Three Square Meals Ch. 126

John strode out of the airlock and crossed the clearing separating the Invictus and the Progenitor shuttle. The twins were waiting for him by the sinister black vessel, their beautiful blue faces wearing identical expressions of concern.

Irillith jogged over to meet him halfway. “How’s Dana doing?”

“I hope she’s okay,” Tashana added, following after her sister.

“She’ll be fine,” he replied, giving them a reassuring smile. He slipped his arms around their waists as they turned and fell into step beside him. “If there was anything wrong, I would’ve known immediately and healed her. She just wore herself out from channelling so much power at once.”

Tashana glanced back over her shoulder at the Invictus. “Alyssa said that Dana tried to fix the entire ship... all in one go!”

“I think she might have succeeded,” John said with a wry smile. “When Sparks wakes up, I’m sure she’ll tell us what she did.”

“Why’s the hull glowing like that?” Tashana asked, gazing at the majestic golden aura shrouding the upper levels of the Invictus.

He paused, studying the mysterious shining light that was shrouding the Crystal Alyssium plating. “I’m not sure, but Dana channelled a huge amount of energy into the ship... this might be some kind of side-effect.” John gently steered Tashana around so they could continue on to the shuttle. “We can investigate later. I really want to find those missing robots.”

Irillith darted ahead of them and activated the airlock. She bowed to him as the serrated door split apart. “Your shuttle awaits, my Lord.”

John felt a shiver run down his spine, and he stared wide-eyed at the Maliri as she pretended to be a mindlessly obedient thrall.

When the twins saw his reaction, they shared a glance. Tashana gently stroked his arm and said soothingly, “It was a just a joke, John. You don’t have to look so worried.”

He pulled both sisters into his arms and hugged them tight. “Best not joke about that, girls. Not when it’s just the three of us on this shuttle. It feels a little bit... too close to home.”

“Whatever Baen’thelas commands,” Tashana whispered, her voice soft and submissive.

John felt another disturbing thrill at her deference, playful though it was. “Don’t, seriously... I like it too much.”

The twins giggled and flounced through the airlock. “Did you hear that, Shan?” Irillith asked her sister. “If we keep being naughty, our Progenitor might punish his thralls.”

“Who knows what unspeakable things he might do to us?” Tashana said airily. “Or make us do to each other...”

He groaned and followed the laughing girls into the shuttle. “I can see you two are going to be trouble...”

“Nothing a firm hand can’t correct,” Irillith suggested, her violet eyes sparkling as she pressed the rune to call for the elevator.

The door opened, and John gestured for the mischievous Maliri to proceed inside. “How about we make a deal? If you’re good girls and don’t tease me mercilessly for the next couple of hours, we can play Progenitor and Thralls when we return to the Invictus.”

“We can hardly turn down an offer like that, can we, Rill?” Tashana purred, giving John a sultry look.

“Don’t be hasty, dearest sister,” Irillith cautioned, raising an eyebrow as she studied him speculatively. “I’ll agree... on one condition. We have our liaison in Larn’kelnar’s bedroom; it’ll make everything much more authentic.”

John gave her a sly smile and nodded. “Alright, it’s a deal. Oh, one last thing... As much as I love seeing you two swallowing, I need to keep filling up the Nymphs, so no blowjobs today... alright?”

“So you’re saying only oral’s off the table?” the Maliri hacker blurted out, losing her composure in her excitement.

“No, I’m saying that I intend to plunder that wonderfully tight ass of yours,” he replied, drawing Irillith into his embrace and filling his hands with her firm bottom. After squeezing her hard enough to make her moan, he pulled Tashana into his arms. “And don’t think you’re escaping a good pounding either!”

Both sisters whimpered in his embrace, rubbing their thighs together as they panted with arousal. John grinned at the effect he’d had on them and took it in turns kissing each beautiful Maliri, excited by the fantasy of dominating a couple of thralls aboard a Progenitor vessel. They stood like that for a couple of minutes, the only sound the girls’ excited gasps as they writhed against him.

John glanced at the elevator in confusion, wondering why they hadn’t arrived at Deck Two yet. He blushed with embarrassment and admitted, “I forgot to hit the rune. Can you press it for me please, ladies?”

The twins giggled together, then Tashana reached over to caress the glowing red glyph. “You’re not the only one who got distracted.”

He gave them both an affectionate hug, then they reluctantly parted when the elevator arrived at their destination. The twins went first, crossing the shuttle’s Bridge as they headed for two of the consoles. John couldn’t help noticing the extra sway they put in their hips, which drew his eyes to the spectacular globes of their asses. Irillith arched her back provocatively as she took her seat at the helm, making the rounded curves of her cheeks all the more enticing.

“You two aren’t playing fair,” he admonished the twins, shaking his head in amusement as he took his seat in the commander’s chair.

“Whatever do you mean?” Irillith asked, feigning confusion. “You can’t chastise us for walking and sitting, surely?”

“Just start up the damn ship,” he grumbled, trying not to smile as he adjusted the uncomfortable bulge in his trousers.

 The sisters flashed triumphant grins at each other when they saw his discomfort, before turning their attention to the shuttle controls. The Progenitor vessel hadn’t been completely powered down, as the stealth field generator had been left running for the last couple of days to conceal the ship from unfriendly eyes.

“Were there any problems after leaving the shuttle cloaked for so long?” John asked with a look of concern, the flirtation with the Maliri temporarily forgotten.

Tashana shook her head. “We shut down all primary systems except life support, so the shuttle was effectively running on minimum power.” She gave him a wry smile. “I would have given my right arm for a ship like this in the Unclaimed Wastes.”

Irillith’s shoulders slumped and her face shadowed with guilt.

Knowing exactly what her sister was thinking, Tashana quickly said, “Rill... I didn’t mean so that I could avoid being captured when I was banished. After I escaped from the Enshunu, I was a smuggler... having a cloaking device this powerful would’ve been invaluable.” She frowned and added, “You know I forgave you for everything that happened in the past.”

Running her slender fingers through her mane of white hair, Irillith let out a rueful sigh. “I do... and I’m so grateful that you did. It’s just that any mention of that horrible place reminds me what happened to you.”

John walked over to the troubled Maliri and gently massaged her shoulders. “Maybe we should take a trip to the Unclaimed Wastes sometime? We could go pirate hunting... Calara would love it.”

“This was never about me.” Irillith turned to meet her sister’s curious gaze. “Would you find that cathartic, Shan?”

Tashana tilted her head to one side as she considered it. “I’d have no problem wiping out all the pirates to make the Unclaimed Wastes a safer place... but more vermin will just crawl back there eventually. Until an empire stakes a claim and backs it up with force, the Wastes are going to continue to be a haven for pirates, smugglers, and slavers.”

“But would dispensing some justice make you feel better?” John asked, squatting down beside her chair.

“My life is already wonderful,” she said softly, cupping his cheek. “Everything in my past led me here to you. How can I regret what happened when you made all my dreams come true.”

“You’re an amazing woman, Tashana,” he said with admiration. Stroking her toned stomach with the backs of his fingers, he continued, “But there’s still some dreams I’d like to help you fulfil.”

She leaned down to give him a very soft kiss, her violet eyes full of promise.

John let out a happy sigh. “Damn... I love spending time with you two.” The twins smiled at him affectionately and he straightened then returned to his seat. “Alright, let’s get moving. The sooner we get everything done, the sooner we can fall into bed together.”

“Taking us up to low orbit!” Irillith declared, twisting back to face the console and ramping up power to the engines.

Tashana laughed at her sister’s indecent haste, but she was also now focused on her own console, her graceful blue fingers sweeping over the controls. “I’m going to scan the Invictus to get a base reading for Crystal Alyssium. As soon as I’ve added the alloy composition to the Scan Array, I’ll be able to search Arcadia for any sign of the missing maintenance bots.”

“Good thinking,” he said, nodding his approval at her ingenuity.

The shuttle was a nimble and responsive vessel, possessing the flight capabilities of a strike craft despite being the size of a Terran corvette. When the retro-thrusters kicked in, the ship soared skyward, kicking up clouds of dirt as it blasted away from the clearing. Irillith controlled the shuttle with confidence, soaring through banks of fluffy cumulus clouds as they gained altitude.

“Crystal Alyssium locked in,” Tashana informed them, her angular eyes narrowing as she updated the search parameters. “Activating the Omni-Phase Scan Array...”

John leaned forward on his seat, holding his breath as he waited for any sign of Faye’s creations.

“There they are!” Tashana exclaimed, whirling around to beam at him in delight. “John, we found them!”

He lurched from his chair and strode over to look at the holographic results being projected above her console. “I can’t believe we found them so easily,” he marvelled, shaking his head in amazement.

“The scanners on this shuttle are a huge improvement over the ones we have on the Invictus,” she said, patting her station. “And they’re only a fraction of the size we could install on a battlecruiser.”

“We need to get the Invictus upgraded with all this tech as soon as possible,” he said, sharing her admiration for the Progenitor components. He leaned down to give Tashana a celebratory kiss, then turned to look at Irillith.

“Course already laid in,” she said, a sparkle in her violet eyes as she pre-empted his command. “The first robot is 174 kilometres to the southwest of the Invictus’ crash site.”

“You two didn’t even need me for this rescue mission,” he said with a self-deprecating smile.

“We’re just showing off to impress you,” Tashana admitted, looking up at him. “Is it working?”

“Consider me impressed,” he readily agreed. “I’ll head down to the airlock. Are either of you coming?”

Irillith shook her head. “Not until after the mission.”

He groaned at her double-entendre, then laughed when she grinned wickedly at him.

“We’ll stay up here,” Tashana said, squeezing his hand. “Just let Alyssa know when you’ve rescued the robot and we’ll move onto the next one.”

John gave them each a quick kiss goodbye, then strode across the Bridge to the elevator. Tapping the glowing red rune beside the door, he descended to the lower deck, then approached the airlock.

\*John, you’ll reach the first maintenance bot in thirty seconds,\* Alyssa informed him. She sounded surprised as she added, \*It’s actually moving.\*

He frowned in confusion as he entered the inner airlock door. \*I thought Dana said that the bots would shut down if they were too far away from the Invictus?\*

\*Apparently they’ve had a few upgrades,\* she replied, both of them recognising Faye’s handiwork. \*Oh, and get this... it’s heading in a North Easterly direction.\*

\*That’s towards the Invictus!\* he exclaimed, really shocked now. \*How did it know where to go?\*

\*They must have watched the ship come down. All three are heading towards the crash site.\* She paused, then said softly, \*John, they’re trying to come home...\*

\*And we’ll get them there,\* he said, smiling as he stood by the outer airlock door.

John could see the jungle flashing past through the tinted window as the shuttle smoothly descended until it was skimming over the treetops. Irillith reduced power to the engines and the nimble ship drifted to a smooth halt, hovering in a clearing a couple of feet off the ground. He opened the airlock and immediately spotted a flash of white, the automaton pausing in the tree line directly ahead, as it evaluated if the black Progenitor vessel was friend or foe.

Leaping out of the shuttle, John waved to the robot, overjoyed to see that it appeared to be completely unscathed. “Hey, it’s me! Come on, let’s get you back home!”

The robot set off again, floating across the clearing and quickly closing the distance to the shuttle. When it drew close, John could see its metallic face sporting a familiar disconcerting grin, but for the first time, the sight brought him nothing but joy.

“I’m so glad you’re alright!” John exclaimed, patting the hulking robot on the shoulder.

[+++ stated with genuine delight +++ [Begin friendly greeting] You have not suffered a catastrophic system error {Admiral John Blake}! [/End greeting]]

“No, I’m fine,” he said with a reassuring smile. “You must be eager to get back to the Collective?”

[+++ stated with humorous intent +++ [Begin joke] You bet your pointed ears I am! [/End joke]].

John looked at the maintenance bot in surprise. “What?”

[Begin apology] No offence intended {Admiral John Blake}. [/End apology]

“Don’t worry, none taken.” Turning to enter the airlock, he continued, “Two more maintenance bots were blasted clear of the ship in the ambush, but we think they both survived unscathed. We’re about to go and rescue them now.”

[+++ stated with humorous intent +++ [Begin statement] Lay in a course, Lieutenant. [/End statement]]

John frowned in confusion, not understanding the joke. He tapped the rune by the door, closing the airlock door behind them. “Irillith’s already got a course set, we’re on our way.”

The robot floated to a halt, then turned to look down at John. [+++ stated with genuine concern [Open query] Did array {Invictus crew} avoid a catastrophic system error? [/End query]]

\*Oh shit... he doesn’t know...\* Alyssa whispered in horror.

John swallowed around the sudden lump in his throat, looking up at the worried robot with profound sympathy. “I’m so sorry...” he said, his voice breaking. “We lost Faye...”

The maintenance robot froze, then its shoulders slowly slumped, the brightness in its eyes fading. [No...]

That single word contained so much defeat, loss, and pain, John could only put his arms around the heartbroken robot and hold it tight. They stood silently together, man and machine, united in their grief.

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Protected by a phalanx of ten Brimorian battleships, the majestic command vessel, Retribution From The Depths, made for an impressive sight as it cruised through space. The radiance from a brilliant white star reflected off the warship’s purple and blue armour plating, illuminating the terrifying aquatic leviathan that had arisen from Brimor’s ancient oceans. Scores of cruisers and destroyers maintained a tight defensive formation around the capital ships, while agile fighters raced around the much larger vessels, like a horde of tiny scavengers hoping to feast off the alpha predator’s prey.

“The only ships we’ve encountered have been civilian vessels,” Shoal-Commander Olbhugh announced, concluding his report. “We eliminated another formation of freighters with falsified transponder codes, but we haven’t seen so much as a single Kintark warship.”

Kaelotegh nodded with satisfaction. “It is just as the Deep Lord predicted. The Kintark Imperial fleets were annihilated in their reckless invasion of the Federation.”

“What are your orders, Shoal Master?”

The leader of the Brimorian invasion armada was a hero of the Enclave, having secured countless victories for his people. Shoal Master Kaelotegh studied the holographic maps before him, his gaze flicking over the eight Brimorian fleets under his command, then across the outlying Kintark systems. With the Tactical Overlay added to the three-dimensional image, he could see fortified starbases marked on the map, each one protecting the Kintark worlds from hostile encroachment.

“Take Fleet Ungumoth and sweep the border colonies, eliminating all static defences. We must clear a path for the invasion craft.”

Olbhugh acknowledged the order with a bow. “When the fortifications have been destroyed, shall I rejoin the armada for the assault on Kinta?”

“No. Hold position here and provide orbital support for the siege ships,” Kaelotegh replied, his cold black eyes surveying the invasion corridor. “There is always the possibility that this is some elaborate ruse and I have no intention of leaving our ground forces unprotected.”

The Shoal-Commander’s fins drooped at the prospect of being stuck with guard duty. “As you command, Shoal Master.”

Kaelotegh chuckled and turned to look at his glum subordinate. “Do not fear that you are missing out, Olbhugh; there will be scant opportunity for glory in this campaign. I have no intention of repeating the Kintark mistake and rushing heedlessly to conquer their homeworld. Like an inexorable tide sweeping all before it, we shall systematically conquer every planet in our path, claiming them all in the name of the Brimorian Enclave. The Kintark are a spent force in the galaxy... and we are merely here to remind them of their new status as our slaves.”

Olbhugh glanced at his own map of the Kintark Empire. “I still can’t believe they threw every last ship at the Federation...”

“If they had succeeded in crushing the Terran forces, the Kintark would now be the largest empire in the quadrant,” Kaelotegh said quietly, studying the exposed territory. “The tides of war can be cruel and unforgiving... as they will soon learn at great cost.”

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Tashana aimed the targeting matrix at the jungle-covered hills, checking that she wasn’t going to vaporise the mineral deposit her scans had located. She pressed the firing rune and the two Tachyon Lances mounted on the port side of the shuttle thrummed with power, smoothly gathering energy before unleashing it on Arcadia’s surface. Purple beams lashed down, incinerating the layer of vegetation covering the planet’s surface and gouging a glowing trench out of the ground.

She scanned the ugly scar, then nodded with satisfaction. “There, all done. You should be able to easily mine some corundum now.”

John didn’t respond and continued staring out of the cockpit window, heedless of the devastating barrage that had lashed the planet.

The twins exchanged a glance, then Tashana rose from her seat to stand beside him. “John...” she said, touching his arm. “Did you hear me?”

“Hmm?” he murmured distractedly, turning to look at the Maliri.

“Irillith’s taking us down to Arcadia. I’d offer to do the mining for you, but we haven’t got the right equipment with us.”

He gave her a strained smile. “That’s alright, honey. It won’t take me long using telekinesis, then we can head home.”

“Are you okay?” she asked, looking at him with concern. “Having to break the news about Faye to each of the maintenance bots must have been heartbreaking.”

John let out a heavy sigh. “It was rough. I had to watch the light go out in their eyes... literally.”

Irillith turned to look at him over her shoulder. “Why didn’t you wait until we returned to the Invictus and have Little One explain it to them?”

“One of the first things each of the robots asked was if we’d lost anyone in the fight... and I just couldn’t lie to them. Besides, I brought all of us out here to Arcadia... it was my responsibility to inform them about Faye.”

“Is there anything we can do?” Tashana asked, gently stroking his hand.

He shook his head, a haunted look in his eyes. “I think I need some help from Helene. Seeing the bots react like that... it just brought it all back. Not being able to do anything to save Faye... that feeling of helplessness...”

Both sisters embraced him, holding John close and trying to comfort him as best they could.

John stroked their backs then gave them a rueful smile. “Thanks, girls. I better go mine this ore, then we can get back home.”

They nodded and watched him leave, knowing exactly how John was feeling.

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“How sssoon will the Breklan’tohok be operational?” High Prelate Zorlin asked, clenching his grip on the maintenance gantry’s guardrail as he gazed apprehensively across the hangar at the massive battlecarrier.

The lead technician glanced up at the green-hulled capital ship, the iridescent armour gleaming as it reflected the overhead lights. “Two more hoursss, High Prelate. I asssigned my bessst team to work on your flagssship,”

“Excellent work, Unchok,” Zorlin said, suitably impressed.

“The Terran thievesss ssstole the heatsssinksss from every weapon,” Unchok noted, rasping his teeth in anger. “Fortunately, we have an ample ssstock of replacementsss... more than enough for your entire fleet.”

“I cannot begrudge them the ssspoilsss of war; we were lucky that wasss all they took. If we had been the victorsss at Terra, I cannot imagine that the Emperor would have been nearly ssso magnanimousss,” Zorlin noted with a wry smile. He suddenly paused and looked at the Kintark technician with concern. “And what of the new ssshield generatorsss? Have they been inssstalled already?”

“The Brimoriansss only provided usss enough devicesss for the invasssion armada,” the other lizardman admitted, nervously twisting his clawed hands together and refusing to meet Zorlin’s worried stare. “Our production linesss at Mar’Trinark Ssshipyard have been reconfigured to conssstruct the new ssshield generatorsss, but we have limited ssstocksss available... essspecially for vessselsss of thisss sssize.”

“How many?” Zorlin asked, his voice going quiet.

There was a long pause before an answer was forthcoming. “Four...”

The High Prelate’s claws scraped across the metal handrail, the grating screech making the technician flinch.

“We have five battlecarriersss and nineteen battlessshipsss all in dire need of upgradesss!” Zorlin snarled in frustration. “Four is unacceptable!”

Before Unhok could reply, they both heard a terrified scream from behind them. The anguished cry tailed away, as if the unfortunate victim was falling from a great height.

“P-pleassse accept my apologiesss, High Prelate,” Unchok stammered, edging towards the walkway that would take him across to the docked starship. “I jussst remembered that I need to check energy output levelsss from the Breklan'tohok’sss Power Core...”

Zorlin could sympathise with the frightened technician, wishing he could hide inside the heavily armoured battlecarrier too. “Inssstall the Brimorian Ssshield Generatorsss in the battlessshipsss... sssave the battlecarriersss until lassst.”

Unchok bowed then turned and fled, his rapid departure prompted by the ominous thump of something... big... approaching.

Swallowing nervously, the High Prelate turned to look up the flight of steps that led to the access gallery that ran the length of the drydock. Long shadows flickered across the ceiling as the approaching creature’s bulk blocked out the light. It was almost as if he could feel the anger radiating off the Kintark Empress and his every instinct cried out to him to flee in terror. When Tamolith finally appeared, her enormous draconic form was silhouetted at the top of the flight of stairs, the sheer size of her making his heart skip a beat. He desperately resisted the urge to run, knowing that should he succumb to his fear, what was left of his life would not be worth living.

Tamolith stalked down the broad steps, her reptilian eyes locked on her most experienced naval commander. “Ah, Zorlin, my courtiers said you were overseeing repairs at the drydock... it seems they are not entirely useless after all.”

He bowed respectfully to the leader of the Kintark Empire. “There wasss no need for you to ssseek me out persssonally, Empresss. I would have dropped everything to anssswer a sssummons to the throne room.”

She loomed over him and her serpentine neck coiled around, searching for anyone who might be close enought to eavesdrop on their conversation. “The walls in the Imperial Palace have ears, Zorlin.” When Tamolith was certain they had some measure of privacy, she lowered her huge head so that she was at eye level to the trembling Kintark officer. “And I wished to speak with you privately...”

“I-I am honoured, Imperial Majesssty,” he stammered with another nervous bow.

Tamolith studied him for a moment, clicking her forked tongue in disapproval. “You weren’t nearly so obsequious when we spoke before, High Prelate. I must say I’m disappointed; if I wanted to be fawned over, I would have stayed in the palace and listened to the honeyed words of grovelling courtiers.”

“Forgive me, Empresss,” he said, fighting the urge to fall to his knees in her presence. “Ssseeing you in perssson isss daunting to sssay the leassst... you are asss intimidating asss you are majessstic.”

She let out a deep breath that whistled through her long fangs, then made a visible effort to calm herself. As Tamolith’s anger dissipated, Zorlin’s urge to run for his life lessened considerably.

“Is that better?” she asked, amber eyes focusing on him again.

“Much, Empresss... thank you,” he replied gratefully. Straightening with newfound courage he continued, “I’ve been reviewing the combat readinesss of the fleet... I asssume that isss why you wissshed to ssspeak with me?”

She nodded, her scaly brow furrowing. “What state are those vessels in? Are they combat ready?”

“The Terransss ssstripped the heatsssinksss from our plasssma batteriesss, but that isss a mere inconvenience... our maintenance crewsss are quickly replacing them,” he explained, his expression pensive. “Mossst of the 300 ssshipsss returned to usss were from my battle group at Regulusss. The Federation forcesss concentrated their firepower on obliterating High Prelate Grikira’sss battle group, so only light repairsss are required for our ssshipsss to be fully operational.”

“That’s far better news than I dared hope!” Tamolith exclaimed, her imposing draconic face lighting up with relief. The dragon’s curious gaze lingered on the High Prelate and she added, “But you don’t seem particularly heartened, Zorlin.”

He shook his head sorrowfully. “We are facing ssseveral insssurmountable problemsss. The majority of our fleet is usssing obsssolete ssshield technology and we cannot manufacture enough replacementsss in time to refit all our ssshipsss. If Emperor Baledranax gave the Brimoriansss our heat sssink ssschematicsss –even the lessser variety– we will be fighting at a sssignificant tech disssadvantage.”

“He did...” Tamolith interjected, grimacing at the thought.

Zorlin looked despondent, but continued with his status report. “The next major isssue isss one of numbersss. We only have enough vessselsss to form three war fleetsss... it won’t be enough.”

“What about the extra 100 ships the Terrans promised?” Tamolith pressed urgently. “The vessels that survived the Battle of Terra should be released shortly...”

“Thossse craft will require sssubssstantial repairsss, new ssshield generatorsss, and are a week away. Even if they were here and combat ready, we ssstill wouldn’t have the numbersss we need. Preliminary reportsss from the Brimorian border are vague, but the Enclave appear to have invaded with at leassst six warfleets.”

“We stand no chance of holding our own against the Brimorians?” the Empress asked grimly, her voice an ominous rumble.

Zorlin’s shoulders slumped. “None whatsssoever, Imperial Majesssty.”

The huge crimson dragon stood frozen for a long moment, then her lips peeled back into a feral snarl. She lifted her head and let out a terrifying roar of frustration and rage that left the High Prelate quaking in his boots.

“A thousand curses on your charred bones, Baledranax!” she screamed, whipping her tail around and smashing the nearest gantry.

The maintenance platform toppled off the Breklan'tohok, the twisted metal squealing in protest, before it crashed to the deck with a deafening clang.

Tamolith clamped her jaws down on the reinforced guardrail and ripped it clear, then spat it into the hangar with disgust. “Opportunistic Brimorian scum... I will not give up now, not after the indignities I’ve endured!”

Zorlin cowered on the floor in the face of her draconic fury. “We could bessseech the Terransss for aid, Empresss!”

“Crawl back to Devereux and beg for help?! Never!” Tamolith snarled, raking her claws across the deck and hurling the mangled floor plates aside. “That insufferably smug bitch already stole half my empire! What would she demand for assistance against the Brimorians? My firstborn son?!”

“What about the Trankaransss?” he implored the fuming dragon, ducking to avoid another lethal ball of crumpled metal. “There mussst be sssomeone!”

Tamolith paused, her outburst of rage abruptly quelled. Tilting her scaly head to one side, she considered the High Prelate’s desperate plea. “Yes... your idea has merit, Zorlin.”

Before he could say another word, the draconic leader of the Kintark Empire turned around and prowled away, her claws gouging huge furrows in the floor. While Zorlin was greatly relieved to no longer be faced with Tamolith’s fury, he couldn’t help worrying that his frantic suggestion might only grant him temporary reprieve. From all the rumours he’d heard, the Trankaran Republic was besieged by the Kirrix. He wasn’t sure they’d even have enough surviving forces to repel the Brimorian invasion, even if they could be convinced to help.

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Alyssa stood outside the Invictus beside Rachel, Helene, and Jade, the quartet looking skyward as the Progenitor shuttle glided towards them over the jungle foliage. The sleek black vessel lifted its nose as it pivoted over the clearing, retro-thrusters flaring in a succession of bright bursts to gently ease the corvette-sized craft to the ground.

“I can feel him,” Helene murmured, wringing her hands together anxiously. “He’s so sad... and so angry.”

“I know... but don’t do anything yet,” Alyssa said, before glancing at the brunette to her right. “Are you sure about this?”

Rachel nodded, her gaze fixed on the airlock as it split apart, the jagged interlocking teeth sliding back into the doorframe. “The confrontation with Larn’kelnar didn’t give John the closure that he needs to move on. If he’d only known about Faye beforehand...”

Her voice trailed off as John stepped out of the airlock. His expression was tightly controlled, but there was no disguising the raw emotions raging in his eyes. He stepped aside to make way for the trio of grieving maintenance robots to emerge from the shuttle, their hulking frames only just fitting through the airlock door. As the first moved aside, Rachel got a clear view of the third, who turned to face John.

He reached out and gently ran his hand over the high-backed leather chair the automaton was carrying. “Could you put it back in her spot please.”

The robot nodded and rejoined its synthetic companions, the trio reminding Rachel of a procession of pall bearers as they crossed the clearing. She watched them float by in silence, noting their slumped shoulders and subdued posture. It was a stark reminder that the maintenance bots were no longer the simple mechanical constructs that her girlfriend had built only a few short months ago.

They glided up the ramp to the Cargo Bay, where Little One and the entire membership of the Invictus\_Node\_Collective awaited their return. The small cleaning robot that had become the de facto leader of the budding AI network rolled over to greet them, her tracks making quiet clicking sounds on the metal decking. She reached up to touch their six-fingered hands as they crossed the threshold and returned home, handing each of the robots a metallic disc-shaped object.

There was a whirring and clacking as each of the robots removed the bolts securing their faceplates, then carefully replaced them with their mourning masks. Little One watched them change then paused by the leather chair, touching it with the same reverence that John had only moments earlier. Their recognition of the rescued furniture as something that was special to Faye brought a lump to Rachel’s throat and she had to look away, feeling like she was intruding on their grief.

John watched the robots head inside, the Collective parting to let them through. With a heavy sigh, he turned to the Maliri twins who were waiting at his side. “Would you mind postponing our threesome? I’m really not in the right frame of mind for it now.”

Tashana gave him a sympathetic smile. “Of course, John. We understand completely.”

“I miss her too,” Irillith said quietly, embracing him.

He hugged her back, then they walked across the grass to join the waiting girls.

“Welcome home,” Alyssa said, reaching up to stroke his cheek. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there to support you.”

John shook his head, a melancholy expression on his face. “We thought we’d be retrieving deactivated bots... I never expected I’d have to break the news to each of them about Faye.” He turned to give Helene a strained smile. “I could really use your help, honey.”

“Of course!” the aquatic girl exclaimed, forgetting the prior discussion with Alyssa as she rushed to give him a comforting hug.

“Hold on a second,” Alyssa said firmly, placing a restraining hand on Helene’s shoulder. She met John’s quizzical look. “While you were dealing with the bots, we’ve been discussing what happened to Faye. Rachel, would you care to explain?”

The brunette was studying John’s face, her clever grey eyes boring into his. “Actually, it would be simpler just to show you. Please come with me.”

John looked at her in puzzlement, then shrugged and followed after the brunette as she strode down the ramp into the clearing.

“Wait!” Alyssa called out, beckoning behind her. “You’ll need this...”

She had left his runesword propped up against the Cargo Bay wall and it floated through the air towards him, guided by her telekinetic urging.

John grasped the hilt of the proffered blade, his frown deepening. “I’m really not in the mood for training...”

“Just trust us...” Alyssa said, giving him a tender kiss.

“Okay,” he agreed with a resigned sigh.

Alyssa shared a look with Irillith, who then fell into step beside the blonde as the group walked past the shuttle towards the edge of the clearing.

Rachel waited for him patiently, standing a few dozen metres away from a chunk of twisted Crystal Alyssium plating that had been torn off the Invictus’ hull in the crash. “This should do nicely.”

“I’m not focused at all right now,” John protested, looking down at his sword, the runes dull and lifeless. “Can’t this wait?”

“This isn’t about training you to break through shields,” Rachel said, her tone gentle and caring. “You need to vent all these emotions you’ve got bottled up inside you... about what happened to Faye.”

Alyssa raised her hand and pressed her first two fingers against Irillith’s temple. The Maliri’s angular eyes began to glow with an inner light, then a violet-hued projection beamed out to envelop the mangled chunk of metal. John looked at her in surprise, then followed the purple glow to its target... and froze stock still. Larn’kelnar stood at the tree line, his handsome Progenitor features twisted into a mocking smirk.

“Larn’kelnar destroyed Faye,” Rachel said softly. “But you killed him before we found out what he’d done... so there was no catharsis in his death.”

John’s eyes narrowed with hatred as he glared at the Progenitor who had slain his friend. His grip tightened on the hilt of his sword and the runes began to glow with an ominous light.

“Alright, let’s do this...” he muttered through clenched teeth.

Rachel nodded and gestured towards the psychic projection, a globe of hexagons appearing around Larn’kelnar. The sphere began to rotate, but John could still make out the Progenitor’s contemptuous sneer through the whirring shield. He remembered Larn’kelnar’s callous disregard for the millions of lives he’d conspired to destroy, just to get some misplaced revenge against Xar’aziuth for the thousands of years he’d spent as his helpless puppet. To a monster like him, Faye’s death would have meant less than nothing.

John whipped his sword around in a broad arc, unleashing a telekinetic blast wave that thundered across the clearing and slammed into the shield. Hexagons cracked but didn’t break, the force projection scything into the jungle behind and carving a path of devastation through the trees. As severed trunks exploded and were hurled into the air, John slashed back and forth, following the first telekinetic blast with several more.

Each force arc slammed into the shield, but with no greater success than the first, Larn’kelnar’s sneer widening as he effortlessly blocked the attacks. John could feel his rage building, emotions that he’d fought to suppress since finding out what the Progenitor had done, finally finding an outlet for his fury. He growled in anger and lashed out at the spinning barrier with more psychic strikes, wanting nothing more than to wipe the mocking smile from Larn’kelnar’s face.

“We didn’t even get a chance to say goodbye to her...” Irillith whispered, a tear rolling down her cheek as she shared in his grief.

With a feral snarl, John charged across the clearing and brought his sword down in a devastating two-handed chop. His blade flared with light as it smashed into the globe, cracking hexes but still not breaking through. John began to accelerate, his sword rising and falling in a blur as he pounded on the psychic barrier, each impact sending booming crashes rolling across the jungle.

Rachel raised a second hand towards the rotating shield, her jaw set firmly in concentration as she repaired the hexes as fast as John could smash through them.

John’s mind was flooded with memories of Faye, remembering how the cheerful sprite always did her best to bring happiness to him and the crew. She’d been a constant reassuring presence aboard the Invictus, and since her death, his home had felt hollow and empty without her. His heart ached with the loss and he would have done anything to bring her back... but there was nothing he could do. He remembered her final moment, Faye reaching for him and calling his name, a look of horror on her beautiful face.

She was so sweet and kind... Faye never deserved to die in such a meaningless way. Her death brought about by the man standing before him now, Larn’kelnar smirking at taking Faye from him.

“You motherfucker!” John raged, eyes ablaze with vengeful fury as he rained blows on the barrier. He was consumed with a frightening hunger, the need to hack his way through the shield and gut his Progenitor nemesis overwhelming all sense of reason.

Rachel gasped as John’s runeblade blazed to life, each mighty blow now echoing with a menacing bass note.

“He’s draining me!” she cried out in warning, darting a shocked glance at Alyssa.

The hexagonal barrier flickered under his onslaught and with Rachel’s concentration broken, John shattered the globe, the psychic barrier exploding outwards in a blizzard of hexagons. He roared in triumph and hacked through Larn’kelnar’s body, chopping him in half and vaporising Irillith’s projection. A hefty chunk of Crystal Alyssium sailed through the air with the force of the blow, cartwheeling hundreds of feet across the jungle before crashing into the dense foliage.

John panted from the exertion as he stood over his slain foe, the outpouring of savage emotions leaving him reeling. When the blinding rage faded away, he realised he was staring at a piece of sundered metal, not the Progenitor he’d burned to death aboard the black dreadnought. Now that reason and clarity had returned, he tossed his sword aside, then squatted down with his head in his hands. As deeply satisfying as it had been to disembowel Larn’kelnar for what he’d done, it still didn’t change the fundamental fact that Faye was gone.

The girls stared at him in stunned silence, all except Jade, who padded across the clearing to her master. She knelt at his side and gently caressed him, her fingers cool and soothing on his fevered brow.

“Remember this feeling, Master,” she whispered in his ear, “... and learn from it.”

He looked at the Nymph, his expression haggard. “How?”

“If you want to give Faye’s death meaning... don’t let this happen again.”

She gave him an enigmatic look and rose to her feet. Her nubile body shimmered with a green light, obscuring her form as she shifted and grew in size. When the verdant haze dissipated, she stood before him as a massive jade tiger, her emerald eyes sparkling as they caught the light.

\*Come with me, John,\* she insisted, her usual deference replaced with firm authority. \*It’s time to be the cat, not the mouse.\*

John breathed deeply as he stood, then fell into step beside Jade as she padded into the jungle.

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The House Baelora flotilla dropped out of hyper-warp, appearing on the outer edge of the Epsilon Aquarii system. Taking pride of place at the forefront of the huge fleet was their flagship, the Ruven Lephyra, a huge mass of sleek golden plating and crystal domes. The engines at the rear of the mighty battleship ramped up in power and pushed her onwards, leading every vessel that House Baelora possessed to the heart of Valaden territory.

