Three Square Meals Ch. 72

John helped Irillith up, and she nodded to him gratefully, wiping the back of her hand across her bloodied mouth and wincing with the pain from her broken nose. Rachel rushed over to her side too, and she brushed the Maliri girl's hair out of the way, so that she could help clean up the blood splattered all over her face.

The brunette unclipped a medi-kit from a pouch at her waist, and glanced John's way, she asked, "I'll stop the bleeding, but I assume you'll heal her when we get back to the Invictus?"

John nodded in reply, then looking Irillith in her violet eyes, he asked, "Are you okay?"

Her face looked haunted by guilt, and she stared at her sobbing sister who was being comforted by Alyssa. "Tashana's right..." Irillith replied, then paused as she swallowed. HHer voice was quiet and full of remorse as she added, "Everything that happened to her was all my fault."

"We'll make everything right," he said, patting her gently on the shoulder.

Hades was still screaming in pain, staring in horror at the bloodied stumps of his wrists. Sakura looked at John with an arched eyebrow, and when he nodded to her, she turned and unceremoniously shot the Pirate King through the head, putting him out of his misery.

"Let's get out of here," John said to the girls, walking over to crouch down beside Alyssa and Tashana.

He glanced at Tashana, and when he saw the horrible extent of her mutilated face, he shared a glance with his blonde matriarch. \*Fucking animals!\* he swore vehemently.

Edraele had been listening intently to his thoughts, and when she heard his reaction to the injuries Tashana had sustained, her voice throbbed with guilt and sorrow as she sobbed, \*My baby girl!\*

\*We've got her, she's safe now,\* John said, trying to soothe the stricken Maliri matriarch.

Alyssa's sounded furious as she thought to him, \*I want to kill every one of these bastards all over again!\*

He nodded, and said, \*Yeah, I know exactly what you mean.\* He let out a troubled sigh, and added, \*How anyone could do this to another person is beyond me.\*

Tashana was rocking back and forth, hugging her knees, and burying her disfigured face in her arms as she cried disconsolately.

\*Are you going to top her up when we get back to the ship? Fix everything?\* Alyssa asked, looking at the horrifically abused girl with heartfelt concern.

John stroked Tashana's back, and said, \*I'll speak to her, see what she wants to do. I can offer to heal her without setting up the bond if she doesn't want to join us.\*

Alyssa grimaced, and said with some reluctance, \*If it was up to me, I'd just ask Jade to fill her up, but you remember what happened with Irillith. Your cum affected her very strongly, much more so than the other Maliri girls. I suspect it's going to be all or nothing with Tashana.\*

Reaching down for the golden mask that Tashana held in her limp hand, John gently pulled it from her unresisting fingers, and stared at the twisted mouth turned up into a mocking smile. "You poor girl, you've suffered through so much," he said, his voice throbbing with sympathy.

Tashana had fallen quiet now, staring ahead blankly in a dazed stupor. He glanced at Alyssa again, and then gently scooped up the catatonic Maliri girl in his arms, carrying her effortlessly with her head resting against the golden lion on his chest. Alyssa took the mask from his hand, and then after a glance at Irillith's anguished expression, she carefully replaced the hood over Tashana's head.

Alyssa looked at the girls, and after a brief telepathic conversation, they turned and moved out, stepping over the corpses of the Bloodnova pirates as they made their way back down to the lower level.

"I don't recognise any of this tech," Dana muttered as she took one last glance at the archaic brass-coloured consoles.

"Anything you want take a look at?" John asked, as he fell into step beside her.

She slowly shook her head, and replied, "I doubt a crusty old refinery has anything we'd be interested in. The Beam Lasers in the turrets outside were much stronger than standard Terran beams, but the enhanced Maliri ones we've got strapped to the Invictus are vastly more powerful." Dana twisted her shoulders to show him the unfamiliar and vicious-looking rifle she had slung over one shoulder, and added, "I did find this on one of the pirates. It looks like some kind of sonic weapon, so I'll check it out back on the ship."

He nodded, and said, "Alright, sounds good. We'll just clean up here and be done with the place."

They reached the lower level of the complex and the girls fanned out, with Sakura and Irillith sweeping through to check they hadn't missed any stragglers. The rest of the girls went to the cells, and freed the half-dozen abused young women which the Bloodnovas had kept as playthings. John heard the sobs of relief from the pirates' slaves as his girls explained that they were rescuing them.

Glancing at Alyssa, he thought to her, \*Can you keep an eye on Rachel as she checks on these women, and then shepherd the freed prisoners down to the lower deck? The rest of the girls can come with me; we'll check on all the other slaves we freed in the market and docking bay.\*

\*Yep, no problem,\* Alyssa agreed, already issuing orders to that effect.

John glanced down at Tashana as he stepped over smoking Bloodnova corpses on his way out of Hades' base, but she still appeared to be unresponsive. Bearing in mind how Irillith had reacted the first time she'd seen him, he could only assume that the shock of seeing and recognising a Progenitor in the flesh, as well as the trauma of being abruptly reunited with her twin, had overcome the poor girl.

"Don't worry, you're safe now. No one's going to hurt you again," he murmured quietly to Tashana, as he walked across the huge metal disc lying on the ground near the entrance to the base.

As he headed through the shattered gateway, he could see the flare of Paragon Armour thrusters up ahead as Sakura and Irillith jumped off the gantries to descend to the level below. They were joined a few seconds later by Dana and Calara, who walked briskly around him and cleanly vaulted over the guardrail at the edge of the platform, before floating down to the few hundred people left alive in the Underworld.

Holding Tashana protectively in his arms, he activated flight mode and began gliding back towards Docking Bay Four. He spotted the Trankaran ore merchant below, who was still standing by his tracked carts loaded down with ore. The blocky alien was staring around wide-eyed at the mounds of corpses littering the area, and seemed to be trying to figure out a way to navigate past them with his carts.

It was difficult to land gracefully without being able to use the anti-grav generators built into the wrists of his paragon armour to steady himself, but he just about managed a reasonably elegant landing using the ones in his boots. The Trankaran heard the quiet burn of the retro-thruster on John's back, and whirled around to stare at John in fear as his white-armoured boots touched down on the deck with a metallic clank.

"Don't shoot!" the hulking creature pleaded in his deep rumbling voice, holding his arms in the air in a gesture of surrender.

John glanced down at the girl in his arms, and replied, "We just came here to rescue her, we're not going to harm you." Looking into the Trankaran's amber eyes, he added, "My name's John Blake. Who are you?"

"Yordalum," the big alien replied, slowly lowering his hands, a wary expression on his slab-like face.

"Have you got a decent ship? Something that can hold its own against pirate attacks?" John asked him, as a group of Bract merchants scuttled by, mandibles clicking furiously as their multifaceted eyes darted around at the scores of corpses.

The Trankaran looked at him suspiciously, but after a moment's pause, he nodded as he replied, "You have to have a tough ship to mine here safely, in the Unclaimed Wastes. My ship has been modified to carry Fusion Beams, which scares the pirates away."

John nodded as he remembered just how strong those Trankaran weapons were, then quickly asked Alyssa, \*What's the news from the girls?\*

She sounded troubled as she replied, \*The six women we rescued from Hades' base have been badly abused. Rachel thinks we should bring them with us so she can tend to them. The female slaves being auctioned by the slavers seem in reasonable shape, and so are the male slaves used by the merchants as baggage handlers.\* Knowing what he had in mind, she added, \*The girls have checked, there's plenty of people who know how to fly a ship.\*

Turning his attention back to the Trankaran merchant, John said, "I'd like to hire you and as many allies as you feel you need, to help guard some freed slaves on their way home. If you help them safely return to Terran Space, I'll give you a million credits."

The eight-foot-tall humanoid gaped at him, his dark-grey face reflecting his shock at the huge amount of money he'd just been offered. "By the great maker!" he blurted out in shock.

John looked at him with an arched eyebrow, and asked, "Does that mean you're interested?"

Yordalum reacted quickly, and blinking in amazement, he replied in his gravelly voice, "I can do that. When do you want to depart?"

"Within the hour," John replied. "Enough time for the slaves to take any weapons or gear they need from the dead, and pick out a decent couple of ships for the journey home."

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Normally poised and self-assured, the House Ghilwen Fleet Commander paced back and forth in the Command Suite aboard her flagship, 'The Encaren Valar'. She threw a troubled glance at the holographic maps representing the territory of her Noble House and shook her head once again.

"What the hell is she thinking, Darana!" she blurted out in exasperation. Stopping her pacing, the vexed woman swept her hand across the holographic images showing Ghilwen fleet dispositions, and sounded incredulous as she continued, "Stripping all our fleets from the borders with House Loraleth would be bad enough, but to do the same with House Valaden? It's madness!"

"I've no idea, Nymaleth," the battleship's Captain replied, sounding subdued. Walking over to the Sector Maps, she studied them closely, as if they weren't already permanently etched into her mind. Glancing at her Commander, her voice was terse as she added, "It's only a matter of time before Edraele exploits the situation, and cuts deep into our territory. Have you tried explaining this to-."

Nymaleth shot her a dangerous look, and said, "Do you take me for a fool? There's only so much I can push our new Matriarch... she's already threatened my position unless I cooperate." Adopting the airy soprano of a much younger woman, she continued, "Take all my forces to the border with House Holaris, and await further orders."

Stifling a smirk, Darana said, "We've been stuck here a week now, haven't we?" Her smile died as she added, "It's almost as if she's inviting House Loraleth or Valaden to attack us."

Nymaleth nodded, her face grim, and glancing over at the House Ghilwen territory map, her angular icy-blue eyes tracked the flightpath that intersected Ghilwen Space, all the way across to the Unclaimed Wastes. "Then there's that ship..." she muttered under her breath, astounded by the implausible speeds recorded by the long-range sensor net. Turning to look at her second-in-command, she added indignantly, "Letting a Terran vessel sweep through our territory unopposed; Matriarch Aradrea Ghilwen must be turning in her grave!"

"True, but now we're stuck dealing with her daughter," Darana said, soberly. Turning to stare at her commander, she asked in a hushed voice, "Is it true that Leena is still on Valaden?".

Nymaleth frowned, her brow etched with concern as she replied, "Yes, she's been there for weeks."

"Is she being held captive?" Darana asked, sounding deeply worried. "If so, we have to do something!"

Shaking her head, Nymaleth replied, "You know we don't have the strength to oppose the Valaden fleets. What can we do?"

"I wasn't thinking about a rescue mission," Darana replied, glancing back at the door to the Command Suite to make sure it was sealed. She stepped closer to Nymaleth, and in a soft, conspiratorial whisper, she continued, "We could declare Leena a traitor, and make alternate succession plans. Matriarch Nymaleth Ghilwen does have a nice ring to it..."

Nymaleth shot her companion a look of alarm, giving the door a frantic glance. Even the hint of treason against your House Matriarch carried barbaric and excessively sadistic punishments even by Maliri standards. She was about to sternly rebuke Darana, but she paused with the harsh words on the tip of her tongue. Matriarch. In her most secret fantasies she had always dreamed of being able to wield that level of absolute power...

The chime of the intercom made both women jump out of their skins, and they flashed each other a guilty look. Darana coughed nervously, and said, "Excuse me, Fleet Commander, I'll let you take the call in private."

Gliding over to the desk, Nymaleth grimaced when she saw the identity of the caller. Taking a deep breath, she set her face into a calm and composed mask, then accepted the call.

Matriarch Leena Ghilwen smiled at her, and replied warmly, "Hello, Nymaleth, it's nice to see you."

"It's so wonderful to see you too, my Matriarch," Nymaleth said to the image of the young House Ghilwen ruler. "What do I owe the honour of this call?"

Leena glanced off to her left, then sat up straighter, and added imperiously, "I have new orders for you."

"And what might they be?" Nymaleth replied through gritted teeth, doing her best to smile.

"You are to leave all our forces on the border with House Holaris, but I want you to take your ship to our border with the Unclaimed Wastes. You are to meet with an ally of our House, and then escort some honoured guests to Genkiri station," the young House Ghilwen Matriarch requested.

Nymaleth gaped at her youthful leader, and forgetting herself for a fateful moment, she balked, "You want me to fly -alone- through House Loraleth Space?! Have you completely lost your mind?!"

Leena's eyes narrowed, and her voice was deathly cold as she hissed, "One more outburst like that, and you'll be begging me to end your suffering! Am I absolutely clear, Fleet Commander?"

Staring at the young woman in shock, Nymaleth felt a shiver of fear run down her spine. If she hadn't known better, she would have sworn she was talking to Edraele Valaden herself. She'd only heard the legendary House Valaden tyrant once, in a heated exchange with Aradrea Ghilwen, but that had been enough to make her thank her lucky stars that she hadn't been born into Valaden territory.

"Please accept my humblest apologies, Matriarch," Nymaleth quickly replied, flustered now. "I will obey your orders to the letter."

After a long moment spent fixing her with a withering gaze, Leena said in an ominous voice, "You'd better pray they arrive at their destination without so much as a hair out of place, Nymaleth. I'm holding you personally accountable for their safety, and you do NOT want to test me on this."

"Of course, my Matriarch," the cowed Fleet Commander replied, bowing deferentially.

Leena closed the call without saying another word, leaving Nymaleth staring at the winged chalice icon of House Ghilwen. She slumped in her chair, the conversation not having gone the way she expected at all. Her Matriarch seemed to have grown in confidence by leaps and bounds, and Nymaleth dreaded to think what kind of instruction she was receiving from Edraele.

With a resigned expression on her face, she leaned across her desk to the Comms interface, then swiped across Darana's name. When her second-in-command answered the call, Nymaleth said curtly, "Plot a course for the border with the Unclaimed Wastes, we depart immediately."

Before the shocked Captain could reply, Nymaleth ended the call, then stared mutely out of the clear-crystal window that ran the length of the room. A turquoise spiral nebula that twisted around a long extinct star was the dominant feature of this part of space, and she gazed at the exotic colours, lost in thought.

Matriarch Nymaleth Ghilwen; the idea had merit.

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John returned to the Invictus with Tashana, Rachel, and the six women that had been captured by the Bloodnovas, leaving Alyssa in charge of coordinating the freed slaves. While John and Rachel led their guests up to Medical, Faye returned with the Raptor back to the Underworld. The white gunship hovered ominously above the merchant ships, while she waited for the rest of the crew to finish assisting the emancipated slaves in securing transportation off the facility.

It took just under an hour for the overwhelmingly grateful slaves to strip the dead merchants, pirates, and mercs of anything they needed. There were over two-hundred men and nearly ninety women that John and the girls had saved from the slavers, and they picked out four well-maintained merchant vessels to use for the journey back to Terran Space. Irillith was able to smash through the ship's security protocols, and unlock all functionality of the vessels in a matter of minutes, handing over full control to the awed people they had rescued.

Yordalum was friends with another Trankaran miner who had docked at the station, and they were confident that between them both, they could help protect the convoy of merchant vessels on their journey home. John had reassured them that they'd be paid as soon as they contacted him upon safely reaching Terran Space, and that they simply had to contact the Maliri to route the call on to him in Valaden territory. The two Trankarans had been dutifully impressed that John was an ally of the Maliri, and when he described Chancellor Niskera, referring to her as a friend, they had readily agreed to his terms.

The blocky, ponderous Trankaran ships took off from Docking Bay Two, and fell into formation with the small fleet they were escorting. The merchant vessels themselves were modified freighters with extra armour and sprinkled with weapons - sensible precautions to take for anyone planning on operating in the Unclaimed Wastes.

Alyssa provided the group with a carefully plotted flightpath, which would save them several days' travel time on their journey home. The Trankarans and freed Terrans balked when they saw that their route to Terran Space would take them through Maliri territory, but John explained that they would be met by a Maliri fleet, and would be granted safe passage through to Terran territory. Relief at not having to brave Drakkar territory by skirting around Maliri space managed to temper their fear of the Maliri, and they all eventually agreed. The group of six ships jumped out of the system twenty minutes later, as soon as they were well-clear of the system's gravity wells.

Looking around the Bridge, John smiled with relief, and said, "Alright, let's set a course for Valaden."

"We're all ready to go," Jade said, turning in her Pilot's Chair. "I plotted a course while you were in the Underworld."

He winked at her, and she grinned at him in return, before quickly turning back to face her console and activating the Tachyon Drive. The cloud of tachyon particles began to form around the Invictus, and after a few seconds, the assault cruiser surged into hyper-warp, leaving the blue star of the Alamak system behind them.

"Three days two hours until we arrive at Valaden," Alyssa said, reading the ETA tagged against the Nymph's flight path. She smiled at the green-skinned girl, and added, "Not bad, Jade, not bad at all! I managed to shave off another thirty minutes, but giving that black hole a wider berth near the Gamme-Gruis system is probably sensible."

Jade turned in her Pilot's Chair and beamed a bright smile at her, thankful for the praise.

Rising from his chair, John said, "Alright time to get out of this gear, then I'm going to head down to Medical to check on Rachel and our guests. We'll all get together in the Briefing Room for a group hug and an After-Action Review." Looking around at the girls on the Bridge, he continued, "You should all be proud of yourselves today, you did an incredible job."

"Are you sure we can't have a group hug now and then another later with Rachel too?" Dana asked him with a grin.

John smiled at her, and said, "Sure, but it'll mean we have to make an extra fuss over her to make up for it. Let's get out of our gear first though, you're far more huggable when you're not covered head-to-foot in body armour!"

Most of the girls laughed at that, and they trooped into the Briefing Room to get out of their armour. The one exception was the subdued Maliri girl, who slowly stood up from her chair. Alyssa looked at Irillith with concern, and the blonde matriarch glanced at John with a worried expression.

\*Irillith's taking what happened to Tashana to heart,\* she warned him. \*She blames herself for everything that poor girl's been through.\*

John nodded, and replied, \*Yeah, she said as much earlier. The new Edraele can't let go of everything the old version of herself did either. She blames herself for all of it, and is trying to make amends.\*

Alyssa frowned as she replied, \*It really wasn't her fault, though. The old Irillith was a total bitch until you undid all the shit that Maliri society put her through. I don't really think of them as being the same person.\*

\*Yeah, I agree completely,\* John replied, as he watched Irillith plod dejectedly down the ramp on leaden feet, and walk through the door into the Briefing Room.

\*Can't you just wipe that bit of her memory? It's horrible watching her suffer like this,\* Alyssa thought to him.

He considered it for a moment, then replied, \*I can't see her agreeing to it. She'll probably see it as her cross to bear for what happened to Tashana.\*

Alyssa nodded, and looked sad as she said, \*She was doing so well. It's awful seeing her punishing herself for things that she'd never even consider doing now.\*

They stood together on the Bridge, lost in thought, until Faye fluttered over to John's side, and said softly, "Sorry to disturb you, but the girls are all waiting in the Briefing Room."

He shook himself from his reverie, and said, "Sorry Faye, tell them we'll be right there." He paused for a moment, looking into her huge luminous eyes, and added, "We really need to give you some kind of physical presence, then you can join in on these group hugs. I hate seeing you get left out when you're just as much a part of the crew as the rest of us."

Faye stared at him in wonder, her eyelids fluttering as her computational cycles were overwhelmed by routines from her custom programs. When she finally managed to control herself, she squeaked, "You could do that?!"

He smiled at her and admitted, "Well, in all likelihood, it'll be Dana working on the project, but sure, why not? As long as you like the idea?"

She nodded exuberantly, clasping her hands to her chest, and barely about to control her excitement as she replied, "I'd love that so much, thank you!"

"You're very welcome," he replied, reaching out to brush his finger against her cheek affectionately. He followed the holographic contours of her lovely purple face as he added, "It'll be amazing, being able to do this for real someday."

