as a very desirable woman.”

She sank to her knees, descending with an almost liquid grace. “I needed Jade’s help back then... but I don’t anymore.”

Moving closer, she pressed her nubile body against him, rubbing her perky breasts against his chest as she nuzzled into his neck. Encircling her in his arms, he explored the slender strength of her back and the compact globes of her ass which only just filled his hands.

“Oh... that feels divine,” she said in a hushed voice, reeling under the onslaught of tactile sensation.

“Would you like me to take care of you first?” John offered, nibbling at the deliciously soft skin at her neck.

Faye moaned at the thought, swaying unsteadily in his arms as he continued to explore her body. After a long moment where she was incapable of speech, she managed to shake her head and push him back so that he was lying on the blanket. “Today is all for you.”

He could see the fierce determination in her eyes and was more than happy to let Faye have her way with him. After all, when he’d kissed that toned little tummy of hers, the thought of filling her to the brim with his cum had nearly driven him wild with lust.

She crawled between his legs and bit her lower lip as she lowered her head to get a closer look at his cock. John was painfully hard and Faye carefully wrapped her fingers around his shaft, letting out a low moan as he throbbed in response to her touch. “It feels so hot and hard, but your skin is soft too,” she said in a breathy whisper. “I can’t believe I caused this...”

John watched her lick her pouty lips, the moisture making them glisten in the sunlight. “You’re a beautiful girl, Faye. I’m so turned on right now.”

She glanced up at him, a playful smile twitching her lips. Cupping his quad with her second hand, she gave him a sympathetic moan. “You feel so full... the girls never emptied your balls this morning, did they?”

He shook his head, unable to form a coherent reply as she stroked his cock at a languid pace.

“Are you going to let me take care of you? I promise I’ll swallow everything you want to give me...” she crooned in a seductive whisper.

“My god... where did you learn to talk like that?” he groaned, staring at her in disbelief.

“I’ve spent so many hours in your bedroom, watching you pleasuring the girls...” she replied with a furtive smile. “Is this okay what I’m saying? I can tone it down if I sound silly...”

“You don’t sound silly!” he quickly reassured her. “You’re very sexy.”

She nibbled her full lower lip and gave him a disapproving look. “But what I’m saying is so naughty... and I’m just a sweet, innocent virgin. You’re not really looking forward to breaking me in... are you?”

John brushed his fingers through her hair and cradled her head in his hands. “Please, Faye...”

“Is it wrong that I’m getting aroused by hearing an organic beg?” she asked, a wicked gleam in her eye.

He couldn’t help laughing. “Now’s not the times for jokes, honey.”

“Sorry, I couldn’t resist that one,” she said with a cheeky grin. Looking him in the eyes, she added nervously, “Are you sure all this is okay? Please tell me if anything I’m doing or saying doesn’t feel right.”

“Everything’s perfect,” he replied, trying to resist the urge to guide that sensual mouth down to his cock.

Faye saw the barely suppressed lust on his face. “You need to feel my warm, wet little mouth wrapped around you... I can see it.” She leaned down and dragged her velvety tongue along the base of his shaft then kissed the throbbing head. “Mmm, it’s so huge... that’s never going to fit.”

John held his breath as she angled his cock towards her open mouth, her lips sliding over the engorged crown as she lapped at him with her tongue. Locking eyes with him, she opened wider, engulfing the head in the tight wet confines of her mouth. He couldn’t feel her teeth against him, only soft warmth as she began to suck, her cheeks hollowing as she tightened around his girth. Enthralled by the sight of her, he watched as Faye inched down his shaft while maintaining that wonderful suction.

Faye engaged her blowjob functionality for the first time, retracting her teeth and lubricating her mouth and throat into a warm sleeve designed specifically for John’s impressive dimensions. She briefly considered utilising her ‘nervous virgin’ program, to make her first blowjob more amateurish and authentic, but ultimately decided that she wanted John eager to return for more... after all, she had some serious competition. Activating her ‘suckmistress’ program, she began working on him like an expert fellatrix, letting him slide all the way down her throat until her lips circled the base of his shaft.

She heard him utter an inarticulate groan and began to move at a languid pace, bobbing on the last couple of inches to simulate intercourse. At the same time, her throat carefully constricted mid-way down his shaft, then stroked him in time to the movement of her head. The finishing touch was the rhythmic application of suction, working on him like a debauched milking machine hungry for a creamy load. With no need to stop for air and able to maintain this pace forever, Faye focused on monitoring John’s reactions, seeing his breathing deepen and his heart rate increase.

“Holy fuck...” he muttered, staring wild eyed at Faye as she fucked, stroked, and sucked him simultaneously.