Sarinia Baelora stood with her younger siblings on the Bridge of that capital ship, the five Maliri noblewoman watching in tense silence as they approached Genthalas Shipyard. It was the first time any of the quintet had seen this ancient relic from a bygone era, bequeathed as it had been to House Valaden down through the millennia, and they were all suitably impressed.

Genthalas was formed in the shape of a gigantic ring, but the sheer scale of the orbital starbase was staggering, the circumference scores of kilometres in length. The upper decks were festooned with gleaming golden spires and sparkling crystal domes, but countless weapon batteries lurked amidst the splendour, reminding the House Baeloran sisters that the shipyard was as deadly as it was beautiful. The outer edge was an unbroken wall of hangars and docking bays that was alive with manoeuvring spacecraft, with at least three-quarters of the starbase now in active use.

“We never stood a chance against House Valaden,” Lieralia whispered, both shocked and afraid.

“With a facility like that at Edraele’s disposal, no one did,” Rosanae murmured, finding herself in wholesale agreement with her twin.

Sarinia stared at the drydocks that were teeming with Maliri warships. “This is all new. I’ve seen mother’s espionage reports on Genthalas from only a year ago; House Valaden barely had the personnel to keep a quarter of this station operational.”

Tehlariene watched a trio of cruisers race away from the drydocks, the three vessels moving with startling speed. She gestured towards them, pointing at the twin moons insignia that declared their allegiance. “Look! Those ships belong to House Loraleth... and that pair of battleships over there are from House Perfaren and House Aeberos!”

Myrdina bit back the urge to torment her youngest sister, turning instead to the eldest. “What does it all mean, Sarinia?” she asked fearfully. “Those houses all hate each other, but they despise Edraele Valaden even more! For that matter, why is House Valaden even refitting their rivals’ ships?! Has Gaenna ever explained any of this to you?”

“You honestly believe that mother would explain her actions to me?” Sarinia replied, turning to give the younger noblewoman a look of incredulity. “Have you learned nothing of Matriarch Gaenna Baelora in the last century?”

Despite flushing at the terse reply, Myrdina refused to be dissuaded. “Gaenna started all her strange behaviour two months ago. Don’t you remember her getting that message from Tsarra Perfaren and how bizarre mother acted afterwards? She departed with the fleet and she hasn’t returned to the homeworld since! It must all be connected... but I don’t understand how!”

“That’s what we’re here to find out,” Sarinia said, brow furrowing with concern. “We shall be meeting mother within the hour, so perhaps she’ll be in a forthcoming mood...”

Her siblings went quiet, the prospect of being reunited with the tyrannical matriarch of House Baelora stifling any further conversation.

Sarinia turned to the Maliri officer seated in the command throne, who was staring at all the fleet activity with more than a little trepidation. “How soon until we dock?”

“Ten minutes, Lady Sarinia,” the Fleet Commander replied, turning to look at her guests with a mixture of sympathy and amusement. “I notified Matriarch Gaenna of your imminent arrival. I believe she is waiting to greet you personally when you disembark at Genthalas.”

While her sisters flinched, Sarinia gave the naval officer a warm smile. “Your loyalty to your matriarch is to be commended, Uricae.”

Sarinia had politely requested that their presence aboard the fleet be kept secret, so her praise was actually a damning reminder that Uricae had betrayed her trust. The Fleet Commander realised that instantly, wiping the smirk from her face, the veiled acknowledgement of that betrayal made all the more sinister by Sarinia’s pleasant delivery. The Fleet Commander watched the noblewomen leave the Bridge without further comment, suddenly finding herself hugely relieved that they were departing.

It didn’t take long for the House Baelora siblings to gather at the primary airlock, their servants bringing their luggage to them before the battleship docked. The Ruven Lephyra glided into one of Genthalas’ huge hangars, then descended to hover a few feet above the deck. A soft chime alerted the anxious Maliri passengers that they had arrived and Sarinia’s four sisters all glanced at her expectantly, waiting for her to open the door.

She looked at them and raised an eyebrow. “What happened to all the indignant women who demanded to accompany me to Genthalas? Now we’ve finally arrived, you’re behaving like meek little flowers.”

Myrdina, Lieralia, and Rosanae all blushed a dark indigo, unwilling to admit that they were frightened. Tehlariene had been strong armed into coming by her sisters, so she felt no shame at being terrified by the prospect of facing their mother’s wrath.

Sarinia sighed with resignation and reached across to touch the rune beside the airlock. The crystal door rotated up into the ceiling, granting them access to the orbital facility. Taking the lead, she stepped through the portal and down the ramp which dropped to the deck, her suitcase floating obediently beside her. Sarinia heard her sisters following her out of the battleship, but she paid them no more attention, her focus now squarely on the woman standing a dozen metres away.

Matriarch Gaenna Baelora stood stiff-backed and aloof, her eyes glinting dangerously as she studied her disembarking offspring. “My dutiful daughters... how wonderful it is to see all of you,” she declared, her airy tone as unfamiliar as it was unsettling.

Struggling to keep her voice from trembling, Sarinia walked across to greet her matriarch. “You look radiant, mother. Your new hair colour is most becoming.”

Gaenna’s composure wavered for a second, her hand rising subconsciously to touch her snowy-white hair. After a moment’s pause, a smug smile appeared across her face, her expression taking on a sly cast. “I decided a change in appearance would be fitting... to match the change in fortunes of our House.”

The other four sisters remained mute during this exchange, fidgeting nervously as they stood a few paces behind Sarinia.

Their mother cast her unfriendly gaze across all five noblewomen. “Thank you for answering my summons to Genthalas so promptly. I do hope you had a pleasant journey?”

Sarinia blinked in surprise at the mention of a non-existent summons, then realised Gaenna was keeping up a facade in case they were under surveillance.

“The trip was uneventful, but filled with anticipation,” she replied, thinking quickly. “We were all grateful for the opportunity to see you again, mother... it has been two months since you left Baelora.”

Gaenna smiled, but it wasn’t reflected in the calculating look in her eyes. “Yes... events at Genthalas have kept me extremely busy.” She turned towards the exit, her long ceremonial robes making it look like she was gliding across the floor. “Come, let me take you to my suite and offer you some refreshments. We can relax together before you retire to the quarters I’ve had allocated to you for the duration of your stay.”

The House Baelora matriarch led them from the hangar, a pair of bodyguards moving to flank her as they walked the corridors of Genthalas. Despite the superficial pleasantries exchanged in the docking bay, Sarinia could see her mother bristling with anger, and she was filled with a familiar sense of dread. Gaenna made no more effort to initiate conversation, so the family walked in silence as they returned to her quarters.

After entering her luxurious suite, Gaenna watched her daughters troop inside, followed by the bodyguards who stood post at the entrance. When the doors had slid shut behind them, she faced Sarinia and her hand whistled out in a stinging slap that made her daughter gasp in shock.

“Insubordinate little bitch!” Gaenna snarled, her eyes blazing with fury. “How dare you travel here without my express permission!”

Sarinia staggered back a step from the blow, then straightened and tried to ignore her smarting cheek. “We were concerned about your wellbeing, mother! I wanted to-”

“I don’t give a damn what you want!” the enraged matriarch screeched. “I ordered you to stay on Baelora! Do you have any idea how embarrassing it was to be informed of your imminent arrival by a Fleet Commander?! You made me look like I can’t even control my own daughters!”

 “I was worried that you might be held under duress by Edraele Valaden!” Sarinia blurted out, before she could be ordered to stay silent.

Gaenna sneered at her with contempt. “Witless fool... you understand nothing!” Her cold unforgiving gaze swept over the quartet of women that cowered behind Sarinia. “And what are the rest of you imbeciles doing here? Isn’t there a single one among you with an iota of sense?! You’ve all abandoned our homeworld!”

The four sisters quailed before her wrath, none of them daring to speak in case they became the focus of their mother’s ire.

“Use of the neural whip might have been forbidden, but I still have many useful tools at my disposal! Would you like another session with a dermal-retractor, Myrdina?”

Myrdina paled, her hands twisting her belt in terror. “N-no mother! Please... I’m so sorry I disappointed you... I’ll do whatever you want!”

Gaenna glared at the frightened siblings, the menacing silence stretching onwards as she pondered their fate. Finally, she curled her lip in disgust and dismissed them with an imperious sweep of her hand. “Leave me... I need to decide how to punish all of you for this wilful act of defiance.”

“As you command, Matriarch,” they said together, trying not to sigh with relief as they left her malevolent presence.

Departing in silence from Gaenna’s suite, they accompanied one of the House Baelora bodyguards, who led them away along the corridors of Genthalas.

“I should never have let you threaten me into coming here...” Tehlariene whispered to her sisters, on the verge of tears as she followed meekly after their escort. “Why did you make me?”

“When mother starts punishing you, she’ll be distracted from the rest of us,” Rosanae hissed spitefully, glad of an opportunity to take out her fear and anxiety on someone else. “It’s not as if we enjoy your company, you snivelling little wretch.”

Lieralia nodded, a vindictive sneer on her face. “Maybe Gaenna will tire herself out torturing you, Tehlariene. At least we’ll have finally found something you’re good for...”

Myrdina glared at her elder sister and hissed under her breath, “This better be worth it, Sarinia! I’ve never seen mother so furious...”

“Oh, I’m sure it will be...” Sarinia murmured distractedly, her mind fully absorbed with her plans.

She needed to track down her undercover agent and start making enquiries, which meant quietly slipping away from her sisters when they were led to their individual quarters. None of the others had noticed, but Gaenna hadn’t slapped her that hard in decades... and Sarinia suspected that wasn’t due to the strength of her mother’s anger.

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John vaulted over a fallen log, then ducked under a low-hanging branch as he jogged along at Jade’s side, keeping pace with the massive green tiger. Despite her huge size, the Nymph managed to barely make a sound as she navigated her way through the jungle, leading him further away from the Invictus. He’d been surprised when she’d asked him to run with her, but now that they were, he found the experience exhilarating.

At first glance, Arcadia’s rainforests seemed very similar to those seeded on hundreds of Terraformed worlds throughout the Federation. The floor was blanketed in fan-like ferns and the trees ranged from vast, thick-trunked Kapoks to low hanging Xate palms. However, there were differences to be found within this Progenitor grown ecosystem, and he spotted a host of unusual fruit trees interspersed amongst the thick vegetation. Exotic six-winged insects flittered around the pungent plants, the drone of their wings joining the chorus of clicks and chirrups that filled the background noise of the jungle.

John watched a pair of four-armed monkey-like creatures squabbling over the jungle’s rich bounty, the small simians bolting for cover when they saw Jade bounding past. “Arcadia’s beautiful, but what are we doing out here?” he asked, darting a glance at the massive green feline. “I don’t think shapeshifting is in a Progenitor’s repertoire, so I might struggle to ‘be the cat’...”

She gave him a toothy grin, baring her huge fangs. \*It’s a mindset, Master. Ever since I’ve known you, you’ve been chasing your tail, rushing to deal with one emergency after another. Now that Larn’kelnar is dead, it’s time for you to stop being the prey... and become the hunter.\*

“You’re right... and that’s exactly what I’m planning to do,” he agreed, nodding thoughtfully. “Now we can finally seize the initiative and be the ones making tactical strikes against the other Progenitors. As soon as we’ve upgraded the Invictus and requisitioned Larn’kelnar’s fleet, we can launch our own offensive against those bastards.”

Jade padded to a halt, then turned to face him, her emerald eyes watching John like a hawk. \*No, Master. You’re still thinking like a military tactician... I’m sure Calara would approve, but that’s not why I asked you to join me. You need to become the cat... which means hunting your prey without pity or remorse.\*

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

\*Progenitors have spent eons fighting each other in protracted wars that can last for centuries...\* she replied, her voice taking on an eerie cadence, as if she were repeating words spoke long ago.

He felt a shiver run down his spine. “Did Mael’nerak say that?”

She slowly nodded her huge head. \*We cannot fight a conventional war of attrition with them, not when we’re so heavily outnumbered and they’re using soulforges to replenish their forces.\*

“Jade, how do you know all this? I thought you couldn’t recall anything from before Mael’nerak mind-wiped the Nymphs?”

Her emerald eyes turned unfocused as she gazed away into the distance. \*Something changed recently. I’ve been remembering things... snippets and fragments... like someone has cracked open a doorway in my mind and memories are starting to slip through.\*

“Like Mael’nerak using a staff? Or him living on Kythshara?” John asked, remembering the other unexpected announcements she’d made. “And the thrall species being seeded through the galaxy for neophyte Progenitors to claim?”

\*Yes, exactly,\* she replied, sounding distracted. She turned her feline gaze on him. \*As soon as I remember anything new, I’ll tell you straight away. I’m not concealing anything from you, Master, I promise.\*

“I never thought you were, honey,” he said, stroking her furry ear. He frowned as he continued, “I just hate knowing that part of your mind is locked away from you. I wish there was something I could do to help.”

She shimmered in a verdant haze, reverting to her familiar Nymph form. “I know exactly how you feel, John,” she said softly, stepping closer and brushing her cool green fingers against his temple.

He flushed self-consciously, then leaned back against a thick tree trunk. “You’re right... I do need to deal with my guide. He’s long outstayed his welcome.”

“Why don’t you then?” Jade asked with a casual shrug, looking at him curiously.

“It’s not as simple as that,” he said, his brow furrowing. “This won’t be anything like Alyssa and Athena. For one thing, Alyssa didn’t actually absorb her guide, she let Athena keep control of a segment of her mind and they cooperate together in harmony. In my case, I’m going to have fight my guide for permanent control of my body... and it’s not going to be easy.”

“But you defeated your guide before,” the Nymph persisted. “Why didn’t you just absorb him then?”

“My own reserves of energy were tapped out... I only had what you gave me,” John explained with a rueful frown. “All I could do was seal him up to deal with later. Besides, my father was trying to kill me at the time... I didn’t have a lot of options.”

Jade stepped closer and hugged him. “You’re going to have to face your guide before you confront another Progenitor, Master... you can’t put this off for much longer.”

“I know,” he said, holding her close and burying his face in her luxurious onyx mane. “I just need a bit of time to deal with everything first. After what happened with my parents and then losing Faye... I’m not in any shape to fight him at the moment.”

“Let me know if there’s any way I can assist you,” she said, running her fingers through his hair as she embraced him.

“Thanks, honey. You’re always there for me when I need you,” he said, giving her an affectionate kiss on the cheek to show his appreciation. “But for the moment, let’s just focus on helping your sisters. It’s been incredibly rewarding to see them develop a sense of self-awareness and I really want to help give them their freedom.”

Jade knew that the rejection by his parents had severely undermined John’s confidence and that doing a good deed for her fellow Nymphs would give him a much-needed boost.

“Of course, Master,” she said with an understanding smile. “Actually, it’s funny you should mention my sisters...”

“Why funny?” he asked, stroking her back.

“Leylira volunteered to help me with your cat training,” Jade replied, idly tracing a pattern on his chest with her finger.

The pattern was suspiciously heart-shaped, drawn directly over his own... which left him wondering exactly what Jade’s plans were for the predatory tigress. “How is Leylira involved exactly?”

“Close your eyes, Master,” Jade whispered, tracing her fingertip lovingly along his jawline.

He did as she asked, resting against the tree trunk as his nymph matriarch caressed him. Losing his sense of sight heightened the rest of his senses and he was immediately aware of Jade’s minty fragrance tantalising his nose.

“I’m glad you like how I smell,” she said with amusement. “But you have other, sharper senses...”

John slowly brushed his fingers down her back, enjoying the delicious feel of her soft skin as he followed the gentle slope to the curve of her bottom. He let his hands cup her cheeks, kneading the firm flesh until he felt Jade respond to his brazen fondling, her skin noticeably warming with her arousal.

“Your touch feels wonderful too,” she breathed, pressing herself against him. “But that’s not the sense I’m referring to either...”

He stuck out his tongue and playfully licked her shoulder, leaving a trail of goose bumps along her skin. Jade tasted pretty good too.

“I don’t think you’re taking this seriously!” she protested with a giggle. “Unless you’re planning to lick the Progenitors into submission?”

“Ahhh... no, definitely not,” he replied with a grin. “I’ll save the licking for you.”

“Good boy,” she said, giving him a tender kiss, before pulling away from his embrace. “Now focus... and just listen, Master...”

John’s ears were sharp anyway, but with his eyes closed he became much more attuned to his sense of hearing. The jungle seemed to come alive with sound, millions of creatures great and small enacting their own life and death struggles throughout Arcadia’s primal forest. From chirping insects to squawking birds and growling mammals, his ears were assaulted by the cacophony of noise surrounding him.

At first it was too much to deal with, his mind rebelling against the dirge of sound coming from the local fauna. He could feel Jade watching him and didn’t want to disappoint her, realising how much this meant to the earnest Nymph. Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to focus on the medley of noise and pick out specific animals amongst the din. He heard a series of sharp barks, which sounded like a warning cry, quite unlike the belligerent shrieks from creatures fighting over territory. Rotating his head slightly, he pinpointed the direction of the cries, then noticed that the rest of the jungle was quieter in that direction.

“There’s something over there...” he murmured, nodding in that direction while straining to hear. “Leylira... she’s unsettling the local wildlife.”

\*Be the cat, John, not the mouse,\* Jade urged him. \*It’s time to hunt...\*

He opened his eyes and found himself face to face with Jade in her hulking tiger form. She padded backwards, giving him plenty of room to move away from the tree trunk. John turned to face the direction of the warning barks and set off into the jungle, jogging at a steady pace as he got his bearings. Now that he was ducking under foliage and leaping over tree roots, he found it harder to concentrate on the telltale sounds that had tipped him off to Leylira’s presence.

\*Become one with your senses, Master,\* Jade encouraged him, bounding along at his side. \*Don’t think about it... just feel... and let your instincts guide you.\*

Running through the forest was raising his heart rate, his blood pumping as he weaved through the dense undergrowth. Jade was right; there was something primal about immersing himself in the hunt and he felt more alive than ever before. Acting purely on instinct, he tuned into the sounds of the jungle, filtering out the chatter as he concentrated on the telltale signs that would lead him to his prey.

He was surprised at how noisy Jade’s heavy paws suddenly sounded, after previously being impressed by her quiet progress through the forest. Fortunately, she ran with a steady gait, so it was easy to tune out the repetitive thump-thump of her padded paws as they landed on the leaf litter. He heard a high-pitched series of cheeps, the unfamiliar alarm call cutting through the rest of the noises, and giving him his next clue to Leylira’s location.

Peeling away to the right, he realised that the catgirl was moving quickly, and he increased his pace to close the distance. Glancing to his side, he caught a glimpse of Jade barrelling through the ferns, her ears pricked up and alert as she listened for their quarry. She darted a glance his way, her emerald eyes sparkling as she got caught up with the thrill of the hunt.

\*Do you feel it, Master?!\* she exclaimed, her voice vibrating with excitement.

John caught a flash of orange in the distance, the sight of his fleeing target sending adrenaline coursing through his veins. Running faster, he grinned as he realised that with his longer legs he was outpacing the sprinting Nymph, gradually closing the distance between them. He saw Leylira more clearly now as she darted between the trees, running full tilt to escape his clutches.

His instincts were crying out for him to use his powers and chase her down with a quick burst of psychic speed, but he resisted that urge, savouring every moment of this pursuit. John flashed a grin at Jade and found her watching him intently, as if she was waiting for something. In a moment of epiphany, he knew that catching the catgirl wasn’t the real purpose of this hunt, or at least, that was only part of it. Jade wanted him to break free of the restraints his upbringing had left on his own mind... the limitations that prevented him from fully embracing his psychic powers.

In her way, Jade was trying to free him too.

He skidded to a halt and looked at the Nymph in surprise. \*I’m right, aren’t I?\*

\*You’re the Lion,\* she said softly, circling around to rejoin him. \*A creature of power and instinct. Your instincts cry out at you to move faster... faster than any normal man can run, so embrace that urge... it’s as natural to you as breathing.\*

John’s pupils flared as he immersed himself in the chase once again, this time enhancing his speed with his psychic abilities. He leapt over roots, clearing a dozen metres in a single jump, then zig-zagged between the trees as he rushed to make up the lost ground. His eyes blazed with a bright blue light and the foliage turned transparent, allowing him to see for hundreds of metres through the forest. A teeming menagerie of animals were concealed amongst the leafy camouflage, but he wasn’t interested in bugs, birds, or beasts.

He spotted Leylira’s luscious figure in the distance, the catgirl’s tail lashing from side to side, acting as a perfect counterbalance as she sprinted nimbly through the jungle. The powerful muscles in her legs bunched and contracted, propelling her at great speed as she ran, and she showed no signs of tiring as she maintained her furious pace. John was running several times faster though and the athletic Nymph looked like she was moving in slow motion as he sprinted after her.

Diving to catch the fleeing catgirl, he wrapped her up in his arms and they went down in a tumble, rolling together in the ferns until they came to a stop. John propped himself up on an elbow and grinned as he looked down at the tiger-striped Nymph, wary for danger in case the feral tigress tried to scratch him.

Leylira looked up at him with a lovely smile. “Hello, Master.”

“You’re not going to attack me, are you?” he asked, returning her smile.

Her amber eyes softened and she gave him a tender kiss. “No, Master, not this time.”

John gently brushed a lock of her jet-black hair away from her beautiful face, then leaned down to kiss her back. This time their lips merged together with passion, as they both succumbed to the thrill of being the hunter and the hunted. Her skin was warm to the touch, but not from the chase through the jungle. The Nymph was panting with arousal because her master had caught her.

By the time Jade caught up, her feline sister was wrapped around John, the wet sounds of their union mixing with their earthy cries. She shifted effortlessly into her humanoid form, then glided across the clearing to join them, kneeling down behind John as he ploughed Leylira with powerful thrusts. Jade smiled with satisfaction as she gently lapped his quad, her tongue caressing the heavy weight of his balls that were packed full of cum. Soon their delicious contents would be filling her sister’s belly, helping Leylira to break free of her bonds... and grow stronger.

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Edraele reclined on the chaise longue and let out a contented sigh. “Lunch was wonderful, my love. Thank you so much for a delicious meal.”

Luna smiled as she knelt beside her matriarch and handed her a tall crystal glass. “After so many years just cooking for myself, it’s always a pleasure to prepare food for you.” She blushed and added, “And being fed was certainly a novel experience. I don’t know what I did to deserve such pampering, but I thoroughly enjoyed it.”

“Thank you for indulging me. It was something John and Rachel did on a date and I was eager to try it for myself,” Edraele replied, taking a sip from the glass before putting it down. She reached out to brush the back of her fingers over Luna’s toned stomach. “With John’s impending arrival, my thoughts turned to you sporting a full tummy... I can’t imagine why.”

The assassin’s eyelashes fluttered at the intimate caress. “I can’t wait for John to return... I just hope I have a chance to be with him before he’s called away on the next emergency.”

Edraele frowned, knowing that her lover was probably right about John’s visit being cut short by another galactic catastrophe. She paused a moment later and looked at Luna with concern when she heard her thoughts. “Wait... why would you think that you aren’t as high a priority to John?”

Luna blushed self-consciously, still unused to her innermost feelings being so exposed to her telepathic lover. “Well... I’m not a noblewoman like everyone else he’ll be seeing while he’s here. I’m sure John will want to spend lots of time with you and the Young Matriarchs, and I know you’re planning for him to get more intimately acquainted with the leaders of the other thirteen Houses...” She smiled wistfully and continued, “It’s alright, Edraele. I understand how important all of you are to the future of the Protectorate.”

Sitting up on the sofa, Edraele looked directly into the assassin’s yellow eyes. “You should never doubt how much John values his relationship with you. It’s true that I’m very close to him as one of his matriarchs...” She said this with special emphasis on the word, referring to their psychic connection, not her position as ruler of a Maliri House. “... and the Young Matriarchs hold a special place in his heart as the mothers of his children, but no one else in the Protectorate stands above you in his affections.”

“But I’m only an assassin,” Luna protested, not quite believing her. “I struggle to believe that he could hold me in such high regard.”

“John is drawn to exceptional women and those with martial talents he finds particularly intriguing,” Edraele explained, her voice kind and patient. “He greatly admires your remarkable skill with a blade and considers you to be one of the most fascinating Maliri in the Protectorate.”

“You really think so?” Luna asked, trying to contain her delight. “I’ve spent so little time alone with him... I never dreamed that he could feel that way about me.”

Edraele gave her a coy smile and gently lifted Luna’s form-fitting top, exposing her chiselled abdomen. “That’s because you don’t know him like I do,” she murmured, leaning forward to kiss her lover’s soft blue skin. Her lips brushed over the spot where John had healed Luna’s scars and restored her fertility. “You’d be carrying his baby already if he wasn’t worried about you getting hurt in the upcoming war. He feels very protective towards you now and wants to ensure you have a long happy life raising his children.”

Luna brushed her fingers through Edraele’s white hair, giving her a doe-eyed look through long lashes. “That would be wonderful...”

“I’d love to see thousands of deserving Maliri bellies swelling with his babies... but John is being cautious not to make that commitment with too many women. He wants to ensure that he has enough time to be a loving father to every child, which means carefully choosing the women who will become the mothers of his children. You’re one of the select few, so I hope you realise how special he considers you to be.”

Biting her lip, Luna smiled, a newfound sense of pride in her eyes.

Edraele kissed her, then gave her girlfriend a rueful frown. “I’d love to spend the afternoon showing you how special I think you are too... but unfortunately, I have a number of important duties to attend to. Can I interest you in some time together this evening?”

Luna nodded, then hugged her exuberantly. “Thank you for all the wonderful things you said! I love you so much, Edraele.”

The Maliri queen smiled as she returned her embrace. “I love you too.”

Rising from her seat, Edraele reluctantly headed to her office, exchanging a lingering look with Luna before they parted company.

\*That was lovely, Edraele,\* Alyssa said with admiration. \*You managed to cheer Luna up and massively boost her self-esteem.\*

\*We’re all really missing John,\* Edraele replied, crossing her office before taking a seat. \*My girls have been growing increasingly unsettled with the passing weeks.\*

Alyssa’s voice was filled with genuine regret as she said, \*I’m sorry we’ve been away for so long. If it’s any consolation, John’s been missing all of you just as much.\*

\*I’d rather he were here instead,\* Edraele murmured wistfully, activating the holo-interface on her desk. As several screens appeared before her, she continued, \*How are all of you coping in the aftermath of the battle with Larn’kelnar?\*

\*Well... we badly needed a vacation before we arrived at Arcadia, so you can imagine what state everyone’s in now after we lost Faye,\* Alyssa muttered, her words tinged with pain. \*She was everywhere, Edraele... and we relied on her so much. All the girls are missing her terribly... it’s like the heart of the Invictus was torn out.\*

\*Come home as soon as you’re able. I promise we’ll do our very best to look after all of you,\* the Maliri matriarch said sympathetically. \*When you arrive at Genthalas, you can take a break from everything and I’ll take full responsibility for looking after John. I intend to overwhelm him with swooning Maliri when he returns to us, so I hope he’s prepared for weeks of pampering.\*

\*Thanks, Edraele,\* Alyssa said with sincere gratitude, her voice throbbing with emotion. \*I’ve really missed you too.\*

A fond smile spread across the Maliri Queen’s face and she shared her feelings with her fellow matriarch. Alyssa reciprocated and they both took a moment to relish the love and respect they felt for each other.

Edraele turned her attention to the holo-screens and started reviewing the status reports, listing the ongoing progress with the refits. The latest vessels to receive the attention of Genthalas’ drydock belonged to House Perfaren, with two of Tsarra’s fleets being upgraded concurrently, their refit almost complete. Next in line were those belonging to Valani and Nyrelle, with scores of cruisers and the first two battleships from both Houses already receiving new components. New drydock facilities were being brought online daily, so forces from House Ghilwen and House Baelora would begin the refit as soon as the last of Tsarra’s ships left the shipyard.

The pace of work at Genthalas was unprecedented in Edraele’s lifetime and she was determined to maintain that tempo. The Maliri queen knew that they were reaching a critical juncture in their preparations for war and now was definitely not the time for complacency. If retrieving the Larathyran fleets proved to be impossible for any reason, John might be forced to rely on the current Maliri ships to defend the Protectorate and his allies.

Assuming the plan to acquire Larn’kelnar’s crewless fleets went flawlessly, it would mean that the existing Maliri forces would be made obsolete overnight. However, that did not render the current work at Genthalas a wasted effort. There was the distinct possibility that Dana could research improvements to the thrall ships in the future... which would necessitate another vast refit program. Training the personnel at Genthalas to quickly and efficiently upgrade hundreds of warships would be of critical importance in the war against the Progenitors.

Her musings were interrupted when Edraele noticed a fascinating report from Genthalas security. The notification informed her of the sudden arrival of Gaenna Baelora’s five daughters, the noblewomen arriving with the Baeloran Fleet earlier that afternoon. Edraele activated the security footage recorded from that reunion and watched the tense confrontation between mother and daughters.

Despite Gaenna’s best efforts to remain civil in public, the Maliri Queen could see the tightly-controlled anger in the older matriarch’s eyes. She panned the image over to the source of that fury and pondered the reason for the obviously uninvited presence of her five daughters. It must have been something of dire importance for the Baeloran quintet to risk provoking Gaenna’s wrath.

She let the camera linger over Tehlariene, the youngest sister cowering and looking petrified of her domineering mother. It would be so easy to... handle the situation... adding another nubile maiden to the Young Matriarchs. Edraele felt a fluttering in her stomach as she pictured the beautiful Maliri noblewoman crying out in ecstasy, John pumping another heir into her fertile womb...

\*Edraele!\* Alyssa admonished her playfully, unable to hide the amusement in her voice. \*You’re getting as bad as me!\*

\*Don’t worry, I wasn’t planning on having anyone assassinated,\* Edraele said defensively, an indigo bloom darkening her cheeks.

\*Just imagine if John hadn’t put a limit on how many women he wanted to get pregnant,\* Alyssa teased her fellow matriarch. \*Would impregnating a matriarch and her five daughters beat knocking up twin princesses and the Maliri queen for sheer naughtiness?\*

Edraele moaned with excitement at that thought, finding both scenarios incredibly arousing. \*Don’t forget... the three of us all tried to kill John at some point and you know he has trouble resisting femme fatales.\*

\*Damn, that’s true,\* Alyssa conceded with a telepathic grin. \*It looks like you and your daughters are still the hottest conquests in the Protectorate.\*

The Maliri Queen laughed and relaxed in her chair. \*That’s reassuring to know.\*

A chime from the comms interface rang out through the office, drawing Edraele’s attention to an incoming call. She glanced at the identity of the caller and her angular purple eyes widened in surprise. Reaching for the helmet she kept beside her desk, she pulled the golden-plated armour over her head, then swiped her finger across to open the holo-screen. The stylised dragon icon of the Kintark Empire appeared as the connection went through, then it faded away to reveal a terrifyingly real dragon staring at the holo-camera.

“I am Empress Tamolith, ruler of the Kintark Empire,” the enormous red dragon rumbled, inclining her massive head towards the armoured Maliri. “I am very grateful for the opportunity to speak with you, Queen Edraele... especially considering our Empires found themselves on opposing sides in the recent war with the Federation.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Empress,” Edraele said, surprised by the huge draconic creature’s deferential manner. “The Maliri Protectorate intervened at the Battle of Terra at the request of an ally, but I bear your Empire no ill will. I was aware of your recent ascension to the Imperial throne; please accept my apology for not having made diplomatic overtures as of yet.”

“No apology is necessary. It seems we are living in turbulent times, with changes of leadership rampant throughout our galactic community. First Queen Niskera was crowned in the Trankaran Republic, then you claimed the Maliri throne, Fleet Admiral Devereux was promoted to command the Terran Federation, and finally I’ve joined this august sisterhood of rulers. The future promises to be very interesting indeed... if I am still around to witness it.”

“That sounds ominous,” Edraele noted, looking at Tamolith curiously. “Is that hyperbole or are you referring to a specific threat?”

Tamolith grimaced, revealing rows of huge fangs. Edraele instinctively knew that the dragon’s fearsome visage wasn’t intended to intimidate; the Kintark Empress seemed loathe to admit that her Empire was in trouble.

“Would that I were being overly dramatic,” Tamolith finally growled, her expression darkening. “I need to speak with John Blake urgently, but I’ve been unable to contact him via Terran Federation comms channels. I know that the Progenitor is held in high regard by your people, as he spoke on your behalf during the armistice with the Federation. Is he currently residing within the Maliri Protectorate?”

“No, he is not here at present,” Edraele said, wary not to reveal too much. “However, I can get word to him if you are willing to elaborate on the threat you face.”

The huge dragon studied the Maliri Queen speculatively, before making her decision. “The Kintark Empire has been betrayed; our territory invaded by a huge invasion force from the Brimorian Enclave.”

“I thought you were allies!” Edraele exclaimed, shocked at the dire turn of events.

“We were... but it was an alliance built on a foundation of sand; a foundation thoughtlessly excavated by my half-witted predecessor!” Tamolith snarled, her huge tail lashing back and forth in anger. “Baledranax over-committed our forces in the war against the Terran Federation and left the Empire’s border critically vulnerable to Brimorian opportunism. The Enclave sensed our weakness and struck... and now they are gobbling up Kintark systems as fast as they can!”

Edraele eased back in her seat and steepled her fingers. “I can only assume that you aren’t trying to contact John Blake to keep him apprised of the situation. Is there another purpose to this call, Empress?”

Tamolith slumped, her anger and bluster deflated. “You assume correctly, Maliri Queen. The Terran Federation did return a sizeable fleet of Imperial vessels to the Empire as part of the terms of our surrender, but we do not have the numbers to repel the Brimorians from our borders. The Enclave fleets are only a week away from besieging Kinta and we do not have adequate forces to prevent their conquest of my homeworld...”

The dragon hesitated, shame and reluctance in her eyes as she wrestled with her pride.

Having no desire to see the proud creature beg, Edraele took pity on the anguished Empress and said quietly, “You have my sincere sympathies, Tamolith. While I’m sure John would have been willing to intervene, unfortunately he is in Kirrix territory at the moment; he cannot reach your Empire in time to stop the Brimorians.”

Tamolith slumped, her scaly shoulders sagging in resignation. Suddenly the bright light of hope appeared in her eyes and she stared intently at the Maliri Queen. “Your fleets are formidable, Edraele! You could crush the treacherous Brimorians with ease! I know you sided with the Terran Federation against Baledranax, but I have no intention of repeating his mistakes! I could be a loyal ally to you if you were to assist me against the Enclave!”

Edraele paused for a long moment as she considered the ramifications of a war with the Enclave. “I am sympathetic to your plight, but the present situation within the Maliri Protectorate is... complicated. I’m afraid I cannot-”

“I am desperate, Edraele!” Tamolith interjected, a flicker of fear crossing her draconic features. “Should the Enclave annex the Kintark Empire, the lives of my precious darlings would be in jeopardy! Just name the price for your aid against the Brimorians! I have dealt with John Blake before and he knows that I uphold my end of a bargain!”

Tapping her fingers pensively on the desk, Edraele met the dragon’s pleading gaze. “I’ll need to discuss your request with my advisors. I will contact you shortly with my decision, Empress.”

Tamolith, bowed her head in gratitude. “I will await your answer with great anticipation, Queen Edraele... you hold the fate of the Kintark Empire in your hands.”