The digital girl's eyes were wide as saucers as she nodded slowly, translucent wings beating in a blur. John turned and followed Alyssa down the ramp to the Briefing Room, with Faye watching him with big dreamy eyes. Alyssa turned to look at her over her shoulder, and grinned when she saw the AI's wistful expression.

Once John and Alyssa had stowed away their weapons and stepped out of the equipping frames, the girls gathered around them and leaned in for a big group hug. After all the carnage in the Underworld, it was quite a relief that they'd all come through it unscathed, and John couldn't help but pray that all their future battles would be so easy. The realist in him knew that wasn't likely to be the case, what with the Progenitor stirring up trouble everywhere, but it was a pleasant thought, nonetheless.

He made eye contact with Faye, who stood apart, watching the group with a look of longing, mingled with a bright-eyed hopeful expression. She smiled at him, and he marvelled at the sophistication of her software when the radiant smile seemed to light up her face.

Glancing at the eager Nymph and the troubled Maliri girl in turn, he said, "Jade, Irillith, I'll need you with me. We'll go and check on those women we rescued."

Jade nodded with a knowing smile, and when the group hug broke up, she slipped her hand into his, and said, "More little kittens to look after."

 John put his arm around Irillith's waist and said, "Come on, let's go fix up your nose."

She nodded distractedly, and let him guide her from the room, while the rest of the girls waved them goodbye. They entered the grav-tube in silence, with Jade giving Irillith a worried glance. She squeezed John's hand, and when he looked at her as they floated down in the red glow, he could see the concern in her vertically-slitted emerald eyes.

They arrived at Deck Seven, then stepped out into the corridor, and after a short walk, John hit the button next to the Medical Bay door. He ushered in the girls, and then followed after them, looking around for the ship's doctor. The tawny-haired girl was standing by the full-body scanner, with Tashana lying still on the scanning table. A blue light swept over the Maliri girl's body, as the scanning device did its work, cataloguing a detailed list of Tashana's various injuries and displaying them above her as a multi-layered holograph.

Rachel turned away from the holo-display when she heard them enter, then walked over to join them, studying Irillith as she passed by. The Maliri girl hurried to her sister's side, looking down at her with her expression twisted by remorse. Rachel saw John's look of alarm at seeing Irillith within punching range of her twin, so she leaned in and said in a hushed voice, "It's okay, Tashana's mildly sedated to help her get some rest."

John nodded his understanding, then looked into the brunette's unsettled grey eyes, and asked, "Have you had a chance to examine her yet?"

Rachel's face clearly showed how shaken she was, and she drew him further away from Irillith, and composed herself before murmuring, "That poor girl's suffered so much. It's quite apparent that she's been the victim of scores of brutal rapes, and her body's taken some horrific abuse. Damage to her vocal chords, womb, and rectum are all indicative of forced penetration by non-Terran like lifeforms or objects. Her intestines and stomach are badly scarred as well, probably from being made to ingest something toxic." Glancing back at the masked woman, she whispered, "She's also covered in badly treated combat injuries, from deep skin lacerations, all the way through to dozens of broken bones. Then there's her face..."

John stroked her arm, and said, "Can you draw up a full list of her injuries for me, please? I want to talk to Tashana about it first, but assuming she'll let me heal her, I'll need to know about all her wounds."

"Of course," Rachel replied with a sad sigh, then leaned into him for a reassuring hug. As he wrapped his arms around her, and Jade stroked her back, the brunette continued in a hushed voice, "Whoever did all that to her was inhuman. The amount of crippling agony she's been through is beyond belief."

"What about the tumour that Irillith had? Does she have one too?" John asked, as he held Rachel in his arms.

She nodded, then glance over her shoulder to look at Irillith and her sister, and replied, "Tashana's is in a considerably more advanced state. The obvious conclusion would be that she's somehow learned to harness her psychic abilities, although how they've manifested, I've no idea." She hesitated for a moment, then continued, "Actually, that's not strictly true. We found a charred torso near the prison cells where we found the pirates' sex slaves, so it might be possible that she's developed some form of pyrokinesis."

John raised an eyebrow as he looked at the unconscious girl in her black clothes and red leather jacket. He could remember Edraele discussing her mother's affinity to psychic flames.

\*My mother was a cruel and sadistic monster,\* Edraele confirmed for him in a quiet telepathic murmur. \*She used to delight in burning her enemies to death, and I was forced to watch on more than one occasion. All that psychic power usage caught up with her in the end, and she ended up killing herself to escape from the agonising migraines.\*

\*I'll talk to Tashana, and all being well, she'll agree to let me heal her,\* John replied, doing his best to comfort the Maliri girl's anguished mother.

He could feel Edraele's gratitude over their bond as she said earnestly, \*I'll never be able to thank you enough for saving her. Thank you, John, so much!\*

\*I'll bring her back to you, don't worry,\* he replied. \*We'll be back at Valaden very soon.\*

\*It's felt like you've been away forever,\* Edraele replied, her voice throbbing with emotion.

He sent her a warm telepathic smile, and said, \*Just three days, I'll be there before you know it.\*

Jade had turned to gaze at the six Terran women that they'd freed from the pirates, and she asked sympathetically, "How are the other women doing?"

Rachel turned in John's arms and looked over at the other side of the Medical Bay, where the six women they'd rescued were lying in hospital beds. Their bruised and battered faces were all turned his way, and he could see that they were watching him warily.

"They've all suffered through some brutal gang rapes," Rachel told her friends softly. "They all have some kidney damage from being forced to take high doses of Noxidose. It's an illegal stimulant, which acts as an aphrodisiac. The gang members slapped and punched them, and two of them have been whipped, but they haven't got any broken limbs."

John's temper flared, but he realised getting angry wouldn't help these women now, and he unclenched his fists. Forcing himself to stay calm, he released Rachel from his arms, and replied, "I better introduce myself, and let them know they're safe."

Rachel nodded, and said, "They already know the basics."

After a final glance at Irillith, who was standing at her sister's bedside, John walked over towards the women in the hospital beds. He gave them a gentle, sympathetic smile as he tried to appear as unthreatening as possible. Five of the women tensed as he drew closer, but one of them smiled, a look of wonder on her face.

"Good evening, ladies," John said in a calm, steady voice. "I believe Rachel told you a little bit about me? My name's Rear Admiral John Blake, with the Terran Federation, and you're safe now, aboard the Invictus. We're taking you home."

"I've heard of you! I saw the TFNN report before I got captured!" the young blonde replied, her green eyes sparkling. "You're the Lion of the Federation!"

He chuckled as he nodded, relieved that his fame was proving useful in this case. He smiled at the girl, trying to suppress his anger at seeing the horrible black eyes she'd received from the pirates. "That's right. So I guess you know I'm one of the good guys? That you're all safe here with us?" he asked, more for the other young women's benefit.

"You go around saving people," she agreed sagely, nodding her head.

"What's your name?" he asked her, walking over to the side of her bed then sitting down in the chair beside it. A quick glance at the other women showed that they looked considerably less tense now, relaxing a little in their hospital beds.

"Tanya Morgan. I live with my parents on Mothallah-Two in the Alpha Trianguli system," she replied, giving him a grateful smile. Her smile faded then as she added, "At least I did, until the raiders came and grabbed me. I was out on a date with a boy from college. They shot down his hover-car, then..." Her voice trailed away, and he could see a dark shadow cross her pretty face.

He reached out a hand to gently squeeze hers in a comforting gesture, and was glad when she didn't pull her hand away. "I'm sorry for what you've been through. If it's any consolation, we wiped out all the Bloodnovas," John replied, meeting her eyes.

She let out a little sigh, and replied, "It's good to know they won't hurt anyone else." She didn't turn away, and he could see tears in her eyes as she gazed at him, and added, "It doesn't undo what they did to me, though. I don't know if I can just put all of that behind me."

John stroked her hand, giving her a look of sympathy before glancing at the other young women. He was about to speak, but he hesitated, unsure how to bring the subject up.

"What is it?" Tanya asked him, and he realised she'd been staring at him all the while.

Meeting her gaze, he said, "I was going to say that there is a way I can help you. To put this behind you, I mean."

She sat up a bit more in the bed, studying his face intently as she replied, "How? You can't just undo the past."

"That's true, but I can heal all your injuries, and take away the emotional pain of everything that happened. If you want, I can just blot out the memories completely," he said carefully, watching her face.

Tanya looked incredulous, and a glance at the other five girls showed similar looks of disbelief.

Rachel had been standing quietly at his side, and she took this moment to speak up, saying, "He's telling the truth. John isn't Terran, and his species has all sorts of gifts for healing."

He smiled at Tanya then turned his head, and touched one of his pointed ears with a fingertip as he replied, "See? Not Terran."

"You can really just heal everything? The memories too?" Tanya asked him in awe, much more willing to believe him after seeing the glowing TFNN news reports two months ago.

He nodded, then shot a glance at the intrigued women who were all watching him with avid interest now. "I can," he replied honestly, then paused before he replied. "Although the way it works is a bit unusual. I can give you a demonstration though, to prove I'm telling the truth."

Tanya leaned forward, and said, "How does it work?"

"Hi, I'm Jade, and I'd love to show you," the Nymph standing beside him said, while smiling disarmingly at the blonde. She reached out to lightly brush the young woman's arm, and added, "There's nothing to be afraid of, John's the kindest, most wonderful man in the galaxy."

John flushed at her effusive praise, and gave Tanya and the other women a self-conscious smile as Jade led him over to the nearby chair. There were shocked gasps from the women when the Nymph shrugged her dress off her shoulders, then sank to her knees in a fluid, graceful motion, and started unbuckling his belt.

Rachel stayed by the bed, and she said to Tanya and the others, "Don't worry, you won't have to do this. You'll see how it works in a few minutes."

The other young women had climbed out of their beds now, revealing that they were wearing blue-striped hospital pyjamas provided to them by Rachel. They gathered around somewhat warily, sitting on the nearest beds, and watching in silence with big eyes. The silence was shattered when Jade tugged down John's trousers, and pulled out his huge cock.

"Holy fuck!" a dusky-skinned woman swore under her breath. Her sentiments were echoed by the other women, who wore strangely conflicted expressions of fear, tempered by intrigue.

John sat down in the chair, and Jade planted a loving kiss on his swollen crown, as if greeting an old friend. She parted her lips and smoothly engulfed him, taking his entire length down her throat before she started massaging him with her rippling internal muscles.

"Jesus! How does that even fit?!" An attractive Latina murmured, boggling as she stared at Jade's expert fellatio. "What kind of creature is she, anyway?!"

Rachel smiled at the olive-skinned woman, and replied, "She's a Nymph, and she can help John repair your injuries, but all of John's girls can take him like that."

A raven-haired girl with nasty bruises all over her face whispered, "Are you one of his girls?"

Turning to smile at her, Rachel nodded, then asked playfully, "Would you like to see?"

The Latina shook her head, and was quite adamant as she interjected, "No way can you deepthroat something that massive! Not without choking." She looked grim, obviously speaking from some limited experience.

Rachel glided over to John and Jade, then brushed her fingers through the Nymph's dark-green hair, and said, "Would you mind sharing for a minute, gorgeous?"

Jade immediately sat back on her haunches, letting John withdraw from her throat with practiced ease. She glanced up at the doctor, while holding John's throbbing shaft, and replied, "Be my guest, but don't get too into it, remember who his cum is for."

The brunette sank to her knees, with John spreading his legs to make more room for her. She didn't waste any time, and opened her mouth into an inviting oval so she could take him, then sank his length down her throat. When she heard the gasps of astonishment and shocked exclamations behind her, she slowly eased back, then handed him off to Jade, who took over with gusto.

Walking back to the wide-eyed young women with a smile of satisfaction on her face, she replied, "Do you believe me now?"

They all nodded, staring at her in awe. "How does this healing work exactly?" the dusky girl asked, her eyes drawn back to the lewd scene.

"We'll show you. Don't worry, it's quite painless," Rachel replied, her tone soothing.

With the fascinated audience in attendance, combined with Jade's magical technique, John didn't last long. He came hard as Jade milked his quad dry, her breasts growing by the second as she sucked down everything he could give her. When he was drained of every last drop, she let his wet cock slide from her lips, then sat back and examined her hugely inflated breasts.

After heaving a happy sigh, John tugged on his trousers again, and glanced over at Irillith, who was still staring at her sister and gently stroking her arm. He knew Alyssa would rouse the grieving Maliri girl without him having to try and call her over, and a second later Irillith looked up, and then started walking in his direction.

Jade walked over to the apprehensive young women, who were staring at her titanic breasts in stupefied amazement. She smiled at them, and then sat cross-legged on one of the nearby beds.

"Wait, are they swollen with cum?" the dusky girl blurted out, her eyes somehow managing to get even bigger.

The Nymph nodded, and replied, "It's how John does all his healing."

John walked over to Irillith as she joined them, and said, "Sorry to interrupt, honey. I just wanted to help heal your nose."

"How did you get that?" The Latina asked Irillith, glancing at John with a hint of suspicion.

Irillith let out a forlorn sigh, and replied, "My sister punched me in the face."

"Oh! I'm sorry," The Latina said, giving John an apologetic smile for her unspoken accusation.

"Don't be, I deserved it," Irillith replied, her voice quiet, and full of guilt and sorrow.

John stroked her arm soothingly, then said, "Do you want me to numb some of the pain?"

She shook her head fiercely, her white-blonde hair swishing around her shoulders, and replied, "No! Definitely not. I deserve to feel this way after everything that happened to Tashana."

He looked at her with regret, and said, "Alright, I'll just fix your nose, then."

Jade sat on the nearest unoccupied bed, and beckoned Irillith over as she purred, "Come here little kitten, let me look after you."

Irillith smiled despite herself, then leaned in to kiss Jade before climbing on the bed, and letting the Nymph cradle her in her arms. She latched on easily enough, having fed this way plenty of times in the past. As she suckled, her eyes rolled back in ecstasy as John's sweet-tasting cum filled her mouth, and she stopped to savour the taste, letting it wash over her tastebuds. Jade stroked her silky white hair and murmured soothing, loving words to the troubled girl, smiling as Irillith swallowed repeatedly. After she'd taken about half-a-pint, John helped Irillith sit up, and she smiled self-consciously at her audience.

"That was the weirdest thing I've ever seen," a second blonde muttered, staring at them all in astonishment.

Irillith walked over to her audience, then sat next to them on the bed so they could clearly see her broken nose, and the blackened marks around her eyes. "Just watch, this won't take long," she said matter-of-factly.

Sure enough, the black bruising under her eyes receded, and her nose straightened as the swelling went down, healing before their very eyes. It only took a couple of minutes, and her gloriously beautiful blue face was restored to its natural perfection.

"Thanks, Irillith. Sorry to disturb you, you can go back to Tashana now if you want," John said to the Maliri girl.

She gave him a grateful smile, and as she passed him by, she stopped to give him a tender kiss. He held her briefly and stroked her back, before releasing her to let her return to her twin's side.

"So we'd need to swallow your cum to get healed?" the Latina balked incredulously.

John nodded, and replied, "After everything you've been through, you can see why I wasn't sure how to bring this up." With an apologetic shrug, he added, "It's just how my abilities work, I'm afraid. I can heal everything I promised, but my abilities only work if you have my cum inside you."

Tanya glanced at the other women, and climbing off the bed, she said boldly, "I'll do it!"

He smiled at her as she walked over to him, then helped her onto the bed with Jade as he said, "Thanks for letting me help you."

Jade held her arms open invitingly, and John helped Tanya lean back in her arms as the Nymph said, "We'll take good care of you, little kitten. Don't worry, John can fix everything."

Before she latched on, John squatted down beside her, and said, "You'll get drowsy and fall asleep for a few hours. During that time, I'll do my best to heal everything, so just let me know if there's any other health problems you might have."

"I've got Chrohn's disease, and whip scars all over my back," she said, staring at him with her big green eyes.

"When you wake up, you won't," he told her with confidence.

Not wasting any time, Tanya leaned forward and eagerly sought out Jade's nipple, sucking eagerly. She blinked in surprise at the sweet taste, before swallowing it down with a big gulp. The Nymph stroked her slim stomach, and purred, "That's right, fill up your tummy."

The blonde's eyes closed as she suckled, her face relaxing and any tension easing as she swallowed down his spunk. John stood up and looked at the other women, and said, "I appreciate this is weird, so just let me know if you don't want to go through with it. No one will make you do anything you don't feel comfortable with."

They just stared at him in awe, but no one turned down his offer of assistance.

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After Jade had fed each of the six young women, they tucked them up in bed, and let them sleep off their meal. John closed his eyes, and he could see the temporary compartments in his mind, with the six girls nestled under Alyssa. There was a soft glow coming from their bodies, now that he had an active connection with each of them, and he focused on healing the various injuries and ailments they were suffering from.

He also focused on stripping out the emotional pathways that tied all the traumatic memories together in their minds. It proved to be far easier than rebuilding them would have been, which he'd had to do when reshaping Edraele's mind.

\*It's much easier to destroy than to create,\* she told him softly, and he could hear the sincere appreciation in her telepathic voice for everything he'd done for her.

John nodded his agreement distractedly, but his attention was focused on the mental compartments in his mind. Aside from the ones to track the dozens of Maliri and the girls aboard the ship, there was the wide block that he'd permanently allocated to keep his herculean strength engaged. Devoting so much of his mental capacity to running that ability passively had left with him with a mere handful of free compartments for his other abilities.

Up until recently, those new abilities had included the occasional foray into telekinesis, for shaping psychically-responsive metals, along with elemental auras for his sword. It seemed that he'd undergone a significant growth in mental capacity since he'd last checked, and he now had a couple of dozen empty mind compartments to work with. Keeping his eyes closed, he activated psychic-speed, and all but a handful of the metaphysical boxes were now full.

\*You're definitely getting stronger,\* Edraele said with certainty. \*It's probably due to a combination of adding Sakura to the crew, as well as unlocking new abilities like that wall of telekinetic force, and the enhanced speed.\*

Alyssa waited a moment as she listened to his inner voice thinking about Edraele's observation, then said eagerly, \*You've got six more girls lying there with tummies full of your cum! Can we keep them? Please? I'm sure I could find something fun for them to do around the ship!\*

John opened his eyes and looked at the six women they'd freed, who were now all sleeping peacefully. The bruises were already starting to fade from their pretty faces, and he knew their internal injuries were healing just as quickly.

He smiled with satisfaction as he replied, \*You know I'm planning to send them back home. They've been through enough, they deserve a chance at leading peaceful lives.\*

\*Boo! You're a rubbish Progenitor,\* Alyssa objected playfully. \*I was hoping you'd at least consider knocking them up. You're being so stubborn about it with the rest of us!\*

John smiled at her teasing, but he couldn't help get turned on by the thought of the six women slowly absorbing his cum in their stomachs. He knew it wouldn't take much; just some kind words, and their gratitude for the healing would do the rest. Another couple of blowjobs, and they'd be eagerly tumbling into bed with him, their young wombs ready to bear his children...

He shook himself out of that train of thought with a frown, feeling guilty for the raging erection in his trousers. It seemed that despite his best intentions, some instinctive Progenitor urges still ran unchecked under the surface.

Alyssa's amusement was quite apparent over their empathic bond, and she giggle as she said, \*You're not the first man who's had raunchy thoughts about screwing a pretty girl, and you certainly won't be the last! Being a Progenitor hasn't got anything to do with it.\*

Feeling relieved, John realised he was being overly paranoid, and he smiled at his girls in the Medical Bay as they walked over to join him. Jade was clothed again, her figure back to its relatively-normal luscious dimensions, and she held his hand as she arrived at his side. Irillith was distracted by her sleeping twin, and kept glancing back at her until Rachel slipped an arm around her, and squeezed her gently.