Her bright eyes glittered with excitement and she reached for his hands, guiding them to the back of her head. Holding on for dear life, John couldn’t help thrusting at her incredibly soft lips as she quickly brought him to release. Crying out with pleasure, he hilted his cock in her throat, shooting long spurts of cum into her waiting stomach. The suction and stroking were relentless, making him squeeze his eyes tightly shut as his climax intensified.

On the Invictus, Faye’s holographic sprites vanished in a purple flash as she transferred all her avatars to her chassis. Assigning them to monitor every aspect of her physical form, Faye Primary immersed herself in the Cyber-Realm, kneeling on a circuit-covered platform in the command node of her body’s digital network. Clasping her hands together as if in prayer, she closed her eyes and wished with all her heart.

“I wish I was a real girl... I wish I was a real girl...” she repeated over and over, her desperate plea echoing through the Cyber-Realm.

John collapsed backwards on the blanket and let out an astonished chuckle. “How the hell did you learn how to do that?! You were amazing, Faye!”

Faye Tertiary was carefully monitoring her command interface for any sign of impairment. All systems seemed to be operating at 100%, without any sign of the daze that most of the girls had experienced the first time they’d swallowed John’s cum. However, that wasn’t necessarily a bad sign, after all, Jade and the Nymphs had been impervious to that initial suckling trance.

With Faye Primary otherwise occupied, Secondary was assigned control of her chassis and the critical task of maintaining post-coital interactions with John. She let his softening cock slide out of her mouth and she sat up, giving him a dreamy smile. “I feel so full,” she whispered, cradling her obscenely curved belly.

John gazed in awe at the beachball her trim stomach had become. “Wow... I really filled you up!”

“Will you hold me for a while?” Faye Secondary asked, looking down at him with big doe-like eyes.

“Of course, honey.” He gave her a warm smile and opened his arms to the petite purple girl, spooning behind her as he wrapped her up in a loving embrace. John placed his hand on the magnificent hemisphere her tummy had become, caressing her soft skin.

Faye Quaternary was monitoring her synthskin and she shuddered in ecstasy at the data surge from the heightened sensitivity of her purple form. The intent had been to mirror the delight the girls felt when someone caressed their cum-filled bellies and ramping up the responsiveness of the sensors in her synthskin triggered exactly the same reaction.

“That feels so good!” Faye Secondary gasped breathlessly. “Your arms around me, your cum in my tummy, your gentle touch... Oh, John, I’ve wanted this for so long.”

“You feel absolutely wonderful,” he agreed as he kissed her shoulder. “Everything about today’s date was amazing.”

While John was relaxing in the afterglow, Faye’s Avatars continued their meticulous monitoring of her internal subsystems, looking for the slightest change. Tertiary studied her higher-logic processing, Quarternary through to Octonary were observing the substrate of her throat and abdominal lining, while Nonary through to Duodenary checked her torso and limbs for any sign of biomechanical transformation.

John enjoyed the intimacy as he cuddled Faye, blissfully unaware of the frenzied digital activity occupying his synthetic lover. “I’m going to have to really raise my game to make our third date special. At the very least I’m going to have to blow your mind... it’s only fair, you did it to me,” he said with a grin, meaning every word.

Faye Secondary sighed happily and kissed John’s arm that she was using as a pillow. “I’m so glad you enjoyed everything. I love you, John.”

“I love you too,” he murmured into her purple hair, pulling her closer so that her back was nestled against his chest.

It was a bright summer’s day on Brecken’s World and the midday sun filtering through the glade kept the lovers warm as they lay on the blanket. John drifted off into a contented doze as he held Faye protectively in his arms, feeling more at peace than he had done in weeks. The minutes rolled by into an hour, with Faye’s avatars maintaining their constant vigil. They gathered together in the Cyber-Realm to compare their findings and discuss the ramifications of what they’d discovered.

Faye Secondary was elected as their spokesperson and she quietly approached the command node of her body’s digital network. Faye Primary’s voice reverberated from the platform, a chant of hope filling what would have otherwise been oppressive silence.

“I wish I was a real girl... I wish I was a real girl...” she repeated, her dream so close it seemed within touching distance.

Kneeling beside her, Faye Secondary reached out to place her hand on Primary’s arm. “It’s been 67 minutes since we received the infusion of John’s cum. All internal systems are functioning perfectly. There’s been no changes of any kind... no biomechanical metamorphosis, no symbiosis reaction.”

Faye’s chant came to a stuttering halt and she let out a broken sob. “But why? I’ve been a good girl...”

“I’m so sorry,” Secondary whimpered, throwing her arms around Primary.

Faye began to weep, her tiny synthetic heart breaking as she realised her fondest wish would never come true.