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John relaxed on the jungle floor, the bed of moss surprisingly comfortable. Orange and green pulses of light made slow progress across the foliage overhead, his two companions illuminating the glade with their soothing radiance. He glanced down at the Nymphs resting in his arms and smiled at the sight of the catgirl’s bulging tummy, her white navel ballooning outwards from her orange and black flanks.

“The contrast in your markings is so beautiful, Leylira,” Jade murmured, running a hand over her sister’s curves. “I love how John highlighted your throat and stomach in white... it’s like a reminder that you need to be fed lots of his cum.”

The tigress gave John a languid smile. “I’m glad you covered me in an instruction manual, Master. Absorbing your load would prove difficult if you got confused and came in my ear...”

He brushed aside her jet-black mane and said earnestly, “I might not be able to help myself, honey. You’ve got very sexy earlobes...”

Leylira looked at him in surprise, then realised he was teasing her and burst into laughter. “I thought you were being serious for a moment!”

The tiger-striped catgirl had a deeper voice than the other Nymphs, the sultry tone reflected in her earthy chuckles.

“It could be a sensible alternative,” he joked, caressing her ear. “You‘re very feisty when you get turned on... I wouldn’t want anything getting bitten off.”

“This one wouldn’t dream of hurting your cock, Master!” Leylira gasped, genuinely shocked. “Is that why you haven’t fed me orally since I changed to this catgirl form?”

“Relax, I was only joking,” John said giving her a reassuring hug. “You’re so wild when you get horny, you manage to bring out the beast in me. I was so into making love to you that changing positions never even crossed my mind.” He paused and brushed his fingertips over her slick pussy. “Is there a problem with me feeding you this way?”

Leylira relaxed and shook her head. “No, not at all; Jade taught me how to absorb your cum whichever way you decide to fill me up. I just want you to know that you’ll be perfectly safe if you’d like a blowjob sometime.”

“An angry blowjob?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. “I’m not sure how that would work exactly.”

Her amber eyes sparkled. “I’m sure I can find a way to make it entertaining, Master...”

\*Sorry to interrupt, John,\* Edraele said, her tense voice cutting through his mind. \*Can we speak for a moment?\*

\*Of course, Edraele. What’s the problem?\*

\*I just received an urgent communication from Tamolith. The Kintark Empire has been invaded by the Brimorians!\*

“What the hell?!” John blurted out, sitting bolt upright.

Leylira looked up at him in alarm until Jade quietly explained the reason for his sudden outburst.

\*I thought the Brimorians and Kintark were allies?\* he said, bewildered by the startling news. \*They were trading tech and ship components only a couple of weeks ago!\*

\*That was my initial reaction too. I imagine Tamolith was just as surprised when the Brimorians turned on her,\* the Maliri Queen noted dryly. \*After Baledranax stripped all the ships from his territory and threw them at the Terran Federation, he left his Empire critically vulnerable. The Kintark are hopelessly outnumbered; they only have a third of the fleet assets the Enclave sent to invade them. It seems Deep Lord Athgiloi sensed blood in the water and the Brimorians are planning to annex what’s left of the Kintark Empire.\*

\*Well, I never saw that coming.\* John said with a rueful frown, running his fingers through his hair. \*Let me guess; Tamolith called you begging for help?\*

\*She was actually trying to track you down,\* Edraele informed him. \*When I explained that you were too far away to assist, she pleaded for me to intervene instead. I told her that I needed to discuss the situation with my advisors before giving her an answer. You are Warleader for the Protectorate, so you have sole discretion over committing the Maliri to war with the Brimorians.\*

John sighed, feeling the heavy burden of responsibility that role entailed. \*I don’t want the Enclave to conquer the Kintark Empire, but we can’t let this distract us from the war with the Progenitors. As much as I’d like to crush the Brimorians, we need your forces ready to capture Larn’kelnar’s fleets. Let me discuss the situation with Calara and we’ll make a decision, okay?\*

\*Of course, John,\* Edraele said softly. \*Just let me know if you require any more information.\*

\*I’ve informed Calara,\* Alyssa interjected, before he needed to ask. \*We’ll meet you in the Briefing Room.\*

\*Thanks, honey,\* he said gratefully, rising to his feet. Turning to the Nymphs, he offered them each a hand. “I had a wonderful time with you two, but I’m afraid I need to get back to the ship.”

“We know,” Jade said with an understanding smile as she rose smoothly. “Are you going to run back to the Invictus, or would you like me to fly you home?”

“Fly me?” he asked in surprise.

“Good choice, Master,” the Nymph purred, padding across the jungle to a small clearing.

Jade began to shimmer as her form expanded to immense proportions, her bulk growing so huge that she knocked over several trees. When the haze faded, she had shapeshifted into her draconic form, the massive green dragon towering over her companions.

Leylira caught her breath, then ran her hand reverently over her sister’s vast scaly flank. “So powerful...” she whispered in awe. Turning to face her master, the catgirl had a wistful look in her eyes. “Do you think I’ll be able to become a dragon one day, John?”

He smiled, recognising her use of his name for the first time. “You really want this, don’t you, honey?”

“I want to fight at your side, Master,” she replied, a feral gleam in her eyes. “Yes, I want this.”

John put his arms around the eager catgirl. “I poured a lot of love and attention into Jade to help get her where she is today. Are you sure you’d like that?”

Leylira swooned in his embrace, barely able to believe her ears. “Oh yes, John...” she said breathlessly.

“Such a good little Nymph,” he said with a smile. John stroked her swollen tummy and continued, “I’ll do my part, but you’re going to need lots of lessons from the expert on shapeshifting to become as strong as Jade.”

The green dragon loomed above them, watching the couple with a benevolent smile. “I can start your first lessons this afternoon, sister,” Jade rumbled, holding out her opened foreclaw for them to climb onto. “Step on here and I’ll help you up onto my back.”

John jumped onto the dragon’s huge scaly limb, then offered a hand to Leylira to help her up too. Jade lifted her claw up to her shoulder, letting the pair clamber onto her back amidst the boney spikes. He settled down in a relatively comfy spot between her shoulder blades with the catgirl seated in front of him. Leylira curled her tail around his waist, then glanced back to give him an enthusiastic grin.

Jade twisted her long serpentine neck around so that she could check they were secure. “Grab onto something, Master. I don’t want you to fall.”

He wrapped one arm around Leylira to keep her safe, then clung onto one of Jade’s spikes with the other. “Okay, we’re ready!”

With a toothy smile that bared fangs longer than John’s legs, Jade turned in a circle, using her hefty tail to fell any trees that might interfere with her take off. Tall tropical kapoks crashed to the ground after every thunderous impact, the branches snapping in a shower of scattered leaves. Satisfied that she had enough room to manoeuvre, Jade flexed the huge muscles in her scaly shoulders, her wings snapping out to both sides.

She lifted them at the same time then beat down, her vast wingspan buffeting her passengers and blasting away swirls of fallen leaves. Jade increased the speed, her wings rising and falling rapidly. Crackling pulses of sonic energy swirled through the air above, before folding under Jade's whipping wing membranes, creating a bouncing bubble of air below that lifted them upwards with a booming moan. The air itself felt alive and responsive to Jade's will, then almost impossibly for a creature of that gargantuan size, her draconic form was airborne.

John felt his stomach sink as they launched into the sky, the dragon gaining height rapidly. Jade cleared the jungle canopy, and ascended ever higher, turning as she rose until she was facing towards the Invictus. The view over the jungle was spectacular and John found himself holding his breath as he marvelled at the view. He’d flown across Arcadia on a hoverbike, but soaring across the sky on a dragon’s back was a magical experience.

\*Hold on tight!\* Jade called back, turning to give him a playful grin.

She tucked in her wings and angled down into a dive, her back arching as her tail weaved around to act as a rudder.

“Oh yeah!” Leylira screamed, holding both hands in the air as they plunged towards the jungle again.

John laughed as he shared her exhilaration, thrilled by the speed as Jade’s wings snapped out to arrest their fall, until they were gliding effortlessly above the endless jungle. The Invictus rushed by beneath them and he noticed that Dana’s golden glow had faded from the armour plating, returning the battlecruiser to its usual sparkling white. Jade banked to the side, circling the ship and bringing them about in a long sweeping descent. She changed the angle of her wings and with a flurry of beats, slowed their speed until she brought them to a halt. Jade hovered over the clearing between the Invictus and the Progenitor shuttle, before landing on the ground with a thump of her huge claws.

“I hope that wasn’t too scary?” Jade asked, craning her serpentine neck about so that she could study her passengers with her emerald eyes.

Leylira hugged her sister’s scaly back. “That was wonderful! Thank you!”

Jade’s fang-filled visage twisted into a grin. “How about you, John?”

He smiled and patted her body. “I thought the last six months with you were exciting, but that was incredible.”

She laughed, booming chuckles echoing from deep in her chest. “You can ride me any time, Master!”

After helping them from her back, Jade shifted back into her usual Nymph form. “I’ll leave you to discuss the Brimorian situation with Calara,” she said, giving him a peck on the cheek. “Leylira was the last of my sisters for this round of feedings, so I think it’s about time I started teaching them more about shape-shifting. Just let me know if you need me for anything.”

“Thanks for this afternoon, honey,” John said, pulling her in for a tight hug. Pressing his lips to her ear, he added, “Not just for the dragon ride... your advice on the hunt was really insightful. I think you’re right about just letting go and trusting my instincts.”

“I’m so glad you found it helpful!” she gushed, squeezing him back just as hard.

They parted and John waved the pair of Nymphs goodbye as he headed for the grav-tube. Stepping into the blue anti-gravity field, he heard voices above and glanced upward to see the rest of Jade’s sisters descending on the red side. Betrixa, Neysa, and Marika were all nude, which made for a most alluring view.

“Hey girls,” he called out, as they floated down.

They waved to him excitedly.

“We’re getting lessons on shapeshifting!” Betrixa gushed, her bright blue eyes sparkling.

Neysa looked thoughtful as she said, “I wonder if we’re strong enough for Jade to teach us how to be a great cat?”

Marika raised her two hands, her fingers curled over in a cute approximation of paws. “Meow!”

“What the heck was that?” Neysa asked in confusion.

“It was me being a great cat,” the tabby catgirl replied, flashing a smile at John.

He laughed at their antics and blew them a kiss goodbye, which they eagerly returned. When he stepped out onto the Command Deck, he could still hear the trio chattering away together, their perky exuberance bringing a grin to his face. He was still smiling when he entered the Briefing Room, where Calara, Alyssa, Sakura, and the twins were waiting for him.

Sakura studied his cheerful expression with a wry smile. “I don’t like the Kintark very much, but I didn’t realise the Brimorian invasion was happy news.”

“Ah, it’s not... the Nymphs were just making me smile,” John explained self-consciously, taking his seat at the head of the table.

Alyssa ran her fingers over his hand, a look of concern on her beautiful face. “I’m sorry you got so upset earlier. I didn’t want to stir up all those bad memories with Larn’kelnar, but Rachel thought it would help.”

John pushed his chair back to make room, then pulled the worried blonde onto his lap. “It was painful dredging that up, but she was right... killing that bastard all over again felt pretty damn satisfying. I still really miss Faye, but at least I feel like I avenged her death now. There’s a degree of comfort in that.”

 He glanced across the table at Sakura, who nodded, giving him a look of understanding.

“Anyway, we’re not here to talk about me. Before we start, how’s Dana doing?”

“Still out of it,” Alyssa replied, leaning into his comforting hug. “Rachel and Helene are keeping an eye on her. I thought it best to just let her sleep, but we can wake her up if you want?”

“No, let her rest. I’m not surprised she was so tired after the amount of power she used,” he replied, shaking his head in amazement. He turned to look at Calara and continued, “Alright, let’s discuss the Brimorian invasion and what we’re going to do about it... or not, as the case may be.”

Calara leaned forward and made eye-contact with Irillith. “Would you do the honours?”

The Maliri twin already had the remote in her hand and her slender blue fingers seemed to dance across the buttons as she accessed their files, activating a map of the galactic empires. The glowing hologram appeared before them on the table, the territory owned by the different species marked in distinct colours. The Brimorian Enclave was highlighted in brown, the Kintark Empire denoted in crimson, with arrows showing the areas of hostile encroachment.

\*Tamolith sent me all the data she has on the Brimorian forces and the progress of their invasion,\* Edraele explained. \*If you have any questions, let me know and I’ll ask her for clarification.\*

“I thought we were outside of comms range,” John said, gesturing towards the map. “How did Edraele get this to us?”

“Mother described the Kintark war maps to me and I attempted to recreate them here,” Irillith explained, gesturing towards the warzone. “Tamolith made an estimation of the Brimorian progress based on the systems she’s lost contact with.”

“Very clever,” John said, nodding appreciatively. He glanced at Calara to see her fully absorbed by the floating image. “Preliminary analysis, Captain Fernandez?”

“It looks like the Brimorians hit the outward bulge of Kintark systems first, Admiral,” the Latina replied, pointing to the protruding triangle bisecting the neighbouring galactic civilisations. “Those systems are a long way from the Terran border, so they obviously want to avoid any interference by the Federation. It also seems quite apparent that the Brimorians are methodically conquering all the systems en route to Kinta rather than rushing to take the homeworld. Tamolith’s estimates are quite accurate; Enclave forces will be besieging her capital in approximately eight days.”

“Now we know why the Brimorians didn’t follow up with an invasion of Terran Space after their victory in the Callopean Shoals,” Sakura said, staring at the map. “They had their eyes on a bigger prize...”

Calara nodded, a look of grudging respect on her face. “Athgiloi and his advisors are cleverer than I thought. I wouldn’t be surprised if their plan all along was to let the Kintark and Terrans exhaust each other in a brutal war, then just clean up afterwards. They hit the Terran Federation while they were still reeling after the Kintark invasion, but limited themselves to only reclaiming systems that originally belonged to the Enclave. That would infuriate High Command, but it’s hard to stir up the public’s moral outrage when an alien empire is simply taking back uncolonised worlds in its own territory.”

Her brown-eyed gaze swept to the left as she studied the invasion route.

“Meanwhile, the Enclave sent the bulk of its fleets to conquer completely undefended Kintark territory. If we do nothing to interfere, the Brimorians will sweep through the last vestiges of the Kintark Empire within a month, claiming even more territory than Devereux annexed after the war. The Enclave would end up rivalling the Terran Federation for sheer numbers of systems, conquering hundreds of highly-developed worlds at the cost of only a handful of ships.”

“While half the Terran fleets are still too torn up to fight,” John noted, shaking his head. “I assume the Brimorians were planning to hit Terran space after mopping up the Kintark? At least until Edraele formed the alliance with Lynette.”

“I certainly would have planned for that if I’d been in their position. Once the Enclave took the Kintark homeworld, they’d gain access to Mar’Trinark Shipyard, effectively doubling their fleet-building capacity. Adopting a long-term conquest strategy would have resulted in an overwhelming victory for the Brimorians, as Olympus would never be able to match their enhanced production capabilities. Launching an immediate invasion of Federation Space after subduing the Kintark would be more of a gamble, but the deck would still be heavily stacked in the Enclave’s favour...”

Tashana turned to look at John. “Unless the Kintark Empress has beaten the odds and has a winning hand. What do you say, Baen’thelas? Can Tamolith play the Progenitor King and the Maliri Queen?”

“Well the Progenitor King is stuck out here in Arcadia,” John muttered, his expression grim. His gaze flicked from the Callopean Shoals to the Kintark Empire, before he let out an exasperated sigh. “I can’t believe all this trouble erupted as soon as we left Federation Space. I wonder if the Brimorians knew that we were too far away to intervene.”

“I know you don’t believe in coincidences, but I think this might genuinely be one... or at least our departure wasn’t the catalyst for all these problems,” Calara said, leaning back in her chair. “Nature abhors a vacuum and the annihilation of the Kintark forces left their empire critically vulnerable. We were pulled in the opposite direction to deal with the Kirrix invasion, but with hindsight, heading to Arcadia was a big mistake. I should have predicted the Brimorians would take advantage of their weakened neighbours... I’m sorry I let you down.”

John squeezed her hand and gave her a wan smile. “It’s not your fault, honey. After we chased down the Kirrix who abducted the Menganus IV colonists, we were only a couple of days away from Arcadia. Even if you’d warned me of the risks, I’m not sure I’d have been able to resist the temptation to find out what happened to my parents.”

“We might be too far away to help, but what about the Maliri fleets?” Tashana asked, her gaze flicking between John and Calara.

Irillith gave her sister a curious look. “Why are you so keen to help? I never thought you were particularly enamoured with the Kintark.”

“I’m not,” her twin replied, her violet eyes narrowing. “But the Brimorians have raped and abused the Abandoned on a vast scale. To say that I’m eager to see them pay for what they’ve done is putting it mildly.”

Sakura nodded, her expression bleak. “The Brimorians hide behind a veneer of civility, but I think they must be the most despicable foe we’ve encountered so far.”

“Worse than the Kirrix?” John asked with a sceptical frown.

“The bugs are merciless monsters, but at least they only did those terrible things to survive,” she replied, her almond eyes flashing with anger. “The Brimorians raped hundreds-of-thousands of Terran civilians to create a slave race and the Abandoned are probably being murdered in their millions when they get too old to breed or work the kelp farms. And what is the Brimorians’ excuse for all this pain and suffering? They were motivated by greed and a thirst for power!”

“So we punish the entire species?” John asked quietly. “I’m not sure that’s a path we want to go down.”

“The Brimorian populace are complicit in the enslavement of the Abandoned, even if they’re just turning a blind eye to it. There’s no way you could hide the existence of billions of Abandoned slaves living on Enclave worlds, which means all the Brimorians must know about them... and condone what the Deep Pool has done,” the Asian girl replied, crossing her arms beneath her chest. “The Enclave is due an empire-wide reckoning for all the atrocities they’ve committed.”

“Well that will definitely have to wait,” Calara said, shaking her head in disapproval.

“But intercepting the Brimorian invasion fleet won’t?” John asked, turning to look at her in surprise.

“A surgical strike might be possible...” she mused, looking lost in thought.

“I thought you wanted to hold the Maliri in reserve for the Larathyran fleet recovery operation?” he asked, studying her curiously. “I want to stop the Brimorians, but we’ve got bigger fish to fry... if you’ll excuse the pun.”

Calara gave him a lopsided smile. “That was pretty bad, but you’re excused. If we handle this correctly, by the time the Invictus is repaired and upgraded, we should have the Maliri fleets back in place and ready to accompany us to Larn’kelnar’s empire. Even if Dana has fully repaired the impact damage the Invictus sustained in the crash on Arcadia and saved us days of time checking the hull, we’re now planning on a diversion to Olympus. It’ll be well over a week before we return to Genthalas, at which point I assume you’ll want to fully upgrade the ship with as much tech as possible before we jump into Larathyran territory?”

“I hadn’t really thought about it, but that would be a wise precaution,” he conceded after a moment’s pause. “We also won’t be able to deploy the Maliri fleet to capture all those Thrall vessels until we find Mael’nerak’s Hyper-warp Gate... which means searching the Mists of Loralar for Kythshara before we can go anywhere.”

“All of which would take time,” Calara said, nodding in agreement. “I can’t see us being ready to venture into Larn’kelnar’s territory for at least two more weeks.”

“Actually, there’s one thing we could do to save time,” Tashana interrupted, a thoughtful look on her face. “We know we can easily pack twenty-thousand people aboard the Invictus. If we use the wormhole generator to jump to the closest Thrall fleet and take that many Maliri with us, we’d have enough personnel to man all the ships with skeleton crews. In a matter of days, we could capture every vessel Larn’kelnar owned.”

“But how would we get those fleets home again?” the Latina asked with a frown.

Tashana winced. “Good point. Sorry, I didn’t think that through.”

“Actually, that’s not such a bad idea,” John said, giving the Maliri an encouraging smile. “It’d be a quick way of claiming all those ships before someone else could get their hands on them.”

“And Larn’kelnar was able to bring several Drakkar ships with him when he jumped deep into Ashanath Space,” Calara murmured, looking lost in thought. “At the very least, we could rapidly acquire dozens of Thrall-class battleships.”

“That’s assuming Dana can actually build a Wormhole Generator,” Alyssa gently reminded them. “There are no guarantees, not without access to the black metal.”

John nodded. “You’re right. Let’s not get sidetracked with ‘what ifs’. I think whatever happens, we can agree that we’re not going to be ready to capture Larn’kelnar’s fleets for a couple of weeks.” He turned to look at his tactical officer. “Even if that does give you enough time for a limited campaign against the Brimorians, we can’t afford to take even moderate casualties. Do you think you can help stop the invasion without this escalating into a full-scale war?”

Calara made eye-contact with him and her mouth curved up into a wicked smile. “I’ll see what I can do.”

\*It sounds as if the decision has been made to help the Kintark,\* Edraele said, with no hint of judgement in her voice. \*Tamolith asked us to name our price for assistance against the Brimorians. Do you have any demands you’d like me to relay to the Empress?\*

John blinked in surprise, having made the decision purely in terms of neutralising the Enclave’s aggressive expansionism. \*I hadn’t even thought about that.\*

The girls looked equally startled as Alyssa relayed the Maliri Queen’s question.

Calara’s eyes narrowed. “Shutting down Xen’Nuchek mine would be a good start.”

“Why not just ban slavery throughout the Kintark Empire?” Sakura suggested, looking delighted at the prospect of ending that injustice.

\*Give us a few minutes,\* John said to Edraele. \*We’ll come up with a list...\*

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Deep in the bowels of Olympus Shipyard, far away from prying eyes, Fleet Admiral Devereux nodded to the special forces soldiers standing guard and approached the high-security door. The man accompanying her darted a wary glance at the black Phalanx suits the elite troopers were wearing, then watched Lynette place her hand on the DNA scanner. A band of light swept across and flashed green as it recognised her genetic code, then the reinforced door slid aside with a weighty clunk.

As they entered the detainment area, Colonel Fiske leaned closer to his commanding officer. “I still don’t see why I couldn’t oversee the investigation, Fleet Admiral. It feels like you suspect me of being involved after excluding everyone from Olympus Security.”

“It isn’t personal, Colonel... but I can’t take the chance that we missed any ISD operatives amongst your men,” Lynette replied, acknowledging the next set of special forces guards with a nod. “It’s standard practice for Internal Security Division operations to have secondary teams waiting on standby, just in case anything goes wrong in the mission. Whoever planned and executed the attack on Olympus must be desperately trying to cover up their involvement after it failed.”

“But I’m locked out of all our primary systems!” he protested indignantly. “I understand your reasoning for excluding my men, but why am I being locked out as well?”

They took a left turn, heading towards the interrogation chambers.

“I do trust you, Colonel, which is why I invited you to accompany me,” Lynette said, stopping by another security door and turning to look him in the eye. “But there’s always the possibility that your security ident has been compromised and I’m not going to risk allowing ISD agents to tamper with our systems. For the moment all access has been suspended, even including members of the Admiralty, and will remain that way until we have the answers we’re looking for.”

He gritted his teeth and nodded grudgingly. “Alright, that’s a sensible precaution.”

When the next set of doors opened, they saw a grim-faced officer waiting for them inside.

“Good evening, Fleet Admiral,” Commander MacCallum said, greeting them both with a curt salute. “Please follow me.”

He led them deeper into the complex and they entered a command hub, which displayed holo-vid footage from the cells. Lynette glanced at the images and saw five dejected-looking men lying slumped on narrow stainless-steel beds. Despite their obvious misery, they didn’t appear to be bloodied or battered.

“Only five?” Colonel Fiske noted in surprise. “I thought you captured seven insurgents, Commander?”

MacCallum darted a glance at Lynette before answering, awaiting her response. When she inclined her head, he quietly replied, “Two are being interrogated as we speak, Colonel.”

“I don’t see the video footage,” Fiske remarked, looking puzzled as he studied the images.

“We turned off the cameras,” MacCallum replied, his expression unchanging.

Fiske frowned. “Evidentiary procedure clearly states that-”

Ignoring the Colonel, the special forces abruptly turned to his commanding officer. “Thank you for your prompt arrival, Fleet Admiral. There’s been an interesting new development and I didn’t want to discuss this over a comms channel.”

“I didn’t think you’d break them that quickly,” Lynette said with surprise.

MacCallum shook his head. “We didn’t. They’ve had extensive ISD training to resist interrogation techniques; it’ll be some time before we wear them down. While my men have been working on the prisoners, I’ve been investigating the troop transfer orders that allowed the strike teams to access Olympus.”

He picked up a holo-reader and turned it so that she could see the docking log. Clearly listed on the document was the name of the officer who had ordered the personnel transfer: Rear Admiral Carmela Moreno.

“Carmela!” Lynette hissed, her eyes blazing with fury. “I never thought that vapid bitch would have the balls to try something like this!”

Colonel Fiske’s brow wrinkled in confusion. “Buckingham’s Chief of Staff? It was a well-known secret she earned her promotions on her knees. I’ve read her personnel file... she didn’t have the mentality or resources to engineer an assassination plot on this scale.”

“Well, we’ll just have to see what she has to say for herself.” Lynette replied, before giving MacCallum a look of gratitude. “Thank you for keeping this discreet, Commander. I’ll issue an order for Rear Admiral Moreno’s immediate detention.”

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Dana’s eyelashes fluttered open and she stretched languidly on the bed. “Mmm, that feels good...”

“Hello, sleeping beauty,” Rachel said, leaning down to give her a tender kiss.

Helene smiled with relief. “We were worried about you, Dana!”

“Why were you worried? I’m fine!” the redhead said, sitting up in bed. She looked at the two girls who were sitting beside her. “But I am feeling a bit peckish. Is it nearly lunchtime?”

Rachel laughed and affectionately brushed her fingers through her girlfriend’s lustrous hair. “It’s after seven, babes. You’ve been asleep for nearly ten hours.”

“Wow... I was totally out of it!” Dana blurted out, amazed she could have slept that long. “What the hell happened?”

“You don’t remember using your psychic powers to repair the ship?” the brunette asked, looking at her with concern.

“Holy shit! That was real?!” the redhead balked, her eyes like saucers. “I thought it was just a crazy dream!”

John sprinted into the Observatory, carrying Alyssa in his arms. Moving in a blur, he skidded to a halt then put Alyssa down next to the bed. “Sparks! You’re finally awake!”

“I can’t believe I’ve been snoozing all day,” Dana muttered, shaking her head.

He walked over to kneel beside her. “We think you over-exerted yourself by channelling too much power. You didn’t seem to be physically harmed though, just exhausted after attempting to repair the Invictus.”

“I really fixed the ship, just like that?” she asked, snapping her fingers.

“You tell us,” Alyssa said, hugging her friend. “We’re not sure what you did.”

John paused for a moment as he tried to remember exactly what Dana had done. “It wasn’t instantaneous. You sent golden pulses out through the ship for a couple of minutes, then you said you’d ‘fixed her up as good as new’ and collapsed in my arms. Whatever you did left the Crystal Alyssium plating shining like a beacon for a couple of hours afterwards.”

Alyssa released Dana and sat back to study her curiously. “Can you tell us what happened?”

The redhead gave them a helpless shrug. “Don’t ask me, I’ve got no idea.”

“Oh... you seemed so certain earlier,” John said, deflating a little. “We assumed you’d repaired the Invictus, so we’ve been re-plating her for the last four hours.”

Groaning, the blonde rubbed at her temples. “Ah, crap! Don’t tell me we’re going to have to strip all that armour and start again...”

Dana laughed and patted Alyssa on the back. “Hey, relax! I just meant that I didn’t know why the ship started glowing. If I wasn’t dreaming and I really did what you said, then the Invictus is fixed and we should be good to go.”

“You actually managed to repair everything?” John asked, gazing at her with wonder in his eyes. “750 metres of reinforced hull patched up in just a couple of minutes?”

His Chief Engineer blushed at his look of awe. “I think so... although it’s really not as impressive as you’re making out. The hull was buckled and fractured in a bunch of different places, so I just unbent the damaged beams and realigned the atomic structure in the titanium alloy to mend the superstructure. It’s not like I was filling in big holes blasted out of the ship or anything like that... it was more like beating out a few dents in the bodywork after a doozy of a fender-bender.”

Alyssa laughed and rolled her eyes. “Sparks... the Invictus was cut in half and crash landed from orbit. Only you could think repairing that wasn’t a big deal.”

“How did you fix the ship exactly?” John asked, studying her in fascination.

“I’ve done the same kind of thing before, just on a much smaller scale,” Dana replied, doing her best to explain her abilities. “Basically, I was able to look into the metal and see where all the faults were. The difference was that I was super-charged after you filled me up... and it felt like a doorway in my mind opened. Suddenly I could... feel... the entire ship, almost as if it was alive. All the bits that were fucked up were sore... like the Invictus was in pain. I just kinda mended everything that didn’t feel right.”

Rachel blinked in surprise. “That’s actually a very similar process to how I heal crowds of people with my rejuvenation aura.”

“Maybe you’re rubbing off on me,” the redhead said with a smirk, bumping shoulders with her girlfriend.

“Well we’ve certainly done a lot of rubbing together,” Rachel said, flashing a saucy grin back.

John smiled at their banter, then leaned down to give Dana a kiss. “I’m really glad you’re okay.”

Before she could reply, her stomach rumbled impatiently. “I don’t suppose there’s any chance of giving me a full tummy?” Dana asked, trying to look as irresistible as possible and gazing up at him with big eyes.

“Sorry, Sparks. I already have plans for tonight,” he said, darting a furtive glance at Helene.

“Oh right! I totally forgot,” she said with a knowing grin. “That reminds me; did you manage to pick up some corundum?”

“I took the shuttle up with the twins earlier and we mined a big chunk of it.”

“Awesome! We can make a start on that... project... if you want?” she asked, wiggling her eyebrows playfully.

“Hold on a second,” Alyssa interrupted, raising her hands. “Before you get too carried away, what’s the state of the Invictus? Are we in a fit state to leave Arcadia?”

Dana tapped a finger on her chin thoughtfully. “Give me ten minutes to check the superstructure. It’s probably a good idea to make sure, rather than take off and rip the ship in half.”

“That might be wise...” the blonde agreed, with a wry smile.

John rose to his feet. “I’ll go and make you something nice for dinner. Head up to the Officers’ Lounge when you’re done.”

Alyssa reached out to clasp his hand. “Actually, the twins wanted to speak to you up on the Bridge. Calara’s offered to make some dinner for Sparks.”

“Thanks, beautiful,” he said appreciatively. “I’ll go see them now.”

He turned to leave, when Dana blurted out, “Hey, John! Did you manage to rescue the maintenance bots? Were they all okay?”

“We tracked them down. All three of them survived,” he replied, his happy expression turning to sadness.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, looking at him with concern.

“They didn’t know about Faye. I had to break the news to each of them...”

Her face fell, knowing how hard that must have been. “Shit... I’m sorry, John. That must’ve really sucked.”

“It wasn’t much fun,” he agreed, resisting the grief that was like a dull ache in his heart. “Anyway, I better go talk to the twins. If I finish before you do, I’ll meet you in the Lounge.”

“Sure,” the redhead murmured, looking at him with sympathy.

John left the Observatory and strode across the bridge spanning the Lagoon, trying to distract himself from dwelling on thoughts of the cheerful purple sprite.

“John, wait!” Helene called out from behind him.

He paused and turned to see the aquatic girl jogging after him. “What’s up, honey?”

She ran into his arms and gave him a comforting hug. “I wanted to help you this morning, but you left with Jade into the jungle before I could talk to you. I’ve never seen you get that angry before... and I can see you’re still upset.”

“Spending time with the Nymphs really helped,” he said quietly, cupping her cheek and stroking her soft skin. “Dana just caught me by surprise asking after the robots.”

“Let me take away your pain...” she whispered, brushing her lips against his.

John gazed into her lovely blue eyes, then nodded, granting her permission. He lost himself in her tender kiss, feeling her gentle telepathic caress as she made contact with his mind. Helene’s empathetic touch was warm and filled with love, suffusing his subconscious with feelings of wellbeing. It was like coming in from a cold winter’s day, then sitting in front of a crackling fire with a mug of hot chocolate. As he thought of that metaphor, he pictured Faye sitting on the sofa, snuggling up with him under a blanket. Instead of feeling heartbroken at her loss, he was reminded of all the good times they’d shared, bringing a wistful smile to his face.

Helene slowly pulled away, her baby-blue eyes searching his face for a reaction. “How do you feel now?”

“You’ve got a real gift, Helene,” he said earnestly, giving her a look filled with gratitude. “Thank you.”

She blushed at his sincere praise. “You gave me these abilities, John. I can’t claim any credit for that.”

He paused and studied her curiously. “Dana told me something similar the other day. Do you remember the evening she brought me to you?”

“I do,” Helene said with a loving smile. “That night was magical.”

John nodded his agreement. “It was, but I’m sure Alyssa told you what Dana and I discussed earlier that evening. She told me that I’d given each of you these psychic abilities and that basically everything you girls accomplished was down to me.”

“Alyssa kept all of us informed,” Helene said softly, having heard the same from her matriarch.

“Dana was wrong,” he stated with certainty.

She frowned, looking at him in confusion. “But... I was just plain and ordinary before I joined you. You were the one who gave me special powers.”

“I might have given you psychic abilities, but it’s what you do with them that counts.” He caressed her temple and continued, “I got the idea for your empathic powers from Nkkrrit, the last survivor of an extinct species called the Vulkat. When we first met her, she was half-mad with grief, mourning the tragic deaths of thousands of her children. Nkkrrit used her abilities to try to terrify us into fleeing from her ship, then made Alyssa feel all of her pain and suffering. You on the other hand, use your new talents to share your love and kindness. The difference is like night and day, and that’s all down to the wonderful person you are... a sweet girl who was never just plain and ordinary.”

Helene gazed at him in awe. “I’ve never met anyone who believed in me like you do, John. You make me feel like I can accomplish anything!”

“Anything you set that lovely mind to, honey,” he said with a warm smile.

 She hugged him fiercely, overcome with emotion.

\*Helene comes to cheer you up and you give her a huge boost to her self-esteem,\* Alyssa said with an affectionate smile. \*I don’t think you really get how us helping you is supposed to work.\*

\*Making you girls feel good about yourselves always cheers me up,\* he replied, stroking the teal-hued beauty’s back. \*Do you think you could keep Helene preoccupied for me until later this evening? I don’t want her to see what we’re working on and spoil her surprise.\*

\*Of course, handsome.\*

Helene lifted her head and gave John a rueful frown. “I’d love to stay with you, but Alyssa wants to talk to me about something.”

“That’s alright, honey,” he said with an understanding smile. “I’ll see you later on, okay?”

She nodded, delighted to see him looking so much happier. They parted with a kiss and John crossed the Lagoon as he headed towards the grav-tube, while Helene returned to the Observatory to rejoin the girls.

Surrounded by the blue anti-gravity field, John rose up to the Command Deck, where he found the Maliri twins sitting at their stations. They both turned to look his way as he stepped out onto the Bridge, greeting him with welcoming smiles.

“Fancy meeting you here,” John said with a wry grin, as he walked over to the sisters.

They laughed and got up to give him a kiss, before they returned to their seats. He glanced at their consoles, curious to see what the Maliri were up to. Tashana had several topographical maps open and with the rolling hills covered in jungle, she had to be studying Arcadia’s surface. Irillith had been viewing some kind of convoluted code that looked like gobbledygook to John, although he did recognise the characters as being written in ancient Maliri.

“So... Alyssa mentioned that you wanted to talk to me about something? ” he asked, looking at each sister in turn. “I assume it’s about whatever you’ve been working on this afternoon?”