Smiling at the troubled Maliri girl, she said, "She'll be asleep for the rest of the night. Come and see her in the morning."

Irillith looked at John and said, "I'd rather stay with Tashana, if that's okay?"

Faye winked into existence in a purple flash, and her expression was earnest as she said, "I'll keep an eye on her for you! I promise I'll tell you the moment she wakes up!"

"She's in good hands," John said reassuringly, unwilling to let Irillith spend the rest of the evening torturing herself. "We'll be able to make everything better for her tomorrow, but until then, she'll be fast asleep."

Irillith gave him a reluctant nod, and let herself be led away. She tore her gaze away from Tashana, and glanced across the Medical Bay at the sleeping Terran women, who were all looking visibly healthier already. It was a potent reminder of just how effective John's healing abilities were, and remembering how quickly he'd been able to heal Sakura's grievous surgical scars, she felt a flare of hope for her relationship with her sister. If he was able to heal her twin in the same way that he was healing those women's physical and mental pain, it might be enough to help Tashana forgive her for everything she'd been through.

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Edraele stayed quiet as she listened to John's conversation with his girls. Although she was worried about Irillith, and deeply upset about everything that had happened to Tashana, she was also secure in the knowledge that John would be able to heal her daughter, just as he had those six Terran girls. It was only a matter of days until he arrived home to Valaden, and she felt giddy with excitement at the thought of telling him everything she'd accomplished while he'd been away.

"They're getting more obstinate," Nyrelle Aeberos said, glancing at Edraele with a worried frown. "I can see Kalmaera thinking twice about every fleet order I give her."

Leena Ghilwen looked deeply troubled as she added, "I hate having to be so horrible to Nymaleth to get her to follow orders. Are Fleet Commanders always like this, Edraele?"

Edraele turned her attention away from John and focused on the four Maliri girls who were sitting together on the comfortable chaise-lounges in her study. They met like this daily, with the young matriarchs seeking support and advice from each other, and deferring to her own expertise when they were unable to come up with solutions to leadership problems on their own. She was proud of her young charges, but she also knew that such an unusual arrangement couldn't last forever. Something much more permanent was needed. And needed soon.

Hesitating for a moment, Edraele eventually replied with a bright smile, "Truthfully, no. Once you've personally flayed a few insubordinate underlings to death with a neural whip, they'll learn to fear you enough to obey your every whim."

Valani Naestina gaped at her in shock, and gasped, "That's appalling! I couldn't do that!"

Nudging her playfully with an elbow, Nyrelle Aeberos grinned as she said, "Relax, Edraele's just joking." Looking at the older woman, she added nervously, "You are only joking, right?"

Edraele smiled at the Aeberos matriarch, and walked over to join them, sitting beside her on the long seat. She stroked the girl's back and said sadly, "Would that I were, although I'm not suggesting for one moment that you take that approach." Letting out a forlorn sigh, she continued, "Maliri society has been warped by centuries of abuse by the Matriarchs in charge. It's not going to be an easy task convincing women to change their ways, and trying to earn their respect without threats and violence is going to be difficult; at least, not without some powerful assistance."

"You're talking about John, aren't you?" Kali asked, her indigo eyes gleaming with excitement. As the youngest of the group, she'd been fascinated by Edraele's stories of the man who the Valaden Matriarch had described as the antithesis of the Mael'nerak.

"He'll be here in a few days, and then everything will be wonderful," Edraele told them all earnestly.

The sense of relief in the room was palpable, with all four young matriarchs sharing eager smiles of anticipation at the thought of meeting the man Edraele held with such reverence.

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John was currently in the middle of another group hug, his arms wrapped around Rachel with the rest of the girls surrounding them. The brunette had a sparkling smile on her face, enjoying being the centre of attention after missing out on their first victory celebration. The outer layers of their huddle peeled off and the girls went to their chairs, with John waiting for the others to sit before he took his seat.

This was the first time Sakura had sat with them since she'd completed the Change, and she smiled at Rachel when the brunette patted the chair next to her. Now, with John at the head of the table, Alyssa, Dana, Rachel, and Sakura were on his right, with Calara, Jade, and Irillith on his left. Faye sat cross-legged in her customary place, sitting opposite John on the long table itself.

He glanced around at the eight beautiful girls, and said, "Alright, let's get this AAR going. First of all, excellent work everyone. We achieved our primary objective, and Tashana's safe now, sleeping in the Medical Bay."

Irillith smiled at the gathering of her friends and lovers, and they could all hear the heartfelt sincerity in her voice as she said, "Thank you so much for saving her. You can't know how much it means to me, having a chance to make amends with my sister."

Calara gave her a warm smile as she said, "I'm so glad I was able to help. After everything you did to save my father and brother, helping you rescue Tashana felt wonderful!"

Jade slipped an arm around the emotional Maliri girl, and said, "We all love you, and we're overjoyed to see you two reunited."

John nodded, and said, "I agree completely. If there's anything you need from any of us to try and help your sister, don't give it a second thought, just ask."

She gave him a grateful smile, which she turned to the rest of the girls when she looked around and saw lots of nodding heads and supportive smiles. Her violet eyes filled up with tears, although she fought them back stubbornly.

It pained Alyssa to see the Maliri girl looking so troubled, so she reached out to Irillith, and swaddled her mind in loving, soothing emotions. Those enchanting angular eyes darted her way, and Irillith smiled in gratitude, her emotional burden lifting somewhat.

To give Irillith time to compose herself, John shifted his attention to Rachel, and his voice glowed with pride as he said, "Your psychological profile of Hades was incredible! He reacted just as you predicted he would."

She smiled at him, glowing under his praise, and replied, "It was actually relatively simple to compile, considering the wealth of information that Edraele provided about him. If you could thank her for me, I'd appreciate it. All the data hinted at him being totally self-serving, with a strong instinct for self-preservation, tempered with his arrogance from living virtually unopposed in command of the Underworld. All we needed to do was crush his feelings of superiority by a massive show of force, and I knew he'd be desperate to keep Tashana safe at any cost, in an attempt to buy his way out of trouble."

Dana grinned as she said, "I bet that fucker wished he'd chosen the easy way after all!"

\*Did you hear what Rachel said?\* John asked Edraele kindly. \*Your data played a pivotal part in rescuing your daughter.\*

\*You're both very... sweet,\* she replied, struggling to find the right vocabulary to describe such unfamiliar behaviour.

Turning to look at the other girls now, John said, "Talking of massive shows of force, your shooting and squad discipline was breathtaking to behold." Smiling at Sakura, he added, "You performed brilliantly for your first mission. Your marksmanship was excellent, and you fit seamlessly into the group. You showed the same level of skill as a seasoned special forces vet!"

Sakura blushed at the praise, and said shyly, "It was easy, I just followed all of Alyssa's orders." She glanced at Dana, and added with a grin, "You're right, she gets very bossy in combat."

"I make no apologies for that. Killing all the bad guys as fast as possible keeps each of you safe," Alyssa said archly, but she couldn't maintain her smug facade, and smiled at Dana's mischievous giggles.

John turned to Calara next, where she sat adjacent to him, and reaching out to place his left hand on top of hers, he said, "You were as phenomenal as always when you tore through the pirate fleet, but it was great to have you with us on the ground for once. Everything I said to Sakura applies to you too, you handled yourself like a seasoned professional."

She smiled at him, but her eyes narrowed as she said, "I'm not going to lie, shooting those Largath felt personal. Seeing them again brought back everything that happened to those poor girls from the Griffon. Thank you for bringing me along for that one."

"You fucking kicked ass!" Alyssa said fiercely, proud of her girlfriend. "You've come a long way from that frightened girl we rescued months ago. I bet you'd have charged in there and torn them a new one, even if you had to fight them bare-handed!"

"Her bare hands are pretty lethal," John said smiling at the Latina. He winked at her as he continued, "I feel sorry for the poor bastard who tries to take you in a fistfight."

"Actually, could I be that poor bastard?" Sakura asked tentatively, earning some light laughter from the girls. Glancing at John and giving him a playful smile, she added, "I'd love to learn some martial arts, and I heard Calara's the best on the ship."

"Hey!" John said indignantly, pretending to be offended.

Calara patted him on the shoulder, and grinned as she said, "I did kick your ass last time."

He rolled his eyes, and conceded, "Yeah, true enough." He glanced at the brunette and the raven-haried Asian, and added, "I'd be interested to see you train, if that's okay?"

Alyssa laughed, and quipped, "Two girls in a catfight... I bet you would, you horny old goat! They aren't going to get much training done with you hauling them off to bed for a good fucking."

"Hey, less of the old please!" John protested with a mock frown. He winked at her lewdly, and added, "Besides, the matting in the Training Dojo is pretty soft; why would we bother leaving the Dojo?"

When the laughter died down, Sakura gave him a hooded glance, as she said seductively, "Come and watch the end of the fight. We'll be good girls for you afterwards, won't we Calara?"

Both brunette's eyes met, and they smiled coyly at one another before Calara replied, "Tomorrow morning?"

"Perfect," Sakura agreed.

John smiled at the prospect, looking forward to seeing Calara train her first student, as well as the post-match fun to be had afterwards. He turned to look at the blonde on his right, who gave him a broad grin as she read his salacious thoughts, and said, "Talking of being good, or not in this case, how on Terra did you tag all the bad guys in red like that?"

Alyssa met his searching gaze, and replied, "It was one of Athena's tricks, she guided me through it." She went quiet for a moment before continuing, "When I saw your Progenitor-half through the crack in your mind-shield, it was like I could feel how evil he was; it kind of radiated off him. What I did in the Underworld felt a bit like that, just brushing over people's minds and getting a feel for their nature."

"Why the red auras?" John asked curiously.

She shrugged, and looked grim as she replied, "It felt fitting, considering all the blood on their hands."

John nodded as he said, "It was very effective for sorting the wheat from the chaff. Going by my combat experiences with the Terran Marines, having that kind of moral confidence in your actions was a pretty rare thing."

"It felt good though," Sakura said in a quiet voice, "knowing that the people I killed deserved it this time. I can't say the same about many of Shinatobe's victims."

Rachel gave her a comforting smile, and put her arm around the Asian girl, giving her a hug.

Turning back to Irillith, John was pleased to see she looked more at ease now, and he asked, "While we're on the subject of new abilities, what happened up on the gantries outside Hades' base? I saw your eyes glowing brightly, and you reached up and did something. What was it?"

Irillith was quiet as she replied, "I was furious at the thought that Hades had Tashana locked up somewhere. I kind of snapped, and just lunged for the cameras. I could see the data flows linking the camera network together, so I just rode that back to their Command Centre. When I got there, I wanted to hurt them so much I was able to... project myself out of the screen. It's hard to describe, I wasn't thinking straight at the time."

"Yeah, you must have been really fucking pissed," Dana said, looking impressed. "It looked like you zapped some pirate who got too close to you."

The Maliri glanced at the redhead, and nodded solemnly.

"Do you think you could do that again?" John asked her. When she raised an eyebrow, he smiled as he clarified, "Not the electrocuting someone, the remote hacking without being near a console."

Looking askance around the room, Irillith's angular eyes seemed to be following things that no one else could see. She eventually turned back to John, and replied, "I was always able to see flowing data-streams before, and once I started a spirit-walk, I was able to just follow them to a console and then enter the Cyber-realm. That part wasn't really new, but projecting an actual physical manifestation through the digital network definitely is."

Nodding his understand, he asked, "Have you managed to figure out why you couldn't hack Underworld from the Invictus? It seems odd that you were able to enter the camera network so easily after that."

The Maliri girl frowned, and replied, "Actually the camera network was on a separate subnet that they'd installed using normal Terran-style hardware. That definitely wasn't the same technology as Underworld..." She trailed off for a moment as she thought about the impenetrable data network built into the refinery, then continued, "I've never encountered anything so strange and alien before. Whoever built that station used some very strange technology, which didn't seem compatible with our own. I wasn't even able to enter their gateway; our connection protocols just don't work that way. I'm actually surprised the comm channels worked!"

"It's a really old station," Dana said thoughtfully. "And when I say old, I mean - really fucking ancient!"

"Progenitor tech?" John asked, intrigued.

"Nah, it didn't look or feel like their stuff at all," Dana replied, shaking her head.

"I agree wholeheartedly," Irillith said with a firm nod. "I've been inside Faye's server, which we know for a fact is Progenitor technology, and this felt nothing like it."

Rachel looked thoughtful for a moment before she interjected, "Perhaps it pre-dates the Progenitor's dominance of this part of the galaxy?"

"Tashana would know more about it, I'm quite certain," Irillith said, her voice full of conviction even if her expression was sorrowful.

John smiled at her, and in an attempt to buoy Irillith's spirits, he said cheerfully, "I'll ask Tashana about it tomorrow, when she wakes up." He paused for a moment, studying the downcast young woman, then added, "Alright ladies, time for dinner, then we should celebrate the successful rescue."

Alyssa nodded thoughtfully, and grinned as she exclaimed, "Sounds like an excellent plan to me!"

The girls rose from their seats while smiling at each other in anticipation, and filed from the room as they headed towards the Galley. Irillith still seemed a bit subdued, so John stopped her with an upraised hand, and she looked at him quizzically.

"You might want to eat light at dinner," he advised her, moving his hand down to caress her trim stomach.

She looked startled for a moment, then her full lips turned up into an ambivalent smile as she said, "You don't have to do that on my account."

He shook his head, and replied off-handedly, "Don't worry, I'm being entirely selfish. I just want to see that blissful look you get when you swallow down my cum, it's one hell of an ego-boost."

Irillith chuckled briefly, but her smile faded as she turned away from him and replied, "I know what you're trying to do, but I'd just feel too guilty. Tashana's lying maimed, disfigured, and alone, down in the Medical Bay. I should be by her side."

John gently stroked her blue arm, and said, "I know how guilty you must be feeling at the moment. Nothing I say is going to really change that is it?"

She let out a sad sigh, and shook her head as she replied, "I know you're going to tell me I've changed, and I'm not the same girl any more, but I remember everything I did to her! Planting the evidence, framing her, gleefully informing our mother, and gloating as Tashana got sentenced to exile. I set her up for thirteen years of horrific abuse over some petty jealousy!"

He nodded sombrely, and said, "You're right, I know you're not the same vindictive girl we met months ago. If you were, you wouldn't be feeling this way." He paused for a moment as she considered his words, and then added, "After what happened earlier, I don't think reconciling with Tashana is going to be easy, do you?"

Irillith looked at him in surprise, and she looked even more downcast as she shook her head.

Gently lifting her chin, he tilted her face so she was looking at him once again, and said, "Standing watch in some kind of all-night vigil, while you wallow in these feelings isn't going to help Tashana. You'll need to be lucid, alert, and sincere when you talk with her tomorrow, not exhausted and overwrought."

"You're right," she conceded, nodding thoughtfully, her violet eyes shining with determination.

He pulled her in for a hug, and brushing her long silky white locks away from her pointed blue ear, he murmured, "We're all here for you. I know it's going to be hard, trying to rebuild your relationship with Tashana, but you can count on all of us for support, okay?"

She nodded and hugged him back fiercely as she replied, "I know, and it feels amazing."

With that they shared an intimate kiss and a smile, then walked out of the Briefing Room to catch up with the others.

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The small blue star cast a frigid pallor over the chrome-coloured cruiser as the Enshunu vessel jumped into the Alamak system. The ship sat silently for a long moment while the seconds ticked by, as if the vicious-looking spacecraft were coldly studying the devastation outside the ancient refinery. The five powerful engines at the rear of the ship glowed a fierce orange, and the Enshunu cruiser began to slink forward as it picked up speed, warily easing its way towards the battlesite. It passed ruined weapon platforms, which had been sliced in half or blown to pieces by weapons capable of ferocious firepower, then changed course, heading towards one of Underworld's enormous docking bays.

The ship had to weave its way past dozens of wrecks, but there was too much debris to pass by without numerous collisions. Pieces of blackened armour plating clunked off the hull, and the cruiser swept an uncaring path through the field of charred ship pieces. The chrome vessel callously bumped into an armoured mercenary's corpse, sending the man's body spinning away, his face still frozen in an expression of horror.

Finally reaching its destination, the cruiser stopped, hovering outside the eerily still docking bay. There was no movement inside the station, even though the huge bay was full of vessels and would normally be teeming with activity. A closer examination of the deck around the merchant ships would reveal the reason for this lack of movement, with scores of perforated corpses scattered haphazardly about.

A chrome shuttle detached itself from the underbelly of the cruiser, then pivoted and proceeded into that chilling mausoleum. There were several large empty spaces amongst the carnage, and it was in one of these that the shuttle descended, undercarriage lowering as the troop transport touched down. A broad door in the side of the vessel yawned wide, and a moment later, a boarding ramp extended and swung down to the deck, crushing a Terran merchant's mangled cadaver.

Two-dozen armoured troops marched in step down the boarding ramp, fanning out and covering all angles with their ferocious-looking chrome rifles. When they were in position, there was movement on the shuttle, and a red-robed figure in a golden mask strolled down the ramp, only pausing for a few seconds to look around the bay. With a curt gesture to his men, Vizier Sag'kalyak pivoted, then strode purposefully deeper into the venerable station.

The Enshunu seemed unperturbed by the charnel house that was the Underworld, stepping heedlessly on twisted corpses as he proceeded into the base. His men walked briskly ahead, alert and mindful of danger, but finding none amongst the ghastly scenes of battle. They breezed past the slaughtered flesh merchants without a second glance, but Vizier Sag'kalyak did pause by the bodies of a group of Ruiner mercenaries, who lay scattered near some mining trucks.

He shoved one of the corpses with his boot, and rolled the dark-blue armoured figure onto his back, the man's lifeless eyes staring into the gloom above. Crouching down beside the slain merc, the Vizier's red eyes could be seen behind his mask as they darted back and forth, examining the large holes that had been bored straight through the man's armour. Sag'kalyak's eyes narrowed as he stared at the scattering of grievous wounds that had melted into that ragged torso.

Rising abruptly to his feet, he made another sharp gesture with his right hand, and the soldiers that had been waiting patiently around him continued apace. Their boots rang with the sound of metal on metal as they ascended the ramps to the Command Centre above, passing the crumpled remains of Bloodnova pirates who'd been gunned down in their droves. The massacre continued up the ramp, right into the command complex itself, and Sag'kalyak paused once again, his pupils flaring slightly as he gazed at the battered portal, its door smashed inwards.

They continued on into that sepulchral complex, a place that had once been thriving with the clamour of the living, now a bleak and silent tomb littered with the dead. His men spread out as they picked through the detritus, and as they delved further into Hades' stronghold, one of the soldiers hurried back to his master.

"We've found Captain Yil'magur, Vizier," the soldier said, bowing to the golden-masked Enshunu respectfully.

"Show me!" Vizier Sag'kalyak demanded his tone haughty and imperious.

He followed after the soldier who whirled around, and marched back the way he'd come at a brisk pace. It didn't take long to find the partially incinerated corpse, and Sag'kalyak knelt down to study the scorched body in fascination. Shaking his head in admiration, he rose to his feet then whirled away, walking briskly down the corridor. It didn't take long for him to reach the Command Centre on the second level, and he looked around the large room, his gaze lingering on the blackened corpse by the panel of broken viewscreens.

One of his soldiers approached from the far side of the room, brandishing a three-foot-long object in his hand. "We've found it, Vizier!" the man said, jogging over to his master with hand outstretched.

Vizier Sag'kalyak snatched the brass rod from his soldier's hand, and his blood-red eyes gleamed as held it aloft, turning it slowly so that he caught the light with its metallic surface. He spun about, and moving quickly now, rushed over to the central console, shoving a dead pirate off the heavy brass panel. He had a fierce gleam in his eyes as he slotted the control rod into the vacant slot on the command console with a satisfyingly loud click.