Irillith saw his speculative glance at her holo-displays and shook her head with concern. “Ah, no... not me. It was Tashana that wanted to discuss something with you.”

He frowned at her hesitant reply, recognising her look of sympathy. Suddenly he knew exactly what the Maliri hacker was working on. “That’s Faye, isn’t it?”

She sighed and nodded. “Yes it is. I didn’t want to mention her and upset you again.”

“I’m okay now,” he said quietly, reaching out to run his fingers through her silky white mane. “Helene helped and I feel much better.”

Irillith closed her violet eyes and enjoyed his gentle caress. When she reopened them, she gave him a grateful smile. “That felt lovely, thank you.”

He let his fingers trace down the line of her throat, brushing the blue skin where her collar would be. “I’m sorry about earlier. I really was looking forward to spending time with the two of you.”

She caught his hand and then kissed his fingers. “I wasn’t in the mood either, John... not after seeing the bots so devastated after hearing about Faye. If it wasn’t for Helene, I’d have been in no fit state to do anything this afternoon.”

John returned his curious gaze to the code on her holo displays. “Does that actually mean anything to you?”

“That data is Faye’s core personality files,” Irillith explained, her face showing conflicting emotions. “I’ve spent the last several hours trying to get a feel for her code.”

He squatted down beside her and looked into her eyes. “What’s the verdict so far?”

Irillith considered how best to answer him for a long moment. “The data structure is incredibly complex and I have no doubt that Faye was one of Mael’nerak’s digital creations, just like Nexus. He had an understanding of AI programming that vastly exceeds my own... and studying Faye’s core data has hammered that point home time and time again.”

“Is there a chance you can bring her back, or is this an impossible pipe dream?” he asked, studying the Maliri.

“It’s hard for me to explain the problems I’m dealing with in terms you could comprehend,” she replied, darting a pensive glance at the floating code.

“Rill!” Tashana snapped, looking at her sister disapprovingly.

Irillith winced and gave him a contrite look. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to sound like such a condescending bitch. I wasn’t saying you’re too stupid to understand, only that the task I’m facing is extremely complex.”

“It’s fine,” he said, squeezing her hand in support. “It’s not like I know the first thing about programming.”

She nibbled her full lower lip, then said, “Maybe an analogy would help explain what I’m dealing with here...” After another long pause, the Maliri hacker continued, “Imagine you’re trying to reassemble a book. You’ve got all the pages, but the page numbers aren’t marked, and the only way the story will make sense, is if you put all the pages back together in the correct sequence.”

John nodded, finally getting an idea of the scale of the problem. “That does sound incredibly hard.”

Irillith’s expression turned grim. “Now imagine there’s a million pages in the book. You can read the sentences, although the language is a little stilted and awkward, but the way the paragraphs are constructed is like nothing you’ve seen before. Then you realise that the person who wrote the book understood the language on a level you can’t even imagine. Paragraphs have extra meaning when read vertically through the book, not just sequentially, and if you make any mistakes, the book will be incomprehensible gibberish.”

He let out a heavy sigh as he began to understand what a herculean task she was facing.

“My thoughts exactly,” she said, giving him a troubled look.

John leaned in to give her a comforting hug. “We always knew this was going to be hard,” he whispered in her ear. “But at least you’ve got something to keep you occupied now that you’re going to live forever.”

She let out a sardonic laugh and hugged him back. “You’re right, I’ll get there in the end. After all, it only took Mael’nerak 10,000 years to get this good at building AIs and what’s 10 millennia to an immortal?”

“I reckon you can do it in 8... maybe 9 tops,” he said sharing a smile with her.

“I’m aiming for 7!” Irillith exclaimed with mock enthusiasm.

“That’s the spirit,” he said with a chuckle, giving her a kiss before rising to his feet. He glanced at Tashana, who was watching their interaction with a fond smile. “Have you got good news for me too?”

She beckoned him over and gestured towards the holographic maps floating above her console. “I did find something that I thought you might be interested in.”

“What am I looking at?” he asked, studying the shallow basin in the ground near the edge of a lake.

“A thrall settlement,” she replied, her violet eyes gleaming. “Arcadia was settled by the Maliri before it was abandoned!”

“Oh wow, that is interesting!” he enthused, squatting beside her. “We can stay for a little while longer if you want to dig for relics.”

Tashana looked at him in surprise. “I didn’t think you’d want to delay our departure for any reason.”

“I don’t really, but finding out more about the history of the Maliri is important to you. Besides, excavating the site could tell us more about Mael’nerak’s legacy... and who knows what treasures we could find in an abandoned thrall settlement.”

He didn’t need to say it, but Tashana knew he was referring to the hacking deck she’d discovered in the thrall facility in the Epsilon Aquarii system. A device that had ultimately led to Faye’s creation.

“Thank you for being so supportive,” she said softly, her face lighting up with a grateful smile. Her eyes flicked back to the map and she continued ruefully, “Unfortunately, when the Maliri abandoned Arcadia, it looks like they obliterated the settlement with an orbital barrage. That large depression in the ground is actually a series of blast craters... I doubt there’s anything left of value.”

“Damn, that’s a real shame,” he said, stroking her arm. “We’ll definitely make some time to thoroughly investigate the other thrall facility when we return to Maliri Space.”

Tashana nodded enthusiastically, thrilled at the prospect of excavating the site with everyone’s support. “There was much more to that place, I just know it! Most of the complex was buried and it was slow going unearthing it on my own. I was intending to return there to see what else I could find... but that wasn’t to be.”

Her voice trailed off and John knew the reason why. Tashana’s plans for further research had been abruptly halted by her banishment to the Unclaimed Wastes. She darted a glance at Irillith, who looked at her sister with regret and shame.

Straightening up, he beckoned Irillith over and pulled Tashana into his arms. “Come here you two. Group hug.”

They smiled as they joined him in the embrace.

“We’ll have some fun together soon, okay?” he said to the twins as he held them close. “Then afterwards we can discuss Tashana’s findings in more detail. I’m looking forward to the three of us working together to unlock more of Mael’nerak’s secrets.”

The Maliri sisters snuggled into him, enjoying the sense of shared intimacy between them. They were still standing together when Alyssa and Dana stepped out of the grav-tube onto the Bridge.

“You three look very cosy,” Dana said, grinning as she hurried over to join them.

“Can we get in on that too?” Alyssa asked with a flirtatious smile.

“The more the merrier,” John replied, greeting the blonde and redhead with kisses as they were included in the group hug. “So what’s the verdict on the Invictus?”

“I did a sweep of the hull... and all the damage is fixed!” Dana exclaimed, her sky-blue eyes shining with pride. “The Invictus is spaceworthy again!”

“Amazing... well done, honey,” he said, his voice filled with admiration. “What about the rest of the ship’s systems?”

She deflated a little. “We haven’t had a chance to replace the Hyper-Pulse generator on the bow so comms are down, and there’s a big question mark over all the gun batteries. The bots and the girls have managed to check the auxiliary systems and they all seem to be fine.”

“Can we check the guns mid-flight?”

Dana considered that for a moment, then nodded. “Yeah, we could. It would mean crawling through maintenance tunnels to access all the guns in their retracted states. It’ll be a major ballache, but it is possible.”

“Alright, let’s get out of here then,” John said decisively. “I’ve had about as much as I can stand of Arcadia. We need to get to back to the border as quickly as possible.”

The girls nodded their agreement and broke up the five-way hug. Alyssa bounded up the illuminated steps to the Command Podium and slid into her XO chair, her hands soon flitting over her console.

“Sparks, can you tractor beam the Progenitor Shuttle into the Primary Hangar? We’ll keep the Secondary Hangar for the Raptor.”

“Wait! What about Faye’s body?” John asked, remembering the bier the bots had constructed for her remote chassis.

Alyssa tapped into the camera footage and displayed the video stream on the main holo-screen. The Primary Hangar was now empty, with no trace of the temporary shrine the Invictus\_Node\_collective had made for their beloved creator.

Feeling a renewed pang of loss for his friend, John said quietly, “I wanted to talk to Little One anyway. I’ll speak to her about it.”

He ascended the steps to join Alyssa, taking his own seat in the Command Chair. As he sat down, Calara, Sakura, and Rachel left the grav-tube, having been warned by their matriarch of the Invictus’ imminent take-off. They fanned out to take their places, sitting at their stations and watching the preparations for departure.

Dana worked quickly and efficiently to retrieve the Progenitor Shuttle, then Alyssa increased power to the retro-thrusters. She kept her eyes locked onto Dana, who was monitoring the ship for any sign of impending disaster, until the redhead finally gave her a thumbs up. Just as the Invictus had done hundreds of times before, the battlecruiser lifted off from the planet’s surface, as smooth and responsive as if she’d just left Olympus Shipyard on her maiden voyage.

John watched them climb skyward, the jungle paradise falling away below them. The Invictus swept through billowing banks of cumulus clouds as they ascended, leaving swirling eddies in their wake. It didn’t take long for the battlecruiser to reach low orbit, and John couldn’t help shuddering as he remembered what had happened the last time they’d tried to leave the planet.

“There it is!” Dana called out, pointing to the holographic depiction of Arcadia.

The Raptor was highlighted with a green icon, the wrecked gunship floating forlornly in space where it had been thrown out of Larn’kelnar’s dreadnought. Alyssa turned the Invictus to head in that direction, then hit a button to open the doors for the Secondary Hangar.

“I’ll bring us right alongside, you tractor beam her in,” the blonde said to Dana, looking up from the navigation controls to glance at the gunship.

“They really shot the crap out of the cockpit...” the redhead murmured, staring wide-eyed at the damage the Raptor had sustained.

John paid scant attention to the recovery effort, his focus still on Arcadia. He’d spent 40 years desperately wishing he could visit this planet to search for his missing parents, but he’d found nothing but pain, sorrow, and disappointment. Filled with regret, he stayed silent through their departure, his thoughts on the sweet girl that the trip to Arcadia had taken from them.

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The attractive middle-aged Latina paced nervously in her hotel room, darting the occasional glance at the holo-screen for any new updates. TFNN had been featuring harrowing interviews with civilians caught up in the attacks on Olympus Shipyard, discussing the aftermath of the explosion that had killed thousands of marines. Even worse was the shocking footage of the devastation caused by that blast... an atrocity that she was highly-complicit in facilitating.

Rear Admiral Carmela Moreno shook her head in denial as the latest report showed thousands of body bags lined up in a makeshift morgue on Olympus. This was never the plan! Admiral Benedito Almada had told her that they were planning a swift and efficient coup, which would eliminate Fleet Admiral Devereux for conspiring with an alien to bring down Buckingham. He’d never said anything about blowing up thousands of marines while they were having their lunch!

She shuddered at the sight of all those corpses, then the camera footage switched locations to Terra, focusing on weeping widows consoling each other. Wracked with guilt, she turned away, unable to stomach watching any more. Carmela was tempted to turn off the news, but she was desperate to find out any information the authorities might have on the conspirators behind the explosion. When she’d seen Devereux on TFNN that morning, she knew the coup had failed, which meant she would have to flee from Terra and the inevitable witch hunt for the guilty parties.

Shaking her head bitterly, Carmela couldn’t believe it had come to this. Only a month ago, she’d felt like one of life’s big winners. A Rear Admiral in the T-Fed military and sleeping with the most powerful man in the Federation... she had been a woman of influence and authority. Then Blake had come along and ruined everything! She was sure he was secretly behind the Kintark invasion, probably scheming with that terrifying dragon that had ripped her poor Vincent in half...

Since Buckingham’s death, her life had systematically fallen apart, shocking her with the rapidity of her fall from grace. Her position as Chief of Staff had been revoked the day Devereux had become Fleet Admiral, leaving Carmela cast adrift in a sea of military bureaucracy as she scrambled to find some other role to fill. She had always thought of herself as a highly-respected officer, but the total lack of interest in all her applications to over a hundred different postings had crushed her self-esteem.

When Almada had approached her, his plan seemed like the perfect way of getting some revenge and bringing her flailing career back on track. Now she could only wonder how the hell she’d let him talk her into getting involved. If she’d thought her life was in trouble before, that was nothing compared to the hell she was facing as a fugitive from justice. It was all so unfair... all she’d done was use her rank to authorise a few troop transfer requests to Olympus, it wasn’t as if she was the mastermind behind the explosions!

Carmela heard loud voices in the corridor outside and glanced nervously at the door to her suite. She had taken every precaution she could think of, to keep her identity a secret when checking into the hotel. She’d paid in cash and used an alias... there was no possible way Internal Security could be here. Could they?

The comms device on her wrist chirped, making her heart leap into her throat. When she realised it was just an incoming call, she took a deep breath to calm herself and glanced at the holo-panel to check for the caller ID. It was the same anonymous ident that Almada had used when speaking to her before. Sagging with relief, she swiped her hand across, opening the comms channel.

“Thank god you called, Benedito! I’ve been so worried!” she blurted out.

“They’re coming for you, Carmela!” the retired admiral yelled in warning.

She froze, her eyes wide in terror. “T-that’s impossible...” she stammered, desperately afraid.

“I’ve still got a contact with ISD... he saw the order for your immediate detention! If you’re captured, you’ll be facing torture and execution! You have to get out of there now!”

Whimpering with fear, Carmela lurched to the door and flung it open with a crash. The cleaning maids were outside and they all turned to stare at her. Could they be ISD operatives in disguise? Carmela backed away from them, then turned and fled down the corridor, cold sweat prickling her brow as she prayed they wouldn’t just shoot her in the back. Rather than risking waiting for the elevators, she dived through the door to the emergency stairwell. Running down the staircase, she nearly fell several times, eventually losing a shoe as she stumbled on the steps. It skittered across the stairwell then fell through the gap by the slanted windows.

“Get to Maryland starport!” Almada said to her, from the open call she’d forgotten in her frantic haste to escape. “I’ve arranged a flight to the transit station at Jupiter. From there you can escape to the Outer Rim!”

“Thank you... thank you so much!” she sobbed, throwing open the firedoor into the underground carpark.

Kicking off her other shoe, she ran barefoot across the sparsely-lit parking facility, rushing to her black hover-sedan. For one gut-wrenching minute, Carmela thought she might have left the keyfob back in her room, but as she patted her pockets in a panic, she found the metallic device. Slumping against the car, she hit the button to unlock the door then collapsed inside. Cocooned inside the safety of the vehicle, she sighed with relief, no longer feeling quite so exposed.

“Nav route: Maryland starport,” she said in a tremulous voice, watching as the auto navigation system mapped out the most efficient route.

“I should be the one thanking you, Carmela,” Almada said, an odd tone to his voice. “Goodbye.”

She looked at the comms device in confusion, unsettled by his final words. The whir of anti-grav cyclics reached her ears and the hover-sedan rose majestically into the air. As the drive system engaged, Carmela felt a queasy sense of dread... an instant before a thunderous explosion ripped the black sedan apart, hurling chunks of flaming wreckage across the underground carpark.

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Sarinia furtively studied a trio of engineers as she walked in the opposite direction, trying not to draw attention to herself as she listened to their light-hearted chatter. It was just as her spy aboard the shipyard had said; hundreds of these white-haired women had recently appeared and were now a common sight on Genthalas. She noticed that instead of keeping a wary eye on each other, the engineers seemed to have developed a sense of cheerful camaraderie. She jumped in surprise when the three smiling Maliri, all from different Houses, suddenly burst into laughter at the punchline to a bawdy joke.

Their behaviour was unnatural and deeply disturbing.

She turned to watch them walk away down the corridor, then winced as the movement aggravated the fresh lacerations on her back. Matriarch Gaenna Baelora had decided that her daughters’ disobedience warranted stern punishment, giving each of them several lashes from a neural whip. Such cruel torments had been recently outlawed, but who were the Baeloran sisters going to complain to? Matriarchs had always been the ultimate authority over their own Houses and such laws never applied to them.

Doing her best to ignore the stinging pain from her latest batch of scars, Sarinia glanced at the holo-signs floating above the next intersection. After scanning through the list, she spotted her destination and turned right. As she continued on her way, she tried to piece together exactly what the white hair signified. Despite how fanciful it sounded, she was convinced that Edraele Valaden had undergone some kind of miraculous rejuvenation process, dramatically reversing the onset of time. There was no mistaking the fact that the matriarch’s appearance had changed from a woman midway through her second century, to a fresh-faced maiden in the full bloom of youth.

The existence of a wondrous elixir capable of such a transformation would explain her mother’s astonishing decision to trade Vrysandral Spice with House Valaden. Sarinia knew that her mother would pay any price to reverse the ravages of time and the recent change to Gaenna’s hair colour, would indicate that such a transaction had been made. The Matriarch of House Baelora still looked her age, although she was already showing increased vigour, the stinging slap a testimony to her returning strength.

However, that didn’t explain why hundreds of engineers would be so similarly blessed; after all, they were at the opposite end of the social hierarchy. If this priceless gift had been bestowed on the poor and worthless, then why would her mother have to pay such an inordinately high price to receive the same benefits. This perplexing issue with the engineers cast a significant shadow of doubt over Sarinia’s whole theory.

She also had no explanation for why several women, including Edraele Valaden and the youngest of the matriarchs gathered at Genthalas, had decided to grow their white hair to such scandalous lengths. From what her spy had been able to gather, only a very small number of the white-haired women had been brazen enough to flaunt tradition that way. That six of them were matriarchs would indicate it to be a mark of prestige, but why would Edraele Valaden’s bodyguard be included in their number... especially when the other 13 matriarchs still had short hair. There were too many contradictions to establish any kind of meaningful explanation for what was happening.

Sarinia paused as she entered the huge arboretum, her golden eyed-gaze sweeping over the numerous women present in the verdant park. There were a disproportionate number of white-haired Maliri here, far more than she had previously encountered in Genthalas. Her arrival was noted by several of the closest women, who seemed to evaluate her as a potential threat before looking away, affirming her initial guess that they were bodyguards.

Security personnel being here was a very good sign, indicating the presence of the woman she dearly wished to engage in conversation. Sarinia wandered idly through the park, trying to appear as non-threatening as possible and it didn’t take her long to find who she was looking for. She immediately recognised the five matriarchs sitting on the grass, chattering away to each other, having memorised their faces from the dossier her spy had provided. The youngest daughters of their Houses, they had all ascended to the title of matriarch in recent months.

Sitting on a bench in open view, but well out of earshot, Sarinia resisted the overwhelming urge to gape at the quintet of matriarchs in awe. She had been quite unprepared for just how astoundingly beautiful they looked when seen in person, their long white manes almost demanding her enraptured gaze. The five matriarchs were the leaders of rival Houses and should have been fierce enemies, but a quick glance revealed how friendly and at ease they were with one another.

Sarinia pretended to be absorbed by the plants and animals that lived in the arboretum, and tried to ignore the birds’ insipid cheeping as she waited patiently for an opportunity. After waiting for nearly an hour, Sarinia’s patience paid off. Four of the young women left the park, leaving Kali Loraleth to her own devices.

“It’s lovely here, isn’t it?” Kali asked, her lovely voice pleasant and without guile.

She turned to look at the stunning young woman standing a few metres away. “It really is. Watching the animals is so... relaxing.”

Smiling warmly, the girl glanced at the bench. “Would you mind if I joined you?”

“Of course not,” the House Baelora noblewoman replied, returning the smile. “My name’s Sarinia... it’s actually my first visit to Genthalas.”

“I’m Kali,” the youthful matriarch replied, being careful not to disclose her rank or House allegiance as she gracefully took a seat.

Sarinia finally allowed herself the opportunity to gaze at Kali’s luxurious mane of white hair... or was unable to resist any longer, she wasn’t quite sure which. “You look... breathtaking, Kali. I’ve never seen anyone with hair like yours before. It’s so beautiful!”

Smiling self-consciously, Kali raised a hand to touch her silky locks. “Thank you. That’s very kind of you to say,” she said with a hint of pride. “I know how scandalous it is to wear my hair long like this, but someone I care about a great deal prefers it this way.”

“You’ve almost inspired me to grow mine out too, but my mother would be... unimpressed.”

Kali had a faraway look in her eyes and she suddenly giggled.

“Did I say something funny?” Sarinia asked with a smile, looking at her curiously.

Shaking her head, Kali replied, “You just made me think of my own mother. I was trying to imagine the look on her face if she could see me now... but I can’t quite decide if she’d be furious or shocked beyond words.”

Sarinia sighed. “Mine would be furious.”

Looking at her with sympathy, Kali murmured, “I’m sorry, Sarinia. I know what it’s like to have an overbearing mother with a foul temper.”

“Would you mind if we talked about something else?” Sarinia asked with a rueful frown. “My relationship with my mother is quite... strained... at the moment. It’s not a pleasant topic of conversation.”

“No, I don’t mind,” the House Loraleth noblewoman replied. “What brings you to Genthalas?”

“My mother...” Sarinia replied, her lips twitching into a wry grin.

“Oh dear, sorry,” Kali said, covering her mouth as she tried not to laugh. “Perhaps you’d like to change the subject instead?”

Sarinia nodded, studying her young companion with interest. “You mentioned that someone you care about a great deal likes your hair long like this. Would you tell me about... him?”

Kali blushed, her cheeks turning a dark indigo. “You’re right, it is a man.” She let out a wistful sigh. “And what a man he is...”

Leaning forward, Sarinia’s ears pricked up. “Might I ask the name of this mysterious man?”

“He’s called Baen’thelas,” Kali whispered, a starry-eyed look on her face. “Oh, I miss him so much...”

The Righter of Wrongs. Something about the cadence of that formal name in ancient Maliri sent a shiver down Sarinia’s spine. “Baen’thelas...” she murmured, liking the way it rolled off her tongue. “What’s he like?”

“He’s so brave, and kind, and impossibly handsome,” Kali said breathlessly. Her hands went to her slim tummy. “I can still hardly believe it, but we’re going to start a family together... as soon as he comes home.”

“A male from the border stations... coming to Genthalas?!” Sarinia couldn’t help blurting out in astonishment.

The young matriarch hesitated, suddenly cautious. “I did say he was brave.”

Sarinia recognised a deflection when she heard one. “He does sound wonderful. You’re very fortunate to have found such a man to start your family.”

“Thank you,” Kali replied, relaxing when it was apparent that her new friend wasn’t going to press her for more details.

With a sigh of regret, Sarinia rose to her feet. “It was very nice to make your acquaintance, Kali. I really enjoyed speaking with you and I’d love to stay, but I wouldn’t want to provoke my mother’s ire by keeping her waiting. That would not be wise at all.”

Kali looked at her with sympathy as she stood. “I understand completely.” She leaned forward, giving her a friendly hug without even thinking about it. After spending so much time with the rest of the Young Matriarchs, tactile displays of affection with people she liked had become second nature. “It was lovely to meet you too, Sarinia. I hope I’ll see you again.”

Sarinia flinched as Kali accidentally brushed her hand over her latest set of scars.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” Kali blurted out, thinking she’d made her new acquaintance uncomfortable by being overly familiar. She suddenly froze and stared at the older woman with concern. “Wait... that wasn’t embarrassment that made you pull away... you’re hurt!”

“It’s nothing,” Sarinia said, backing away a few steps. “Please... forget it happened.”

“I know wounds like that. Someone lashed you with a neural whip, didn’t they?” Kali asked, her dark blue eyes flashing with indignant anger. She held herself taller and seemed to radiate authority. “Tell me, Sarinia. Who hurt you?”

Sarinia was shocked at the sudden change in the kind-hearted young woman’s demeanour. Kali looked so young, she must have only just turned 30, but she now held herself with the regal bearing and commanding presence of a woman with a century of leadership behind her. It took every ounce of her willpower to resist the urge to tell Kali whatever she wanted to know.

“Please... I’ll just get in more trouble,” Sarinia said nervously, before turning and hurrying away.

“Wait, Sarinia! Come back!” Kali called after her, the concern and worry in her voice as unfamiliar as it was endearing.

Her two bodyguards moved to block Sarinia’s hasty departure, but they paused when Kali waved them off, letting the House Baelora noblewoman leave unmolested. Sarinia darted one final regretful look back over her shoulder, making brief eye-contact with Kali before leaving the arboretum. As soon as she was safely out of line-of-sight, she relaxed, dropping her fearful act.

Sarinia allowed herself a furtive smile of satisfaction; that ‘accidental’ first meeting had gone even better than she could have ever imagined. She had established a rapport with Kali, and left on a high-note as she’d previously planned, but she never could have anticipated that final hug. Playing on the young woman’s sympathy had been an act of pure improvisation, but it had worked like a charm. She could hardly wait to see Kali again and further worm her way into the matriarch’s confidences.

That naive young woman was Sarinia’s key to understanding what was happening at Genthalas... and her mother’s insidious schemes.

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John strode into the Officers’ Lounge, trying to shake off his melancholy mood and focus on preparing for the evening with Helene. He smiled when he saw the two teenagers sitting together at the dining table, Dana leaning back in her chair and letting out a contented sigh.

“Are you sure I can’t make you anything else?” Calara asked, looking at the redhead with motherly concern. “You missed lunch and dinner, so please don’t feel shy if you’re still hungry.”

Dana groaned and stroked her rounded stomach. “I honestly couldn’t eat another bite. That was awesome... thanks, Callie.”

“You’re very welcome,” the Latina said, leaning over to give her an affectionate kiss on the cheek.

“Evening, ladies,” John said, walking over to join them. “It looks like Calara’s been taking good care of you, Sparks.”

“Are you sure you didn’t turn her into a Progenitor?” Dana asked, squinting at him suspiciously as she rose from her chair. “Because she’s doing her damndest to give me a full tummy!”

“You do look cute with a food baby,” Calara said, gently patting her friend’s curved abdomen. She turned to greet John with a kiss. “Hey, John.”

“Thanks for looking after her,” he said gratefully.

“No problem at all,” she replied, collecting the plates and cutlery. With a gleam in her dark brown eyes, she sashayed away. “I’ll see you later tonight...”

He watched in confusion as she left, until the closing kitchen door blocked his view. “I thought everyone knew I had plans with Helene?” he asked the redhead standing beside him. “It was just going to be me, her, and Alyssa.”

\*I’ve been discussing things with Jade and she made some intriguing suggestions,\* Alyssa interjected, sounding entirely too innocent.

\*Alyssa...\* he said, a warning note to his voice. \*I want this to be a special evening for Helene.\*

\*So do we! Just trust us, okay?\* she pleaded, trying and failing to contain her excitement.

Dana was suspiciously quiet, finding her fingernails of particular interest.

“Sparks, do you know what they’re up to?” he asked, nudging her with an elbow.

She looked up at him and tried her best to suppress a smirk. “Maybe.”

“Ah, so I just need to tickle you to find out?” he asked, nodding in understanding. He raised his hands, wiggling his fingers. “Okay, ready when you are...”

“No, don’t! I’ll barf for sure!” Dana protested, hurriedly backing away.

John shrugged amiably. “So you’re just going to tell me instead? Sure, that works.”

The redhead had a conflicted look on her face. “Alright, I’ll tell you if you really want to know, but Alyssa’s going to kill me...”

Jade’s calm voice swept through John’s subconscious before he could say anything more. \*Master, this isn’t about Alyssa trying to make things more kinky. My sisters and I have spent a great deal of time with Helene and we know her very well indeed. Will you let me help you make this very special for her?\*

\*Alright... but why can’t you tell me what you’re planning beforehand?\*

\*Because we want it to be a nice surprise for both of you!\* the Nymph said with a mischievous lilt to her voice.

John sighed in resignation. \*Alright you win, but she better love it.\* He held out his hand for Dana. “Come on, let’s go make an engagement ring.”

“Sure!” she agreed, slipping her hand into his and bouncing along at his side as they left the Officers’ Lounge.

As they stepped into the grav-tube, John pulled his young companion into a hug. “I just thought... have we actually got enough time to make the gemstone we need? I didn’t really think about it until now, but I was hoping it would be ready by about midnight tonight.”

“John... It usually takes at least a week to grow an artificial sapphire,” Dana replied, her tone sombre. “You have to slowly and carefully cultivate them to avoid distortion or fractures in the crystal lattice.”

“But you can do it faster?” he asked hopefully, noticing she hadn’t told him it was impossible.

“Hmm... I have kind of become an expert on crystalline substrates over the last few months...” She winked at him and grinned. “Don’t worry, you’re in good hands. We are going to be very busy for the next several hours though. I’ve got a bunch of components to design, then I’ll have to run a build through the mass fabricators so we can construct a super-powered pressure furnace. Even working at turbo speed, it’s going to take some time to grow the jewel, then I’ll have to cut it to your specifications.”

“I’m all yours. I’ll help however I can.”

She gave him an affectionate squeeze. “Awesome! I love working with you on projects like this.”

They reached Deck Seven and stepped out of the red anti-grav field, before walking hand-in-hand to her workshop. John opened the door, then stepped aside so Dana could enter first. She smiled at him playfully as she strolled into the Engineering Bay, then bounded up the steps to the computer consoles on the podium.

“Make yourself at home,” she called out to him over her shoulder. “It’ll probably take me ten minutes or so to design the kind of pressure furnace we need for this.”

He nodded and turned to glance around her Workshop, curious to see if Dana had been working on anything new. As he wandered through the Mass Fabricators, he spotted the bulky frames she’d used to support the maintenance bots when they were being built. He sighed as he remembered the trio of robots they’d rescued this morning and how heartbroken they’d been when he told them about Faye. She could never have imagined that her wonderful gift of self-awareness for her fellow robots, would lead to them suffering such devastating grief.

Leaning his head against the cool metallic framework, he wondered how he was ever going to get over losing the cheerful purple sprite. Faye had integrated herself into almost every aspect of their lives... and everything aboard the Invictus reminded him of her. As much as he adored all the other girls, he wasn’t sure if losing any of them could have left such a gaping hole behind.

John turned and walked over to one of the storage containers, quietly removing the lid and checking it contained the Crystal Alyssium he needed. Drawing away a small globule of liquid metal, he reshaped it a dozen times, then fashioned it into a disc large enough to fit in the palm of his hand. Picturing Faye’s adorable face in his mind, he remembered the way she used to look at Dana, her cupid-bow lips lifting into the affectionate smile that she reserved for her best friend.

“What number was that one, Faye?” he murmured under his breath, as he recreated her image in the malleable metal.

The next step was to add a bloom of purple that spread out to colour her elfin features. He paused, then gestured towards the disc, adding the finishing touch; a couple of tiny Progenitor runes to her eyes that illuminated them with a soft inner glow. Staring at the sculpture for a long moment, he traced a finger across her cheek. The rendition was perfect. She looked so alive and full of life that he had to close his eyes and turn away, the image too painful a reminder of what he’d lost.

He felt a pair of hands touch his. “John... is that for me?”

Looking at Dana, he nodded mutely, handing her the portrait.

She cupped it in her hand and stared at the face of her friend. A tear rolled down her cheek to splash on Faye, and for a moment it looked like the fallen Lioness was sharing in their grief.

 “Irillith’s got to bring her back... she’s just got to,” Dana sobbed, leaning into John’s chest as he wrapped his arms around her.

“I know... she’s trying, honey,” he whispered in her ear, almost wishing he didn’t know just how impossibly hard that was going to be.

They stood together for a long while in that tender embrace, supporting each other in their grief.

John finally felt a cool hand caressing his arm and turned to look at his Nymph matriarch in surprise, having been too distracted to hear her approach. “Hi, Jade.”

“Hello, Master... hello, Dana,” she said softly, hugging the melancholy pair. Looking at each of them with concern, she continued, “You know how much Faye loved you both; she wouldn’t want to see you in pain like this.”

“I know... but everything keeps reminding me of her,” he said, with a sad sigh.

Dana nodded, resting her head against his chest. “Faye was just so awesome... I miss her all the time.”

“Try to focus on the good memories, not on how much you miss her,” Jade said, gently stroking their backs. “Leave the pain and grief behind on Arcadia. Faye wouldn’t want you to be carrying that with you.”

They nodded, doing their best to follow the Nymph’s advice.

“I’m surprised you didn’t bring Helene down here,” John said looking curiously at his matriarch.

“She could make you feel better, but it hurts her to see you upset,” Jade explained, sympathy in her emerald eyes. “Alyssa and I didn’t think you’d want to start her evening that way.”

“You’re right, that wouldn’t be fair to her at all,” he said, inhaling deeply then blowing out his breath. Smiling at Dana he continued, “We can’t stand around here crying all day, we’ve got an engagement ring to make. How long until the Mass Fabricator batch is finished?”

Dana blushed and looked embarrassed. “I actually haven’t finished the design yet. I saw you looking sad, so I came over to check you were okay... then I realised what you were working on.” She took one last glance at the portrait of Faye, then carefully slipped it into her pocket. “I love it by the way, thank you.”

He kissed the tip of her nose then released her from his embrace. “You’re welcome.”

The redhead smiled and walked back to the podium. “Give me a few more minutes and I’ll be done. We’ll have to kill a bit of time while we wait for all the parts to be made.”

“Aren’t you making the ring out of Crystal Alyssium?” Jade asked in confusion, looking at the delicate band encircling her finger.

“I will, but we also need a high-pressure furnace to grow a synthetic sapphire,” John explained, before darting a glance at Dana. “That’s right, isn’t it, Sparks?”

“Yep. We need to apply shitloads of pressure and heat; that’ll crush the corundum until it turns into a gemstone. It’s a bit like how a naturally occurring sapphire would be formed by a volcano,” the redhead replied, studying a three-dimensional schematic. “If we get the corundum mix just right and set the furnace settings correctly, we should get a jewel that’s an exact match for Helene’s eyes.”

Jade turned to look at John and raised an eyebrow. “Why are you making a machine to do that?”

He looked at her in confusion, then followed her pointed gaze towards Dana. Blinking in surprise, he blurted out, “Sparks... black holes create lots of pressure, don’t they?”

She turned to give him an indulgent smile. “Yeah, but it’s not like we can just toss a lump of ore into one and make a sapphire.”

“Why not give it a try?” John suggested. “You can create the pressure... and Tashana can create the heat.”

Dana’s mouth fell open and she looked at him incredulously. “What? You’re kidding, right? I wouldn’t have a clue how to control it to that degree!”

“Someone was telling me recently that we should rely more on our instincts,” he said, putting an arm around Jade’s waist.

“Yeah... but my instincts are falling about laughing at this dumb idea,” Dana muttered, shaking her head.

\*Tashana’s on her way,\* Alyssa informed them all.

Rolling her eyes, Dana stomped down the steps to the ore container that John had filled with corundum mined from Arcadia. She studied the misshapen chunk of minerals, the colour varying from a yellowish brown to flecked grey.

“Hack me off about... a tenth of this would you?” she requested, jerking her thumb towards the ore.

John walked over to join her and levitated the lumpen mineral from the container. Turning it to get a good idea of its size, he made a chopping motion with his hand and a telekinetic arc slashed through the chunk of Corundum Aluminium Oxide. “Is that enough?”

Dana picked up the piece that clattered onto the deck. “Perfect, thanks.”

Her eyes began to glow as she stared into its structure, determining the exact mineral composition. She looked lost in thought as she calculated the ratios, then left the chunk on her workbench and moved to several other mineral containers to retrieve their contents. Using her multitool, Dana collected tiny samples of each element, then brought them back to add to the pile.

“There... those are the exact minerals in the precise proportions we need,” she replied, eyeing the football-sized mound.

The door slid open and Tashana rushed into the Engineering Bay. “Hey everyone!” she said cheerfully. “Alyssa said you need my assistance to make the jewel for Helene’s engagement ring? Thanks for asking me to help... this is so exciting!”