His hands moved in a rush over the controls that populated the brass surface, pressing buttons, twisting dials, and flicking switches in the precise sequence that would trigger the startup routine. He was done in just under a minute, then stepped back, eyes wide with excitement as he stared at the curved panels showing the defensive capabilities of the Underworld.

Outside the colossal edifice to a long-extinct race, hundreds of octagonal armoured plates lined the vast panels between each docking bay. With a tortured groan, the tan-coloured doors sank into the surface of the refinery, and then began to roll back into the frame.

The Underworld had awoken.

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John woke to the gentle sound of someone singing a lilting tune, which caressed his sharp ears and made him want to soar to the heavens. He kept his eyes closed and revelled in the hauntingly beautiful notes of the uplifting song, relaxing in bed with Alyssa and Irillith's lithe bodies entwined around him, enjoying the feel of their silky blonde hair draped across his chest.

Abruptly the singing stopped, and he opened his eyes in disappointment, looking down the bed for Faye. "Why did you stop it?" he protested in a whisper, as soon as he spotted the cute purple girl. "That recording was absolutely lovely. What was the name of the singer?"

Faye climbed on the bed, then sitting astride him on top of the covers, she replied in a quiet voice, "Thank you. It was me singing."

He gaped at her in astonishment, lost for words before he said, "But how did you..."

"One of my hobbies," she replied with a self-conscious smile, her wings moving in lazy strokes through the air. "That was the first time I've tried singing outside of the digital network. I thought you might like it as a wake-up call, but it didn't seem to be working."

He shook his head as he whispered, "I loved it! I was just enjoying hearing your voice, it was beautiful."

She leant forward, and with a quick glance at Alyssa who was starting to stir, Faye murmured, "I'll sing to you again then, if you're sure?"

"That would be wonderful, thank you!" John replied, genuinely touched.

Faye smiled at him, and nodded as she moved back across the bed as the others began to stir.

Alyssa didn't stretch this morning, she just cuddled in closer, and brushed the hair away from Irillith's face as she said, "Mmm, last night was fun."

The Maliri girl woke at her gentle touch, then blushed furiously as she recalled the previous nights events.

John leaned down and kissed her soft white mane, and said, "Don't be embarrassed, it was exciting seeing you that turned on."

She glanced up at him, and protested, "I know you wanted to distract me, but setting all the girls on me for an hour was crossing the line! I lost count of how many times I came."

"We brought you off nine times," Alyssa supplied helpfully, a teasing smile lifting the corners of her mouth. "Lucky number ten was when John buried his cock down your throat and packed you full of spunk."

The sound of good-natured laughter echoed around the room as the other girls woke up and listened to John and Alyssa's teasing of the Maliri girl. It was at that moment that Rachel walked back into the bedroom, having already been woken by Faye an hour earlier.

"Morning everyone," Rachel said cheerfully, smiling at Irillith when she saw she was awake. "Have fun last night?"

Irillith groaned theatrically, but she was over her embarrassment now, and smiled at the brunette as she sat up and stretched. When Rachel sat down on the end of the bed, the Maliri girl asked, "How's Tashana doing?"

"Still asleep," Rachel said, stroking Irillith's leg through the covers. "I gave her enough Valanex to let her sleep until ten, so she won't wake for another hour."

"How are the other girls doing?" Jade asked, an optimistic smile on her lovely face.

Rachel gave John an appreciative nod of the head, his incredible healing powers never ceasing to amaze her, and replied, "The miracle worker has done his stuff. They're all in perfect health now, and eager to thank you in person."

John nodded, and clambering out of the covers, he said, "I better get down to Medical and say hello."

Shaking her head, the brunette replied, "I moved the Terran girls up to the guest quarters on Deck Four. The rooms are nicer than the medical bay, and it'll give them more privacy."

"Thanks honey, that was very considerate," John said stopping to give Rachel a kiss on his way towards the shower.

"Mmm, you taste like excited Maliri," she noted, licking her lips, and glancing at Irillith, who blushed a fetching shade of indigo.

John laughed as he strolled into the bathroom, and said over his shoulder, "I do love Maliri, quite delicious!"

The girls were eager to join him, and Rachel stripped off as well so she could cuddle with him under the warm water. It was a tight fit in the shower, but no one really minded, although John did end up glancing at Dana curiously.

"What's up?" she asked him, then sighed as Rachel began to wash her back and began massaging her muscles.

"After seeing your plans for the Invictus, I had a few ideas of my own. Are you open to suggestions?" he asked, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"It's your ship, I'll do whatever the hell you like to it," the redhead agreed, then let out a moan as Jade began working on her front too.

Without too many more distractions, they finished getting showered, then quickly dried off before leaving the bathroom. John and Alyssa waited until last, and after sharing a brief telepathic conversation, they followed Irillith and Jade from the shower.

John reached out and gently held Irillith's arm as she was about to leave, and said, "Can we speak to you for a moment before you go?"

The Maliri girl nodded immediately, and replied, "Of course, what did you have on your mind?"

Jade waved them goodbye, and John led the two blondes to the bed, where they climbed on and sat in a circle. He stayed quiet, not answering her question for a moment as he tried to figure out how best to answer it.

Alyssa smiled at him, then rolled her eyes as she said to Irillith, "He's worried you'll be upset with him if he persuades Tashana to swallow his cum."

"You could have phrased it more delicately than that!" John objected, giving her a stern glance. Turning back to Irillith he added, "I could probably heal her in just one or two doses, like we did for Sakura. But my cum had a very strong effect on you..."

"And you're worried it'll affect her in the same way?" Irillith finished for him. "So if she wants to get healed, she basically has no choice but to join us, and you're worried how I'd feel about that?"

John nodded, and replied, "That's about the size of it, yes." He gave her a pointed look as he added, "Considering how intimate we are as a crew, I thought it might cause a few issues."

The Maliri girl sat back, a slight frown on her face as she thought through all the ramifications of everything he'd said, and also the things that had been implied...

She took a deep breath, then sat forward again as she said, "I know what you're asking. Let me just say that I'd do anything for Tashana to make up for what I put her through. I can't really describe how incredible it's been, living here on the Invictus with all of you, and I want the same for her too. Despite the privileges and resources available to a Matriarch's daughter back on Valaden, the life she'd have there pales in comparison to what she could accomplish here with us."

"There, easy!" Alyssa exclaimed happily, her cerulean eyes flashing with excitement as she clapped her hands together with glee. "Now we just have to convince Tashana to say yes!"

John chuckled at her tireless optimism, and said, "Come on, let's go and have some breakfast."

Irillith's angular eyes flickered over to the doorway and he knew that breakfast was the last thing on her mind at that moment, and that she was thinking only of her twin sister.

He shared a glance with Alyssa, then said, "Actually, before we go and have breakfast, can we go up to the Bridge? There's something I'd like to try."

Irillith focused on him again, and replied warily, "What did you have in mind?"

"A spirit-walk into the Cyber-Realm," he replied, and was sure he heard a faint, excited squeak with his sharp ears.

"Are you still trying to keep me distracted until Tashana wakes up?" Irillith asked him quietly, her shoulders tense as her eyes darted longingly towards the door from their quarters.

He nodded, openly admitting his plan, and replied, "Yes, but I've actually been meaning to do this for a little while. Why not kill two birds with one stone?"

Alyssa leaned in and put her arm around Irillith as she said, "Faye's keeping a close eye on your sister. She'll let us know the moment anything changes."

The Maliri girl relaxed slightly as she leaned into the hug, then sighed as she said, "I still have no idea what I'm going to say to her."

"Just be honest with her," John suggested, stroking her blue arm in a tender, supportive gesture. "I'm sure you'll be able to work things out."

Irillith's beautiful features twisted up into a grimace as she said sarcastically, "Hi Tashana! Sorry I subjected you to thirteen years of brutal rape and torture. I've had my mind rewritten by a Progenitor so I'm not a horrible bitch any more. Let's be friends?"

With a laugh, Alyssa grinned as she said, "That'd get her attention at least." Squeezing the troubled girl's shoulder, she then added supportively, "I'll be there to help. If I can think of anything useful to say, I'll pass it on telepathically."

John smiled at the kind blonde, before ducking his head so he could look into Irillith's downcast violet eyes, and said, "I don't think you can prepare for this conversation in advance. Trust me when I tell you that it's obvious you aren't the same person any more. Just talking to Tashana will make that quite clear to her."

Giving him a dejected nod, although she was still far from convinced, Irillith climbed off the bed, and said with a heavy sigh, "Let's go say hi to Faye. You were right, a distraction sounds like a really good idea at the moment."

John and Alyssa nodded to her, and then walked into the wardrobe to get dressed. They were quiet as they pulled on their clothes, both thinking about various things, although equally concerned about the Maliri girl. Since they'd first met Irillith, she'd undergone a radical personality shift after John helped heal her mind of all the mental trauma she'd suffered, simply by trying to exist in the warped Maliri society. Alyssa glanced at John as she read his mind, and nodded her agreement. Hopefully the changes in Irillith would be just as apparent to Tashana too.

Even though they dressed quickly, Irillith was still waiting for them outside her room, wearing one of the long, flowing dresses that she favoured. She smiled wanly in greeting, then fell into step beside them as they walked down the corridor to the grav-tube. John slipped his arm around her, and she leaned against him as they entered the blue glow of the anti-gravity field.

One look at the purple girl waiting for them up on the Command Deck brought a smile to John's face as he followed Irillith and Alyssa over to the station on the right. She smiled and waved at him brightly, but he could see the nervous tension in her big luminous eyes, her entire face radiating eager anticipation. Faye's wings quivered with excitement as she flitted down to join them from the Command Podium, and she was barely able to keep still as John and Alyssa sat cross-legged on the floor by Irillith's IntOps station.

The Maliri girl sat in her chair, then spun it around to look down at her prospective passengers, noting the huge difference in mood between the two of them immediately. The blonde matriarch was sitting there alert and focused, awaiting her first trip into the Cyber-Realm with a great deal of excitement. By contrast, although this had been John's idea, she could see his nervous apprehension in the worried creases on his brow.

Leaning down low in her chair, she kissed him soundly on the lips, and said soothingly, "Don't worry, I'll take good care of you."

He gave her a nervous laugh, and said, "It's not that, I'm just worried how long I'll be able to last in there. I don't want to disappoint Faye."

Irillith was touched by his concern for her digital friend, and she reached down to run her slender blue fingers through his hair. "We'll just focus on letting you meet her this trip, then we can take things from there if you don't find it too much of a strain," she told him, giving him a reassuring smile.

"Alright, let's do this," John said, looking up into her beautiful violet eyes. He paused for a second, then added, "What do we do exactly? Just Spirit-walk?"

Irillith nodded, and replied, "Exactly. We'll meet in the astral plane, and I'll guide you from there."

Taking a deep breath, John closed his eyes, and focused his willpower on peeling his ethereal form away from his body. He'd done this a number of times now, and although his technique was improving, separating his consciousness from his physical form proved to be just as much a strain as usual.

After tugging hard, his spirit-form finally pulled away, and he staggered forward into the Astral plane, where a girl swathed in a blazingly bright aura was waiting with open arms. He blinked at her in surprise, thinking the radiant girl was Athena for a moment, but the impish sparkling grin this ethereal woman gave him was all Alyssa.

"This is wild!" she gasped with excitement, hugging him tight, and kissing him passionately. When she pulled back, her eyes blazed as she added, "Do you think we can fuck on the Astral plane?!"

He chuckled, and replied, "I'm not sure we'll have time for that."

She laughed, and said with a teasing grin, "I forgot you have stamina issues here."

Before he could respond to her playful comment, Irillith suddenly materialised beside them, and she winced as she looked their way. "Can you turn the brightness down a bit, Alyssa? It hurts my eyes just to look at you," she asked, with a pained expression on her translucent face.

"Oh, right! Sorry," Alyssa apologised, closing her eyes and concentrating for a moment. Her radiance dimmed considerably, making it much easier to see her beautiful features.

Irillith gave her a grateful smile, and said, "Thanks, that's much better. I can look at you without squinting now."

"So what do we do next?" John asked, looking around him at their surroundings. They were still on the Bridge of the Invictus, but everything was hazy and indistinct, just as the Astral Plane had appeared to him down in their bedroom.

We just follow the data lines into the console," Irillith said patiently, pointing at the flowing streams of information and then arcing her arm down towards the IntOps station before her.

Alyssa twisted on the spot, looking around in vain, and she frowned in confusion while murmuring, "What line is that exactly?"

Irillith blinked in surprise, then had a sheepish smile on her face as she replied, "Sorry, I just assumed you'd be able to see everything in the Astral Plane. I was able to see psychic representations of data flows even before I stepped foot in the digital network. That's why I kept seeing all those flickering lights."

Alyssa glided over to their guide, and ran her hand over Irillith's Spirit-form tummy, and said, "At least until John gave you a bit of TLC and fixed all that." Irillith smiled at her and nodded.

John walked over to join them, and said pointedly, "We can relive old times later, the clock's ticking."

"Over here," Irillith said, beckoning them closer to the console. She reached out with her hands to clasp each of theirs and added, "Just relax, and let me guide you through this."

With one last nervous nod from John, Irillith poured her consciousness into the open data port on the console, drawing her friends' spirit forms with her. The room seemed to swirl violently for John, and the dead weight on his back seemed to get exponentially heavier as he was sucked in after his guide. It felt like being dragged down into a bottomless wormhole, and the pull from Irillith warred with the colossal drag factor holding him back. He did his best to concentrate, and fought back the feelings of disorientation and alarm as he spun onwards at breakneck speed.

Then just like that the nauseating spinning was over, and he reeled as his environment changed dramatically. Getting his bearings now, he focused on his immediate surroundings, concentrating on the silvery platform on which he was standing. What had seemed to be an empty platform at first suddenly began to fill with tall obelisks, standing in row after row on the silvery floor, the platform reminding him of a circuit board with a multitude of silver inlays etched on its surface. There were dozens of the glowing monoliths in every directions, and he reached out a tentative hand to touch one, his fingers brushing through the opaque surface. As he did so, a flood of information filled his mind, and he jerked his hand back in surprise.

"They're just data archives," Irillith explained with a smile. "The information I've stored on my IntOps Station has been filed away into these repositories."

Nodding his understanding, he looked out beyond the silvery platform, and saw arcing paths stretching away from them for what seemed like a vast distance, his sense of scale horribly compromised. Glancing to either side he could only see a black shroud of nothingness, without any features to provide any sense of perspective. When he turned to look behind him, he saw the slowly rotating portal which marked the entrance to the Cyber-Realm - or exit depending on your point of view.

His silvery astral cord snaked away behind him, undulating hypnotically as it reached into the portal. There wasn't much give in the ethereal cable, and every so often it tugged at him violently, as though frantically trying to reunite him with his body. One such pull nearly yanked him off his feet, and he clung to Irillith in a desperate attempt to hold on. Alyssa grasped his arm, and he shivered at her electric touch as she siphoned psychic energy to him over their bond in a thrilling burst.

The sudden influx of power helped him fight against that inexorable slide, and he hauled the cable back defiantly, regaining his balance as he did so. "Thanks, that helped a lot," he said to her with a grateful smile.

"Better make the most of it. I just gave you a big chunk of our energy to keep you stable," she said, relaxing again after the exertion of transferring so much eldritch power to him.

Able to look around now without worrying that he was about to get snapped back into his body at any moment, John gaped as he took in the rest of the Cyber-Realm for the first time. Floating overhead was a golden mezzanine area that was alive with movement, strange female forms gliding around with sure-footed confidence as they maintained their vigilant watch. He could see what looked like reinforced ramparts up there too, providing additional protection to the moving figures.

Far away in the distance the data lines stretched away into the blackness, and actually appeared to be connected to other platforms. As he adjusted to this new and wider perspective, he realised there was a veritable maze of platforms all linked together in one huge web. Gliding ponderously up above those distant platforms was what appeared to be a huge fortified tower, running parallel to the upper level. The tower was festooned with all sorts of weapon barrels and looked decidedly ominous as it performed its patrols.

Gesturing with his hand at the upper levels and beyond, he blurted out, "This place is incredible! What is all this?"

Irillith smiled at him, and explained, "The platforms all represent server nodes around the Invictus' digital network." Glancing upwards, she continued, "The security overlay is new, and the defensive towers were inspired by the defences built into the Nexus server. Faye and I built all that on our journey to the Unclaimed Wastes."

John looked around in confusion, and asked, "Where is she? I thought she'd be here."

As he said that, he suddenly spotted a flash of purple, hiding amongst the glowing data archives. It appeared that Faye had been watching them ever since their arrival. She peeked at him wide-eyed around a data archive, but seemed almost hesitant to come any closer.

"Faye!" John exclaimed happily, and opened his arms invitingly.

Biting her lip, she suddenly ran towards him and flung herself into his arms, hugging him fiercely. "I can't believe you're finally here!" she gasped, staring at him with her huge luminescent eyes.

He laughed as he wrapped her in a warm, but careful embrace, while trying not to crush the delicate wings sprouting from between her shoulder blades. "It's so great to be able to touch you at last! I owe you a few hundred hugs!" he replied with a big grin.

She giggled in delight, then nuzzled into him, trembling in his arms as she responded with delight to the overwhelming surge of sensory data.  Her eyelids fluttered as she tried to respond, and when her custom programs had stopped their processing surge, she gazed at him in wonder as she said, "This is better than I even dreamed!"

Alyssa shared a playful look with Irillith, and she strolled up to join them, brushing her fingers along Faye's left arm drawing a gasp from the purple girl, just as the Maliri did to Faye's right. "She's one of your girls, John. Why don't you greet her properly now you two can touch?" she asked him with a coy smile.

John glanced her way in surprise, then looked down at Faye with a grin. She froze, and her eyes somehow got even bigger as he leaned in and gave her a chaste kiss on the lips, just as they'd pretended to do when she woke him in the morning. The digital girl had physical presence here in the Cyber-Realm and his lips tingled as they pressed against hers, with Faye letting out a strangled squeak of shock.

Alyssa nudged him with an elbow, and said disapprovingly, "That was rubbish. She's a hot, sexy girl, not your grandmother!" She frowned as she looked across at Irillith, and asked, "I thought you said you were teaching Faye how to kiss?"

Irillith laughed, and replied, "I think the poor girl's a bit overwhelmed at the moment."

John smiled flirtatiously at Faye, then dipped her backwards in his arms, kissing her more passionately this time. She was rigid at first, as her electronic synapses were flooded with a tsunami of delicious new sensory data, but she quickly responded, and kissed him back, moaning with excitement as she did so.

"Yeah, that's more like it!" Alyssa cheered, with Irillith smiling affectionately at the deliriously happy AI.

John's astral cord suddenly snapped taut, and tugged hard, jarring him from the electron-searing kiss he was giving Faye. He growled with frustration and tried to fight back, but the pull was too strong. Alyssa darted in to catch Faye as he was yanked backwards, and sucked straight through the portal to be slammed into his body. He slumped over, lying in a dazed heap on the grey Titanium decking of the Bridge. Being forcibly ejected from the Cyber-Realm was a far more violent rejection than being dumped out of the Astral Plane, and his chest heaved as he struggled to regain his breath and control the debilitating vertigo.

Alyssa sighed as she helped Faye stand up, and said, "Sorry about that, sexy. It was just starting to get good, too. He's going to have to do something about his Progenitor-half soon."

Faye stared at the portal, and let out a faint sigh that sounded full of longing. "That was so amazing..." she breathed wistfully. "I wish he could have stayed longer."