Dana shook her head at the Maliri’s exuberance. “We’re going to need extremely precise temperatures if this is going to work. Do you know how hot you can conjure fire?”

“Sorry, I’ve got no idea,” Tashana replied with a helpless shrug.

Tapping a finger on her chin, Dana suddenly brightened. “We could use the thermocouple from a flux heat-exchanger to measure it. Give me a second and I’ll hook one up!”

She darted over to a pile of components and found what she was looking for, then bolted it onto one of the empty construction frames so that it was suspended in the air.

“Okay, go for it,” she said, turning to beckon the Maliri pyrokinetic over to the device.

When John and Dana had moved back to give her plenty of room, Tashana held out her hand and a flame burst into life, twisting and turning on her palm as it took on female form. The fiery sprite began to dance, gyrating slowly, its moves seductive and alluring.

“Wow, 1000 degrees right out of the gate!” Dana marvelled, glancing at the temperature reading on an engineering console.

“Hotter?” Tashana asked with an eager smile.

The redhead nodded. “We need 2044 degrees to melt corundum. Crank it up and I’ll tell you when to stop.”

Focusing on the fiery sprite, Tashana concentrated her will and poured more energy into her conjuration. The elemental increased her tempo, hips rolling as she turned in a circle. She paused facing John, her hands gliding over her curves to cup her amber breasts, before turning and glancing at him over a tiny shoulder.

“1600...” Dana muttered.

The sprite dropped to her knees and arched her back, her fiery form flickering as the flames intensified. She kicked up a leg, and span on her side, her scarlet mane blazing as she moved.

“1900... just a bit more.”

Pivoting again, the elemental began thrusting her hips, her hands running over her body as if writhing in passion.

“Okay stop!” Dana blurted out, waving a hand at the Maliri. “2050 degrees... Can you remember that exact temperature?”

Tashana nodded amiably. “Yes, that’s no problem.”

“How hot can you go?” John asked, giving the cavorting sprite a speculative look.

The Maliri grinned at him, then turned to focus on her fiery creation. Her brow furrowed with concentration and she started tapping into the angry blaze deep inside her. The elemental leapt to her feet, throwing her arms up dramatically. Spinning and kicking out with her slender leg, the sprite danced with increasing passion, her movements frantic and furious.

 “3000... 4000... 7000!” Dana exclaimed, yelling to be heard over the roaring flames.

John flinched backwards, feeling the waves of heat pouring out from the blazing sprite, her form turning white hot as she leapt and cavorted across Tashana’s palm. An instant later he was surrounded by a hex shield, instantly protecting him from the heat. He pulled Jade into his arms and stood closer to Dana, enveloping them both in his psychic barrier and shielding the girls from harm.

There was a strangled beep from the console display as the flux heat-exchanger melted, the Crystal Alyssium frame beside Tashana twisting and buckling.

“Stop!” Dana yelled, darting a worried glance at the blazing inferno.

“Oops, sorry!” Tashana said, wincing as she realised she was melting everything around her. She snapped her palm closed, instantly extinguishing the furious sprite. “I got a bit carried away there.”

Dana glanced at the console and shook her head in disbelief. “12,379 degrees before you fried it.... fucking crazy!”

“You’re not even singed,” John said, staring at Tashana in fascination.

The Maliri hopped over the steaming deck plates and sauntered over to join them. “Nope, I feel fine.”

“At that temperature, everything around you should have been incinerated. You must have been containing the heat somehow,” Dana said with a frown. She glanced at the buckled titanium floor and added, “Or most of it anyway...”

“I wonder how that works exactly?” John mused, studying the untouched floor directly beneath where Tashana had been standing.

“Do you melt your runesword when you surround it with flames, Master?” Jade asked, playfully trailing her fingers along his arm to his hand.

He shook his head. “No... it’s covered in fire but it doesn’t actually affect the blade.”

“Why not?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

John frowned in confusion. “Err... I’m not sure why exactly.”

The Nymph gave him an indulgent smile. “Wouldn’t it be tricky to fight with a melted sword? The eldritch flames don’t affect your weapon because you will it to be so.”

“It’s as simple as that?” he asked, studying her curiously.

She nodded in confirmation. “As simple as that.”

Dana couldn’t help looking sceptical. “So you’re saying I can regulate the precise pressure exerted by a black hole just by deciding what I want it to be?”

Tashana laughed and put her arm around the redhead. “You’re already creating one just using your mind... why is that such a leap?”

“I don’t know,” Dana admitted, scratching her head. “I guess I never really put any thought into the ones I’ve created so far.”

“Let’s give it a try,” John suggested, glancing at his hex barrier that was still in existence and dismissing it. He gestured towards the pile of minerals and turned his hand upwards, levitating the materials from the workbench. “We better move away from anything valuable, just in case.”

The girls followed him over to an empty space in the Engineering Bay and he stopped with the collection of elements floating a few feet above the decking.

“Me first?” Tashana asked, glancing at Dana for direction.

“Yeah... melt it down so it’s in a flux state, then maintain that temperature.”

“2050 degrees coming up!” the Maliri exclaimed with an eager smile.

She gestured towards the hunk of minerals, engulfing it in a roiling orb of fire. The flames crackled and roared, heat pouring off the fiery globe as she raised the temperature.

Dana took a deep breath, then the golden coronas around her pupils flared, bathing the inferno in a shining radiance. A black sphere enveloped the conflagration, the light from the fire winking out.

“Did that cancel out your fire?” John asked, turning to look quizzically at the Maliri.

Tashana gritted her teeth but shook her head. “I’m still keeping it going... just.”

John felt the unsettling pull of the pocket singularity, the gravity well tugging at him and everything else in the vicinity. Without even thinking about it, he summoned a telekinetic net and stretched it out in front of them, preventing anyone from being dragged closer.

“I don’t know if I can control it...” Dana muttered with a grimace, as she stared at the jet-black orb.

Hugging her from behind, Jade said softly, “It is your creation, Dana... and yours to control as you see fit. Just think of it as another tool.”

Dana’s eyelashes fluttered and the sphere contracted, applying more pressure inwards. John turned to watch her, but her expression didn’t change as the minutes rolled on, her face a mask of concentration.

“Okay... ease off the heat,” she murmured without opening her eyes.

Tashana nodded, lowering the temperature of her conflagration. While the minerals cooled, Dana kept up the pressure for several more minutes, before finally dismissing her black hole with a hollow-sounding whump.

John glanced at the redhead. “Is that it?”

She paused before giving him a hesitant shrug. “I honestly don’t know. Why don’t you take a look?”

He gestured the orb over, now condensed so that it was no larger than a marble. He could still feel it radiating some heat, so left it suspended in the air above his hand as he stared in fascination.

“The colour’s an exact match,” he marvelled, gazing at the exquisite baby-blue sapphire. As he turned it in the air, he paused and blinked in surprise. Suspended in the centre was a tiny white star, a nimbus surrounding the heart shape at the core of the gemstone. “Dana... did you do that?!”

She stood on tiptoe and peered at the rotating jewel. When she saw the addition, she darted a self-conscious smile at him. “I turned it into a star sapphire instead. Do you like it?”

“It’s perfect!” he exclaimed, pulling her into a fierce hug.

The redhead grinned, then jerked a thumb towards her workbench. “I’ve got some cutting tools. I can shape the stone for you.”

He studied the uncut jewel then shook his head. “We’ve gone this far just using psychic powers, I might as well finish it the same way. Can I take a look at your ring again?”

Dana nodded and started unbuckling her trousers. “Sure.”

He chuckled and rolled his eyes. “Your engagement ring.”

She gave him an impish grin. “Ah, why didn’t you say so?” Holding out her left hand for him to see the stone, she turned it from side to side so that he could get a good look at the Brilliant Cut sapphire adorning her ring.

Nodding, he focused on the newly created sapphire, his eyes narrowing in concentration. Pointing at it with a finger, he made a swiping motion and started to shave away slivers of the gemstone, carefully forming a rounded edge. Each telekinetic slice carved more facets in the precious stone, maximising the light reflecting through. When John was satisfied with his handiwork, the blue jewel sparkled magnificently, catching the eye with its brilliance. Next he gestured to a block of Crystal Alyssium and shaped the delicate band and setting for the gem. He hesitated for a moment, then proceeded to engrave it with ten Lionesses, an exact match for the rings he’d given to his matriarchs and the Invictus crew.

Jade rubbed his back in sympathy, but chose not to comment so as not to upset Dana.

“May I?” Tashana asked, reaching for the ring. After he nodded, she plucked it out of the air and examined it in fascination. “Amazing... we turned an ugly lump of rock into something so beautiful.”

“And only using psychic powers,” Dana reminded the Maliri girl. “I still can’t believe that actually worked!”

“Do you think Helene will mind that it’s not a natural sapphire?” John asked with a worried frown, as Tashana handed him the ring.

The three girls all laughed and shook their heads. “No!”

“When she finds out we made it for her, she’s going to love it even more,” Tashana said with a soft smile, giving him a hug.

\*I’ve got Helene with me; we’ll just be a few minutes,\* Alyssa informed him, already sounding excited. \*You should head up to the Observatory whenever you’re ready.\*

The grins appearing on his companions’ faces let John know that Alyssa had told them too.

“Thanks so much for your help, ladies,” he said gratefully, pulling the trio into a hug. “I couldn’t have done that without you.”

Dana looked thoughtful, having heard his earlier conversation with Helene via Alyssa. “It was an awesome team effort,” she conceded with a smile. “I’m really glad I was able to help.”

Jade slipped out of the embrace and clasped John’s hand. “Come, Master,” she said with eager impatience. “Helene awaits!”

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Rahn’hagon slumped dejectedly in the command chair on the Bridge, staring with unseeing eyes out through the broad windows at the blank expanse of space before him. Ten thousand years ago, his legions had rampaged through this sector, slaughtering the hideously ugly rock-like creatures that resided here. Entire worlds had been obliterated in that catastrophic war, killing billions of ancient Trankarans with every terrifying blast of a Quantum Annihilator.

However, he was not thinking about millennia-old galactic conflicts... his present situation was far more fraught. It looked like Rahn’hagon was going to be facing another lonely night, sleeping by himself in Larn’kelnar’s old bedroom. He’d tried to coax Jessica into another conversation earlier that afternoon, but she was still furious with him and had stormed off with an ear-blistering burst of profanities.

He was still staggered by her complete disregard for his authority. As his matriarch, Jessica should be following his commands immediately and without question, but somehow the brunette had been able to resist his order without batting an eyelid. The only time he’d previously had to enforce that absolute control, was when he’d sent Jessica to Terra while she was pregnant with John. Despite how upsetting she found the thought of them being separated, she had obeyed him back then, which meant her newfound resistance was a recent development.

Rahn’hagon desperately wanted to spirit walk into her subconscious to investigate further, but doing so would require close proximity and there would be no hiding his use of psychic powers. The last thing he wanted to do was further provoke Jessica’s ire, as each hate-filled glare from the brunette made him feel like his heart was being torn from his chest. That meant he had to try to repair their relationship without using his abilities... but he didn’t know where to even start. Rahn’hagon had no experience at dealing with furious females, having spent thousands of years being worshipped by a succession of doting matriarchs and networks of enraptured thralls.

Kalestria had been his first matriarch, joining Rahn’hagon when he began his ascension. She helped him establish the Randarai Empire, before being slain by his first Progenitor adversary at the climax of a close-fought battle. Despite hundreds of years of her catering to his every desire, he’d felt nothing when she died, quickly replacing her with another Randarian female. Her successor, Ikesha, had been his servant for far longer, overseeing countless victories in millennia of constant warfare until she was obliterated by Mael’nerak’s suicidal strike in the Niryean Rift.

Rahn’hagon paused for a second, shocked by an unfamiliar stab of guilt. In his interminably long lifetime, no one had been more dedicated to him than Ikesha, but he’d never mourned her passing in all the time since her death. He could still remember her gazing at him with nothing but adoration, emotions he’d never respected or reciprocated. In return for her faithful service, he’d used her selfishly for thousands of years, then forgotten about her like some meaningless acquaintance.

Feeling even worse, he sank lower in his seat, ashamed of the way he’d treated his matriarchs. Jessica’s tirades had spelled out exactly what she thought about him now and all the different ways he’d wronged her. The estrangement from her parents had not been deliberate, only an accidental consequence of Jessica being with him... but in truth he’d never even given her previous life a second thought.

It was difficult to empathise with Jessica’s relationship to her parents, having never met his own mother and father. However, for a brief moment in time, Rahn’hagon had known what it was like to be a proud father; feelings that had been as surprising as they were enjoyable. He rubbed a hand over his face, knowing the disastrous meeting with John was also high on the list of Jessica’s grievances. Unfortunately, Rahn’hagon knew that reconciling with the bitter brunette would be child’s play compared to restoring friendly relations with his furious son.

Compounding his matriarchal woes, he now found himself banished from John’s territory. He dared not risk provoking his son’s wrath by trespassing, as incineration by that ancient runeblade was a distinct possibility should they ever meet again. Leaving the protective embrace of the Shroud was out of the question, or he’d deliver himself directly into Xar’aziuth’s clutches. That meant being faced with an unenviable future of drifting like a nomad through the stars, skirting around the periphery of his son’s territory... until the impending onslaught of Progenitors wiped John and the Maliri from existence.

Rahn’hagon briefly considered claiming a seed race for himself and aiding his son in the upcoming fight, but the odds of success were astronomically small. It would take him at least a century to recruit enough thralls to regain his old levels of power, but the massed ranks of Xar’aziuth’s underlings would annihilate him long before then. As he considered just how long it would take to prepare for a fight of that magnitude, a nagging thought flitted through his mind.

The ease with which John had hurled him across a room was a shocking demonstration that his son was certainly not lacking in power. John had nowhere near the necessary time to recruit enough thralls for that level of strength, a fact confirmed by his son, who claimed that he only had a thousand thralls in his network. Such a pitiful number would make little to no difference, but there was no denying just how powerful John had become. It was becoming very clear that his son had approached his Progenitor legacy in a radically new way, with spectacular results. Establishing multiple matriarchs, gifting psychic abilities to his Terran thralls and... Alyssa... whatever she was, were all conundrums that Rahn’hagon desperately wished he had answers to.

“I want to go back.”

Rahn’hagon jerked in his chair, whipping his head around to stare at his matriarch in surprise. He’d been so absorbed in his thoughts, he never even heard her approach.

“Jess, how wonderful to see you!” he exclaimed, giving her a hopeful smile.

Jessica narrowed her eyes, glaring at him with tightly-suppressed anger.

His smile faded and he gave her a pained look. “I don’t think that returning there would be a wise-”

“I don’t want to hear any excuses,” the brunette interrupted, a dangerous edge to her voice. “Take me back to Arcadia... now.”

He found himself torn between his desperation to avoid an encounter with a hostile Progenitor and the desire to reconcile with his matriarch.

“Alright...” he said quietly, not wanting to provoke her further. “Give me a moment to prepare the Wormhole Generator.”

Jessica crossed her arms in front of her chest and just stared at him, her cold expression not showing any sign of thawing.

Rahn’hagon activated the jump matrix, assigning an exit point that was a safe distance from any planetary bodies. The initiators fired, creating a swirling vortex in front of the dreadnought, which gradually swept over the black Progenitor vessel. He felt a lurching sensation in his stomach as they were transported across the galaxy, covering hundreds of light years in a matter of seconds.

He heard a retching sound and glanced at Jessica with concern. “Are you alright?”

The brunette was leaning heavily against a console, her face pale. “I forgot how bad that was last time...”

“I’m sorry, I should have warned you,” he apologised, rising from his seat to comfort her. “It takes time, but your body will eventually adjust to the gravitational distortion.”

She waved him away when he approached, a flurry of emotions crossing her features. “Just get us to Arcadia.”

Rahn’hagon paused with his hand outstretched towards her, then reluctantly turned back to helm control and engaged the dreadnought’s engines, taking them in-system. There were no signs of Thrall vessels which might have accompanied a Progenitor into the shroud, giving him a modicum of relief that his brothers weren’t openly invading this quadrant of the galaxy. They could still be lurking in the inky darkness, hidden by a cloaking device, but then so was he... and Rahn’hagon had no intention of giving away his position. The black dreadnought cruised closer to the beautiful green world, until finally holding position in high orbit above Arcadia.

“We’re here,” he told his matriarch, stating the obvious in an attempt to initiate conversation.

“Where’s John’s ship?” she asked, hurrying over to the window to stare at the planet. “Is he safe?”

Rahn’hagon began a sensor sweep of the world below, searching for wrecks on Arcadia’s surface. “There’s no sign of his vessel... but I have found evidence of an orbital bombardment.”

Jessica looked at him with fear in her eyes as she walked to the command chair. “Was his ship destroyed?!”

He hit a rune to display the lush forests of Arcadia and the vast series of craters that the Quantum Flux Cannon barrage had left behind. Focusing on one of the chunks of blasted hull, he zoomed in the image... filling the holo-screen with a close up of black Progenitor armour plating.

“No, it was ours...”

She gasped, staring in horror at the devastation wrought on the planet’s surface. “Rahn... our home!”

“I’m sorry, Jess,” he said quietly, putting his arm around her shoulders. The pangs of loss were surprisingly painful as he added, “I know how hard you worked on those vegetable gardens.”

Jessica heard the forlorn edge to his voice and remembered the many hours they’d spent toiling together under the hot sun. They were memories of happy times with the man she loved... which just didn’t fit with the image of Rahn’hagon as an uncaring monster, no matter how hard she tried to convince herself.

“You lived on that ship for thousands of years,” she murmured, looking up at him with sympathy. “It must be heartbreaking to lose your home...”

He let out a heavy sigh. “It was only really a home for the last forty years. You living there made it special.”

She hugged him, then looked up at him with tears in her eyes. “Why did you do it, Rahn? You destroyed my old life... you broke my parents’ hearts. They died alone, thinking I never cared about them. Why would you do that to me?”

“I never meant to hurt you,” he replied quietly. “My kind have no concept of family... at least, not as you know it. I never knew my parents... in all likelihood, my father was probably one of the Progenitors I killed many thousands of years ago. I didn’t realise that taking you away from your old life... from your parents... would be so traumatic.”

“I don’t even know who I am anymore...” she whispered, looking lost and alone. “You changed my mind and body so much, I’m not even the same person. Why didn’t you warn me this would happen?”

“The changes occurred without conscious thought on my part,” he said with regret. “I’ve lived a very long time and been intimate with countless Randarai females before you. They didn’t change in appearance afterwards and were all overjoyed to be with me, so I never suspected there would be any adverse consequences to us being together.”

Tears filled her eyes and Jessica pulled away. “I loved you so much. You had me convinced that I was special to you... that you loved me... but I’m just the latest in a long line of sex slaves.”

“Jessica... I’m over 22,000 years old. In all that time, I’ve only ever loved one woman... and she’s standing right here before me,” he said earnestly, putting his arm around her again. “My last matriarch was a Randarai thrall who served me faithfully through eleven millennia of brutal warfare. Ikesha worshipped me with every fibre of her being, but I felt absolutely nothing for her. She deserved far better than to be treated with total indifference... but at the time I was Xar’aziuth’s puppet and not in control of myself. I swear to you that I’m not the same man that I was back then.”

She studied him with a terribly conflicted look on her face. “Part of me desperately wants to believe you... but then I remember what you did to John. You tried to kill our son, Rahn!”

Rahn’hagon’s brow furrowed and it was his turn to look conflicted. “I regret that now, but I was not solely to blame for what happened...”

Jessica pointed an accusatory finger at his chest. “You started the fight after John saved us from Larn’kelnar! Why the hell would you attack him?!”

“He lied to me!” Rahn’hagon snarled, unable to rein in his temper any longer.

“And you think that justifies trying to kill him?!” Jessica balked, her own temper flaring. “Fuck off, Rahn! You totally overreacted and ruined any chance I had at building a relationship with my son!”

“Overreacted?!” he yelled back at her, fists clenched in fury. “How dare you judge me? You’re barely sixty years old... try plotting your revenge for 10,000 years, then see how you react when everything you worked for falls to pieces in front of your eyes!”

“But that wasn’t John’s fault!” she protested, hands on hips.

“He tricked me into thinking he’d successfully defeated the Progenitors! I thought it was finally over after all this time... that I could finally settle down with you and live the rest of our lives without fear of reprisals. When I found out he’d been lying all along, I was furious... and I still am! Instead of defeating Xar’aziuth, John left us exposed and vulnerable!”

“That’s bullshit!” Jessica snapped, shaking her head. “Alyssa was listening to everything you two were discussing. She said they never knew you wanted John to hunt down and kill all the Progenitors! How the fuck can you blame him for something he had no idea he was supposed to be doing?!”

Rahn’hagon grimaced with irritation. “But his guide confessed that he was lying-”

She glowered at him and interrupted, “What else did you expect him to do? He spent the last 40 years wondering why we abandoned him when he was just a baby! Rachel said that John was desperate for our approval; he had no idea what you’d been planning and just wanted you to be proud of him, Rahn!”

“He treated me like I was a fool! Even when he realised that I’d intended him to be my secret weapon against the Progenitors, he still said nothing!”

Jessica lashed out and slapped him.... hard.

Rahn’hagon looked at her in shock, his hand going to his cheek. “What was that for?!”

“What the fuck were you thinking, sending our son off to fight all the Progenitors alone?!” the brunette demanded, her maternal instincts kicking in. “I saw what Larn’kelnar was like... that bastard was terrifying!”

“Larn’kelnar was a petulant halfwit,” Rahn’hagon snorted, his lip curling with contempt. “He’d been isolated under the Shroud for nearly a year and let his power decay while he played his ridiculous games. Trust me, he was a pale shadow of his twisted brethren.”

“You mean the rest are even worse?!” Jessica blurted out incredulously.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to make you understand,” he said in exasperation. His voice took on a pleading edge as he continued, “Jessica, we have to get away from here and hide... I don’t want you anywhere near the fighting when they invade!”

She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. “What about our son? John’s not the kind of man to back down from a fight.”

“Then he’s a fool,” Rahn’hagon said with weary resignation. “If he’d struck in secret, like I planned, he could have picked off the Progenitors one at a time without them knowing where he was attacking from. Now Xar’aziuth is enraged and knows John is hiding in the Shroud; it’s only a matter of time before this place is overrun, the Maliri exterminated, and John butchered by a rampaging Progenitor. He stands no chance of defeating them.”

“I’m not going to abandon our son again,” Jessica said stubbornly. “If you want to run away and hide that’s fine... but drop me off on Terra first. I’ll find a way to atone with John for what we did to him.”

“Please listen to reason, Jess,” he implored the brunette, desperate to make her understand the stakes. “There’s nothing we can do to avert this disaster... and I don’t want you to throw your life away for nothing. I know you hate me now, but I can’t bear the thought of losing you!”

She stared at him for a long moment, until her stern expression turned to one of sadness. “I tried to hate you for what you’ve done, Rahn... but being apart from you for the last couple of days has been torture. I do still love you.”

“You do?” he asked, his face brightening with hope.

Jessica nodded and leaned heavily against the nearest console. “I do... I just don’t like you very much at the moment. You hurt my parents so badly and I should hate you for that, but the time we had together on Arcadia were the happiest years of my life.”

“You know that hurting you or your parents wasn’t intentional-”

“I know... and I haven’t forgotten that I was the one that seduced you, so I’m at least partially to blame for what happened,” she interrupted, forestalling him from repeating his excuses. “I dread to think what atrocities you committed when you were under Xar’aziuth’s control... but I do believe that you aren’t the same person you were before. That’s the only reason I’m willing to give you another chance.”

“Really?” he asked, smiling at her with relief. “I missed you so much, Jess... thank you!”

 She held up her hand to stop him as he moved to embrace her. “Wait. There’s one condition...”

Giving her a pained look, Rahn’hagon shook his head. “I know what you’re going to ask, but John banished me from his territory. Even if there was some way to help our son, he’ll kill me if I try to approach him. I saw death in his eyes, Jessica. He only granted me mercy because you interceded on my behalf, but there’ll be no reprieve next time.”

“Please, Rahn,” Jessica said softly. “I’ve never asked you for anything, but this is important to me. He’s my son and I hate myself for the appalling way I’ve treated him. If you really love me, help me try to make it up to our boy.”

Rahn’hagon grimaced, torn between his love for the enchanting brunette and his own sense of self-preservation.

She gave him a coy smile and stepped closer, her hand moving to gently caress his quad through his trousers. “You must be so full, baby... If you help me, we can go back to exactly the way we were before. Wouldn’t you like me to give you some relief?”

He couldn’t help moaning at her seductive touch. “Jess... I don’t think...”

“I’ve been craving your taste, my love,” she whispered, planting fluttering kisses on his throat. “I’ve been so hungry... don’t you want to fill me up? Feel my soft lips sucking on that big thick cock?”

Rahn’hagon nodded, his breathing laboured.

“Will you help me, Rahn?” she asked quietly, massaging his shaft in all the ways he liked.

With a helpless groan of resignation, he pulled her in for a fierce kiss. “Alright, you bewitching temptress... I’ll help you.”

Jessica’s eyes gleamed in triumph, then she dropped to her knees without preamble, frantically unfastening his trousers. She hadn’t been lying earlier... over the last two days, she’d desperately longed to feel his cock pulsing in her throat, feeding her a heavy meal.

“Don’t waste any time,” she insisted, grasping his hot length. “I need it as much as you!”

He nodded, staring feverishly into her eyes as he pushed the head of his cock against her lips. She opened them in welcome, then engulfed his entire length in one long smooth motion. Rahn’hagon thrust at her beautiful face, groaning in relief as she sucked hungrily like she was possessed. As pent up as he was, it didn’t take long to reach an explosive climax and he held her with her nose pressed against his abdomen as he cried out with his release. Jessica moaned wantonly as he throbbed in her throat, his heavy load jetting into her stomach and quickly filling her up. Her eyes rolled back as she frantically rubbed herself, joining him in his release.

When he was finally done, Jessica let him slide out of her clutching throat, then gave him a languid smile as she stroked her cum-packed belly. “That was a huge load, Rahn... you must have been really backed up.”

“Nine days...” he said with a grimace, pulling his trousers up.

“And thirteen hours...” they added at the same time, sharing a smile.

When Rahn’hagon offered her a hand, she straightened and eagerly leaned into his open arms. “It was awful being separated from you. I actually had to cook for myself!”

He chuckled and held her close, a hand gliding over her swollen curves. “I’m sorry, my love. I should have been there to feed you.”

Jessica nuzzled into him, almost purring with contentment. “You’re forgiven... just don’t get captured again!”

Picking her up, he walked over to sit on the Command Chair with the brunette on his lap. Now that he could free a hand, he swiped a finger across the holo interface and activated a Sector Map.

“Is that John?” she asked, pointing towards a red glyph travelling away from Arcadia at high speed.

Rahn’hagon nodded, studying the runic description by the swift battlecruiser. “He’s acquired a Stealth Field Generator for his ship but Larn’kelnar tagged him with a tracking device.”

“Are we going after John now?” Jessica asked, snuggling into him and making herself comfortable.

“He’s travelling too fast,” her Progenitor lover marvelled, astonished that anyone could exceed the maximum velocity attainable using a Progenitor Tachyon Drive. “We’ll have to follow them using the Wormhole Generator once it’s recharged.”

She gave him a tender kiss. “Thank you for agreeing to help. I’m so glad we’re back together.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” he said, brushing his fingers through her hair. “Get some rest, Jess... I plan to ravish you when I’ve recovered.”

 She giggled and closed her eyes, letting out a contented sigh. The tension eased from the brunette as she relaxed, a serene expression on her beautiful face as she fell asleep in his arms.

Rahn’hagon watched her carefully and as soon as she was slumbering away, his eyes began to glow with a soft grey light. He’d never had cause to scrutinise the mental state of a matriarch, having always taken their unquestioning obedience for granted... but he wasn’t going to waste this opportunity to find out the cause of Jessica’s defiance. He delved into her mind, slipping inside her lowered mental defences to examine her personality to see what had changed... then slammed into a shimmering mental shield.

He recoiled in horror, stunned at the discovery of this psychic intrusion in Jessica’s subconscious. Reacting by instinct to protect his matriarch, he drove a telepathic spike into the dazzling white barrier, determined to smash the shield and free her from its embrace. To his amazement, the psychic assault rebounded without making so much as a dent in the white hexagons. During that brief instant where he’d thrown the full weight of his mind against the barrier, he felt the presence of an astonishingly powerful... and distinctly feminine mind.

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“Uh-uh, Rahn,” Alyssa murmured, a sly smile appearing on her face as she reached inside the bathroom cabinet. “You’re not making her forget about John again...”

“What was that, Alyssa?” Helene asked, brushing aside her wet hair as water from the shower splashed over her.

The blonde turned and brandished the bottle of amber liquid she’d just retrieved from the shelf. “I knew we had some massage oil in here!”

Helene looked at her in confusion. “Is John going to give me a massage?”

Alyssa shook her head. “You’ll see why we need this in a moment.” Glancing at Calara she added, “Nearly done?”

The Latina nodded and turned off the shower. “Let’s get you dry, Helene.” As she led the aquatic girl out of the cubicle, she made eye-contact with her girlfriend. \*You’re looking very smug about something. What just happened?\*

\*Oh, nothing to worry about,\* the blonde replied, giving her a look of artful innocence.

\*Alyssa...\* Calara said sternly, echoing John’s disapproving tone. \*What’s going on?\*

Rolling her eyes at her lover, Alyssa guided Helene to the auto-drier. \*I shielded Jessica’s mind to stop Rahn’hagon from dominating her again. He just tried to break through her new mental defences.\*

Calara blinked in surprise. \*You can do that?\*

\*Sure, Athena showed me how. She did exactly the same thing to protect Irillith from John’s guide,\* Alyssa explained as she dried Helene’s luscious body. \*When I freed Jessica from Rahn’hagon’s control, she stopped being so obsessed with him and started feeling guilty for abandoning John. I’m just surprised it took Rahn this long to notice and try to change her back.\*

\*What would it matter if he did? After that fight between John and his father, we’ll probably never see his parents again,\* the Latina said, feeling an outpouring of sympathy for her fiancé at the estrangement from his dysfunctional family.

Alyssa shrugged as she fluffed out Helene’s light green hair. \*They both treated John like shit. If Jessica’s feeling guilty about it, she’s not likely to let Rahn forget what he did either.\*

Calara stifled a rueful laugh. \*You’re so bad...\*

After winking at her playfully, Alyssa turned her attention back to Helene. “I don’t think you need any makeup, you look gorgeous already.” She squeezed some of the massage oil onto her hands, then passed the bottle to Calara. “Now, let’s get you oiled up!”

A soft moan escaped Helene’s lips when the two girls went to work, their agile hands covering every inch of her nubile body as they massaged the oil into her skin.

When they were finally done, Alyssa stepped back and studied her with an appraising eye. “You look positively scrumptious,” she said with a sultry smile of satisfaction.

Calara grinned at their blushing companion. “She’s right, John will love it!”

“Can I see?” Helene asked, her eyes sparkling with anticipation.

The Terran girls led her over to the mirrors in the walk-in-wardrobe, letting Helene see herself in all her glory. Her flawless teal skin had an alluring sheen to it, Helene’s curves glistening as the oil reflected the light.

She drew in a sharp breath as she gazed at her reflection, having never seen herself look quite like this before. “My body looks magical!”

Alyssa nodded as she stood beside her. “You’re a very beautiful girl, Helene.”

Helene studied the naked Terran teenager, comparing Alyssa’s stunning athletic physique to her own. Aside from the colour of her skin, their bodies were absolutely identical, even down to the perky upturned nipples that begged for attention. It was obvious that the Change was now complete.

“I look the same as you now,” the aquatic girl murmured, savouring the wonderful sense of belonging.

“After tonight, you’ll be just like the rest of us girls,” Alyssa said, gently stroking her cheek. “Now, we’ve got you nice and clean, so just one last thing to do then you’ll be all ready for John...” She glanced at her olive-skinned lover. “Did you bring the lube?”

Calara produced the tube and handed it over. “Here you go.”

Alyssa gave her a grateful smile, then stepped behind Helene and made eye-contact with the aquatic beauty in the mirror. “Do you still want to do this?”

Helene returned her smile with an eager one of her own. “Definitely...”

She bit her lip a moment later as the blonde gently caressed her ass, a lubricated finger moving in teasing circles.

Calara stepped in front of the flushed girl and gave her a tender kiss. “You’re like me, Helene. I only had one boyfriend before I met John and I hadn’t done this with anyone before either.”

“I was a virgin back there too,” Alyssa murmured, slowly easing her finger inside the vice-like grip of Helene’s anal ring. “I’m so glad I could give that to him.”

Helene groaned at the unfamiliar intrusion, relaxing her body and enjoying the new sensations. “What about the others?”

“Dana had never done anything with a guy before,” Alyssa replied, smiling as she thought of her closest friend. “Irillith once slept with a male at Geniya station, but anal sex is taboo in Maliri society... she never would have dreamed of doing that before meeting John.”

“Now she’s a woman obsessed!” Calara said with a grin.

“Does it feel that good?” Helene asked, before emitting another soft groan as Alyssa added more lube and another finger.

“It’s the submission that really turns Irillith on,” Alyssa purred in the writhing girl’s ear, as she continued her gentle ministrations. “Wearing a collar and willingly letting John do something so naughty drives her wild.”

“John acts differently when we do it that way,” Calara said with a wistful smile. “You’ll see what I mean very soon...”

Alyssa kissed Helene on the shoulder and carefully withdrew her fingers. “There, gorgeous girl... you’re all ready for him now.”

“Thank you both so much,” Helene said, embracing the pair. “You’ve been so kind to me.”

“You’re easy to love,” Calara said hugging her back.

The trio shared a smile, then Alyssa said, “Come on, I think we’ve kept John waiting long enough.”

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John sat in the middle of the oval bed and darted another glance at the chronometer on the wall. “I never really appreciated just how much hanging around there is before these kinds of sessions.”

Rachel gave him an indulgent smile. “That’s because you’re usually the star of the show and we’re all waiting for your grand entrance.”

“To be fair to Alyssa, normally she times everything much better,” Sakura noted, idly twirling a long tendril of jet-black hair around her finger. She uncoiled it and let the lock fall back on her naked breasts. “I don’t think she was expecting you to rush up here quite so quickly.”

“That’s my fault. We got the engagement ring finished way faster than I expected,” Dana said with an apologetic smile directed at John.

“Can I see it?” the Asian girl pleaded, sitting up eagerly.

“Sure,” John agreed, lolling back and reaching under a pillow at the edge of the bed. “But it’s going to cost you a kiss.”

Sakura giggled and crawled across the bed to join him. “You drive a hard bargain.” She straddled his waist and ground herself against his thickening shaft, her eyelashes fluttering as she moaned at the contact. “Very hard...”

\*Positions please,\* Alyssa requested. \*We’ll be there in thirty seconds.\*

“Oh, I forgot to set the lights!” Dana gasped, bounding across the bed to lower the overhead lighting to a sensual glow.

“Sorry, honey,” John said reluctantly, sitting up with Sakura on his lap. “You’ll have to wait until later.”

The Asian girl gave him an alluring smile. “To see the engagement ring or for something else?”

“It’s been a while since we’ve done any sparring. How about spending some time with me in the Dojo tomorrow?” he asked, knowing how they usually ended each session.

“I’d love that!” she exclaimed, her brown eyes flashing with excitement.

When they separated, John moved to the middle of the oval bed and the girls fanned out to kneel in a semi-circle behind him. They had just settled into their places when the door slid open, admitting Helene and her two escorts. John gazed at the aquatic girl, captivated by the way her oil-slicked skin glistened as it reflected the soft lighting.

“You look breathtaking,” he said, rising to his feet and joining the trio.

Helene blushed at his praise, giving him a shy smile in return. “Alyssa and Calara were wonderful; they helped make me look beautiful for you.”

“We barely did anything,” Alyssa said, kissing her on the cheek. “You were already gorgeous.”

Calara crossed the bed to sit with the rest of the girls, passing Jade who rose to join her fellow matriarch.

“You’ve come so far since we first met, Helene,” the Nymph said with a warm smile. “I knew right away there was something special about you.”

Happiness seemed to radiate off the excited young woman. “I never imagined my life would turn out this way! I love all of you so much!”

“We all love you too,” Alyssa whispered, turning slightly so Helene could look at her audience. “Would you mind if we all stayed to watch you take this final step with John? After this evening, you’ll be our sister... sharing an equal place in our family.”

Helene’s breath caught and she nodded, her expression reflecting fervent emotions.

John watched her curiously, fascinated by her reaction. He remembered Helene’s sad tales of loneliness and rejection; of her being left alone in the communal sleeping quarters, listening and watching the mated pairs around her as she was cruelly ignored. Now the situation would be reversed, with Helene the centre of attention for the entire crew.

“Thank you for sharing this with the girls,” he said, stroking her cheek. “They care about you very much. They’re all just as eager as I am for you to take your proper place in our family.”

Her smile widened and she gazed at him adoringly. “I want that more than anything!”

“This is the final act of submission that lets John know you’re ready to bear his children,” Jade murmured, her fingers reaching out to caress Helene’s toned stomach. “... just like all of us.”

Helene’s pupil’s flared and she gave John a lustful look. “You’ve given me everything I ever dreamed of... I can’t wait to dedicate my life to you and our family.”

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her, Helene crossing her wrists behind his neck as she returned it just as passionately.

When they pulled back, he gazed into her eyes and saw nothing but total devotion. “You don’t really have to do this to become my fiancée,” he said gently. “The girls were only joking before.”

Helene glanced at their enraptured audience, before returning her attention to John. “You were intimate with all of them in every way possible before you proposed... weren’t you?”

It was a rhetorical question as she already knew the answer, but John still nodded.

“Traditions are important,” she murmured, giving him a coy smile. “Besides, I really want to do this... to share something with you that I’ve never done before with another man.”

John groaned at the thought, his hands drifting down to cup her ripe buttocks. Her skin was smooth, slick, and pliant after being prepared with massage oil and felt delicious as he squeezed her rump.

Jade stepped to their side and smiled with anticipation. “Would you let me pleasure Helene while you take her, Master? That way you can just focus on her reactions... and your own enjoyment.”

“It’s up to you, honey,” he said, pulling Helene closer.

She bit her lip and nodded, pressing her trim tummy against the heat of his erection. “Yes please...”

“I’ll leave you in Jade’s very capable hands,” Alyssa purred, kissing Helene before rejoining Calara and the rest of the girls.

The Nymph lay down on the bed and gave Helene an inviting smile as John helped the aquatic girl to straddle her. Helene knelt facing towards her audience, bringing her moist pussy to Jade’s flushed lips, then let out a low moan as the dark-green shapeshifter gently tongued her silky folds.

“That feels wonderful... thank you,” Helene whispered, running her fingers through Jade’s dark silky hair.

Emerald eyes met baby-blue, their shared gaze softening with the intimacy of the moment. Jade wasn’t able to reply as her mouth was busy, but the loving caresses with her tongue spoke volumes.

\*She’s relaxed and ready for you, Master,\* Jade said, her telepathic voice welcoming him to join them.

John also straddled the Nymph, his quad resting on her warm breasts as he knelt behind Helene. He felt Jade shift underneath him, then her hands were cupping Helene’s ass and parting her cheeks so that he could see his target. Lining up the hefty head of his cock against the glistening knot of muscle, he heard a gasp at the unfamiliar contact.

“This is so exciting...” Helene breathed, leaning back against his chest and looking at him over a shoulder.

“For me too,” he agreed, wrapping his arms around her.

There was no need to ask if she was ready, the naked lust in her eyes told him everything he needed to know. With one hand placed on her slim tummy and the other cupping a full breast, he held Helene upright as he pushed forward with his hips. Staring into her eyes, he could see her pupils flare, enlarging just as her body was being stretched open to accommodate him.

She groaned, her eyelashes fluttering. “You’re so big...”

John paused, letting her adjust to the massive penetration. “Does that hurt?”

Helene gave him a feverish look as she shook her head. “No... keep going!”

John kept a firm grip and pushed inside her gorgeous body, watching Helene’s full lips open into a perfect oval as she stared at him in awe. She felt incredibly tight, her well-lubricated passage clenching and releasing around his shaft as he inched deeper. He kept a close eye for any signs of distress, but she just moaned wantonly, gazing at him in adoration as he filled up her belly with his throbbing length.

He kept up the pressure until he felt warm, soft buttocks pressing into his groin, her snug ring wrapped tightly around the base of his shaft. John was about to tell Helene that she’d taken his whole length, when she suddenly shook through a huge climax, her body convulsing with pleasure. He could feel her thighs trembling against him and her hot depths fluttered along the entire length of his cock.

“Oh... John!” she gasped, staring at him in awe.

“That looked like a strong one,” he said with an indulgent smile.

“So strong...” she panted, before screwing her eyes shut and crying out again.

He heard the wet lapping sounds between her orgasmic screams and glanced over Helene’s shoulder, down between her luscious cleavage. Jade’s emerald eyes glinted as she gazed up at him, the Nymph’s expert oral attentions pushing the aquatic girl into a series of rolling climaxes.

\*Enjoy her, Master!\* Jade urged him. \*I’ll keep her at the peak of ecstasy until she can’t take any more!\*

John eased back a couple of inches, then sheathed himself up to the quad once again. Helene’s virgin passage had stretched to accommodate him and was gripping his length as he slowly fucked her with steady strokes. Meeting her awestruck gaze over a teal shoulder, he relished the look of wonder on her face as she accompanied each ass-stuffing penetration with breathy moans of pleasure. He could see that she trusted him with every fibre of her being... the love filling her eyes making John determined to never let her down.

Helene did her best to maintain eye-contact through each orgasm, but it was hard for her in the face of such a sensory onslaught. He was careful to maintain a slow, steady pace, letting her savour every time he fully impaled her, while fighting to stave off his own mounting need for release.

Leaning down to kiss her ear, he murmured, “How does that feel?”

“Amazing...” she cooed, swooning in his arms. “Does that feel good for you too?”

“You’re so tight back there... it’s incredible,” he murmured, flexing his cock and making her groan. “And I love that I’m your first like this.”

She tensed through another intense orgasm, her eyes widening as she cried out in pleasure.

He smiled, brushing a stray lock of hair from her flushed face. “God... you look gorgeous when you do that.”

Helene laughed and gave him a blissful smile. “How can you stop yourself from finishing? This feels so good...”

“Tonight’s all about you, honey,” he said, holding her close.

She paused and glanced down at the Nymph. “Jade, stop a moment please.”

“What’s wrong?” John asked with concern.

“This isn’t your favourite way of doing this is it?” Helene asked, frowning in disapproval.

He hesitated for a moment, then replied, “No... but it’s easier for me to last longer and concentrate on you this way.”

“Please John... I want you to enjoy this as much as me,” she said, leaning up to kiss his throat. “Besides... I’ve lost count of how many climaxes I’ve had already!”

“Eight...” Jade supplied helpfully.

Helene blushed and gave him a self-conscious smile. “See... I don’t want you to think I’m greedy.”

“Don’t worry, Dana’s the greedy one,” Alyssa interjected, with a wink at the redhead.

The aquatic girl laughed along with the others, then looked imploringly into John’s eyes. “Show me... I want to please you.”

“Alright, honey,” he said affectionately, giving her a tender kiss.

He gently eased back, withdrawing his cock from her depths, the sound of Helene’s disbelieving groans accompanying every inch. After pulling out completely, John lifted her off the supine Nymph, while explaining to Jade exactly what he wanted to do. Jade moved up the bed so she was lying in front of them, then opened her arms and legs in invitation.

“Oh, I like this position already...” Helene cooed, resting atop the verdant girl’s glorious figure. “You feel lovely, Jade.”

“My skin warms up when I’m feeling aroused,” the Nymph explained, cradling the aquatic beauty between her splayed thighs. “And I love seeing you two together...”

Helene let out a happy sigh and kissed her bedmate, her sigh turning into a moan as Jade’s long tongue stroked her own. As they writhed on the bed, their impressive breasts pressed together, erect nipples begging for attention and driving each other wild. John took a moment to admire the two exotic alien girls, then moved into position behind Helene, mounting her lovely prone form. He lined up his cock with her anus and applied pressure, the tight muscle puffy and swollen after being opened up earlier.

Clenching the sheet with her fists, Helene’s groan was low and sultry as John regained lost ground. He watched the muscles in her back rippling, the teal hue making her body look like waves lapping over a beach. Her anus was stretched taut around his girth, a dark blue-green circle that steadily enveloped his entire shaft. She was still just as slippery as before, so he was able to make slow and steady progress until fully buried inside her again. Helene’s beautifully rounded bottom was soon moulded into his groin and John lay down on her back, covering her entire body with his larger frame.

“Are you okay like this?” he asked the lovely young woman impaled on his shaft, being careful not to squash her with his weight.

She whimpered with joy. “It’s like being the filling in a love sandwich!”

He laughed and kissed her cheek, then gently lowered himself down on her. “Too heavy?”

“Even better...” she moaned, arching her back to allow him even deeper penetration.

“This feels wonderful, Master,” Jade agreed, planting loving kisses on the girl between them.

John heard a wet squishing sound and looked up, then grinned as he saw that the rest of the girls weren’t idle. They were avidly watching the trio of lovers, their firm thighs now parted as they knelt in a semi-circle, with slender fingers delving lower to heighten their excitement.

“Honey... look,” he murmured in Helene’s ear. “See how turned on you made everyone.”

She tilted her head up and let out a breathy gasp at the erotic sight before her. “Oh my...”

“They’re all remembering me taking them this way,” he said, starting to thrust into her with a steady but insistent rhythm. “Do you want to share what you’re feeling so they can experience that too?”

Helene did as he asked, the enchanting sounds of feminine arousal intensifying.

She suddenly gasped and jerked her head up. “John... I can feel them!”

“What do you mean?” he asked, enjoying the feel of her firm body underneath him.

“The girls!” she exclaimed, staring at the rest of the crew in wonder. With tears in her eyes, she sobbed, “I can feel everything!“

He looked at her with concern, startled by her outburst of emotion.

Before John could say another word, Alyssa knelt beside the lovers. \*Happy tears,\* she explained soothingly, before reaching out to stroke Helene’s lustrous green mane. “This is what I feel all the time, Helene.”

“You all really do love me!” Helene marvelled, her face lighting up with joy. “John... I’ve never felt anything like it... it’s so beautiful!”

“I’m glad you got to feel just how much we all care about you,” he said, pleased to see how happy she was.

Alyssa stifled a giggle and glanced at her fiancé. “Helene... maybe we should discuss this later? You were kind of in the middle of something... and John’s going to get blue balls unless he finishes soon.”

Helene twisted to look aghast at him over her shoulder. “I’m so sorry!”

He laughed and hugged her. “Don’t worry about that.”

She arched her back so she could turn and kiss him. “Take your pleasure from my body,” she encouraged him, a determined gleam in her eyes. “I want to feel you cum!”

John wasn’t going to argue with an offer like that and he took his time kissing Helene as he started thrusting again. Her hips rolled instinctively, desperate to milk him of his load, adding a new level of sensuality to their passionate coupling. She moaned as she ground her pussy against Jade’s nimble fingers, pleasure shooting through her body to match John’s impending climax. Helene’s heated gaze flicked between all the women watching her every move, their beautiful faces showing a heady mix of lust and genuine affection.

Interlacing his fingers with hers on the bed, John stroked smoothly into Helene’s ass, grinding against her soft bottom as he ploughed the limits of her belly. What started as a tingling in his balls become an unstoppable surge and he cried out in ecstasy as he drove forwards as deep as he could go. Helene’s scream of pleasure reverberated with his, echoing around the Observatory as they climaxed together. Her tight ring clenched around him as if trying to prevent his release, but the pressure mounting in his balls wasn’t to be denied.

Helene’s tummy began to swell as he pumped her full of long jets of cum, his shaft pulsing with each hefty spurt. Through his delirium, John felt Alyssa gently massaging his quad, stroking and caressing his bulging sack as he emptied his balls into Helene’s magnificent body. While he crested through his climax, Helene groaned as she expanded, her tummy swelling with the heavy weight of his load. Fortunately, John had enough sense of awareness to lift himself from her back, giving her room to grow as he filled her up.

Jade cooed lovingly as she cradled Helene’s cum-packed stomach, the sphere growing larger to take everything John could give her. When his climax finally ended, John panted for breath, being careful not to collapse on top of Helene. He held himself up with one arm, then gently stroked her curved midriff, smiling at the numb tingle in his balls and the sense of satisfaction at seeing her packed full of his cum.

“That was amazing, honey,” he said, kissing her shoulder as he eased himself from her exhausted body.

She shuddered and groaned as John pulled out, feeling every inch as the ridges of his cock rubbed her internal walls. When they finally separated, John and Helene flopped on the bed, then turned to face each other. The look they shared was accompanied by an intimate smile, the couple finally sated with the pleasure they’d enjoyed from each other’s bodies.

“Sharing my first time doing that with you is something I’ll remember forever,” Helene whispered, tenderly caressing his cheek.

John hugged her, then pulled back to look in her eyes. “Speaking of forever...”

He turned to reach for the ring, but Alyssa had already retrieved it and she handed it to him, a dazzling smile on her face. “There you go, handsome!”

Giving her a grateful nod, he faced Helene again and gently clasped her trembling hand in his. “I can hardly believe that we only met a couple of weeks ago. Ever since that first day, when that beautiful, wide-eyed Abandoned girl was brave enough to leave her old life behind to start a new adventure, you managed to capture my heart.”

Helene gazed at him with complete devotion, enthralled by his every word. “I was in awe of you when I first met the magnificent Master Wizard,” she said, giving him an adoring smile. “Since I’ve got to know you, those feelings have only deepened.”

“I want you to be mine forever, Helene,” John said, raising the sparkling engagement ring to her finger. “Will you accept this humble token of my affection and share eternity with me and my girls?”

Her breath caught and she gazed at the ring, captivated by the glittering blue sapphire with the tiny heart at its centre.

Jade gently kissed her on the shoulder. “You have to say ‘yes’ if you want to join us...”

“Oh, yes!” Helene gasped, nodding vigorously. “I want to be a part of your family so much, John!”

He smiled and slid the ring onto her dainty teal-hued finger. “We all want that, honey.”

“I know, I can feel it!” she gushed, wrapping her arms around him and showering him with kisses. “You won’t regret this, John... I promise! I’m going to be the best lover, partner, and mother to your children I can possibly be!”

“I don’t doubt that for a minute,” he said with a grin, embracing her back just as tightly. “I love you, Helene.”

She paused her kissing for a moment to exclaim, “I love you too!”

John glanced at the girls as he hugged the overjoyed young woman, and saw there wasn’t a dry eye in the room. He was startled to see that even the Nymphs were moved by Helene’s euphoria, the four catgirls watching their friend with wistful smiles on their faces. The jubilant celebration was temporarily halted when Helene’s tummy rumbled and she gave John a wide-eyed look of surprise.

“Ah, the girls didn’t warn you about that?” he asked, placing his hand on her swollen belly. “For some reason you girls can’t absorb my cum that way.”

Jade snuggled up behind the aquatic beauty and said soothingly, “Don’t worry, I’m here to help. Just relax and I’ll siphon this load into your stomach.”

Helene hesitated, then glanced over her shoulder at the Nymph. “I’d like to share with all of you... if you want?”

“You even have to ask?” Dana blurted out with a delighted grin.

As Jade moved closer and gently inserted two fingers into the cum-packed mermaid, John stroked Helene’s tummy. “Are you sure, honey? I thought you’d enjoy a preview of your future; after all, you’re going to be the most fertile mother in Abandoned history...”

She blinked in surprise, both joy and disbelief reflected on her lovely face. “But you said the Abandoned had to stop having so many children!”

“True, but you’ll be living in Maliri Space with me... and the Protectorate desperately needs a population boom.”

Helene beamed at him with delight, then paused and ruefully shook her head. “I can’t tell my people to stop having so many babies and then stay constantly pregnant myself. That wouldn’t be right.”

John smiled at her affectionately. “You never cease to surprise me, Helene.” He cupped her face and gave her a tender kiss. “Don’t worry, I wasn’t encouraging you to be a hypocrite. Even if you practice what we preach and restrict yourself to a small family... perhaps two children in a normal Abandoned lifetime, you’re still going to live forever. Even just having two children a century adds up when you’re going to live for many thousands of years.”

“Oh, John...” she breathed, the doe-eyed look back with a vengeance.

Jade nuzzled into the blissful girl and whispered in her ear, “Do you still want to share?”

Alyssa knelt beside them and stroked Helene’s hair. “Don’t worry about us... tonight is supposed to be about you.”

Helene smiled and glanced back at Jade. “I want everyone to share my happiness.”

The Nymph kissed her shoulder, then brushed the first two fingers of her other hand against Helene’s flushed lips. She opened them obediently, and gazed into John’s eyes as Jade started to pump his sweet-tasting load into her mouth.

“Thank you for letting them be a part of this,” he said gratefully, caressing Helene’s throat as she swallowed. “I love being connected to all of you at once.”

Helene glanced at the girls, who were all suckling on Jade’s undulating tentacles, then smiled around the dark-green fingers jetting cum into her own stomach. With her mouth full, she couldn’t reply, but the happiness on her face spoke volumes.

John felt the psychic network light up in his mind and he lay back with Helene in his arms, savouring the feelings of closeness with all the women in the bedroom. As the girls each came over to congratulate Helene and admire her engagement ring, he smiled with contentment, enjoying a sense of peace that had eluded him since the terrible events on Arcadia.

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Edraele smiled as she woke, then stretched languidly in the warm comfy bed. John had fallen asleep in a jubilant mood the previous evening, prompting joyful celebrations with her fellow matriarchs. Feeling happier than she had been in what felt like months, she’d then enjoyed a night of very pleasant dreams. When Edraele finally opened her purple eyes, she noticed one of the Young Matriarchs sitting on the end of the bed, obviously waiting for her. Kali Loraleth had a pensive look on her face and it was quite apparent she was lost in thought.

“Good morning, darling girl,” Edraele cheerfully greeted the young noblewoman.

Kali’s worried frown vanished in a flash and she smiled back at the Maliri queen. “It’s actually the afternoon now, Edraele. You looked so peaceful, I didn’t want to disturb you.”

Glancing at the chronometer on the wall, Edraele saw that it was now nearly one o’clock. “Goodness me! How decadent to lounge in bed until this hour!” she exclaimed, rolling over to reach for her silk robe.

“Luna said you were up until very late,” Kali said with a look of understanding, referring to Edraele’s time zone shift to mirror John’s waking hours. “I hadn’t expected you to stir until at least noon.”

Edraele cinched the robe at her waist, then studied the distracted girl. “Even so, I’m sorry to keep you waiting. I assume you wanted to speak with me about the new friend you made in the arboretum?”

Kali blinked in surprise, then blushed as she realised the Maliri Queen knew exactly what was bothering her. “You overheard my meeting with Sarinia...”

“Only because you chose to share it with me,” Edraele replied with an affectionate smile. She held out her hand to the seated matriarch. “Come... I want to show you something.”

Nodding obediently, Kali slipped her hand into Edraele’s and followed her from the bedroom.

“I can see that meeting upset you,” Edraele said, giving Kali’s hand a sympathetic squeeze. “Why did you wait until now to speak to me about it?”

“I didn’t want to betray Sarinia’s confidence,” Kali explained, as she accompanied the House Valaden matriarch into her study. “She seemed terrified of her mother and I was concerned I might make the situation worse.”

Edraele took a seat behind the broad desk and activated the holo interface. “Well I overheard everything you discussed, so I already know that my ban of the neural whip is being flaunted.” When she saw her young companion frown with concern she continued, “I won’t pursue the matter until you permit me to do so, Kali. Does that sound like a reasonable compromise?”

Kali nodded, giving her a relieved smile. “That sounds perfect, thank you.”

Turning to glance at the holo-screens, Edraele’s nimble blue fingers danced over the runic interface. An image of a beautiful golden-eyed Maliri woman appeared on the screen. “Now, I presume this is the young lady in question?”

Walking around the desk to look for herself, Kali recognised Sarinia at once. “Yes, that’s her. Was this image taken from the arboretum?”

“Actually, it was recorded hours earlier in Docking Bay Sanev’kalyn.” Edraele expanded the image, revealing Gaenna’s scowling face as she glared at her five daughters. “Your new friend is actually Sarinia Baelora, eldest daughter of House Baelora.”

Kali’s jaw dropped open in astonishment. “No... that can’t be!”

Edraele remained silent, watching the House Loraleth Matriarch with concern.

“She was so nice... I really liked her,” Kali said, slumping against the desk. “I can’t believe I was so gullible... she had me completely fooled.”

“There is a chance that Sarinia was being sincere,” Edraele said, her tone gentle and sympathetic.

Kali let out a heavy sigh and shook her head. “I’m not a complete idiot, Edraele. I know all too well what a matriarch’s eldest daughter is like; I still have nightmares about some of the things Arbane did to me...”

Edraele rose to her feet and embraced the troubled girl. “I’m sorry, Kali.”

“For having a sister like Arbane, or for being so naive?” she asked with a tremulous smile.

“For the pain your sister subjected you to,” Edraele replied, stroking her hair. “Never apologise for being kind-hearted and willing to place your trust in people; I love that about you... and I know John does too.”

Looking more composed, Kali gave her mentor a grateful squeeze. “Sarinia must’ve been planning to manipulate me in some way. I’ll avoid all further contact with her from now on.”

Edraele pulled back from the hug and gently squeezed her hand. “I think that would be wise, Kali.”

The House Loraleth matriarch sighed in resignation. “It might be the sensible thing to do, but I can’t help wondering what Sarinia was up to.”

“I must admit, I’m also curious what Gaenna’s five daughters are doing here at Genthalas,” Edraele agreed, gesturing to the House Baelora matriarch’s stern visage. “She obviously wasn’t happy to see them.”

Kali gasped, her eyes shining with excitement. “I know! I could be your undercover agent!”

The Maliri queen smiled indulgently at the enthusiastic young woman. “Didn’t we just agree that you should be wary of Sarinia?”

“Yes, but I never got the impression that she wanted to hurt me. Besides, if we use Genthalas’ sensors to check her for weapons, I’ll be perfectly safe!”

Edraele considered it for a moment. “Alright, I suppose there’s no harm in you befriending Sarinia to find out why she’s here... but keep your bodyguards close at hand. I don’t want to expose you to any danger.”

“Oh, this is so exciting!” Kali gushed, a broad smile on her face. “What should I say to her?”

“Just make friends and see what crops up in conversation,” Edraele suggested.

Kali hesitated, her brow furrowing. “Actually, now I’m thinking about it... when I mentioned that I was looking forward to Baen’thelas’ return, Sarinia seemed particularly intrigued. It might have been a ruse, but I don’t think she’d heard of him before.”

Edraele raised an eyebrow speculatively. “It seems Gaenna has been keeping her daughters in the dark about events here at Genthalas.”

“What should I tell Sarinia if she asks more questions?” Kali asked, nibbling anxiously at her bottom lip.

“I’ll listen closely and offer advice on what you can disclose,” Edraele suggested, giving the young woman a reassuring pat on the arm. “Who knows, we could be wrong about Sarinia and all this paranoia is completely unfounded.”

Kali eyed her askance. “You don’t really believe that, do you?”

“No, I’m afraid I don’t,” Edraele admitted, reluctantly shaking her head.

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John felt soft lips brush against his own, awakening him with gentle kisses.

“Good morning, my handsome fiancé,” Helene said with a dreamy look in her eyes.

He returned her smile as he roused from his sleep, gradually becoming aware of his surroundings. The teal-hued beauty was partially draped over his left side, with the right occupied by a lissom blonde.

“Good morning, my handsome fiancé,” Alyssa echoed with a grin. “We let you have a lie-in after your magnificent performance last night, but it’s nearly ten and I didn’t think you’d want to sleep the day away.”

John tilted his head back to glance at the circle of pillows and found the rest empty.

“The girls got up about an hour ago,” his matriarch explained. “You were still out for the count and they all had things they wanted to do.”

“Thanks for staying... that was a very nice way to wake up,” John said, slipping his arms around them and pulling them closer. “What’s everyone else up to?”

“Dana’s manufacturing parts to fix the comms array, then she’s going to check out the damage to the Raptor. Calara and Sakura are in the Dojo sparring, Rachel’s back to researching cures for incurable diseases, and Jade’s training the Nymphs how to shapeshift into something other than hot girls,” she replied, ticking off the crew on her fingers. “Last but not least, the twins are on watch duty... they’re both working on the same projects as before.”

He noticed Alyssa deliberately avoided any mention of Faye’s code, then he gave her a reassuring smile to let her know the thought hadn’t upset him. “I doubt the Kirrix would dare trying to attack us, but it’s sensible having the girls there just in case; we’re vulnerable until we’ve checked the guns.”

“Jade actually started the first watch last night after you went to sleep. She showed the Nymphs what to do and they all took it in turns until this morning; the rest of us can keep an eye on the Bridge during the day.”

“Sounds good,” he agreed, stoking their backs. “Does anyone need any help from me this morning?”

Her cerulean eyes flicked to Helene and she gave him a coy smile. “Yep.”

John chuckled and gave the two girls an affectionate squeeze. “Alright... while I’m doing whatever I can to help Helene, would you mind making breakfast? I’m hungry already and I suspect I’m about to work up even more of an appetite...”

Alyssa nodded enthusiastically. “Sure! What do you want?”

“Surprise me,” he said, pulling her in for a kiss.

She let out a happy sigh, then blew them a kiss goodbye as she left the Observatory.

Turning his attention to the aquatic girl in his arms, he rolled Helene over so she was on her back looking up at him. “So... I hear you’re in dire need of assistance this morning?”

Helene blushed and shook her head. “Alyssa was just teasing you... although, I did want to tell you that I had a wonderful time last night.”

He interlaced his fingers with hers, then brought her teal hand up to his lips, kissing her finger beside the engagement ring. “I’m really glad you enjoyed yourself, my lovely fiancée.... but do I have to worry about you being addicted now, like Irillith?”

She struck a thoughtful pose as if seriously considering his question. “I think I’ll need to make love to you normally, so I can compare...”

“It’s important you know which is your favourite,” he agreed, covering her body with his as she smiled and spread her legs for him.

Helene was already wet and eager, so he was able to push deep inside, her pussy fitting him like a hot glove. She moaned softly as he nudged into her cervix, the alluring sound lowering into a groan as her body yielded and let him penetrate her womb.

Placing a hand on her belly, she caressed the swelling created by the throbbing head of his cock. “This just feels so right...” she whispered, gazing adoringly into his eyes.

He nodded, cradling her head in his hands. “It really does...”

She wrapped her arms and legs around him, pulling him down into a fierce hug. “You’ve given me so much love, more than I ever dreamed possible. I promise I’ll repay that someday.”

“You already have, Helene,” he said quietly, kissing away her tears. “I was in a dark place after Arcadia... and I needed your help. Any debt you might think you owe me, you’ve repaid in full.”

Touched by his sincerity, her lips found his and they kissed passionately, thankful that they’d found each other. Helene’s gentle mental caress coaxed him into opening his mind, then they shared minds and bodies, revelling in the profound intimacy of that connection.

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The beep from the cardio-monitors was strong and steady, tracking the heartbeat of the comatose young man lying in the hospital bed. Admiral Laurence Walker glanced across the room at his wife, who had her arm around Anna Newmont, the exhausted blonde having maintained a tireless vigil over her fiancé since he’d arrived at the Unity City Medical Institute. The admiral’s attention then switched to Thomas, who looked peaceful in his repose, oblivious to the distraught women watching over him.

Laurence could still hardly believe that his son had escaped the massacre in the Callopean Shoals. The Brimorians had slaughtered the entire fleet, but by some miracle, Thomas had somehow survived that terrible atrocity. Despite calling in as many favours as possible, the admiral hadn’t yet been able to ascertain exactly what had happened in the battle, but he’d been assured that retrieval of black boxes from the Terran wrecks had begun in earnest.

Admiral Walker smiled to himself with satisfaction. Video footage of his son fighting a desperate last stand would make him a household name, placing him squarely on the fast track to promotions and glory. He could see it now... Commander Thomas Walker, the sole survivor of the Callopean Shoals massacre; a Novaburst and promotion to Commodore were all but guaranteed. He’d just have to coax his stubborn son into accepting a prestigious post in the Citadel... then a decade of service close to the centre of Federation power and Thomas’ advancement into the Admiralty was a certainty.

“Admiral Walker?” a clipped voice asked quietly, interrupting his thoughts. “Might I have a word?”

Laurence turned to look at the man in the high-necked medical coat standing by the doorway and nodded. Leaving his wife with Anna, he followed the doctor into a deserted waiting area. “Have you found a cure for my son’s condition?” he asked, making no attempt to hide his impatience.

Senior Consultant Fitzroy-Ferguson hesitated, irritation crossing his sombre features. “Yes and No.”

“I don’t have time for riddles, Doctor,” the frustrated admiral snapped. “They said my son had a head injury and you’re supposed to be the best neurosurgeon in the Federation! What the hell’s wrong with him?!”

Fitzroy-Ferguson held his hands up in a placating gesture. “Commander Walker’s incapacitation is not due to the lacerations on his scalp. He’s been exposed to a form of exceptionally rare protein-based neurotoxin that has no match in our medical databases. This substance appears to be natural rather than synthetic in origin, but we’re unable to create an antitoxin because the samples are degrading at a cellular level.”

Laurence huffed in irritation. “In English please, doctor! I’m paying you enough not to need a translator on standby.”

Biting back a sharp retort at the admiral’s curt tone, the doctor replied, “Whatever toxin induced this coma is breaking down. At the current rate of decay, it should be completely eliminated from your son’s bloodstream in a matter of days... at which point, we believe he will regain consciousness.”

Lowering his voice, Laurence asked in a gruff whisper, “Will there be any... problems? He’s not going to end up a vegetable, is he?”

“We’ve seen no evidence of neurological impairment. The toxin proved remarkably effective at incapacitating your son without causing any adverse side-effects.”

After sighing with relief, Laurence then frowned in confusion. “How on Terra did my son get exposed to something like that? His ship was shot to hell... but Brimorian particle bolts don’t put people into comas!”

The consultant paused, uncertainty in his eyes as he glanced at the door behind them. “No... they don’t.”

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Alyssa strolled across the Observatory and knelt beside the resting lovers, placing her tray on the bed. “Breakfast is served!”

John helped Helene sit up, then reached for the covered plate. “Oh wow... you’re a lifesaver!” he exclaimed, a broad grin on his face as he saw the steaming pile of hash browns, sausages, and baked beans.

“Thanks for a lovely morning,” Helene said with an affectionate smile, leaning over to kiss his cheek before rising to her feet. “I had a wonderful time with you.”

“Me too, honey. Hey, wait a second... you’re not staying?” John asked, looking up at her with a disapproving frown. Glancing at the well-stocked plate, he added, “There’s loads here... plenty for both of us.”

She lovingly caressed her swollen belly. “I’m going to feed the Nymphs. I’ll share breakfast with them, if that’s okay?”

John kissed her rounded stomach. “Of course. Thanks for a great morning.”

Helene gave him a glorious smile as she waved goodbye, before padding out into the Lagoon with an extra swish to her hips.

\*You made her very happy, John,\* Alyssa murmured, her gaze following the aquatic girl as she seemed to float out of the Observatory.

\*Helene’s a very sweet girl... it would’ve been impossible not to fall in love with her,\* he replied fondly, watching the door slide shut behind Helene. Turning to face Alyssa, he continued, “Thanks for going to all that effort to make last night special for her.”

She sighed wistfully. “Ah, a girl always remembers getting buggered for the first time...”

He laughed and rolled his eyes at the blonde. “Well, she seemed to really enjoy herself... although I think a large part of that was down to her feeling truly accepted as one of us.”

Alyssa lounged on the bed and nodded. “Helene’s more obsessed with you filling her womb... nearly as much as Irillith is with you stuffing her tight blue ass. At least she gave anal a try and earned her ring.”

John was reaching for a knife and fork, but he paused mid-stretch with a frown on his face. “I can’t remember exactly how that idea started, but Helene really didn’t need to ‘earn’ her engagement ring that way. I was going to propose last night whatever happened.”

She gave him a knowing look. “John... it’s me you’re talking to.”

“I’m serious!” he protested.

Sliding her slender fingers along his naked thigh, Alyssa purred, “You’re telling me it wasn’t thrilling to break in Helene’s virgin ass? To see the love and trust in her eyes as she submitted herself to you completely... giving you full access to every pleasure her body had to offer?”

John’s mouth went dry and he blushed as his body reacted to the memory of that look of adoration in the aquatic girl’s baby-blue eyes.

Alyssa noticed of course and gave him a coy smile as she caressed his thickening shaft. “That’s why it’s important. Anyway, you better eat up before your breakfast gets cold.”

He chuckled, then gestured to the extra set of cutlery. “There’s loads here; get stuck in.”

“Finally... I’m famished!” she replied, eagerly reaching for the knife and fork.

After cutting off a piece of hash brown and taking a big bite, John let out a contented sigh. “Compliments to the chef; this tastes fantastic.”

She crinkled her nose at him affectionately, then skewered a sausage with her fork. Sitting together in companionable silence, John savoured his breakfast while watching Alyssa eat. She even managed to make eating look graceful, taking dainty bites before swallowing each morsel.

“This reminds me of us back on the Fool’s Gold...” he said, reaching out to hold her hand.

“Good times,” she agreed, caressing his fingers. “The meals you’ve been cooking on the Invictus are amazing, but I do miss you giving me a full tummy for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.”

“Me too,” John conceded with a wry smile. He studied her for a long moment, then continued quietly, “Alyssa... we went from just the two of us, to you sharing me with a couple of dozen other girls. Do you really not have any regrets about the way things turned out?”

“I thought you were over all that silly guilt nonsense?” she protested, raising an eyebrow.

“I am... but that’s not why I’m asking,” he replied, his brow furrowing. “I just find it hard to believe you wouldn’t have wanted things to turn out differently.”

Alyssa hesitated, then looked into his eyes, a deep sadness reflected in her own. “You’re more perceptive than I give you credit for, John. Yes, you’re right... there are some things I regret.”

“I’m so sorry, honey,” he said, squeezing her hand sympathetically. “Do you want to talk about it?”

She sighed and nodded, a wistful look appearing in her cerulean orbs. “I really wish I hadn’t attacked Tony on Karron... if I hadn’t scared Kelli and Perl, they might be here right now. My cousin, John... just imagine how fucking hot giving her a full tummy would’ve been!”

John blinked in surprise, then groaned when he realised she was teasing him. “Alyssa...”