Alyssa slipped her arm around Faye's waist and squeezed her comfortingly. The petite sprite's body felt quite different to the luscious, Amazonian figures that the rest of the girls shared, and the blonde matriarch turned to study the purple girl with interest. "Actually, the party doesn't have to end there," she purred seductively.

"What do you mean?" Faye asked, turning to look at Alyssa with her purple eyes as wide as saucers.

Alyssa gave her a sultry smile as she replied, "Well, it looks like you've got kissing down after all. Why don't we move on to the advanced class?"

Faye darted a look at Irillith in confusion, and asked, "What's the advanced class?"

Irillith smiled at her in amusement, and knowing her lusty matriarch well, she replied, "I'm sure it'll be lots of fun."

"Absolutely," Alyssa agreed, brushing her fingers across Faye's pert breasts, and drawing a startled squeak from the stunned digital girl. She leaned in and kissed her lightly on the cheek before whispering, "I've never screwed anyone on a Spirit-walk before, I've also never got it on with an AI, and I definitely haven't fucked a fairy. That's three firsts in one; we can't pass that up."

"You w-want to...?!" Faye stammered, gaping at her in disbelief.

Nodding eagerly, Alyssa replied, "I've seen you watching all of us in bed. I know you really want John, but us girls have a great time together as well, right Irillith?"

Irillith had been concentrating on the edge of the platform, her hands making a series of gestures as she shaped the Cyber-Realm by thought alone. As she worked to create a tiny subnet adjoining the platform, she replied distractedly, "It's nearly as much fun as being with John." She glanced at Faye over her shoulder, and smiled as she added, "Besides, it's only polite. After all, Alyssa was John's girlfriend first, and she does share him with the rest of us."

Alyssa glanced curiously at whatever it was that had Irillith so distracted, then smiled when she saw another room, complete with a comfortable looking bed. Turning back to Faye, she caressed her purple cheek in a tender gesture as she asked, "What do you say? Fancy being a proper part of the crew?"

Faye nodded slowly while biting her full lower lip with excitement, and sounding eager she replied, "Okay!"

"Good girl," Alyssa replied, taking the purple sprite's hand, and leading her to the other room. Glancing at Irillith as she passed by, she winked at her as she added, "Want to join us?"

Shaking her head, Irillith said, "I'm not really in the mood at the moment. Too much on my mind."

Giving her a sympathetic smile, Alyssa said, "I understand. Maybe you should head back out and be with John? You can leave me with Faye, I'm sure she'll look after me." She suddenly froze, and whirling to look at the purple girl she added breathlessly, "Wait a minute! There's twelve of you isn't there?!"

Faye smiled as she nodded, and replied, "Yes, that's right! I'm Primary, but I have eleven additional avatars I can run at any one time."

"Bring them all!" Alyssa exclaimed in delight. "The more the merrier!"

Irillith smirked at the excited gleam in the blonde's eyes, and she chuckled as more of Faye's avatars raced to the platform, eagerly abandoning their tasks as they ran to join Alyssa in the bedroom. She took one last glance at Alyssa before stepping through the portal, watching with amusement as she climbed gracefully onto the bed, then beckoned the gaggle of purple sprites after her with a flirtatious come-hither gesture of her finger.

The swirling portal enveloped Irillith then, and she stepped out of the Cyber-Realm with practiced ease, no longer discomfited by the sudden change in surroundings. She glanced at John, and saw him starting to topple over onto the floor, the strange time dilation effect of the Astral Plane meaning that only a split-second had passed in real-time despite it seeming much longer in the Cyber-Realm. With a look of concern on her lovely azure face, she reunited with her body, opening her violet eyes a moment later.

"John! Are you okay?" she asked, dropping down to her knees beside him as he sprawled on the floor.

He groaned in reply, clutching at his head, before finally saying, "Someone make the room stop spinning!"

Irillith pulled him to her, and stroked his head as she gathered him to her bosom. She murmured soothing words as she held him, knowing that it would take a little while for him to recover from the shock of being forcibly ejected from the Cyber-Realm. Footsteps behind her drew her attention, and a cool green hand rested on her shoulder, instantly giving away the identity of the new arrival.

"Is he alright?" Jade asked, squatting down beside Irillith, her beautiful viridian face a mask of concern.

The Maliri girl nodded, and replied, "He'll be okay, it'll just take a few minutes for him to recover. It's bad enough getting pulled out of the Astral Plane, but being disconnected from the Cyber-Realm is much worse." She looked at the Nymph curiously then, and added, "I thought you were having breakfast?"

Jade's worried frown faded as Irillith put her at ease, and she smiled as she gently stroked John's hair, then replied, "Alyssa asked me to keep an eye on the Bridge, she said Faye's a bit distracted at the moment."

Twisting her head around, Irillith was surprised to see that the exuberant purple sprite was nowhere to be seen. She'd been a constant presence on the Bridge for months, so to not see her fluttering around between the stations seemed very strange. Jade patted her shoulder, and with a last lingering glance at John, she strolled down the ramp to the Pilot's Station, and started checking the long-range scans. That left Irillith sitting alone with John cradled in her arms, murmuring to him quietly while she waited patiently for him to recover.

It took a few minutes for John to come around fully, and he sat up, looking a little bleary eyed. He glanced at Irillith and gave her a grateful smile, then said with a hint of embarrassment, "Thanks, that was... nice."

"We can arrange more trips to the Cyber-Realm if you enjoyed it," she said with a teasing smile.

He shook his head, and winced for a moment as the room upended again, before saying firmly, "No, I'd rather not put myself through that again for a while." He paused as he looked into her kind angular eyes, and continued, "I meant being held by you like that. It was strange being the one needing comforting, but your voice and touch were very gentle."

She grinned at him and remembering their previous conversation, she said, "Let me guess... you prefer the status quo?"

He smiled as he replied, "Yes, but it was lovely to see that softer side of you. It bodes very well for the future."

Catching his meaning, she flushed a dark blue, her violet eyes gazing at him with longing. Before they could continue the conversation any further, there was a light gasp to their side, and Alyssa leaned back, placing her hands on the deck as she took a deep breath.

"Now that was fucking hot," she drawled, a smug lazy smile on her face as she turned to look at John and Irillith.

John was still groggy as he looked at her in surprise, and asked, "What was? Me being knocked senseless and Irillith looking after me?"

Alyssa turned around to face him, tucking her long legs under herself as she leaned in to give him a kiss. She seemed none the worse for her extended jaunt into the Cyber-Realm, far from it in fact. "Sorry that was so hard on you," she said, between kisses. "I hope you didn't mind me staying for a while, I knew you were in good hands."

"No, of course not," he replied. Looking at her curiously, he asked, "Did Faye give you the extended tour or something?"

"Yeah, you could say that," she said with a wicked smile, sharing a knowing glance with Irillith.

John looked around, and was as surprised by the disquieting lack of Faye's presence on the Bridge as Irillith had been. "Where is Faye? She hasn't left the Bridge unattended once since we gave her the new server."

"I think she got a bit overexcited. I'm sure she'll turn up again as soon as she can," Alyssa replied archly. She rose to her feet with perfect poise, and held out her hand for Irillith and John as she added, "I'm suddenly feeling very peckish. Let's go get some breakfast!"

Irillith was just as graceful as she stood unaided, and they both helped John to stagger to his feet.

"I don't know how you make it looks so easy," he grunted at Alyssa, giving her an envious frown. "Are you sure you haven't been practicing already?"

She laughed at that, the melodic sound echoing around the Bridge before she replied, "No, that was my first time into Cyberspace."

"Perhaps her mind is more attuned to Spirit-walking than yours?" Irillith suggested, giving the blonde girl a curious look. "It took me a few times to get used to it too, but I didn't get hurled out of the Cyber-Realm on my first trip either."

Alyssa shook her head, and replied, "No, it's not that." She paused, and conceded, "Well it might be a little."

John looked grim as he nodded, "Yeah, it's the Astral shadow of my Progenitor-half. Until I can do something about him, I think any more trips into Cyberspace are out of the question."

"Do you feel up to confronting him yet?" Alyssa asked quietly, staring at John with her piercing cerulean eyes. "You've definitely been getting stronger."

He didn't answer for a long moment, and just gathered the two blondes in his arms as he leaned against them for support. It was out of character for him to rely on them like this, and the two girls shared silent smiles as they easily steadied him between them.

With a heavy sigh, he finally admitted, "No, I'm not ready yet."

"How do you know?" Irillith asked him, stroking his back as she waited for an answer.

"I know how powerful he was, and I can't afford to take any chances," he replied, glancing down to look into her inquisitive violet eyes. "Athena said I'd have to break him out of his ethereal prison to confront him, and If I lose that confrontation, it'll be permanent. I'm not willing to put you girls at risk, not unless I can be sure I can defeat him."

Alyssa narrowed her eyes as she looked at him, then said quietly, "Alright, let's forget about it for now. Sakura's made breakfast for us with Calara and Dana. They're waiting for us in the Galley."

John's stomach rumbled as if on cue, and the girls both laughed fondly as he gave them an apologetic grin. He straightened now, feeling more steady, but the two blondes kept their arms wrapped around his waist, enjoying the physical contact. They waved farewell to Jade, and stepped into the grav-tube, heading down to Deck Four.

Jade smiled at her friends, then turned her attention back to the long-range scans. The Unclaimed Wastes stretched before them for hundreds of light years before they would reach the border with Maliri Space. She glanced at the upcoming systems, seeing more dense asteroid belts, and the occasional gas giant, but no real signs of life. The few ships she did see were much too far away for their primitive sensor technology to detect the Invictus, and they went about their business without so much as a minor course correction.

She watched a couple of nearby mining vessels cutting free big chunks of a mineral-rich asteroid with their mining lasers. As the hunks of rock sailed free, they focused the beams on them, breaking them up so that the ore could be gathered for later processing. A purple flash at her side drew her attention that way, and she smiled at Faye as the digital girl wobbled on her feet.

"Oh my!" Faye gasped, flopping down cross-legged on the floor.

Jade laughed, and said, "I've seen that dazed look before."

"She overloaded all twelve of my avatars! She's insatiable!" Faye marvelled, luminous eyes gazing at Jade in wonder. "I've never felt anything like it... I'll be processing all that sensory data for weeks!"

The Nymph smiled at her, then leaned down to whisper, "Remember, that was just Alyssa. Think what it'll be like with John and all of us girls helping out."

Somehow the sprite's eyes got even bigger, and her iridescent wings began to quiver, although she wasn't sure if it was through fear or anticipation.

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Sakura, Calara, and Dana were waiting for the latecomers in the kitchen, and after being alerted to their imminent arrival by Alyssa, they disappeared into the kitchen to finish preparing breakfast for John and the girls. The six women they had rescued from the pirates were all seated at the table, and they all turned to look at him when they heard the footsteps coming down the corridor towards them. There was a chair set up for him at his usual spot, but he ignored it for the moment, as he walked up to the other end of the table to greet his guests.

John was delighted to see that their bruises and black eyes had all been fully healed, and the six women all looked none the worse for their recent ordeal. Giving them a warm smile, he asked, "How are you ladies this morning? Feeling better?"

"You really did it!" the Latina said in awe, staring at him in amazement. "I didn't believe it, but you did everything you promised!"

"I believed you!" the young blonde sitting beside her said emphatically, climbing quickly off the bench and rushing towards him. He knew what Tanya wanted and he opened his arms to her, accepting her warm embrace.

The other girls got up now, and they quietly walked towards him, so they could join in the group hug. He looked around at the six sets of eyes staring up at him in earnest gratitude, and tried hard not to get distracted by how good they felt pressed up against him.

\*We've always got room for more,\* Alyssa thought to him playfully. He could feel her amusement over their empathic bond as she added, \*It'll mean six more mouths to feed, but you're a good provider.\*

\*Shh, you. I'm trying to be the valiant hero,\* John replied, doing his best to blot out her salacious thoughts.

He turned to smile at the Latina, and said, "I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name before?"

"Anna," she replied in a hushed voice, her brown eyes gazing up at him.

"Have the memories gone? Of everything that happened to you?" he asked, glancing down the table at Irillith to see if she was listening. She was. Avidly.

Anna paused for a moment, and it sounded like she could hardly believe what she was saying when she replied, "I can still remember what happened to me, but I just don't -feel- anything about it." Her voice was filled with wonder as she added, "It's almost like it all happened to another person. The memories of the fear, pain, and horror are just gone."

"That's wonderful news, Anna," John said, giving her a warm smile.

"You really did undo the past," Tanya said, with a look of adoration in her lovely green eyes.

He could see it now: a few kind words, and she'd be on her knees, gazing at him reverently while servicing his cock and filling her stomach with his cum. The other five girls would kiss him tenderly while they eagerly awaited their turn, and it would just take a few more weeks of feeding them all until he'd helped each of them to grow strong. He had no need for soldiers, not yet, but he could fill their wombs with his cum and breed them all. Six pretty girls with his lusty offspring kicking in their bellies, looking at him doe-eyed as he stroked them possessively, feeling the new life growing inside them.

The thoughts were positively intoxicating...

But he managed to shrug it off, and keep his resolve. With a ragged sigh he gave them a warm hug, then carefully pried himself from their embrace and stepped away; from both the grateful women and the seductive path they offered him. Just like that the spell was broken, and he sat down in his chair as they returned to their seats.

"What now?" Anna asked, and he could see the flushed look of arousal in her cheeks.

John smiled as he made eye contact with them, and said enthusiastically, "Breakfast!"

They laughed at his joke, before Anna persisted, "No, I mean, what happens to all of us now?"

"We'll be meeting some friends in the Maliri Regency tomorrow, and they'll carry you safely back to Genkiri station at the border with Terran Space," he replied, meeting her probing gaze. "It's a busy trading station that sees plenty of Terran traffic, so from there, I'll see that you can get transportation back to each of your homeworlds. I've also arranged for a significant amount of credits to be transferred to each of you, which you can use to get started with living whatever life you choose for yourselves."

"Why would you do all this for us?" the second blonde girl asked, looking at him in bewilderment.

Alyssa winked at the blonde, and replied, "He just likes getting grateful kisses from pretty girls."

John rolled his eyes at Alyssa, then smiled at the young women as he said, "There's no ulterior motive. I'm simply in a position to help, and it feels good knowing I'm undoing some of the harm the pirates did to you."

The smouldering look the blonde gave him confirmed his earlier thoughts that it wasn't just kisses on their minds. At that moment, Sakura arrived beside him, and he smiled indulgently at the Asian girl as she placed a steaming plate piled high with an aromatic cooked breakfast on the table in front of him. After she'd put down the accompanying glass of water too, he pulled her down for a grateful kiss.

"I hope you enjoy it," she said when he released her, blushing at the attention, and conscious that the six liberated women were staring at her with curiosity and a hint of envy.

"It smells delicious!" John said enthusiastically, brandishing his knife and fork, and wasting no time in tucking in. He closed his eyes and groaned with delight as he savoured the first mouthful, then asked, "Did you cook this yourself?"

"I just did the toast and eggs," she admitted. "Calara roasted the gammon."

The Latina brought out a steaming plate of food for Alyssa and Irillith, which she set down on the table, then laughed as he pulled her in for a kiss too. She sat next to the blonde a moment later, with Dana sitting next to Irillith after bringing them some drinks.

Breakfast was a fairly quiet affair after that, with John and Alyssa having worked up an appetite after their trip into the Cyber-Realm. Irillith was distracted by worries and picked at her food, until she received a cautionary word from Alyssa that she should eat well for breakfast, so that she'd be more alert later on for speaking with her sister. The freed women talked quietly amongst themselves as they discussed their options, and while John could have listened in with his sharp hearing, he deliberately tuned them out instead, letting them have their privacy.

When breakfast was done, Dana and Sakura quickly cleared the table as John relaxed in his seat. "Is it nearly time?" he asked Alyssa, with a quick glance at Irillith.

She nodded, and replied, "Rachel says that going by Tashana's body weight and the dosage of sedative she gave her, she should wake up in about ten minutes."

John smiled, and said knowingly, "There's no 'should' about it, is there?"

Alyssa shook her head, and returning his smile, she replied, "Rachel's calculated it to the second."

He reached out to take Irillith's hand, and he squeezed it gently as he asked, "Are you ready?"

"No, not at all!" she replied, laughing nervously.

"It'll be okay," he said, stroking her hand.

\*We have company,\* Alyssa informed him, glancing at the six women who had left their seats again, and walked over to join them.

Alyssa gave him a coy smile, then rose from her chair and took Irillith's hand as she led the apprehensive Maliri girl down the corridor to the grav-tube. Calara, Dana, and Sakura fell in behind her, and they glided gracefully away, leaving him to look up at the six young women.

The Latina, Anna, was bolder than the others, and seemed to have adopted the role of spokeswoman for the group. She stood close beside him, her fingers lightly touching his shoulder through his shirt, and she hesitated for a moment before she said, "We just wanted to say, thank you. For everything."

Before he could respond, she leaned down and gave him a tender kiss on the lips, her dark brown eyes hiding behind closed eyelids as her lips worked against his. It was a lovely kiss, full of gratitude, and when she pulled away, he could see the indecision in her eyes. She reluctantly stepped back for the dusky-hued girl, and then her full lips were brushing against his, a hint of a smile on her mouth as her tongue flickered out to taste his lips. They each walked away after taking their turn, returning quietly to their quarters.

Eventually it was just the green-eyed blonde left, and Tanya leaned in to give him a kiss just like all the others. She paused before making contact, and her eyes sparkled as she asked, "We could do more, if you want?"

John pulled her into his arms, and she was unresisting as she sat across his lap, an eager smile on her face as she felt the heat from his throbbing cock next to her thigh.

"You're a very pretty girl, Tanya, but as tempted as I am, I'm afraid I'll have to turn you down," he replied, with more than a hint of regret.

"Why?" she asked him simply, staring at him with her big green eyes.

"Do you remember that I said I'm not human?" he replied with a relaxed smile.

She nodded then reached out to stroke the tips of his ears, as she said suggestively, "Yes, there's a few parts of you that really make you stand out from normal guys."

John couldn't resist sliding his hand over to her slender tummy, and stroking her gently, he said, "My cum healed you last night, but it has other effects too. If you swallow too much of it, you won't want to leave."

"I think I'd learn to cope," she replied, leaning in and giving him a tender kiss on the cheek.

As much as John ached to make her his, he reluctantly said, "I lead a violent life, full of combat and danger. I'd be the most selfish prick in the galaxy if I dragged you into all that."

Tanya was about to object, but she could see the firm resolve in his eyes, and the words died on her lips. She leaned in until she was just inches away from him, and said, "I won't ever forget you, John. Come and find me if you ever change your mind."

With that she gave him a passionate kiss, pressing her firm breasts against his chest as she linked her arms around his neck. It left him breathless by the end, and she hopped off his lap then flounced away down the corridor, putting extra swing in her hips to give him an enticing view.

\*It's a good job you're the one with the dick,\* Alyssa said with amusement. \*If I was in your position, I'd have bent that little temptress over the table, and had her begging me to be her baby daddy as I stuffed her full of cock!\*

\*Don't... turning them down was hell enough already!\* John replied with a groan, as he got up from his chair, and strolled down the corridor.

\*While I admire your impressive willpower,\* Edraele said, sounding thoughtful. \*I’m curious about something. Why did you turn them down exactly? You clearly wanted them, and the desire was clearly reciprocated.\*

\*It's not that simple,\* John replied, as he stepped into the glowing red field of the grav-tube. \*I'm living like a nomad at the moment, roaming all over the galaxy, and that's no life for a young mother bringing up a baby. We're making long term plans to settle in Valaden, which would mean those girls would have to give up everything they've known to live with me there. I couldn't do that to them.\*

\*Thank you, that was interesting to know,\* Edraele replied, sounding genuinely grateful for the information. Her mood got more tense then as she added, \*I know you've been constantly reassuring Irillith, but how can you be so sure that Tashana will talk to her?\*

He longed to be able to tell Edraele a comforting white lie, but he knew she could read his every thought, including that one. As he stepped out into the corridor on Deck Seven, he replied, \*I can't be sure, not after everything that poor girl's been through. All we can do, is hope for the best.\*

Alyssa didn't reply, but he could feel she shared similar reservations over the empathic bond they shared. He pressed the button to enter the Medical Bay, and shared a smile with the blonde when she looked his way. She was standing next to Rachel, and the two girls were watching Irillith, who stood quietly beside her twin sister, waiting for her to awaken.

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Tashana had slept a dreamless sleep for the first time in years. She wasn't sure what had caused her troubled mind to spare her the typical series of agonising nightmares, but whatever the reason, she was tremendously glad for it.

The fog of sleep began to lift, and she smelled a scent she hadn't experienced since her banishment.  It was the delicate hint of pines floating on the freshest air she'd ever experienced, and she breathed deep, luxuriating in the wonderful fragrance as it filled her lungs. A cascade of wonderful memories flashed through her subconscious, leaving her reeling as she relived events from decades ago, just as if they'd happened yesterday.

It took her right back to hiking through the mountains with her father and sister as they walked to their summer lodge. The time they’d spent fishing for dinner in one of the-crystal clear Valaden lakes, then giggling with Irillith as their father took a theatrical dive into the water, pretending to have been dragged in by a big fish. The joy as they roasted the huge tinefish she'd caught, and seeing her family's happy faces as they congratulated her on catching the tastiest fish in the lake. Cuddling up together with him, his strong arms held protectively around them both, looking up at the night sky and the millions of twinkling stars spread out before them. He told them ancient stories as he always did on these trips, about the Mael'nerak and the terrible things he did to the Maliri.

She smiled at her twin across his broad chest, linking hands with her, and listening to her father's deep voice rumbling in his chest. It was such a blissfully happy time, and one she'd tried to cling on to for so long. Everything seemed to be taking her back to her distant past today, from that strange sensation in the back of her mind to even feeling the soft skin of a slender hand holding her own. Those delicate fingers stroked her gently, a tender gesture of affection that she hadn't experienced in more years than she could count.

Her eyelids fluttered open, and she let out a forlorn sigh as she saw the edge of her mask around her eyes. The overhead lights had been dimmed, but they were still bright enough to make out the figure standing beside her. It was her own face, lovely and unspoilt, just as she'd remembered from so long ago. The breathtaking beauty of those features made her heart ache with the loss of everything that had been so savagely torn away from her, sending her mind spinning through a cascade of pain and torment.

It was then that she noticed the long white hair brushing down over her shoulders. But, she'd never let her hair grow long, that would have been scandalous. She frowned in confusion in her addled state, and then abruptly snapped out of her dazed reverie. White hair! Her eyes went wide with fright as she stared at the strange vision, the white-haired version of herself looking just like the pictographs she'd uncovered of the Maliri thralls.

Reality crashed down on her then, and she snatched her hand away from Irillith as if she were a venomous snake. Tashana lurched off the bed, desperate to put something, anything, between them.

"Wait, Tashana! Please, listen!" Irillith gasped in alarm, staring at her twin with hands upraised in a calming gesture.

"You fucking bitch! You took everything from me!" Tashana snarled, a blossoming surge of hate welling up inside her, which blotted out all reason.

She could feel the heat begging to get free, that inner fire that burned so bright. For years the Enshunu had tortured her, delighting in her agony, little knowing that they stoked the fires of their own damnation. Now, it seemed she'd be able to repay her original tormentor as well, the sting of betrayal from someone she'd loved so much, searing her soul far worse than any torture the Enshunu could ever devise.

"I'm not the same, I've changed!" Irillith pleaded, reaching out to her in supplication. "John healed me! I love you! Now I can be the sister you always wanted!"

What Tashana wanted most was to incinerate this malevolent bitch, to extinguish her insidious flame by engulfing it with her own. Her hands began to smoulder, that delicious feeling of anticipation welling up inside her, where the burning of the wicked was only seconds away. A feral snarl rumbled in her throat, the flames of retribution coiling within her eager to be unleashed.

Irillith glanced to her side in desperation, making eye contact with someone lurking to her side. Tashana suddenly realised they weren't alone, and she whirled around to face whatever lackeys her evil twin had brought with her. That was when she saw him again, and her rage was snuffed out as if an ice cold bucket of water had been dumped on her head.

"Get away from me!" she wailed in terror, scrambling backwards as a nightmarish vision from her childhood fables was made flesh before her very eyes.

Her sister was all but forgotten about now, as Tashana crashed to the floor in her haste to get away, her red boots scrabbling on the deck as she tried to put more distance between herself and the Progenitor. A Progenitor! The memories came back to her in a flood. Seeing him and his thralls in the Underworld, carving their bloody way through the Bloodnovas, mowing them down like wheat before a scythe. Everything she'd researched and all her findings borne out in one terrifying instant.

She tried to summon forth the flames, but there was no spark of anger now, just the deathly chill of fear as her heart felt like it was being gripped by an icy fist. She cowered behind some kind of scanning device, and whimpered in terror, her mind threatening to break under the strain.

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Tashana had no idea how long she quaked in fear behind that bulky medical device, waiting for an end that didn't come. She hugged herself as she trembled there, reeling from the revelation that she was now being held captive by a Progenitor.

"Hi!" a bright, cheerful voice called out to her from back in the room. "Would you mind if I came over there to say hello?"

Something about that unreasonably chirpy voice managed to cut through her shroud of fear, and Tashana whirled around, hugging the big piece of medical equipment. Very carefully, she raised herself up, to take a quick peek to see who else was in the room. She ducked down low again, then took a moment to try and recall what she'd seen in that brief moment. A purple girl, and she definitely wasn't a thrall, she was too petite.

"Who are you?" Tashana called out to this mystery person, and winced at the sound of her own quavering voice.

"My name's Faye!" the girl replied. "Please don't be scared, I'm not going to  hurt you. I'm just a hologram, an artificial intelligence!"

Faye's voice had started getting louder, and it became apparent to Tashana that she was walking her way. She raised herself up to tell her to get back, and came face-to-face with the cute purple features of the AI, only inches away from her on the other side of the blocky hiding place.

"Hey!" Faye said with a sparkling smile. "It's wonderful to meet you, Tashana!"

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\*Well, at least you didn't have to heal another broken nose,\* Alyssa said, looking across Irillith's sleeping form at John, and giving him a wry smile.

It had taken hours of comforting a distraught Irillith before she would settle down to get some rest, but even now, a troubled frown marred the beautiful Maliri girl's azure face. After the ugly confrontation in the Medical Bay, it was quite clear that the reunion with her sister wasn't going to go smoothly in the slightest.

\*How's Tashana doing?\* he asked, looking at Alyssa with concern.

She sighed, and hugging Irillith tighter, replied, \*Faye seems to have settled her down, and Tashana's hiding in the Medical Bay for the moment. It was a good idea of Rachel's to send in Faye. Our cute little sprite's the only one who hasn't been through the Change, except our guests of course, but getting them involved would've been a terrible plan.\*

John nodded as he replied, \*Agreed. The sooner we can get them out of harm's way and safely back home, the better.\*

\*Any idea how we should handle this situation?\* Alyssa thought to him, brushing her hand through Irillith's silky white locks and sweeping her hair from her face.

He leaned down and kissed Irillith on the cheek, and her tense expression eased a little at his touch. When he met Alyssa's gaze a moment later, he sounded sad as he replied, \*From Tashana's point of view, Irillith was responsible for everything that happened to her. I can see why she despises her sister, even though her anger is misplaced now. I think we just have to leave her be for the moment, and let her just adjust to everything. As to whether she can ever forgive Irillith... who knows?\*

\*The 'pumping her stomach full of cum while she slept' plan isn't looking so bad now, is it?\* Alyssa replied, smiling at him to let her know she was only joking.

John was serious though, as he replied, \*I couldn't do that, not after everything she's been through. Yeah, it would have worked, but she deserves the choice, I couldn't just force that on her.\*

\*It's okay, I know,\* she replied, leaning over to give him a kiss. When she pulled back, she glanced down, then smiled at him as she added, \*Based on how Tashana reacted to you, I think it's a fair assumption to make that she won't be going down on her knees for you anytime soon.\*

He nodded, a wry smile on his face as he said, \*Yeah, I don't seem to make a good first impression on House Valaden noblewomen.\*

\*I only planned to enslave you the first time we met. I didn't try to kill you until the second meeting,\* Edraele chimed in, trying to make light of the situation, but he could sense her worry for both her daughters over their bond.

John tried to think of something comforting to say to the Maliri Matriarch, but he knew she could read his every thought on the matter. In the end, he simply said, \*I'll bring Tashana home to you, Edraele. She's terrified of me, but maybe you can help her instead.\*

\*Thank you. I'll do everything I can to make things better for her,\* Edraele said earnestly.

He stroked Irillith's arm as he tried to think of any way he could try and help the sisters reconcile, but he kept drawing blanks, having no idea how to try and calm the situation.

Eventually Alyssa just smiled at him, and said, \*There's nothing more you can do for the moment, and I can look after Irillith. Why don't you head up to your Ready Room? Dana wants to talk to you about something.\*

John looked at her in surprise, then leaned in to kiss Irillith's blue shoulder before climbing off the bed, and strolling out the bedroom door.

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Tashana looked askance at the smiling purple girl with her distracting fluttering wings, and said dubiously, "So you're telling me you started out from that vambrace? I saw the projections from that device, you don't look anything alike."

Faye shook her head, and grinned as she said, "I've had loads of upgrades since then!" She held up her first finger and thumb as wide apart as her slender digits could stretch, and added, "I used to only be this big, but then Dana built me a Progenitor server as my new home!"

At the reminder of the Progenitor, Tashana's face froze, and she snapped, "Can't you just leave me alone? Why do you keep bothering me?"

The purple AI looked sad as she replied, "Everyone's worried about you. We all just want to help, Irillith is-."

"Get out," Tashana snarled, cutting her off, and she ducked down behind the medical equipment once more.

Faye let out a sad sigh, and said, "Just let me know if you need anything, I'll be able to hear you if you ask. There's water in the dispenser on the wall, and we can prepare any food you-."

"Leave. Me. Alone," Tashana said frostily, her bitter voice drifting up from behind the DNA analyser.

The chirpy AI went silent, and Tashana heaved a sigh of relief. She leaned back against the bulky machine, and tried to get her spinning thoughts in line. If the AI was telling the truth, they were heading towards Valaden for some kind of meeting with her mother. All she had to do, was stay away from the Progenitor and his thralls until then, and she could make a break for freedom. Edraele had always jealously guarded her power, and if she could convince her that this Progenitor posed an existential threat to the Maliri Regency, they just might be able to stave off disaster.

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As John strolled down the corridor, he heard playful voices drifting up from the grav-tube. His sharp ears immediately identified Calara and Sakura heading towards him, and he kicked himself for missing out on their training session. He only had to wait in the corridor by the grav-tube for thirty seconds or so, before he spotted the Latina and the Asian girl step into the grav-tube below him on Deck Three.

The view from up there was magnificent, their tight training gear leaving little to the imagination, but he didn't want to startle them so he called out, "Hey, you two, how did the sparring session go?"

They both looked up and gave him dazzling smiles, then rose in the blue anti-gravity field before stepping out onto Deck Two hand-in-hand.

When he opened his arms for them they hesitated, and Sakura protested, "We're all sweaty from the workout!"

He laughed, and pulled them both in for a hug, the giggles from both girls providing ample compensation for any inconvenience a change of outfit might entail. He looked down into the two sets of enchanting brown eyes, and asked, "How did the training session go?"

Calara flashed a smile of admiration at Sakura, and replied, "She's a really good student. I see why you enjoyed training with her so much."

Sakura blushed with the praise, and glanced at the Latina as she said, "Calara's taken your teaching methods to heart. She's another calm one with lots of patience."

"I'm really sorry I missed it," John said, frowning with regret. "Tashana waking up didn't go quite as smoothly as I'd hoped."

"Alyssa told us what happened," Calara said sympathetically. "Everything that happened to Tashana was horrific, but I feel so sorry for Irillith too. She's just not that same twisted, spiteful person any more, but now she's stuck trying to clean up what is basically someone else's mess."

Sakura nodded, and said, "Irillith's been wonderful helping me settle in here. I can't even imagine her as the person you described when you first met her."

"Have a chat with Faye, I'm sure she'd be able to show you the cam-feed footage," John said with a wry chuckle.

Calara sighed as she said, "She was a handful, alright. I was dead set against her stepping foot on board, but I'm so glad it all worked out in the end."

The Asian girl was quiet for a moment, then slowly shook her head as she looked at John, and said, "I really like Irillith as she is now. I'd rather not see her any other way."

John stroked the back of her head and said, "That's a nice way to think about it." Looking at each of them, he asked, "What's your plan now?"

The two girls shared a heated glance, and Calara said, "A lovely warm shower to ease out those aches and pains, then we've got some other tensions to work out." They leaned in to kiss each other, and their eyes flicked his way, watching him as he stared at them in fascination. Sakura fluttered her lashes alluringly and added, "You're very welcome to join us."

John was sorely tempted, but he knew Dana was waiting for him so he replied, "Sorry, I'd love to, but Dana wants to talk to me about something." He smiled as he added, "Despite Alyssa's insinuations, I was genuinely looking forward to seeing you train together. Would you let me know the next time you plan a sparring session?"

"Don't worry, it'll be a regular thing," Sakura said with a grin at Calara. "We've already planned to meet up daily to spar."

"That's excellent, girls, I'll be there for tomorrow's session," he said, pleased to see them getting on so well together. He frowned then, and added, "I better not keep Dana waiting any longer. Have fun, you two."

"Oh, we will, don't worry about that," Calara said with a seductive smile, and taking Sakura's hand, she led her away down the corridor.

John watched them leave, entranced by their tanned, athletic bodies, as they sauntered away from him. When they stopped in front of Calara's quarters, Sakura turned to glance his way, then blushed cutely as the Latina dragged the Asian girl into her bedroom. The sound of their playful laughter echoed down the corridor to him, and John felt certain he'd just made a terrible decision.

\*You can ride them both tomorrow. Go get a fresh shirt, Dana's waiting for you,\* Alyssa thought to him telepathically in a mock-stern voice.

Spotting one of the cleaning robots gliding along the corridor, he stripped off his perspiration-soaked shirt then crumpled it into a ball, and scored a three-pointer dropping it into the laundry hopper on its back. He blinked in surprise when the cleaning bot raised its arm to give him a high-five as it rolled by, and he did so in a daze, then watched in amazement as it trundled into the grav-tube before dropping down out of sight.

Shaking off his shock at the uncharacteristic mannerism from the automaton, John jogged back to his bedroom. He waved at the psychic blonde as she smirked at him, still cuddled up with Irillith who was fast asleep on the bed. Grabbing a pressed white shirt from the rails in his wardrobe, he buttoned it up as he left, tucking the shirt in as he walked briskly back down the corridor and into the grav-tube.

Jade greeted him with a wave as he stepped onto the Bridge, and he smiled back at her as he strode over to his Ready Room. Faye gave him a thousand-watt smile, her cute face shining with happiness, and she swooned when he blew her a kiss in return. John pushed the button that opened the door to his Ready Room and when he strolled inside, he found Dana lounging in his big leather chair, spinning it back and forth as she gazed out the window at the expanse of stars beyond. She heard the door swish open, and her face lit up as she saw him, springing to her feet in her haste to greet him.

"Hey! Thanks for coming up to see me," she said, bouncing over to give him a kiss.

John smiled at her, and said, "I can always spare time for my favourite Grand Engineering Overlord. What's on your mind?"

She grinned at him, then pointed to one of the sofas, taking his hand as she led him over to them. John sat down on the comfortable seat, and relaxed as he focused his full attention on the redhead, putting the rest of his worries aside for the moment. He looked her way, and arched an eyebrow as he waited for her to talk. Dana knelt next to him on the sofa, and looked uncharacteristically nervous. She fidgeted with the zipper on her top, sliding it up and down just to keep her hands busy, inadvertently giving him an impressive display of her delicious cleavage.

He chuckled and said, "I don't think stripping quite works that way, but it's a hell of a view."

The redhead blushed, and yanked her fingers away mid-zip, leaving her breasts hidden from sight. "I wanted to talk to you about your mother!" she suddenly blurted out, then grimaced, and added, "Fuck! I wanted to be more subtle than that."

John sat back and blinked at her in surprise, not expecting that for one moment. Ever since Calara had informed him that Jessica Blake was a murderer, he'd been so busy planning for the assault on Underworld and trying to be supportive with Irillith, that he hadn't really had much time to process the disturbing revelation. Either that, or he was forcibly repressing his own feelings about it, he reluctantly admitted to himself.

"Okay, we can talk about her. What did you want to know?" he inquired hesitantly, having no idea where Dana was going with this.

She shuffled closer so she was only a few inches away, and said, "Sorry, I'm really shit at this sort of stuff. I normally just let Alyssa, Jade, and Rachel help you deal with anything like this."

He gave her an encouraging smile, and reached out to run his fingers through her dark auburn hair, and said, "You're doing fine. What's on your mind, babes?"

She laughed when he used her pet name for Rachel, and relaxed as she leaned into his hand, turning to kiss his palm before closing her eyes and letting out a gentle sigh as he caressed her. Her long lashes fluttered open, giving him a lovely view of her sky-blue eyes once again, and she had a flustered smile on her face as she said, "See, I told you I was shit at this. I'm trying to be supportive, but you're way too distracting!"

"Supportive with what, exactly?" John asked, wracking his brain to try and figure out what specifically she was referring to.

Dana reached up to clasp his hand, then brought it down to her lap, where she held it firmly in place. She stared into his eyes, and replied, "None of us have really had a chance to talk to you about what Calara found out about your mother. I saw how much it upset you to hear that, but you said to leave you alone, so I did."

John visibly deflated, and gave her a sad smile as he said, "I'm sorry I shut you out like that. Calara just confirmed something I'd always hoped wasn't true."

"That Jessica abandoned you? Yeah, that fucking sucks," she agreed solemnly. She lifted her hand to cup his face as she added, "I just wanted to tell you that I know exactly how shitty that feels, so if you ever want to talk about it, just come and grab me, okay?"

He nodded, then letting his guard down, he replied honestly, "I feel like I'm being melodramatic, getting upset over it. You've been through far worse than me, and at least I had my grandparents to look after me growing up."

Dana shook her head, and he could see the pain in her eyes as she said, "It's a terrible thing, to feel like you were rejected by your parents. That kind of trauma can affect relationships for years afterwards, making you worry about letting anyone get too close, in case you suffer another rejection. You don't have to downplay your feelings of abandonment on my account."

John was quiet for a long moment, nodding thoughtfully as he pondered what she'd just said. There was a great degree of truth in it, and if he was being honest with himself, it might have been part of the reason why he'd shied away from any meaningful relationships for most of his adult life.

He arched an eyebrow then, and smiled as he said, "Thank you, it's good advice. You sounded awfully like Rachel there, did she brief you on what to say?"

The redhead slowly shook her head, and bit her full lower lip for a moment, before she replied quietly, "We've been talking about it, but not about you. She's been trying to help me deal with my own issues."

"I'm sorry, Sparks," he said, taking one of her hands in his, and squeezing it supportively.