A huge grin broke out on her face. “Wait, I haven’t finished! Felicity from Oceanus was gorgeous, I should have totally convinced you to recruit her! Then there was Mary Tavistock, that base commander at Port Megara... there was some sizzling chemistry between you two! Plus we can’t forget Madison Wessex... if her sergeant hadn’t been such a lovesick puppy, I would have snapped her up in a heartbeat! So many sexy girls I let get away... ah, what it is to live with a life of regrets.”

“Eat your breakfast,” he grumbled, trying not to laugh.

Alyssa smiled at him affectionately, then stretched out on the bed as she reached out to impale another sausage. “Honestly, I couldn’t be happier with how things have worked out. All our girls are lovely... why wouldn’t I want to pick up more along the way?”

“You’d really just keep recruiting indefinitely?” he asked, giving her a half-disbelieving look.

“Yeah, pretty much... at least until we got to the point where you started feeling overwhelmed,” she replied with a shrug. “If it was up to me, we’d have a few dozen more girls on board and we’d all be knocked up.”

“You know why I haven’t. I want to be there for my kids and I’m already worried that I’m overcommitted.”

“I know, handsome... and I understand,” she said softly, an adoring smile on her beautiful face. “I’m just being honest with you. I love it when you get all protective over some lost little waif; then watching you turn her life around while she falls madly in love with you is hot as hell. Helene was a perfect example... she was so sad and lonely before we picked her up, but now she’s a happy, confident woman with a wonderful future ahead of her. You were able to make all her dreams come true, John... and a gift that precious is something that should be shared.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “Maybe I should trade in the Invictus for a magic lamp? if I’m going to go around granting wishes, that is the traditional mode of transportation.”

She laughed then pouted at him. “Hey, I’m being serious!”

“It’s annoying being teased, isn’t it?” he asked, thoroughly enjoying the role reversal.

With a gleam in her eyes, Alyssa replied, “Yeah... and I remember what happens next!”

He grinned as she pushed him back onto the bed, but his confident expression was wiped away when she summoned a dozen telekinetic hands to help find his ticklish spots. Trying to fend her off, John was roaring with laughter when the door to the Lagoon slid open. Tashana strode inside, a purposeful look on her face, which shifted to hesitation when she saw Alyssa giggling as she mercilessly tickled her fiancé.

John noticed the Maliri’s arrival and quickly shielded himself with a hex barrier, pushing back the glowing telekinetic hands. “Hi, honey!” he gasped, panting for breath. “Everything okay?”

Tashana nodded, watching them from the edge of the oval bed. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt. Let me know when you’re free and I’ll come back.”

“It’s okay, I’ll make him beg for mercy later,” Alyssa said with a wink, dismounting John and patting the bed beside them. “Come and join us.”

Kicking off her shoes, Tashana padded across the bed and greeted John with a kiss. “It’s lovely to see you looking so happy.”

“It’s been a good morning,” he replied, guiding her to sit down on his lap. “Now, what’s on your mind?”

She snuggled into his comforting embrace. “I’ve spent the last couple of hours going through my research notes, but I still haven’t made any new discoveries. There’s still more to go, but I know my work by heart and I’ll be very surprised if I’ve missed anything important.”

“Well, it won’t be too long until we’re back in Maliri Space and we can excavate the thrall facility. Hopefully we can find out more then.”

“Actually... there’s another source of Progenitor lore we could start investigating right now...” she ventured, tracing intricate shapes on his chest with her fingertips.

John looked at her quizzically, then the answer came to him in a flash. “The Kyth’faren citadel on the Astral Plane...”

Tashana nodded, her violet eyes alight with excitement. “Exactly! That place must be a treasure trove of Kyth’faren secrets!”

“The Deep Astral’s very dangerous, honey... it’s teeming with fallen Progenitors. When I went there with Rahn’hagon, it felt like we were sneaking around Xar’aziuth’s backyard,” he muttered, his face shadowed with doubt. “I remember the warding runes my father showed me... but I’m not sure it’s wise to head back there alone.”

Alyssa snorted and rolled her eyes. “As if I’d let you go alone! I’ll be going with you, obviously.”

“I’d like to come too,” Tashana said, a determined set to her jaw. “I’m the closest you’ve got to an expert on Progenitor lore.”

John didn’t even bother attempting to dissuade Alyssa, knowing it was futile, but he paused at the Maliri girl’s declaration. “But you’re not able to Spirit Walk, honey.”

“You could carry me with you,” she quickly countered. “Alyssa took Sakura into the Astral and you did the same thing with Jade.”

He shook his head. “That’s not the same thing. On both those occasions we didn’t stray very far into the Astral Plane.”

Tashana frowned in confusion. “But we were hundreds of light years away when Alyssa saved you from your guide’s trap. She travelled a huge distance to reach you!”

“No, he’s right,” Alyssa interjected, sharing a look with John, before focusing on the Maliri. “The Astral is weird... distance doesn’t work the same way there.”

Seeing the confusion on Tashana’s face, John gave her a sympathetic smile. “It’s hard to understand unless you’ve been there.” He paused for a moment to try to think of a helpful analogy. “Okay, try to picture it like the Lagoon...”

“With the water as the Astral Plane?” she interjected, listening attentively.

“Yes, exactly. The surface of the water is the barrier between dimensions, which we can cross with a Spirit Walk. You can travel just below the surface and easily reach a telepathic mind that might be hundreds of light years away in the Material Plane... but you haven’t actually gone very deep into the Astral.”

Her face lit up with understanding. “That must be why distance is never a problem when you’re speaking to my mother. No matter how far away we are from Maliri Space, in Astral terms, Edraele’s always close by.”

He nodded, pleased that she grasped the concept. “That’s right, you’re getting it.”

“It’s the same with the Ashanath,” Alyssa interjected. “In Astral terms, they’re not far away at all.”

“And if you dive deeper into the water, you travel deeper into the Astral?” Tashana asked, looking intrigued.

“Visiting the Deep Astral is like diving to the bottom of an ocean,” John explained, recalling his trip with Rahn’hagon. “The fortress my father took me to is about as deep as you can get.”

“So how do sub-planes work?” the Maliri enquired, fascinated by the subject.

“Alyssa’s the expert on those,” John replied, glancing at the blonde. “Can you think of a good way of explaining them, beautiful?”

“Actually, they’re pretty easy to understand,” Alyssa said with a nonchalant shrug. “Just think of pocket planes as bubbles in the water. The one I created is right next to the surface, just like the one Mael’nerak built for the Ashanath, and the palace the Kirrix Hive Mind constructed. The sub-plane that Xar’aziuth controls is deep in the astral... which John was being dragged to when he was having his nightmares.”

John hesitated for a moment, then said quietly, “I got the distinct impression that place was just one of the sub-planes under Xar’aziuth’s control.”

“If he’s as powerful as Rahn seemed to think, then I’m sure you’re right,” Alyssa agreed. “Maybe each of them is run by a... boss... like that Progenitor training place was?”

“I sure as hell hope not,” John muttered, shuddering at the thought of that dreadful encounter.

Tashana felt the shiver run through his body and gave John a reassuring hug. “As monstrous as that creature was, it still fell before your might, Baen’thelas.”

He didn’t want to remind the girls that he’d actually been killed in that battle, so just gave the Maliri an appreciative smile. “True... but you’ve seen how lethal those fallen Progenitors are. I can’t risk carrying you with me into the deep Astral if I’m going to have to fight things like that. I’m sorry, honey... I don’t think it’s a-”

“You could teach me to Spirit Walk!” Tashana blurted out, interrupting him. “I don’t want to be a burden either, but I won’t be if I can come with you by myself!”

John exchanged a glance with Alyssa, who nodded her agreement. “We need her help, John. Progenitors and their Thralls seem to speak a variant of ancient Maliri... and Tashana knows the language.”

“That’s a good point,” he finally conceded, turning to look at the eager girl sitting in his lap. “Alright, you can come too... but Astral Projection is an ability, I can’t just teach it to you.” He slipped a hand inside the slit in her long dress and stroked her toned stomach. “If you’re really determined to join us, I’m afraid I’m going to have to give you a full tummy...”

She gave him a coy smile, enjoying the familiar caress of his fingers. “I’m willing to serve my Lord in whatever capacity he demands.” Her eyelashes fluttered as she leaned into his touch. “How about meeting Irillith and me in the shuttle this afternoon? We do have unfinished business to attend to...”

John kissed her, then pulled back to look into her angular violet eyes. “Unfortunately, I’ve already made plans for today. How about tomorrow?”

“As Baen’thelas commands, I obey...” she purred, rubbing against his engorged shaft.

He groaned and reluctantly lifted the smouldering Maliri from his lap. “And I thought you were going to be the nice wholesome twin...”

Tashana gave him a seductive smile. “You brought out my wicked side.”

“Are you still intending to help Dana fix the Raptor this afternoon?” Alyssa asked, watching the flirting with a smile.

“That’s the plan... but first I need a shower,” John replied, getting up from the bed. “Once I’ve done all the shaping she needs, I want to catch up with Calara and Sakura in the Dojo.” He offered his blonde matriarch a hand. “You never told me what you had planned for today?”

“Oh, this and that,” she replied with a dismissive wave.

“Ah, I see... so just shirking off from shaping duties then,” he said with a knowing look. “When you can fit me into your busy schedule, I must start teaching you how to create Progenitor runes.”

“I can’t wait!” Alyssa grinned, then rose to her feet. “For now, I’ll leave you to enjoy your shower.”

Tashana slipped the long dress from her shoulders and let it pool at her feet. Delightfully nude, she padded towards the new bathroom, glancing back at John with a twinkle in her eyes. “Are you coming, Baen’thelas?”

Smirking at John’s startled expression, Alyssa stood on tiptoe and gave him a tender kiss. “I did promise you’d never have to shower alone... have fun, handsome.”

“Thanks...” he murmured distractedly, entranced by the azure siren.

Satisfied with a job well done, Alyssa watched John follow Tashana into the en suite, then knelt down to collect the outfit she’d placed at the edge of the enormous oval bed. Dressing quickly, she headed for the primary grav-tube and eavesdropped on her wards chattering away together, enjoying listening to their varied conversations. The girls tended to forget she could hear them unless she chimed in, allowing Alyssa a fascinating insight into their private lives.

\*Alyssa, do you have a moment?\* Lynette asked, sounding troubled.

\*Of course, gorgeous,\* the blonde replied, her voice calm and soothing. \*What’s on your mind?\*

\*I’m afraid there’s no new development on the ringleaders behind the assassination attempts,\* the Fleet Admiral replied. \*We’re currently trying to identify the ISD operatives involved in the attack on Jericho and hope that’ll give us more leads.\*

\*It’s a shame we couldn’t get to Carmela Moreno before she was blown up,\* Alyssa said with a scowl, as she stepped into the blue anti-grav field. \*Buckingham’s whore must have known all sorts of fascinating secrets.\*

\*Carmela might have ordered the troop transfers to Olympus, but she was obviously set up to take the blame if the assassination attempts failed. I’ve known her for several years; she wasn’t bright enough to plan something like this.\*

\*We’ll be back in T-Fed comms range by tomorrow night, so try to find out as much information as possible by then. The more leads we have, the quicker Irillith can hunt down all the assholes that fucked with us.\* Alyssa’s voice turned glacially cold as she continued, \*Then we’ll round them all up and I’ll have a little chat with them...\*

Lynette sounded equally grim as she said, \*They tried to kill Charles... I want them to suffer just as much as you do.\*

Alyssa stepped out of the grav-tube onto the Command Deck and smiled at the Maliri hacker who was writhing in her seat. As much fun as it was imagining the torments she could rain down on the masterminds behind the assassination attempt, flirting with a horny girl always took precedence.

She sauntered past Irillith’s station. “You look like you’re enjoying your work...”

Irillith’s blush deepened as she returned the friendly wave. “I can’t get anything done when Tashana’s playing with John. You know I can feel everything!”

“I do... and you’re welcome!” the blonde replied, blowing the flustered Maliri a kiss.

Rolling her eyes, Irillith laughed as she returned to her work... or at least she tried to. Her soft moans echoed across the Bridge, accompanying Alyssa as she entered the Commander’s Ready Room.

\*How’s everything going between you, Charles, and Lina?\* Alyssa prompted, the older woman having lapsed into silence.

\*That’s actually the reason I wanted to speak with you,\* Lynette admitted. \*Lina’s eager to join us in bed, but I’m not sure how to proceed...\*

\*As I recall, you had no trouble handling a woman’s body, \* Alyssa teased her, sashaying over to John’s desk.

Lynette smiled at the erotic memories. \*That’s definitely not the problem.\*

\*Charles is having cold feet?\*

\*He still can’t believe his luck... but he’s worried that this is some kind of faithfulness test, so he’s letting me take the lead.\*

\*So what’s the big deal?\* Alyssa asked, sitting down in the high-backed leather chair. \*Bed that sexy redhead and blow Charles’ mind!\*

\*I don’t want to do anything that might stop John from making her a secret Lioness. At the moment, Charles and Lina haven’t even kissed yet... and John’s already uncomfortable about putting her through the Change.\*

\*Crap... you’re right,\* Alyssa conceded with a sigh, slumping in her chair. \*We’ll reach Olympus in just over three days; can you keep things at a simmer between Charles and Lina until then?\*

\*I won’t have any problem keeping Charles more than satisfied,\* Lynette said with well-founded confidence. \*And I’m sure Lina won’t do anything to jeopardise her chance at becoming a Lioness.\*

\*Don’t worry; I’ll do what I can to soften up John,\* Alyssa said with a wry smile. \*He cares about you and Charles a great deal, and just wants you to be happy. It shouldn’t be too hard to persuade him.\*

\*Thank you!\* the brunette gushed, feeling tremendously relieved.

Alyssa activated the holo-interface built into the desk, then turned her attention to several holo-screens that were configured for her use. The first showed John’s financial portfolio, which Alyssa had begun investing in several promising ventures. Her first trades had been to snap up shares in the Voss Corporation when the share-price had slumped after all his extravagant acquisitions. When Henry unveiled his company’s shift to starship construction in the aftermath of the Battle of Terra, the value of her shareholdings had soared, resulting in a massive profit.

The data she was currently reviewing was several days out of date and needed to be refreshed when they re-entered T-Fed territory. The Voss Corporation was still showing an upward trend, if not at quite the same meteoric rate, but Alyssa had no intention of selling yet. A confrontation with the Brimorians was imminent, meaning another huge demand for Terran warships... and a corresponding surge in the value of Henry’s company.

So far, the profits had already funded the 150 million credits Alyssa had siphoned off to create the Lion Foundation. Using brokers, she’d begun purchasing property on planets throughout the Terran Federation, which would soon become Lion Cub orphanages. Once the facilities had been refurbished, recruitment would begin in earnest and she was determined that all candidates would be thoroughly vetted... by Irillith... leaving no stone unturned. Having seen first-hand how employees at the orphanages in Karron abused their vulnerable charges, there was no chance she’d allow history to repeat itself. Scanning through the long list of potential properties on offer, she read the agent’s summary for each one and evaluated each in turn, authorising scores of purchases that would be dispatched when they reached T-Fed territory.

With that business taken care of, Alyssa focused on the third and fourth screens. One of those was filled with staggeringly complex formulas, calculating the exponential increase in gravitic force that a gravity well projected on a body in hyper-warp. The adjacent screen showed a detailed view of the Invictus, tracking the vessel’s physical attributes, such as mass, thrust, and inertia rating. Her fingers swept over the keyboard, updating both the formula on the left and the test model on the right.

After a final perusal of her calculations, Alyssa began a simulation depicting the Invictus with its existing hull plating and Inertia Dampening cores. The white battlecruiser raced towards a dazzling yellow star, moving at impossible speed in hyper-warp. Banking to the side, it attempted to slingshot directly around the star, a manoeuvre only a madman would attempt. As expected, the holographic model of the Invictus buckled and twisted as if clenched by a gigantic fist... then the mangled wreck barrelled straight into the sun.

Tilting her head to one side, her brow furrowed as she stared into the distance. \*Sparks... could you run some tests on icosa-shaped Crystal Alyssium please?\*

Dana hesitated for a second. \*Icosa? What the fuck’s that?\*

\*Twenty-shaped...\* Alyssa clarified.

\*Sure, no problem,\* the redhead cheerfully replied. \*What kind of data do you need?\*

\*The amount of gravitic force the hull plating can withstand before stress fractures appear. If you can estimate some projections of the metal’s increased resilience with additional shapings, I’d appreciate it,\* Alyssa murmured, deep in thought. \*I’d also like to know the inertia dampening rating of the Null-Inertia Gyroscope please.\*

\*I’ll send the specs for the gyroscope over asap,\* Dana replied, sounding lost in thought. \*I might know a quick way to test Crystal Alyssium for gravitic stress... I’ll let you know the results.\*

\*Thanks, Sparks,\* Alyssa said affectionately. \*What would I do without you?\*

\*You’ll never have to find out!\* Her friend hesitated for a moment, then asked, \*What are you working on anyway?\*

\*Oh, not much. Just passing the time...\* Alyssa murmured, returning to her calculations.

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John dressed quickly, pulling on a t-shirt and combat trousers that were the only items hanging up in his section of the new Changing Room. He glanced at Tashana as he pulled on his boots, watching her shimmy into a long dress and admiring her sleek blue physique.

“Thanks for keeping me company in the shower,” he said with a grin when he caught her eye. “That was fun.”

She returned his smile and leaned over for a kiss. “I should be thanking you for being so selfless.” Her fingers idly traced a circle over her flat stomach. “I must admit, it’s very strange to feel this satiated and not have a full tummy.”

“Sorry about that. Helene just beat you to it and I need a few more hours to fill up again,” he said, joining her in caressing her abdomen. “I actually enjoyed just focusing on you for a change.”

She reached down to gently stroke his quad through his trousers. “Who is the next load for?”

“Marika...” he replied, thinking of the warm-hearted tabby catgirl. “I’m focusing on enhancing the Nymphs at the moment.”

“Ah, she’s a lucky girl,” Tashana said with a wistful smile.

They returned to the Observatory and walked around the oval bed as they headed for the Lagoon.

“Are you going back to studying your research notes?” he asked the Maliri archaeologist.

Tashana nodded and tapped the button to open the door. “I don’t think I’ll find anything, but it doesn’t hurt to be thorough. I might have to take care of Irillith first though... she’ll be climbing the walls after the pounding you just gave me.”

John groaned at the delightful images that brought to mind, making the Maliri giggle. She gave him a parting kiss, then sauntered through the door to the Lagoon. Her graceful departure was undermined by nearly tripping over the cleaning robot that was waiting just outside the door.

“Oh, sorry!” she blurted out, skipping to the side. “I didn’t see you there!”

“No apology is necessary,” Little One replied. “I failed to account for your lack of proximity sensors.”

Tashana glanced back to smile at John. “It looks like someone wants to speak with you. Thanks for this morning.”

He returned her wave goodbye, then turned his attention to the small automaton. “Were you looking for me, Little One? I actually wanted to speak with you too.”

“I know,” the robot replied. “Where would you like to conduct this conversation?”

Giving her a bemused smile, he gestured towards the bridge. “How about there, overlooking the Lagoon?”

“That is acceptable.”

John walked to the apex of the bridge spanning the artificial lake, then sat down with his legs dangling over the edge. Little One followed him, her tracks clicking until she stopped by his side.

“There were actually a few things I wanted to chat to you about,” John said, gazing down into the crystal-clear water below.

“Which would you like to discuss first? The location of Meta\_Faye’s physical chassis, the installation of the Observatory’s en suite bathroom, or the current status of the Invictus’ weapon battery checks?”

His mouth fell open in surprise. “Wait, how did you-” He paused and gave the robot a knowing look. “You’ve been listening in on our conversations again, haven’t you?”

“Meta\_Faye believed it to be the most efficient way of meeting the needs of the Invictus\_crew.”

John studied the robot for a long moment. “Actually, there was something more important that I wanted to talk to you about first. How are the three maintenance robots we rescued doing?”

Now it was Little One’s turn to be surprised. The robot’s posture slumped slightly and there was a melancholy note to her voice as she replied, “I had to take them offline to repair several catastrophic system errors.”

“I’m sorry... I probably handled it badly,” he said quietly. “They all wanted to know if everyone was okay after the attack and I just couldn’t lie to them.”

Little One turned, her tracks making soft metallic clicks. She placed a small hand on his shoulder in a very human gesture of sympathy. “The Invictus\_Node\_Collective is very grateful to you for retrieving those we thought lost to us. We will not forget the compassion you showed towards maintenance bots #13, #17, and #22. Thank you, John Blake.”

“You guys are family,” he said giving her a sad smile. “It was the least I could do.”

They sat together in silence for a while, with John reflecting on recent events. He glanced at the robot and realised that Little One was watching him, patiently waiting to continue the discussion.

“You were right earlier, I did want to thank you for helping install the new bathroom,” he said, smiling at Little One gratefully. “There’s a lot of pressure on Dana as our gunsmith, armourer, and Chief Engineer, so I really appreciate anything you can do to help her.”

“The designated purpose of the maintenance robots is construction and repair. They derive a sense of... satisfaction... in fulfilling their duties.”

He nodded his understanding. “Still, I just wanted to let you know how much I appreciate your help. You also mentioned that you’ve already started checking the Invictus’ guns? Aren’t those bots too big to fit in the maintenance ducts?”

“You are correct. The maintenance units are unable to perform this task, but myself and the other cleaning robots are able to negotiate the tunnels with no difficulties. The Collective reviewed the weapon schematics last night and began checking for any damage the ship’s guns might have sustained in the crash. The Tachyon Lances have all been examined: the barrel of topdeck starboard-mount-4 was cracked in the impact and the Eternity Crystal in port-mount-4 has been fractured.”

John’s brow furrowed as he tried to place those guns. “They’re the guns flanking the Observatory, right?”

“That is correct.”

“Nice work,” he said with a nod of gratitude. “We’ll fix them next time we drop out of hyper-warp.”

“The Collective is currently examining the Pulse Cannon batteries. I will submit a status report of our findings to the Grand Engineering Overlord when the checks are complete.”

He smiled when he heard Little One use Dana’s grandiose title, but couldn’t tell from her inflection if she was taking it seriously. “What about the Nova Lances and Singularity Drivers?”

“I reviewed combat footage of the Invictus taken from your recent battles and prioritised weapons based on the frequency of their usage and respective damage output.” Little One hesitated, suddenly sounding unsure. “Was I in error to prioritise the tasks in that way?”

“No, not at all,” he quickly replied, startled by how much thought the robot had put into the work. “You’re right... Calara does tend to favour our beam weapons and defence grid in a fight. If we were attacked by a Kirrix battle fleet, she could wipe them out just using those guns.”

“It was the method that provided optimum combat effectiveness in the quickest timeframe, although it was 27% less efficient than clustering checks based on weapon proximity,” the robot intoned. Her voice shifted slightly as she added, “I’m... glad... that I chose a method that meets with your approval.”

“You’re doing a great job,” he said, his smile touched with sadness. “Faye would’ve been very proud of you.”

The robot froze for a second, then seemed to hold itself higher. “You are kind to say so, John Blake. I do not know Meta-Faye’s reasoning for my creation... but I hope I am fulfilling whatever purpose she intended.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know either. She never discussed the Collective with me or any of the other crew.”

Little One studied him for a long moment, then said quietly, “We moved Meta\_Faye’s chassis to her quarters. Will you accompany me there?”

Surprised by her request, John nodded and rose to his feet. “Of course.”

They walked in silence across the bridge towards the opposite side of the Lagoon. He opened the door for the small robot and accompanied Little One into the corridor as they headed towards the grav-tube. John began to regret agreeing to go to Faye’s old room, his heart feeling heavy in his chest with the pain of his grief. He’d been doing his best to get over her loss over the past few days and he wasn’t sure he could handle seeing her lifeless body again.

Walking with leaden feet, he stepped into the gravity field and rose up to Deck Two, then reluctantly followed Little One over to the door. It opened as they approached and she rolled to a halt beside the entrance, turning to look at him expectantly. With a heavy sigh, John joined her in the doorway and gazed into the softly-lit room.

Faye was on the bed, but she didn’t have her hands folded across her chest as she had when lain to rest on the bier in the Hangar. Instead, the purple sprite was tucked snugly under the covers, lying on her side with her long silky hair spread out over the pillow. As he stared at his fallen friend, he noticed her chest was slowly rising and falling... and for the briefest of moments he felt a flare of hope.

As if sensing his shock and bewilderment, Little One said quietly, “We posed her this way and reactivated her chassis’ respiratory functions.”

Harsh reality returned and with a lump in his throat, John turned to his robotic companion. “Why?”

She looked up at him and he could almost see the sympathy on her face. “Instead of thinking of Faye as being irrevocably lost, I thought you might find it... comforting... to think of her this way. I am aware of your intention to have Irillith restore Meta\_Faye, which would mean she’s simply lying here asleep, waiting until you can reawaken her.”

John leaned against the doorframe and watched the purple sprite, too overcome with emotion to respond. Logically he knew that this was not Faye; that it was simply her remote chassis, and the server that had contained his friend had been destroyed... but his heart didn’t know the difference and still felt a powerful connection to the beautiful girl asleep in that bedroom.

“Thank you,” he finally said, glancing at Little One. “This means a lot.”

“You are family,” she replied, a strange undercurrent to her voice. “It was the least I could do...”

Startled at hearing his own words echoed back to him, he was touched by the small robot’s sincere attempt to ease his pain at Faye’s loss.

Crossing the room, he sat beside Faye on the bed and smoothed aside a wayward lock of hair. “Sweet dreams, honey,” he whispered, leaning down to kiss her cheek.

Faye’s skin was soft and warm against his lips, her breathing deep and even in her repose. His every sense screamed at him that this was a living, breathing girl who was merely asleep... an illusion he desperately wanted to believe.

“Even if Irillith can bring her back, Faye won’t be able to remember any of us,” he said, in a voice thick with emotion. “We had a backup of her personality files on the hacking deck, but everything else was lost. All Faye’s memories of us and our time together... that’s all gone. I’m sorry, Little One... but she won’t be able to remember anything about the Collective.”

“You are incorrect, John Blake,” Little One said, sounding oddly distracted. “The purpose behind the Collective’s existence might be lost, but Meta\_Faye’s love for all of us endures.”

“You’re right... even if she can’t remember us, we’ll always have our memories of her,” he conceded with a sad smile. “When Faye wakes up, we’ll tell her all about the Collective and how much she cared about you.”

“Alternatively, we could simply upload the data,” Little One stated, gazing up at him.

“But that was all destr-...” John’s voice trailed off as he stared in astonishment at the holographic projection that appeared beside the bed.

The image showed Little One picking up a plasma torch in one of her tiny hands.

“Oops! Not that, Little One,” Faye’s airy voice said with concern. Purple hands reached out to pluck the device from her newest creation, then she demonstrated how to activate the tool. “That’s dangerous... it could hurt you.”

“Pretty...” the diminutive cleaning robot declared in the recording, studying the flame in fascination.

Accompanying the recording was reams of data, the three-dimensional stacks of code scrolling down beside the images.

John gaped at it in stunned disbelief, “That was Faye! What is all this?!”

“Smile 58...” Little One said wistfully. “... Maternal Pride.”

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Fleet Commander Lilyana stood in silence on the Bridge of the Galaena Serine, watching the holographic map of Dun Hergrun. The Trankaran world was rust-red, the continents formed from volcanic rock that had cooled millions of years ago. A trio of Nievath interceptors swooped low over the surface of the planet, the Maliri fighters darting nimbly between the squat buildings of Brussulum as they performed a visual sweep of the ominously dark capital city.

“There’s no trace of activity, Fleet Commander,” Krisalei stated quietly, the sadness in her voice reflected in her cyan eyes. “We found landing sites circling the city where the Kirrix abducted the citizens. It appears they depopulated the entire capital, but they have long-since departed.”

Lilyana acknowledged her with a nod. “Return to the fleet, Flight Commander.” She turned to the golden-armoured Maliri female manning the engineering station. “Have you detected any life signs?”

The engineer shook her head. “We are still performing sensor sweeps of the capital, but we’ve detected nothing so far, Fleet Commander. The Iolas Aethyra and the Sylvis Daenala have completed their scans of the neighbouring cities; they report that those settlements are also deserted.”

Ilyana glanced at her fellow assassin. “What was the population of this world?”

“8 million Trankarans...” Almari murmured, appalled by the loss of life.

“We’re being hailed by The Forge of Ukonlir, Fleet Commander,” the comms officer stated. “Warden Brokurlun wishes to speak with you.”

“I wish to speak with him too,” Lilyana said, a bleak note to her voice. She glanced at the System Map, which showed the Trankaran fleet in close orbit of the planet, their ships interspersed with her own. “Put him through.”

The leader of the Trankaran forces appeared on a holo-screen, his slab-like features twisted with grief.

“I’m so sorry, Brokurlun,” Lilyana said, feeling nothing but sympathy for the huge rockman. “I can’t imagine how terrible it must be to see your homeworld like this.”

“Four generations of my family lived in Brussulum,” he rumbled, his voice cracking. “Dun Hergrun was one of the first worlds to fall to the Kirrix... I prayed to the Great Maker for their salvation, but I always knew that there was little hope.”

Lilyana hesitated for a moment, then expanded the System Map so that it was displaying the wider sector of space. Dun Hergrun was close to the border of Kirrix Space and the last of the Trankaran worlds to be liberated from the insectoid menace. The Kirrix forces had clearly retreated once they had captured the population of the planet, but there was still a chance that some of the abducted Trankarans could be saved.

“Have you been able to connect to Dun Hergrun’s security net to find out when the Kirrix departed?” she asked the grief-stricken Trankaran commander. “If they don’t have too much of a head start, we might be able to catch their fleet in time to rescue the surviving prisoners.”

Brokurlun grimaced, then glanced off-screen to one of his Bridge crew. “Transmit the footage you retrieved to the Galaena Serine.” He faced the Maliri Fleet Commander again. “This was taken three days ago.”

A few seconds later the Maliri comms officer acknowledged receiving the file from the Trankaran battleship, then displayed the data for those on the Bridge to see. Grainy images of a vast Kirrix warship appeared, the 2km long vessel blotting out the sun as it lifted off from the surface of the planet. The huge craft had bulbous, segmented protrusions along its length, with a set of strange vanes just behind the bow and iridescent wing-like structures jutting out from the flanks.

“A Kirrix dreadnought...” Lilyana muttered, her own grimace now matching the Trankaran Warden’s.

“Baen’thelas has forbidden us from engaging a Hive Queen,” Almari reminded the Fleet Commander in an anxious whisper.

Lilyana glanced up at the holo-screen and saw the despondent look on Brokurlun’s face. His amber eyes were shadowed in pain, the normally stoic Trankaran devastated at the loss of his family. She turned to the pair of assassins, staring in silence at their opaque faceplates and wondering if they were feeling as conflicted as her.

They’d spent a week fighting alongside the Trankarans, helping the valiant rockmen reclaim their lost worlds, and in that time Lilyana had developed a healthy respect for her courageous allies. They seemed to be aware of John’s orders to the Maliri to preserve their forces at all costs, but had not raised so much as a murmur of complaint. The Trankarans volunteered to act as the vanguard in every boarding action, ensuring that it was always their forces, not the Maliri, who took any casualties. Not only did they not resent this lop-sided distribution of risk, they were endlessly grateful for any aid the Maliri were willing to offer.

\*Let me discuss it with John,\* Edraele said, her telepathic voice breezing through Lilyana’s thoughts. \*Give me a moment... he’s working on something important.\*

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Irillith gaped open-mouthed at the data scrolling down the holo-screen. “I can’t believe it...”

“Will these files let Faye remember who we are?” John asked, pacing nervously by her station.

The Maliri hacker brought up a dozen new holographic screens, each one scrolling through lists of data files.

She pointed to each one in turn. “Dana, me, Shan, Alyssa, Rachel, you... she’s got files on everyone!”

“What are all these records?” Rachel asked, her gaze flicking from screen to screen.

“All of Faye’s interactions with us...” Irillith marvelled, staring wide-eyed at all the data. “She recorded everything!”

Tashana glanced at her sister. “So it’s basically a video archive?”

Shaking her head, Irillith gushed, “No, it’s so much more than that! These are Faye’s memory files! Whenever she spoke to any of us, she recorded the conversation and documented her thoughts and feelings at the time... I had no idea she kept such meticulous records!”

“Holy shit...” Dana muttered, gaping at the central holo-screen. “15 million files!”

John’s brow furrowed in confusion. “She was only created five months ago...we can’t have spoken to her that much.”

Dana shook her head. “That’s not all of us, those are just her files on you!”

“What? That can’t be right!”

Irillith’s fingers swept over the runes on the console, examining the data structure of the smaller files. “They weren’t all conversations... the files marked in green contain audio records of when you actually spoke to Faye. The files marked in blue are when she was just thinking about you.”

“You were on her mind constantly...” Alyssa murmured, slipping her arm around John’s waist and giving him a comforting hug.

“Are you able to read that code?” Rachel asked, looking at the three-dimensional data in fascination.

Before Irillith replied, Little One spoke up, her quiet voice echoing across the Bridge. “May I request that you refrain from examining individual entries. I do not believe Meta\_Faye intended them to be for your perusal.”

“She’s right,” John said, nodding solemnly. “These are Faye’s most intimate thoughts. We can’t violate her privacy like that.”

Dana knelt down beside the tiny robot and wrapped her in a hug. “Thank you so much for sharing these with us!”

Little One patted her on the shoulder. “The Collective will do anything it can to assist you in restoring Meta\_Faye.” She hesitated, then added, “Those archives were precious to her, they helped shape the... *person*... that she had become.”

Dana looked quizzically at the synthetic creature. “How come you didn’t mention the archives before?”

“I was... not permitted to do so...” the robot faltered. She made an odd whirring sound, then continued, “If you will excuse me... I must leave.”

Dana released her and sat back, startled by Little One’s abrupt departure. They all watched as the synthetic creature rolled up the ramp towards the grav-tube, her metallic tracks clicking on the deck. When the diminutive cleaning robot descended out of sight in the red anti-gravity field, John and the girls exchanged concerned glances.

“Shit... did I upset her?” Dana asked, looking worried.

“It wasn’t an unreasonable question to ask,” John replied, giving her a helpless shrug. “Little One has been listening in to all our conversations, so she must have known for days that we’re trying to rebuild Faye.”

“If she wasn’t permitted to share this data with us before, but is allowed to now, I wondered what changed?” Rachel asked, turning to Irillith.

The rest of the group all looked to the Maliri hacker for an answer and she blinked in surprise, then held up her slender blue hands in protest. “Hold on, I haven’t seen so much as a line of Little One’s code! I have no idea what’s driving her behaviour!”

John rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Let’s give her a bit of time to herself, then I’ll go have a chat with her.”

Irillith hesitated then shook her head. “No, let me. Little One might not know what the trigger was, but if she trusts me enough to take a look at her code, I should be able to find out.”

“Thanks, honey,” he said appreciatively, placing a hand on her shoulder and giving it a grateful squeeze. “So... how long will it take you to rebuild Faye now you’ve got these files?”

Her face fell and she looked up at him with concern. “John... they won’t make any difference.”

“What?!” he asked, staring at her in disbelief.

“We’ve got Faye’s core personality files that were backed up on the hacking deck,” Irillith replied, holding up her left hand. She then held up her right hand. “And Little One just gave us the archive of Faye’s memories of the crew...” Putting her hands together, she had a resigned expression on her face as she concluded, “But we need Faye’s application files to activate her. That’s what I’m going to have to build from scratch; all the code necessary to run a fully self-aware Artificial Intelligence.”