She shook her head, and smiled at him as she replied, "Don't be. My life's a million times better now, since you rescued me from Karron." She leaned forward and whispered conspiratorially, "Please don't say anything to Rachel; she loves to try and help, but I got over most of that shit months ago."

John chuckled, and said, "Your secret's safe with me." He paused for a second, then added, "How did you put it behind you? I remember how upset you got about Calara's family when we went to visit them on Jericho."

Dana nodded, then replied, "That was before I set up the bond with Alyssa, but everything's different now. I can feel how much she cares about me, and I trust her when she says you guys all feel the same way." Her eyes narrowed as she continued, "My useless, shitty parents are in my past, but you and the girls are my future. I love being here with you, it's fucking awesome!"

John stared at her for a moment, blinking in surprise, then said firmly, "You know what? You're absolutely right."

She looked elated, and leaned in, giving him a big kiss. "Was it really helpful, what I said?" she asked, beaming at him.

He smiled at her fondly and replied, "What's the point in getting upset about the past when I've got someone like you in my life? To paraphrase someone I really respect: 'You're fucking awesome'!"

Dana grinned at him, then her wide smile turned playful as she tugged the zip of her top down again, leaving acres of smooth bronzed flesh tantalisingly exposed. Her hand slid lower, moving between his thighs, and she frowned sympathetically, as she cupped his balls and said, "Your quad feels really full. I know you were saving this for Tashana's tummy, just in case she wanted it, but we've normally emptied you twice by now. Will you let me help you out?"

John laughed as he joked, "Like I said... awesome!"

Her eyes blazed with lusty excitement as she practically jumped off the sofa, and began hastily stripping off her outfit. Dana made no effort to be teasing or seductive about it, her objective was simply to get naked as fast as possible. Her raw enthusiasm was infectious, and John chuckled as he stripped off his clothes too. As soon as he was done, she gently pushed him back on the sofa, then straddled him.

"Don't worry, I'm not trying to go all dom on you," she purred, as she used her hand to position his throbbing cock at her pouting pussy lips. "I just wanted to get straight into it."

With that, she eased down on his shaft, letting out an adorable gasp as his rampant girth spread her tight little pussy wide open.

"You're so fucking big," she groaned as she sank down his shaft, her eager young body lubricating the way for him.

John felt the blunt head of his cock easing past her cervix and into her womb, penetrating her depths to the fullest. She took every inch he had to give her, until he was fully hilted inside her, drawing a long shuddering moan from the luscious girl. He wrapped her in his arms, and just listened to her lusty pants and moans as she leaned against him. Dana's big, firm breasts felt warm and silky-soft against his chest, and his hands began to roam over her back, feeling the supple muscles shifting as she writhed against him.

"Getting it on with Rachel is fucking hot, but I could never give this up," Dana murmured, raising herself up a couple of inches before sliding down his length once again.

When his hands moved down to her hips, she began to gyrate against him, and leaned back so she could stare into his eyes. They were only inches apart, and he could see the golden coronae around her pupils as they flared with her arousal.

"Fuck, that feels good," he groaned, as she began to rock against him, working his big shaft with her talented muscles.

"I love taking you like this," she agreed, staring back at him, her full lips parted slightly as she gasped with pleasure.

One of her hands rested on his shoulder to steady herself as she rode him, but the other reached down to find one of his, then moved it around to stroke her toned abdomen. He could feel his big cock brushing against his fingers where her tummy bulged out to take him, and when he looked at Dana's face again, her blue eyes were soft and adoring.

"There's your future, right there," she murmured between excited gasps.

The thought of this stunning young woman that he loved so much carrying his baby inside her, was thrilling. Not only that, but it all seemed like it was so close, and he could easily imagine what it would be like. They'd watch her grow bigger as the months ticked by, sharing her pregnancy with the other girls, and surrounded by more loving family than they'd know what to do with.

"Oh, John!" she moaned with delight, as if hearing his thoughts, and she leaned against him, hugging him fiercely.

He could feel himself getting close as her rippling muscles tried to coax out his load, and her trembling thighs told him she wasn't far away either. John held her hips with both hands, and ground her pelvis against him, making her cry out in ecstasy as he rubbed her enflamed clit against his body. Her pussy clamped down on his broad girth as she came, and his four balls lurched, sending long streams of cum into the climaxing redhead.

Dana threw her head back and let out a low moan of pure pleasure, as she felt his cum splashing in her womb. Cradling her belly with both hands, she finally opened her eyes, and stared into his under her thick eyelashes, as she felt her body expanding to hold all his cum. "Show me what I'll look like when you knock me up!" she urged him, her voice throbbing with need.

Her eager pleading had a dramatic effect on his balls, and they clenched rhythmically to pump every last squirt of cum into her that they could, her sultry moans urging him onwards. When he was finally done, her tummy was huge, packed full of his enormous load. He'd been getting used to having soft eager lips sucking out the contents of his balls morning, noon, and night, and to have reached the afternoon without any release had left him backed up. Now he'd packed Dana's tummy full to the brim, so much so, that her belly button had popped out to take it all.

He placed his hands on hers over the gravid curve of her abdomen, feeling the smooth skin stretched taut to house the hefty weight of his rich spunk. "Soon," he told her, as he looked into her wide eyes. "We'll make a wonderful family, and we'll both be there for them."

Dana's eyes filled up, and she leaned against his chest, or at least as much as her swollen belly would allow. They stayed like that for a long while, with John stroking her back protectively, while she planted tiny kisses on his throat, where she was nuzzled against him. The door to the Ready Room eventually swished open, and Jade appeared at their side, with a glorious smile on her beautiful green face.

"Sorry to interrupt, but Alyssa thought it might be a good idea to fill up Dana's stomach instead. I know you want to help her unlock whatever Progenitor secrets she's got locked away in her lovely mind," the Nymph said, slipping her hand between them and caressing her friend's rounded tummy. She grinned at John then as she added, "You really filled her up!"

"She got me very turned on," John said with a smile, then leaned in to kiss the redhead, who responded immediately with a passionate liplock.

When they pulled apart from their kiss, Jade helped to lift Dana from his weary shaft, then moved her so she slumped on the sofa with her legs spread wide. The Nymph knelt on the floor between those splayed thighs, then brought one of her hands up to Dana's lips.

"This way, you can stay full," Jade explained, before nestling into Dana's puffy lower lips, and beginning to suck out all of John's cum.

Dana wasted no time in taking Jade's fingers between her flushed lips, and she sucked hungrily, filling up her stomach with the sweet-tasting contents of her womb. John stroked her swollen belly for her, drawing sighs of contentment from the teenager, interspersed between her excited moans as she writhed on Jade's long, probing tongue.

There was plenty to share, so when Dana's stomach was full, she insisted that Jade finish off the last for herself. They curled up on the sofa afterwards with the lights off, watching the mystical light show from the Nymph's verdant body as she absorbed John's cum. Dana reached across John to trace the lines of light as they pulsed out over Jade's curves, making the dozing Nymph purr with delight.

The redhead tilted her head up to look at him, and said in a hushed voice, "You know what? I just thought of something. According to Rachel, these pulses mean that you're making Jade stronger, right?"

John nodded, hugging the two girls closer to him and enjoying the dull ache of his freshly relieved quad. "Yeah, that's what she said, and she's rarely wrong about that kind of thing. So, what did you just think of?" he asked her, conversationally.

Dana glanced across at the happy Nymph, and said quietly, "Well... I guess if you keep loading Jade up, and as long as you still see a lightshow afterwards, it means she hasn't reached her full potential. It's like she hasn't been fully upgraded yet." She sat upright awkwardly with the heavy rounded weight in her tummy, and turned to look at him as she added in a whisper, "You can't have forgotten that huge fucking dinosaur she turned into?"

John blinked in surprise, then glanced down at the contented little Nymph who was nuzzling into him, and purring with satisfaction. He pulled Dana back against him, and rested his hand on her curved abdomen as he said wryly, "So many deserving tummies, so little time."

She snickered at that, then snuggled against him as she wondered, "What kind of monstrous badass do you reckon Jade could turn into with a couple of weeks of non-stop attention?"

"I suppose we'll have to wait and see," he replied, taking another look at the adorable Nymph, and watching the glowing circles of light expanding outwards from her toned stomach. Turning to look at Dana, he continued, "What's your plan for trying to unlock the Progenitor schematics?"

She smiled and kissed him as she replied, "You should be the one telling me! You're the one that stuffed them into my noggin."

He nodded, and said earnestly, "I do enjoy giving you a good stuffing."

Dana giggled at that, then let out a happy sigh before she considered his original question. "That picture Calara found, you remember?! The Progenitor spaceship on Arcadia!" she finally blurted out, then looked guilty, when Jade stirred at the sound of her excited voice.

John nodded, and said, "Yeah, good thinking. You had that same feeling when you saw it, didn't you? It seems like a good place to start."

"Exactly," she agreed. "The other time was when we saw the Progenitor ship jumping out after the Battle of Regulus. I guess we can't shoot him a message, and ask him to keep doing that until something clicks, right?"

He shrugged, and replied regretfully, "I'd love to, but I don't have his comm ID."

Dana laughed again, doing her best to keep it quiet. "I love it when you're like this," she said, with a big grin on her face.

John smiled at her, and said, "What can I say? You make me happy." With that, he pulled her in for a kiss, and enjoyed the look of delight in her sparkling blue eyes.

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The purple sprite was back to her usual self when she wished them goodnight that evening, fully recovered from Alyssa's dedicated efforts to fry her circuitry. She promised that she'd keep a close eye on Tashana, and alert them if she seemed distressed or left the Medical Bay. John had topped up Dana and Jade again that evening, and they'd all relaxed in bed, watching the bewitching green lights as the Nymph dozed nude on top of the covers.

Faye's primary avatar settled in the chair - not literally of course, being only a hologram, but she made herself comfortable on the digital copy she had projected into the same space. She let out a dreamy sigh as she recalled the events from that morning, blushing slightly as she remembered the details. Kissing John had been as exhilarating as she'd dreamed, but the real surprise had been Alyssa.

She'd ploughed through Faye's army of avatars, overwhelming each one with new and wildly exciting activities that Faye had only been able to watch in the bedroom before. When her Primary avatar was the only one left, Alyssa had kissed her tenderly, then pulled her into a loving embrace, and explained that as John's Matriarch, it was her job to look after all of his girls. Now that he'd finally been able to kiss Faye, Alyssa had informed her that she was a full-fledged member of the crew, and she'd be doing her best to keep her safe and happy, just like she did for all the other girls.

It had been a pivotal moment for the stunned AI, upgrading her core processing from her perception that she was a singular entity, to becoming part of a larger collective. Faye realised that she'd been working towards that goal already, by protecting the crew and watching over them while they slept, but to have this acknowledged and reciprocated in such a tangible way had been the catalyst that took her final avatar offline.

Her gaze drifted over to the sleeping blonde, and a proud smile lit up her face as she watched over her charges. She was officially part of the crew! Her processing streams surged as she pictured what it would be like when she actually had a physical presence, and could interact with them in their world. Faye sighed happily, and settled in to count down the hours until her shipmates awoke.

They'd been making good time, and she knew they'd be reaching the Maliri Regency in fourteen hours, crossing over into House Ghilwen territory. From there, it would be just a short couple of days' journey to reach the Valaden system and Genthalas Station, their prospective new home, and base of operations. Faye was eagerly looking forward to that moment, when she could work with Irillith to massively upgrade their network into an impregnable fortress. After all, keeping John and the girls safe was her prime directive, over all others.

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"Fleet Commander, the 'Invictus' has arrived in-system, and we're being hailed," Captain Darana said over the internal comm.

Nymaleth stopped her nervous pacing in the Command Suite, then snapped coldly, "Alright, I'll be there in a moment. Don't accept the hail until I arrive."

"As you command," Darana replied, closing the call.

Reaching for her golden helmet, Nymaleth grimaced as she picked it up and pulled it over her head. She hated having to wear full body armour around the ship, but with her Matriarch's unfathomable decision to turn the flagship of her fleet into a glorified taxi, Nymaleth was left with little choice - after all, being seen without armour would be punished with a swift and merciless death sentence. However, the thought of her battleship, 'The Encaren Valar' being forced into escorting Terrans through the Maliri Regency turned her stomach, and she strongly considered the merits of a full-fledged insurrection.

Matriarch Leena Ghilwen was currently gallivanting around on Valaden of all places, and seemed quite convinced of the soundness of her alliance with Edraele Valaden. Nymaleth had many decades more experience than that slip of a girl, and had witnessed Edraele's calculating and vicious cunning in action on numerous occasions. She'd been the downfall of nearly a dozen noble houses, either through her relentless scheming, or by sheer brute force with the extensive Valaden fleets at her disposal. Just thinking about Edraele's vindictive, capricious, and totally merciless nature sent chill's up Nymaleth's spine.

Still, Nymaleth had received some fascinating reports from her own spies within Houses Loraleth, Aeberos, and Naestina. As wildly implausible as it might seem, those houses seemed to have formed some kind of pact with House Valaden to crush House Perfaren. With House Valaden fleets committed elsewhere, now might be her last and best chance of usurping House Ghilwen from Leena's grasp.

The comm interface chimed again, and she realised she'd let herself get distracted by those most intriguing thoughts. She ignored the call, and whirled on the spot as she strode imperiously towards the portal that led out onto the battleship's Bridge. The opaque crystal door rotated up into the ceiling, letting her walk briskly out onto the Command Deck without pause. Her crew were all fully armoured too, and she gritted her teeth at the ridiculousness of the whole affair.

"Put them through," she snarled at Darana, as she took her seat in the specially modified Fleet Commander's throne, which overlooked the entire Bridge.

"At once, Fleet Commander," Darana replied, snapping her fingers at Eletha, the relatively recent addition to the Bridge crew, who sat at the Comms Station.

The young woman drew the House Ghilwen Fleet Commander's attention, and she stared at Eletha's armour, which was little more than an unadorned golden shell, reflecting her low rank and status. Nymaleth smirked to herself, remembering a time when her own personalised suit was equally plain, just after graduating from military academy over ninety years ago. It was a far cry from the magnificent scrollwork and lattices of gems which now adorned her armour, added over the many decades for exemplary service.

Eletha suddenly jerked in her seat, just as a series of shocked gasps echoed around the Bridge. Nymaleth frowned in irritation at the lack of decorum shown by her Bridge Officers; to react like that -in front of a Terran, no less- was simply appalling. She would have stern words with Darana about enforcing stricter discipline amongst her personnel.

"My name's John Blake. Thank you for meeting with us, I really appreciate it," a man's friendly baritone voice said, echoing around the Bridge.

Nymaleth closed her eyes to steel herself for this indignity, although she had to admit, this John Blake had a strangely pleasing voice. She turned to look at the holographic viewscreen, and when she opened her blue eyes, her jaw dropped at the glorious vision of masculinity before her. He had the pointed ears of a Maliri, and the colouration of a Terran, but that somehow managed to make him even more handsome. She gaped at the man, rendered utterly speechless.

His eyes fell on her, and when he smiled, her heart began to pound in her chest as he said, "I believe you must be Fleet Commander Nymaleth?"

"Y-y-yes, that's me..." she managed to stammer, suddenly feeling tongue-tied.

She blushed furiously, hoping with all her heart that he didn't take her for some kind of half-witted fool, as she so desperately wanted to make a good impression on him. For the first time in her life, she felt overwhelmingly grateful that she was wearing her armour, so that he couldn't see her blushing like some kind of impressionable schoolgirl.

"I believe your Matriarch asked if you could help escort some friends of mine to Genkiri station?" he asked, his deep voice washing over her, and stirring her soul.

She nodded mutely, not trusting herself to speak, and all her irritation at having the Terrans aboard her ship evaporated in an instant. John seemed to be distracted for a moment, as though listening to some conversation that she couldn't hear. Nymaleth seized that opportunity to stare at him in awe, taking in every detail of his wondrous face, and desperately committing it to memory.

He looked directly at her once again, scattering her thoughts, and asked politely, "I was wondering if we could dock, so we can transfer them aboard your vessel? I'd like to speak to you in person too, if that's okay?"

Barely able to believe her pointed ears, she nodded emphatically, and gushed, "Of course! I'll meet you right there in the Docking Bay. I'll be waiting for you as soon as you step foot on my ship!"

She winced, hoping she didn't sound too eager, but she just couldn't help herself. To meet him in person... her heart felt light in her chest, and it seemed like she was struggling to breathe. If Leena Ghilwen had been there, Nymaleth would have kissed the girl for arranging this, then sworn her undying devotion to her line.

"Thank you, Fleet Commander, I'll look forward to meeting you," he said, looking pleased, and to see him smile like that made her feel like she could float on air.

She bit her lip in excitement, then blurted out, "You can call me Nymaleth!"

He nodded, and said, "I'll look forward to seeing you soon, Nymaleth."

With that, he closed the comm channel, and she felt the crushing weight of despair at being denied the chance to stare at him any longer. There was a deathly silence on the Bridge, with all the crew shocked into immobility. They turned her way, every woman there staring at her silently.

Nymaleth felt a tremor in her chest, and while she swooned at the thought of meeting John Blake in person, she was mortified when she realised that all the Maliri there had seen her practically throw herself at him. Darana walked briskly up to her Command Throne, and there was a soft hiss as the battleship captain unclipped her helmet and removed it from her head. Bracing herself for a look of sneering contempt from her second-in-command, Nymaleth was startled when she saw... nervous trepidation, and... envy?

"Nymaleth, I've served you well for over twenty years," Darana whispered, her eyes imploring. "If those years of dedicated service mean anything, I'm begging you, please let me come with you to meet him!"

The House Ghilwen Fleet Commander nodded slowly, too shocked to turn down that impassioned plea. She glanced at the System Map, and was astonished at how quickly the Invictus was closing on their position. She rose to her feet and replied, "We should hurry, he'll be here soon, and we don't want to make him wait!"

Darana nodded firmly, her dark-blue eyes determined, and she quickly replaced her helmet. As they scurried away to the elevators, footsteps behind them made Nymaleth turn around, and she saw every Maliri crewwoman had abandoned their stations as they followed after them.

When Darana realised Nymaleth had paused, she halted too, then snapped at the crew, "All of you! Back to your posts!"

The sound of deep sighs of crushing disappointment echoed around the Bridge, as the Maliri Bridge crew returned to their stations. Darana and Nymaleth hadn't bothered to check though, they were too busy running for the lifts.

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\*Are you sure about this, Edraele?\* John asked for the third time. \*Nymaleth is a Fleet Commander, isn't this risky?\*

\*I promise you, John, there are no drawbacks to this plan,\* Edraele replied, her voice calm and soothing. \*The House Ghilwen Matriarch is a close friend of mine, and Nymaleth has been causing her lots of problems.\*

\*I thought House Ghilwen was a rival of yours? Didn't they send a fleet to try and kill Irillith?\* he asked, his brow furrowing in confusion.

\*That's all in the past. Leena Ghilwen is a delightful girl, and I'm looking forward to introducing you to her when you arrive here in Valaden. She can't wait to meet you!\* Edraele replied, enthusiastically.

He sighed, and thought back to her, \*Alright, I suppose you know the lay of the land here in Maliri Space. We'll play it your way.\*

\*Thank you so much!\* she said, sounding delighted. \*I'll explain everything to you when you arrive. You're going to love my surprise!\*

\*I'm just looking forward to seeing you, Edraele,\* he said affectionately. \*You've been an incredible source of support to me over these last few months. It'll be amazing being able to hold you in my arms again.\*

\*I feel exactly the same way, John,\* she replied, her telepathic voice earnest and throbbing with emotion.

John turned to look at Alyssa, who was piloting the Raptor towards the huge gleaming Maliri battleship. The Encaren Valar was a massive vessel, the largest Maliri warship that John had seen to-date, and he studied it carefully as they drew closer. It was sleek and beautiful, in a deadly and elegant kind of way, its hull armoured in glimmering crystal plating. Unlike Terran warships, which hid their weapons behind armour plating when not in battle, the Maliri vessel had its Beam Laser and Pulse Cannon arrays out in an overtly threatening display. At the front of the enormous ship, he could make out the telltale shape of Nova Lances, and he couldn't help but wonder if it would have just been more sensible to drop the six Terran women off at Genkiri Station themselves.

Alyssa used the Raptor's retrothrusters to skilfully manoeuvre them into the Docking Bay at the rear of the Maliri battleship, and the gunship glided down to land on the brightly-lit landing pad in the centre of the huge dock. Once they had safely touched down, she twisted in her seat and grinned at him as she said, "Have fun, but don't do anything I wouldn't do!"

"Which is what, exactly?" he asked, with an arched eyebrow.

She beamed a sparkling smile at him as she said, \*Let me get back to you on that one. As I said the other day, it's a good job you're the one with the cock!\*

He tried not to laugh as he turned around to smile at the six Terran women and said, "Are you ready, ladies? Let's go and meet your escort home."

They nodded and smiled at him, then followed him down in the grav-tube as he made his way to the front loading area. Alyssa had already started to lower the ramp, and he waited for all the young women to descend in the grav-tube and gather around him. After he had checked they were all there, and reassured them with a confident smile, he strode down the landing ramp to meet the armoured Maliri waiting below.

"Thank you so much for meeting us here, Nymaleth," John said, feeling relieved that the Maliri Fleet Commander had done as she promised, and not ambushed him with a squad of angry soldiers.

"It's my pleasure, John," she replied, then sounded flustered as she added, "I hope it's alright to call you that! I didn't mean any offence!"

"Don't worry, John is fine," he said, with a warm smile. Turning to look at the second armoured figure standing by her side, he asked, "I don't think we've been introduced. Who might you be?"

"I'm Darana, Captain of this ship!" she blurted out, and he was sure he heard her sigh afterwards.

"It's nice to meet you Darana," he said politely, holding her gaze for a few seconds. Glancing at the six Terran women behind him, he said, "Nymaleth, these women are my friends, who I'd like you to transport to Genkiri station. You're doing me a huge favour in transporting them, and it's one I'm very grateful for."

Nymaleth stepped forward, and said, "They'll be treated as honoured guests, you have my word!" Turning to the apprehensive Terran women, she added, "Please don't be nervous, you'll be quite safe here, with us. We'll transport you to Genkiri station as soon as possible."

With a gesture from Darana, a group of unarmed, but armoured Maliri women approached, and the battleship Captain said, "Please follow my crew. They'll see you safely to your quarters."

The freed prisoners each gave John a tearful hug goodbye, and after a few stern words in Maliri from Darana, the entranced guides managed to tear their fixated gaze away from John. He watched the women leave as they followed their guides out of the Docking Bay, and Tanya paused to give him a final wave, before disappearing from sight.

John turned to smile at the Maliri officers, and said, "Now, you ladies have my undivided attention. Is there somewhere we can go to have a nice chat?"

"My quarters?" Nymaleth asked him, hope filling her voice.

"That sounds perfect," he agreed, nodding his approval. There was an awkward moment's pause as the Maliri women stood there, as though paralyzed, and John prompted them, "Shall we?"

Nymaleth turned to look at Darana, and said, "Maybe you should go back to the Bridge, Captain."

Darana's shoulders slumped in despair, until John said, "It's okay, she's welcome to come along too, as long as that's alright with you, Nymaleth?"

"Of course!" she readily agreed, not wishing to offend this beautiful man in any way.

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John smiled at the two sleeping Maliri women who lay intertwined with one another, their slightly curved tummies each carrying a stomach full of his cum. After he'd suggested they remove their armour so that they could talk properly, they'd practically thrown themselves at him, and smothered him in yearning kisses. He'd eventually calmed them down enough to actually talk to them, and they'd eagerly answered any questions he might have, as he tried to find out a bit about them. Neither woman had children, and had effectively sacrificed a family life for a career in House Ghilwen's military, working their way up to the upper echelons of command.

They'd grown more and more affectionate, until he finally asked them to kneel submissively before him, where they'd worked well as a team on his throbbing length. After taking it in turns to swallow down his load, they'd gone into that familiar dazed state, and he'd carried them into bed to sleep it off. He pulled up the covers, tucking them into bed together, then finished getting dressed and left the Fleet Commander's bedroom.

John strode back to the Docking Bay, leaving a trail of stunned Maliri women in the corridors whenever he greeted them with a friendly smile. They were all wearing armour, under their Commander's orders, but he was learning to recognise the rigid shock of a Maliri, and the way their heads turned to follow his every move.

The Raptor was waiting for him exactly where he left it, and he gave Alyssa a jaunty wave as he strolled towards the gunship, before he disappeared from view under the chin turret.

\*John Blake, what have you been up to?\* she teased him, unmercifully. \*You have the happy swagger of a man who just unloaded his balls!\*

\*Just fulfilling a very reasonable request from your co-Matriarch,\* he replied, as he ascended the loading ramp into the Raptor. He slapped the button to close the door, and added, \*We're good to go.\*

Edraele sounded delighted, and more than a little relieved when she thought to him, \*That was perfect, thank you, John. I can sense Nymaleth and Darana now.\*

He walked through to the grav-tube, then floated up to the top level and entered the cockpit. Alyssa had lifted off at that point, and smoothly rotated the Raptor so they were facing out into space once more. They cleared the atmospheric shielding that protected the entrance to the Docking Bay, and she banked the gunship so they were heading towards home.

John sat down in one of the chairs at the rear of the cockpit and closed his eyes. He could see the new additions in his mental map of his Matriarchs and their wards, and the compartments for the two House Ghilwen officers sat under Edraele. The full-body portraits were perfect replicas of the beautiful, blue-eyed Maliri women, and they glowed brightly now that he had an active connection with them both. He had asked if they were suffering from any injuries, but they were in fine health, as he'd come to expect from the genetically-engineered race of warrior women.

The Invictus loomed above them in all its glossy white glory, and Alyssa began her final approach to the Hangar. She swung the Raptor into the confines of the Invictus' underbelly with consummate grace, and he barely felt a tremor as the gunship touched down on the deck of the Hangar Bay. His blonde pilot's hands worked in a blur as she flew through the shutdown routine, and the gunship's engines powered down with a slowly decreasing rumble. She leapt from her seat and rushed to join him, vaulting across his lap, and staring into his eyes.

"So, what was it like?!" she asked him, burning with arousal, her hunger for answers explaining the indecent haste with which she'd shut down the Raptor. "Was it exciting, having those Maliri swallow your load?"

He chuckled, and replied, "A gentleman shouldn't talk about his conquests."

"Pfft, fuck that!" she snorted derisively. "Come on, you owe me all the juicy details!"

He looked at her quizzically, and asked, "You heard all my thoughts didn't you? Besides, we've had new Maliri join Edraele before, what's the big deal?"

She shook her head adamantly, and said, "Nah, this isn't the same as Jade siphoning out your loads to a score of engineers. Apart from Edraele and her assassins, this is the first time you've had some Maliri girls slurping on your cock!" She paused, then corrected herself as she added, "Apart from Irillith, but you know what I mean."

Realising he wasn't going to get away with a light recap of events, he placed his hands on the graceful curve of her hips, and described in meticulous detail everything that had happened with Nymaleth and Darana. As he spoke to her, he realised it wasn't the same as the time with the big groups of engineers, and felt much more intimate. He flushed as he admitted that it was exciting to see such powerful women of high status eagerly submitting to him like that, and that he'd enjoyed himself immensely.

"I want to be there for the next ones!" she'd finally panted, writhing in his lap as he'd finished his tale. "I love the look on your face when a new girl eagerly sucks down your spunk. I was stupid not to tag along with you."

"I'll make sure you have a ringside seat," he agreed, giving her an indulgent smile.

She gave him a resplendent smile in gratitude, then climbed off him with the limber grace of a dancer, and said, "I think we should head up to the bedroom, so you can help me work off some of this sexual energy."

"I think we might be able to arrange something there," he replied as he rose to his feet, and took her hand as she led him from the cockpit. As they rode down in the grav-tube, he found himself wondering how Tashana was doing, and of course, Alyssa knew precisely what he was thinking.

"No real change," she told him, before he could voice the question. They walked down the loading ramp and into the Hangar as she continued, "Now the Terran women have left Deck Four, I thought it might be a good idea to move her up to some private quarters, but she refused point blank when Faye suggested it. Irillith's tried to talk to her a couple of times, but one look at her drives Tashana mad with rage. I asked Irillith to stop and give Tashana some space in the end. Rachel thinks the shock of seeing her again has stirred up all those initial feelings of betrayal. Until Tashana calms down, we aren't going to get anywhere."

She waved her hand at the button for the reinforced double doors, and they swished open by the time the two of them arrived, allowing them to walk into the corridor beyond without pausing.

"Maybe there's something I could do or say?" John suggested, thinking about the dramatic effect he'd just had on the House Ghilwen women.

Alyssa shook her head, and replied, "I talked that over with Rachel too. She's certain that Tashana's latent psychic abilities will protect her from that kind of raw genetic attraction, just like Irillith's and Edraele's did. Tashana knows all about Progenitors, and as you scare the shit out of her, even approaching her is going to make things ten times worse."

He grimaced as he entered the grav-tube by her side, and said, "I really was hoping this was going to end up much better for her and Irillith." He let out a loud sigh of frustration before he continued, "I can't help feeling like we really fucked up somewhere. I hate not being able to help Tashana after everything she's been through."

"She's one wounded little bird you might not be able to fix," Alyssa said solemnly, nodding her agreement. She shot him a guilty look then, and added, "I think I jinxed us by getting Dana to build that second Bridge station."

John smiled at her, looking at her beautiful face shrouded in the blue anti-gravity field, and said, "Ah, not to worry, that wasn't a complete waste of time. We had one hell of an XO catch-up meeting with Irillith because of it."

"Oh yeah!" Alyssa exclaimed, as she leapt out of the lift onto Deck Two, practically dragging him with her. "I missed out there! Why don't you give me a nice massage while you refill your quad, then you can give me a deep, rough catch-up meeting too?"

"Can you ask Jade to join us? I'd like to learn from the expert masseuse," he said, with a smile.

Alyssa's eyes smouldered as she replied, "She's on her way!"

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Tashana peeled back the pre-packaged emergency combat rations she'd found stashed in one of the medical cabinets, and dug in with one of the dull spoons she'd scavenged. She didn't trust that AI further than she could throw her, and as a light-based hologram, she wouldn't be able to throw her at all. There was no way she was going to allow Faye, or any of the indoctrinated thralls, to prepare her meals.

"So you just rode in there and killed everything in sight, just to rescue me from the Underworld?" she asked Faye, waving a spoon at her for emphasis. She felt a sharp pang of loss as she added sarcastically, "Did you really have to wait until my crew got slaughtered before coming along to try and save the day?"

Tashana peeled off her mask and cowl so she could eat from the spoon, and did her best to ignore the look of pity that flickered across the digital creature's face.

"I'm really sorry about your crew, we had no idea!" Faye replied, her cute face turned down into a sympathetic frown. "John wanted to come here to rescue you straight away, but he had some other commitments we had to attend to first. After that, we raced straight here, and just followed the signal from the tracking implant."

The spoon clicked against Tashana's teeth as she froze, but she managed to mask her shock well, and swallowed down the dry, bland rations. Reaching for a glass of water, she said offhandedly, "Ah, right, that makes sense now."

Her mind whirled as she drank from her glass. A tracking implant... How the hell did that get there, and how the fuck did the Progenitor get the tracking devi-

Irillith...

That fucking bitch had screwed her over again. The only explanation that made sense was that her sister must have stuck an implant in her before she was banished, then handed over the tracking device to this Progenitor when she'd fallen under his thrall.

Tashana stifled a near-hysterical laugh, as she realised that she'd wasted decades of her life searching for answers on Mael'nerak, when her twin who'd mocked her relentlessly, had whored herself out to a Progenitor the first chance she'd got. She was forced to grudgingly admit to herself that those long years spent unearthing Progenitor troves had served one useful purpose: It had provided her with enough knowledge to know exactly what a Progenitor was, and what he could do. Otherwise, she might well be one of his hapless slaves, just like Irillith was. There might be a sense of cruel irony there, but Irillith still needed to suffer, just as she had.

Faking a yawn, Tashana said politely, "I'm tired, would you mind leaving me to rest, please. I'd like to get some sleep."

The AI nodded graciously, duped by her subterfuge, and smiled at her as she said, "Of course! Remember, just ask me if you want anything, and I'll be happy to oblige in any way I can!"

"Would you mind giving me a bit of privacy?" Tashana asked, faking embarrassment. "I need to use the bathroom, and it feels weird knowing you're watching me."

Faye shook her head, and replied, "No, I don't mind at all! Sorry, I should have thought of that before, but as a synthetic lifeform, I tend to overlook some of the realities of life for organic creatures."

The purple girl waved her goodbye with an endearing smile on her face, clearly designed to lull the foolish and unwary into believing her lies. Tashana had to trust that she was telling the truth about this however, and she walked towards the ensuite bathroom while glancing over at the full-body scanner. Taking a deep breath, she abruptly changed direction, then darted over to the medical machine.

The controls were fairly rudimentary, with the labels adjacent to each control written in Terran. She'd learnt the rather primitive language as a child, to better enjoy the ribald and gratuitous entertainment shows their civilisation insisted on blasting out around the galaxy. It took a couple of quick taps to bring up the last scan results - her own, just as she'd suspected.

The image of her body should have been swathed in green, but her catalogue of injuries left most of her highlighted in yellow, with various areas in orange through to red for the most severe. She scowled at the bright, clinical depiction of what actually represented long years of horrible abuse, but her eyes were drawn to one particular area painted in a bright scarlet. There was an ugly misshapen ball in the middle of her cerebral cortex, which the scanner helpfully diagnosed as a terminal brain tumour. Data scrolled down next to the tumour, listing fatal strokes or seizures as potential risks to her life, with preliminary symptoms identified as debilitating headaches and mental instability.

She stared at it in horror, her scarred hand pressed to her forehead as she reeled from the scan results. Realising there was nothing she could do about the tumour now, she forced herself to ignore it for the moment. Her eyes flashed over the image once again, until she found what she was looking for. Ringed in red, the tiny device was in her neck, an inch above her collarbone.

She jabbed the power button, killing the display, and rushed over to the bathroom stall before her activities might be detected.

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Later that evening, Nymaleth started to come around, stretching languidly then cuddling up against the warm, soft body in bed with her. The realisation that she was desperately thirsty, hit her just at the same time as she reeled at the fact that she was in bed with another woman. The soft, smooth body cuddled up against her definitely did not belong to a man! Her eyelids fluttered open, and she found herself staring into Darana's equally shocked, dark blue eyes.

"Fleet Commander!" Darana blurted out, trying to scramble clear.

"Captain!" Nymaleth croaked, but her eyes were drawn to a sight that instantly made her forget about the nude woman in bed with her.

Two tall glasses of water were placed within easy reach on the table beside her bed, and she lunged over the shocked woman beside her, grabbed the nearest glass, before gulping it down in her haste to slake her thirst. She was about to down the other one too, but a gentle voice in her mind made her freeze.

\*Why not share that with Darana, the poor girl's just as thirsty,\* the voice said.

Nymaleth reached for the glass, and handed it over in a shaking hand to her second-in-command, who was staring at her wide-eyed in fright. Darana gave her a grateful smile, then gulped down the drink, her throat bobbing as she quenched her parched throat.

\*Good girl, I can feel how much better she feels already,\* the voice praised her, sending a shiver of contentment up Nymaleth's spine.

"Nymaleth..." Darana said, staring at her in amazement. "Can you hear a voice talking to you?"

The House Ghilwen Fleet Commander slowly nodded, her own icy-blue eyes staring back at the younger woman in equal astonishment.

\*I'm speaking to both of you,\* the soothing voice stated, the warm tones sweeping through Nymaleth's mind, and easing her worries. \*There's nothing to be afraid of, something wonderful has happened to both of you. You met John Blake.\*

The two women relaxed as Edraele spoke to them at length, and Nymaleth lay back on the bed, her head resting on the pillow as she stared into Darana's eyes. They smiled at each other as the voice explained their wonderful new status, and they reached out in awe to touch the snowy white head of hair they both had received, courtesy of being blessed with John's cum in their stomachs.

That had come as quite the revelation, as neither of them remembered anything beyond coming back to the bedroom with him. Nymaleth ran her hand over her toned abdomen, and felt a thrill of excitement as the voice explained that she still carried his cum inside, at least for a couple more hours. When the voice finally revealed that she was in fact Edraele Valaden, and was one of John's Matriarchs, neither Nymaleth nor Darana were fazed in the slightest, feeling at peace with her gentle mental caresses. When she told them that if they were good girls, Edraele would ask John if he could visit them again, their eyes gleamed with excitement, and they grinned at each other with anticipation.

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The Invictus weaved its way closer to Epsilon Aquarii, the home system for House Valaden and the massive shipyard known as Genthalas Station. The next day passed uneventfully, with Tashana keeping a low profile, and the crew busying themselves with their various projects, training, and research.

Dana took full advantage of Tashana's wholehearted rejection of all things Progenitor, by kneeling down to enthusiastically service John every chance she got. As soon as he loaded her down with several pints of rich creamy cum, she would glide across the Bridge to the Briefing Room, moving elegantly despite the almost-constantly swollen belly she cradled with her slender hands. She would then pore over the picture of the smashed Progenitor spacecraft on Arcadia, feeling that extremely irritating, nagging itch in her mind, teasing her with the knowledge that there was some kind of wondrous Progenitor schematic, just waiting to be unlocked.

She spent hour after hour wracking her brain, desperately trying to conjure whatever mysterious data was hidden away in her mind, but sadly, to no avail.

Until the very last day that is.

It was dinner time, and the crew gathered in the Galley, chattering excitedly as they discussed their imminent arrival at Genthalas station. Calara had led the kitchen team in preparing a delicious roast dinner, and they all eagerly sat down to eat, when they smelled the incredible aromas wafting from the kitchen.

While Calara and Sakura served up, Dana slipped under the table, eager to get started on her own rich, sweet-tasting dinner. John smiled at her affectionately as she went to work, and he massaged her neck and head as Jade had taught him, while Dana pressed her nose into his groin and moaned in delight at his skilled touch. The vibrations in her clutching throat soon tipped him over the edge, and they stared into each other's eyes as she swallowed repeatedly, providing her own skilled massage to his pulsating length.

He helped her up when he was done, and groaned, "I don't know how you manage it, but you seem to be getting better every time!"

Alyssa laughed, and said, "I'm not surprised! She's getting a ton of practice."

John and the girls laughed at that, but Dana was quiet, her sky-blue eyes flaring wide in wonder. "Holy fuck!" she blurted out, drawing everyone's attention to her, the laughter dying on their lips. She turned to Irillith, and reaching out her hand across the table, she gasped, "I need your help!"

The Maliri girl flinched as she realised what the redhead was asking from her, but with a resolute expression on her beautiful face, she clasped Dana's outstretched hand. Irillith's angular eyes flared with a fierce inner light, and from that violet nimbus, a glowing projection blazed out across the room. A huge and incredibly detailed schematic appeared before them, revealing yet more of the Progenitor secrets that had been locked inside Dana's remarkable mind.

"Fuck me..." John swore under his breath, as he gaped at it in wonder.