“Oh, wait a second!” Tashana blurted out, her violet eyes like saucers. “What about Nexus!”

Alyssa frowned and shook her head. “Nexus is gone... Calara blasted that fucker to bits.”

“Yes, but Mael’nerak built Nexus on Kythshara!” the Maliri archaeologist persisted undeterred. “I’ve been reviewing the Nexus files and there’s footage of him activating that Progenitor Server for the first time. Mael’nerak might have constructed more AI there!”

Dana’s eyes suddenly shone with renewed hope. “She’s right! He might have left an instruction manual!”

“Building AI for Dummies?” Irillith asked with a raised eyebrow.

“If programming an AI is as complicated as you say, Mael’nerak can’t have just made that shit up as he went along,” the redhead said patiently. “There must be prototype servers, experimental test branches, even code archives... right?”

Irillith broke into a grin and looked up at John, “That’s actually a very good point. Mael’nerak must have left research notes on constructing AI; if we can find them it’ll make a huge difference.”

John nodded, unable to disagree with her conclusions. “Finding Kythshara was already our top priority... this just makes it even more urgent.”

Rachel frowned as an unpleasant thought crossed her mind. “Even if Mael’nerak’s palace is still intact after all this time, will any computer hardware still be functional? He built Nexus over 60,000 years ago... surely everything must be broken beyond repair by now.”

“Hey, don’t be such a downer!” Dana protested, scowling playfully at her girlfriend.

“I want Faye back as much as the rest of you,” the brunette insisted. “I just don’t want you to build up your hopes and be met with disappointment.”

“That’s true,” John conceded, putting his arm around Rachel. “Getting Faye’s memory files from Little One was a fantastic stroke of luck, but we shouldn’t get too carried away.”

“Well Nexus was still functional after all this time, or he would have been, if T-Fed scientists hadn’t fucked him up,” Dana said obstinately. “Plus, the hacking deck worked like a charm and that was just as old. I reckon everything on Kythshara will work as good as new!”

Rachel laughed and rolled her eyes at the redhead’s unflagging optimism. The others laughed along with her, apart from Irillith, who had a curious look on her face.

“What is it, honey?” John asked the distracted Maliri.

“There’s a vast amount of data here... it must have taken a considerable amount of time to download this amount of information and taken up a huge amount of storage space,” she mused, studying the scrolling code. “So why did Little One have Faye’s files?”

“It never crossed my mind to ask,” he admitted. “When Little One told me she had Faye’s memories of us, my first thought was to show you girls.”

“Aw...” Dana said affectionately, throwing her arms around him. She was quickly followed by the rest of the women on the Bridge.

He smiled at them, enjoying the group hug. “Even if everything with Kythshara doesn’t work out, this is still a fantastic bit of news. It doesn’t matter how long it takes Irillith to bring Faye back... she’s actually going to remember her life with us.”

“I know, it’s so awesome!” Dana gushed, tears in her eyes.

The others murmured their agreement, getting equally emotional.

John inhaled deeply, then let out his breath. “Well we can’t stand around hugging on the Bridge all day. Let’s leave Irillith to work in peace.” He stroked Dana’s back. “Do you still need my help with shaping?”

Dana gave him an eager nod. “Yeah, definitely. I could use a hand with an experiment for Alyssa.”

\*John, could I speak to you for a moment please?\* Edraele asked, reluctant to disturb him.

\*Of course, honey. What’s up?\* he replied cheerfully, as the girls split up from the group hug.

\*I’m afraid we have a problem with the Kirrix...\*

That wiped the smile from his face and he scowled with anger. \*What’ve they done now?\*

\*There was a Hive Queen leading the forces that invaded Trankaran Space; her fleet abducted all the colonists from Dun Hergrun then retreated into Kirrix territory. Lilyana is asking for permission to hunt them down and rescue the Trankaran captives...\*

\*Absolutely not! There’s no way I’m giving them permission to board a dreadnought,\* John said adamantly. \*We barely survived against a Hive Queen... regular marines wouldn’t stand a chance.\*

\*Almari said that Trankaran marines have been spearheading the boarding actions... Maliri forces would only be accompanying them in a supporting capacity.\*

John went quiet as he considered it, knowing the bloody toll the Trankarans would suffer if they attempted to fight a Hive Queen and her lethal bodyguards. Considering the huge numbers of conventional Kirrix troops they’d also faced inside the dreadnought on Carolus III, he wasn’t convinced that regular forces stood any chance of completing a successful boarding action. He grimaced and glanced at Alyssa.

She shared his look of resignation. \*The rest of the girls are on their way. They’ll meet us in the Briefing Room.\*

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Matriarch Gaenna Baelora stared coldly at her five daughters, enjoying their fear and anxiety. “As much as the sight of you is a grating reminder of your flagrant disobedience, I will not compromise the refit of my ships just to rid myself of your presence.”

“So we are to stay on Genthalas?” Sarinia asked tentatively.

“For the time being,” Gaenna retorted, locking eyes with her eldest daughter. “I have requested that the upgrades to one of my cruisers be expedited in the drydock. The moment that vessel is spaceworthy, you will all be banished to the homeworld.”

“Yes, mother,” the five sisters intoned, hanging their heads and avoiding eye contact.

Gliding over to the contrite siblings, Gaenna stood before them, anger radiating off her in waves. “Mark my words,” she hissed, her voice as chilling as a glacier. “Should any of you disobey my orders again, the consequences will be excruciating... and will last for what’s left of your miserable lives. Am I understood?”

“Yes, mother.”

She glared at them, then pointed imperiously towards the doors of her quarters. “Now get out of my sight.”

Tehlariene wasn’t even able to maintain a dignified composure and she fled in tears between the two bodyguards at the door, desperate to escape her mother’s wrath. Sarinia ignored the angry glances from her other three sisters and followed her youngest sibling out of Gaenna’s suite, into the deserted corridor that led to their own quarters.

“I’ve never seen mother this angry before,” Lieralia faltered, her azure face pale with fear.

Rosanae flinched as she remember Gaenna’s last outburst. “Don’t provoke her again, Sarinia... I’m begging you.”

The oldest of the three shot a venomous glance at her eldest sister. “This was your plan all along, wasn’t it? You tricked us into coming to Genthalas to spread the blame!”

Sarinia sighed in exasperation. “Now you’re accusing me of the same thing the twins conspired to do to Tehlariene? I told all of you not to come, but you insisted!”

“But-”

Rounding on her obstinate sister, Sarinia held a pointed finger in her face. “But nothing, Myrdina! Gaenna views all of us coming here as a mass insurrection against her authority. She would’ve been angry at my unexpected arrival at Genthalas, but with the four of you on Baelora, she would have no grounds to accuse me of dereliction of duty to my House. I would have been free to investigate whatever she’s up to on Genthalas, without being dragged back to her chambers to endure the sharp bite of her tongue and the sharper bite of a neural lash! Do not blame me for your own rash decisions!”

 Myrdina stared wide-eyed at her sister’s finger, then slumped as she recognised the truth of her words. “I wasn’t thinking rationally... Mother was acting in such a bizarre fashion, I just wanted to know what was happening,” she mumbled quietly. Meeting her eldest sister’s golden-eyed gaze, she added, “Have you found out anything so far?”

Sarinia glanced either way down the corridor, then beckoned her younger siblings closer. “I’m attempting to befriend the youngest of the ruling matriarchs. Kali Loraleth’s barely an adult and lacks the hardened edge you would expect of a woman with her station; she has already let slip a few intriguing snippets of information...”

“Such as?” Rosanae asked in a hushed voice, her fear forgotten.

“She is soon to be bedded by one of the border males to begin building her dynasty,” Sarinia whispered furtively.

Myrdina’s brow furrowed in confusion. “What’s so special about that? The first duty of every matriarch is to establish a robust noble lineage for her House.”

“The male is coming here... to Genthalas!” Sarinia revealed, watching as her sisters gaped at her in astonishment. “And his name is Baen’thelas...”

“The righter of wrongs,” Lieralia murmured, suddenly looking unsettled.

Myrdina felt a shiver run down her spine and there was a dark blush to her cheeks. “Who is he? I feel like I should know him...” she said in a breathless whisper.

“That’s one of the things I intend to find out,” Sarinia said, smiling at her co-conspirators. “Now, return to our quarters and try to calm Tehlariene. If she has a breakdown, it will only further infuriate Gaenna.”

Rosanae’s lip curled with disgust. “You can’t seriously be suggesting we be nice to her?”

Sarinia gave her a look of incredulity. “A few kind words or a dozen lashes... is that so difficult a choice?”

Now it was Rosanae’s turn to blush, but this time with embarrassment. “Alright, we’ll avoid upsetting her any further.”

“Thank you,” Sarinia said graciously. “Now, I must go. The sooner we can find out what is happening here the better; we don’t have much time before mother banishes us to Baelora.”

She turned and hurried away, her three younger sisters watching her pensively as she departed.

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Edraele stood by the sweeping window in her office, her gaze following a golden-hulled battleship manoeuvring into Genthalas’ drydock. The House Baeloran vessel was the first to be upgraded in this newly opened section of the enormous shipyard, the facilities having lain dormant for many thousands of years. It should have felt satisfying to see Genthalas restored to its former glory, but she knew the grim purpose behind the massive refit program. Edraele sighed and waited patiently for John and the girls to gather, so that they could decide how best to deal with the fleeing Kirrix dreadnought.

\*Sarinia’s arrived at the arboretum, Edraele!\* Kali exclaimed, interrupting her matriarch’s thoughts. \*Can you scan her for weapons?\*

The Maliri Queen hesitated for a moment. \*Kali, this isn’t a good time. John is discussing the possibility of another battle with the Kirrix.\*

\*I’ll be perfectly safe,\* Kali said confidently. \*I have Avelissa and Renaya right here. If Sarinia’s unarmed, there’s no chance she could hurt me before my bodyguards intervene.\*

Edraele reluctantly walked to her desk and entered the security code for the localised sensor sweep. \*Alright, but if you feel threatened in any way, I want you to promise me that you’ll end the conversation with Sarinia and leave immediately.\*

\*I won’t take any chances, I promise,\* Kali pledged, sounding uncharacteristically sombre. Her tone lightening, she then added, \*So... is she carrying any weapons?\*

The Maliri Matriarch glanced at the sensor readouts, which had not detected any sign of firearms or blades on the House Baelora noblewoman. \*No, she appears to be unarmed.\*

\*See, I’ll be fine!\* Kali said breezily. \*If there’s anything you don’t want me to discuss with her, just tell me and I won’t say a word.\*

\*Alright, I’ll let you know. Just remember your promise, Kali. I would never forgive myself if something happened to you.\*

\*You can trust me, Edraele,\* the young matriarch said sincerely. \*Here she comes...\*

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Sarinia smiled when she spotted Kali in the arboretum. She’d expected to have a long wait ahead of her before the House Loraleth Matriarch made an appearance, but there she was already, looking resplendent with her gorgeous mane of long white hair cascading over her shoulders. Nibbling her lip in an affectation of nervousness, Sarinia slowly approached the young woman, while trying not to appear threatening to the pair of bodyguards that stood vigilant nearby.

“Hello, Kali. I’m very glad you’re here,” she began, looking contrite. “I wanted to apologise for the way I behaved yesterday. I really enjoyed speaking to you and I never should have ended our conversation like that.”

Kali’s anxious expression softened. “I was hoping to meet you again too, Sarinia. I’m so sorry for the way we parted company... I never meant to scare you away by being so intrusive. Will you forgive me?”

“You were only concerned for my wellbeing; there’s nothing to forgive,” Sarinia replied, ending with a warm smile.

The Loraleth matriarch startled Sarinia by giving her another hug, catching her off-guard with the physical display of affection. After instinctively tensing, she relaxed and embraced Kali back, surprised at how good it felt to hold another person in her arms.

When they finally separated, Kali gave her a shy smile. “I keep hugging you and we barely know each other. I forget how aloof everybody normally is... you must think I’m crazy!”

Sarinia found herself captivated by the alluring white-haired beauty and she was quick to return the smile. “I do find it a little strange...” When Kali deflated, she quickly added, “But only because I’m unused to how pleasant it feels to be held like that.”

Kali’s face lit up with delight. “Hugs do feel wonderful, don’t they? I don’t recall my mother ever hugging me, but I’ve had so many in the last couple of months, I honestly believe I’ve become addicted!”

“I can understand why,” Sarinia replied, feeling an unexpected surge of affection for the guileless young woman. She had to remind herself that she was befriending this naive girl to pump her for information, but Kali was so endearing it was impossible not to like her.

Gesturing to the park bench nearby, Kali waited for Sarinia to take a seat before joining her.

“Sarinia, I must confess to not being completely honest with you yesterday,” the young noblewoman said with a rueful frown. “My name is Kali... but I neglected to tell you that I’m-”

“Kali Loraleth, Matriarch of House Loraleth,” Sarinia finished for her, wanting to ease her new friend’s guilt at keeping her status secret. As soon as the words were out of her mouth, her golden eyes went wide with shock... she had never intended to reveal that!

“So you already knew?” Kali asked, looking strangely unsurprised.

Sarinia blushed and nodded. “I must admit that I sought you out, Kali. My name is Sarinia... but I neglected to tell you that I’m-”

“Gaenna Baelora’s eldest daughter?” Kali asked with a knowing grin.

It came as a shock to realise that the youthful matriarch knew exactly who she was, but Sarinia was relieved to see that her new friend wasn’t upset. “It seems we were both hiding secrets...”

Kali gently bumped shoulders with her. “I didn’t find out until this morning, but I can understand why you might want to hide your true identity. House affiliations can make things very... unpleasant at times. I have met your mother before, she can be-”

Sarinia raised an eyebrow and interjected, “A spiteful, vindictive bitch?”

This time it was Kali’s turn to blush. “I wasn’t going to say it quite like that.”

“There’s no need to use honeyed words, Kali. I’m Gaenna’s eldest daughter; unfortunately, I’ve got to know her very well over the past 129 years.”

Kali clasped her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “My mother had a vile temper too.”

“It seems that being a spiteful, vindictive bitch comes with being a matriarch,” Sarinia said with a sardonic smile.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been called that before,” Kali joked, giving her a lopsided grin.

Sarinia’s eyes widened at the inadvertent insult to the House Loraleth Matriarch. “I didn’t mean you!”

Giggling at the distraught expression on the other woman’s face, Kali patted her hand. “I wasn’t offended; I’ll just have to work harder at being mean to everyone.”

“Please don’t,” Sarinia quickly replied, surprising herself that she genuinely meant it.

They sat in silence for a long moment, then Kali turned to gaze into her companion’s eyes. “Sarinia, why did you go to these elaborate lengths to speak with me?”

The eldest daughter of House Baelora studied the younger woman and found herself torn with indecision. All sorts of schemes raced through her head, offering cunning ways to deceive and manipulate... but she was shocked at just how much she wanted to answer truthfully.

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“Hey, thanks for joining us,” John said, greeting Calara and Sakura with a smile as they entered the Briefing Room.

“As if we’d miss it,” the Latina said, leaning over to give him a kiss before taking her customary seat at his side.

“Alyssa said we’re expecting more trouble with the Kirrix,” Sakura said as she sat further down the table. “That you want to board another dreadnought?”

“I don’t exactly *want* to, but unfortunately I don’t think we have much choice,” John replied with a rueful frown. “There was another Hive Queen with the Kirrix forces that landed on Dun Hergrun. They abducted a huge number of Trankaran colonists and have retreated into Kirrix territory. Lilyana wants to track them down and rescue the prisoners... but I don’t think conventional troops are strong enough to tackle a Hive Queen.”

“No fucking way!” Dana exclaimed, shaking her head for emphasis. “Don’t let them even try it, John. That last Hive Queen was one mean bitch!”

“With the civil war kicking off within the Hive Mind, this Hive Queen will only be half as strong as the one we fought on Carolus III,” Alyssa clarified. “Still... I think you’re right. Any marines that board that dreadnought stand no chance.”

“Intercepting the Kirrix fleet is going to mean another diversion,” John said grimly. “I want to reach Olympus as fast as we can, but there’s huge numbers of Trankaran lives at stake.”

“We can’t stand by and let the Kirrix murder millions of civilians,” Sakura agreed, her expression sombre. “This Hive Queen breached Alyssa’s treaty and needs to be punished.”

John stared across the room at the Asian girl, momentarily lost in thought. “That’s what I was thinking. Besides, this might actually be a good opportunity...”

Alyssa winced and looked away, losing some of her colour.

Calara was completely focused on John and missed her girlfriend’s discomfort. She nodded her agreement with him and said, “Dana can pull the Kirrix fleet out of hyper-warp by creating another gravity well, then we’ll be able to launch an ambush. It’ll be a relatively safe environment for us to field test the cloak in combat.”

“The Invictus should be fully repaired and ready for action by then,” Dana informed them. “The bots have been going gangbusters with checking all the ship’s guns. They still need to take a look at the Nova Lances and the Singularity Drivers, but they’ve scanned all our Tachyon Lances and Pulse Cannons. We need to fix a couple of them, but that should only take us a few minutes.”

“I don’t want to waste a lot of time tracking the Kirrix down,” John said, drumming his fingers on the desk. “We know they left Dun Hergrun three days ago; how hard will it be to figure out where they’re going and where they are now?”

Tashana started to reply, but Jade wasn’t listening to what the Maliri was saying. She stared at Alyssa, who looked just as uncomfortable as the Nymph.

\*What was that? John wants to train Sakura to kill him?!\* Jade blurted out incredulously to her fellow matriarch.

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Edraele felt her heart skip a beat and she collapsed in the chair behind her desk. The thought of losing John was too horrific to contemplate, paralysing her with dread. She stared listlessly at the holo-screens in front of her as she listened to the frantic conversation between Alyssa and Jade.

Alyssa couldn’t keep the bleak resignation from her voice as she said,\*John started preparing for this long before you became a matriarch, Jade. Sakura’s his contingency plan... in case his guide wins.\*

\*But he promised!\* the Nymph protested, aghast at the idea. \*No more noble sacrifices!\*

\*This isn’t the same thing,\* the Terran teenager replied despondently. \*If John is defeated, then he’ll be gone forever and the guide will take permanent control of his body. There’s no way John will risk exposing us to that kind of danger, so he wants Sakura ready to execute him if he loses. You won’t change his mind on this, Jade.\*

\*We could keep training him, make John so strong his guide has no chance!\* Jade exclaimed, refusing to give in.

Alyssa’s voice sounded hollow as she whispered, \*What if he still loses? Could you kill him, Jade? I don’t think I could do it... even to protect the girls.\*

\*He’s my Master...\* Jade whispered, her voice in agony. \*I-I can’t harm him!\*

Edraele groaned, trying to fight off the crippling heartache assailing her.

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“My mother’s behaviour has grown increasingly erratic in recent months,” Sarinia finally confided in the young woman sitting beside her. “I came to Genthalas to try to find out the answers to a whole host of puzzling questions.”

“Such as?” Kali asked, listening attentively.

Sarinia laughed and shook her head. “I don’t know where to start. A couple of months ago she gathered the House Baeloran fleets, ventured into House Perfaren territory and never returned. I then discovered that my mother had taken up permanent residence in House Valaden territory, but she absolutely despises Edraele Valaden! What could have possessed Gaenna to reside with one of her most hated adversaries?”

Kali tilted her head to one side and appeared to be waiting for something. After an imperceptible shrug, she replied, “So I take it she didn’t tell you anything about Baen’thelas and the civil war?”

“Civil war?!” Sarinia blurted out, staring at her in astonishment. “She never said a word! What happened and how is your mysterious man involved?”

“My mother never used to tell me anything either,” Kali said with a wry smile. She leaned forward and gave her friend a conspiratorial grin. “Don’t worry, I’ll explain what’s been going on. I doubt you’ll believe me, but I promise it’s the truth...”

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“Oh, I’ve just had a great idea!” Dana gushed, bouncing up and down in her seat. “We could upgrade the Invictus with the Quantum Omni-Phase Scan Array! The long-range sensors would be totally insane... it’d massively increase our chances of finding and intercepting the Kirrix fleet!”

“Are you able to construct one without the black metal?” John asked, looking intrigued.

The redhead nodded confidently. “The power requirements aren’t drastic enough to need that kind of durability; I should be able to easily rewrite the schematics and we can make it out of Crystal Alyssium instead. As for fitting it, that shouldn’t take us very long. Ripping out the old sensor array will only take about ten minutes, then with you or Alyssa using telekinesis to manoeuvre the new one into position, I reckon we can be done in twenty minutes tops!”

“If Alyssa helps you with the array, I could focus on repairing the damaged guns,” John suggested, glancing at the blonde who nodded her agreement.

“Awesome,” Dana said with an enthusiastic grin. “The Mass Fabricators are currently churning out the missing parts for the comms system, but I can stop that and switch over to the Sensor Array if you want to save some time?”

He shook his head. “No, let’s get everything upgraded in one go. I want to be able to talk to the Trankaran and Maliri fleets, so we’ll need the comms systems back online anyway.”

“I can help using the Valkyrie,” Sakura volunteered. “I removed the old Hyper-Pulse generator at Valia Gate, so I shouldn’t have any trouble installing a replacement.”

“Sounds good,” John said gratefully, gazing into her warm brown eyes. “Thanks, honey.”

The Asian girl beamed a radiant smile back at him, delighted that she was able to assist. She looked so happy and at peace, John dreaded the thought of having to lay such a terrible burden on her.

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Edraele listened to John’s thoughts, feeling his conflict at honing such a sweet young girl into a deadly executioner. Sakura was fast, strong, and determined, possessing enough skill and psychic ability to very nearly assassinate Larn’kelnar on her own. With some more training and enhancement, John was convinced she could be made sufficiently powerful to end the possibility of his guide’s tyrannical reign before it ever began.

Edraele wasn’t the only one listening to his innermost thoughts, with Jade and Alyssa, disquieted by his macabre plans.

\*But Sakura loves him!\* Jade protested in anguish. \*She could never kill John!\*

\*Sakura’s the only one that could do it,\* Alyssa said, her words heavy with sorrow. \*She adores John and will do anything he asks of her. As much as it will destroy Sakura to kill him, if John’s guide wins, her sense of justice will force her hand. She won’t allow a megalomaniac to subjugate us and the Maliri Protectorate... billions would die if that happened.\*

Edraele couldn’t even imagine the pain that Sakura would go through if it came to this. Losing John would be horrific enough, but to be the one who was forced to kill him? A tear rolled down her cheek as she slumped listlessly in her chair, her heart going out to that lovely girl.

Wrapped up in her melancholy thoughts, she was heedless of the animated conversation between Kali and Sarinia.

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“It sounds like we have a plan then,” John said, looking around at the girls assembled in the Briefing Room. “When we’ve finished building all the components for the new sensor array, we drop out of hyper-warp for an emergency refit. Once we’ve got the Invictus combat ready, we’ll track down and ambush the Kirrix fleet.”

Everyone nodded their agreement.

He turned to Alyssa and asked, “How accurately do you think you’ll be able to predict their flight path?”

“Well, the good news is that their ships are pretty slow,” she replied, managing to conceal her distress at his maudlin thoughts. “The Kirrix won’t have been able to cover much distance in only three days.”

“And the bad news?” he asked, bracing for her answer.

“I doubt the Hive Queen is planning to stay close to the border, which means they’ll be heading much deeper into Kirrix Space... and I have no idea which system they’re travelling to. The longer we take to intercept them, the harder it’s going to be to track them down.”

He glanced across the table at Irillith. “Could you show me a sector map of the Trankaran border? It’d be good to have an idea what we’re dealing with.”

“Of course,” the Maliri agreed, reaching for the remote and quickly activating a holographic map that floated above the meeting table. Irillith searched for Dun Hergrun in the Trankaran Republic, then plotted the most direct course from the besieged world to the border with Kirrix Space. Moving the focus of the map to that point, she turned and looked quizzically at Alyssa. “How far could they have gone into Kirrix territory?”

“Let me,” Alyssa requested, holding out her hand for the remote.

After Irillith handed it over, Alyssa drew a broad cone which penetrated just over 60 light years into Kirrix territory.

“That’s as far as they could have gone so far.” She entered some more parameters and the arc extended outwards, growing increasingly wider with each increment. “Each of those represents another day of them travelling at maximum hyper-warp.”

“We can’t let that haystack get too big, or we’ll never find the needle,” John muttered, studying the fleet’s escape path across the border. “How long will it take us to get there?”

“Eighteen hours,” the blonde replied, scaling back the flight path projections to show the likely locations for the Kirrix fleet’s present position. She hesitated, then added, “I’ve actually been developing a new method of astro-navigation for improving our hyper-warp speed; if it works, we could get there even faster.”

“That’s great news!” John exclaimed, looking at her with admiration. “The sooner we can get back to Maliri Space, the better. How does this new method work exactly?”

Alyssa paused for a moment, spinning the remote in her hand. “Do you remember I developed that theory on warp tunnelling? By oscillating the hyper-wake, we were able to slingshot around the outer edge of a system’s gravity well and increase our top speed by up to 22%.”

“I don’t fully understand the physics behind it, but I know you’ve been using it to speed up our flight paths for months,” John said, his curiosity piqued.

“Well this is entirely theoretical at the moment, but I’ve been working on combining warp tunnelling with my calculations on intra-system tactical hyper-warp jumps,” she explained, using the remote to bring up her research notes. “We should see some considerable gains in hyper-warp speed.”

Dana stared at the holographic screen and blanched. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me!”

Tashana looked equally stunned, her angular eyes going wide. “You want to slingshot around a star inside its gravity well?! We’ll be torn apart by the gravimetric forces!”

“If we tried it now, yes... we’d be crushed like a bug,” Alyssa replied, looking remarkably calm despite that alarming admission. “However, if we install the Null-Inertia Gyroscope we requisitioned from Rahn’hagon’s ship, we should be able to negate most of the gravitic stress on the hull.”

“Most of the stress?” John noted, raising an eyebrow sceptically.

“I need Dana to test this for me, but I reckon twenty-shaped Crystal Alyssium should be strong enough to prevent the hull from crumpling like tinfoil.”

“You want to twenty-shape the entire hull?!” John balked, staring at her in shock.

“Ideally, yes, but I think we might be able to get away with just reinforcing the bow,” Alyssa replied, her cerulean eyes flicking to the holo-screen. She tapped several buttons and a simulation began, showing a swirling vortex of turbulence building in front of the Invictus. “This is entirely theoretical, but if we enter a system fast enough, the hyper-wave oscillations from flying inside a gravity well should build into a hypervelocity bow wave that will lessen the strain on the rest of the ship.”

John stared at the simulation in shocked disbelief. He considered her proposal for a long moment, then shrugged and gave her a wry smile. “What the hell, let’s give it a try. You were right about warp-tunnelling.”

“Thanks, handsome!” she gushed, leaning over to kiss him on the cheek.

He pulled Alyssa onto his lap and gave her a hug. “The Invictus has deca-shaped armour at the moment... how strong does the rest of the plating have to be?”

“We’ll have to harden the plating so it’s been shaped at least 15 times,” she admitted, grimacing at the thought.

“Okay... so let’s leave reinforcing the bow until later and strip the armour off the rest of the ship,” John said, mulling it over. “We can store all the Crystal Alyssium in the Primary Hangar, then the two of us can reshape the plating for the next... how long do you reckon it’ll take? Three, maybe four hours?”

Alyssa sighed and nodded. “Yep, that should do it. We’ll need to stop again to reattach all the armour, but if everyone helps out, it shouldn’t take too long to get it done.”

“With the entire ship armoured in pentadeca-shaped Crystal Alyssium we’ll be completely impervious to laser fire,” Calara said thoughtfully. “It’s a real shame that won’t make any difference to Thrall Tachyon Lances.”

“Well the energy lattice and the capacitors will still work,” Dana said with an optimistic smile. “Pentadeca-shaped plating is also twenty times more resilient than titanium armour, so we’ll be able to take a load of damage.”

“How tough is twenty-shaped plating?” John asked, thinking about the bow.

“Icosa-shaped Crystal Alyssium is the equivalent of 25 times the thickness in titanium armour... so tough as old boots basically,” the redhead replied with a grin.

“If we plated the entire ship like that, could we take a hit from a Quantum Flux Cannon?”

She frowned, no longer looking so confident. “I think so, but I’d need to do some penetration testing to be sure. Either way, any hits and our armour would be seriously screwed. We won’t be able to trade broadsides with a dreadnought, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“No, just curious,” he replied with a grateful nod.

\*What action would you like Lilyana to take, John?\* Edraele asked, tremendously relieved that he’d stopped thinking about his own mortality.

\*Ask her to accompany the Trankaran fleet and begin pursuit of the Kirrix dreadnought. Having more eyes available will help us track them down, but if they do reach the Hive Queen before us, she’s not to engage the Kirrix forces in combat. Leave the fighting to us, but we’ll need them to handle the civilian relief effort.\*

Edraele immediately relayed that information to her Fleet Commander. \*I’ve informed her of your orders.\*

\*Thanks, honey.\* John patted Alyssa’s thigh. “Alright, let’s get moving. We’ve got a hell of a lot of work ahead of us.”

“I’d like a word with you first, Master,” Jade requested quietly, her emerald eyes boring into him.

Rachel smiled and raised an eyebrow. “I take it this is matriarch business?”

Jade nodded, her stony expression surprising the rest of the girls.

“Thanks for your helpful advice, ladies,” John said, smiling gratefully at the group before looking quizzically at the Nymph.

All the girls except Alyssa and Jade got up to leave the room, departing with a kiss on John’s cheek and a worried glance at the seated trio.

When they were alone, John studied the agitated Nymph with concern. “What’s the matter, honey?”

“You promised you were going to stop being a bonehead!” she exclaimed, unable to hold back the anger and pain.

Thousands of light years away in Genthalas station, Edraele groaned, rubbing at her temples.

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Sarinia stared in stunned disbelief at the Maliri Matriarch beside her, too shocked to even respond.

“Are you alright?” Kali asked with concern, squeezing her hand. “You haven’t said a word.”

“I-I don’t know what to say,” she stammered, her eyes like saucers. “You have to be lying... but you’re not, are you?”

“Everything I told you was the truth,” Kali said gently. “I know it must be a lot to take in.”

Sarinia choked back a near-hysterical laugh. “Why would you think that? Mael’nerak was real... Baen’thelas is another ‘Progenitor’... Edraele is now Queen... I hear such things all the time!”

Kali shook her head. “Baen’thelas is nothing like Mael’nerak or the other Progenitors; he’s very kind, not cruel.”

A delicious shiver ran down Sarinia’s spine when she heard his name again from Kali’s lips. “Yet he now leads the Maliri *Protectorate* with Edraele as his Queen and consort?”

“He prefers not to actively lead us except in times of war,” Kali agreed, repeating what she’d said earlier.

“And your beautiful hair...” Sarinia said, raising her hand to touch it, then freezing and darting an anxious glance at the suddenly-tense bodyguards.

Kali nodded to them, then smiled at her companion. “Go ahead, it’s alright.”

“I wondered what the change in colour signified... and the length,” Sarinia murmured, feeling the glorious silken tresses slip through her fingertips. “But I never could have guessed the real reason.”

Unable to stop herself blushing, Kali let out a wistful sigh. “He’s so wonderful, Sarinia... I can’t even begin to describe the ecstasy I felt in his arms.”

“Has my mother...?”

“No... but I’m certain Gaenna longs to be with him,” Kali replied with a giggle. “Edraele has a somewhat strained relationship with the older matriarchs, but she’s been making all sorts of bargains on his behalf.”

“Vrysandral Spice...” Sarinia murmured, the pieces of the puzzle falling into place.

“I’m not privy to the details, but I know he wants to open up trade and improve relations between all the Houses.”

Shaking her head in disbelief, Sarinia muttered, “What finer way than to sire an heir with all the matriarchs...”

“Actually, I don’t think you’re about to gain another sibling,” Kali said with a reassuring smile. “Baen’thelas is very selective about who will become the mothers of his children. So far, only the Young Matriarchs are pregnant with his babies.”

“The Young Matriarchs? You say that with special significance, as if it were a title.”

“Oh, it’s what he calls the matriarchs who are closest to him,” Kali explained. “Edraele assassinated our mothers and elder sisters, choosing us to replace them as matriarchs of our Houses. Except Tsarra of course, her family had already been killed, but I think John was impressed with her because she’s very clever and led Tashana’s rebellion. At the moment, Tsarra Perfaren, Nyrelle Aeberos, Valani Naestina, and Leena Ghilwen are all expecting... and they’re all really lovely girls. I care more about them than I ever did my own family.”

“And then there’s you...” Sarinia said, giving her an affectionate smile. “I can see why you were chosen to be one of the select few. You’re by far the nicest person I’ve ever met.”

“Thank you,” Kali replied, touched by her sincerity. “Baen’thelas intends to father children with Edraele as well, once the Progenitor threat is eliminated. For the time being, he’s simply restored her youth, but he will get her pregnant eventually.”

Sarinia’s ears pricked up at that, but she managed to keep her expression neutral. “My mother has white hair too, but she still looks her age...”

“As far as I’m aware, Baen’thelas only plans to grant immortality to those of us with long hair,” Kali continued, oblivious to her new friend’s stunned reaction to that news. “He might make the older matriarchs young and beautiful like he did with Edraele, but they’ll need to stop being so horrible to everyone before he even thinks about letting them stay as House Matriarchs forever.”

Sarinia tried not to blanch at that appalling revelation. Gaenna Baelora, returned to a nubile 30 year-old and given a new lease of life. Three more centuries of her mother ruling as matriarch of House Baelora... and that was a best-case scenario. This Baen’thelas might even gift Gaenna with immortality, so that she could rule her House for countless millennia. Sarinia shuddered, barely able to contemplate the hideous thought without being overcome by nausea.

“But for the time being, the Council of Matriarchs is focusing on upgrading all our fleets in case of a Progenitor attack,” Kali explained, gazing up through the crystal ceiling at the warships in formation around Genthalas. “We also might have to intervene to stop the Brimorian invasion of the Kintark Empire, so things are likely to stay pretty busy around here. I just hope Baen’thelas returns soon... I really miss him.”

Trying to regain control of her scrambled wits, Sarinia gave her a strained smile. “I think you’ll make a lovely mother, Kali. Far better than Shaedra ever was to you.”

“You’re just so nice,” Kali gushed, her beautiful face lighting up with a lovely smile. “I never would’ve imagined that Gaenna was your mother; the two of you are nothing alike.”

Sarinia stared away into the distance and faked a shiver. “I sincerely hope not...”

Clasping her hand again, Kali leaned forward and said urgently, “Sarinia, listen to me. Edraele is Queen of the entire Protectorate and she was furious when she heard that Gaenna ignored her ban of the neural whip. She hasn’t taken your mother to task yet, and will not until you grant me permission to intervene, but Edraele is more than capable of making Gaenna rue the day that she flouted one of her edicts.”

Her mind racing, Sarinia gripped Kali’s hand as if in fear. “Are you certain that there will be no repercussions for me or my sisters?”

Kali giggled and nodded. “I’ve seen Edraele get angry before; trust me, Gaenna will never want to risk provoking her ire again!”

With a hesitant nod, Sarinia met Kali’s blue-eyed gaze. “Would you speak to the Queen on my behalf? Gaenna loves her instruments of pain... any respite from them would be welcome.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry for what you’ve been through!” Kali exclaimed, her eyes welling up as she hugged the Baeloran noblewoman. “I promise I’ll do whatever I can to make life more bearable for you!”

Sarinia closed her eyes and hugged the troubled girl, feeling a pang of guilt for manipulating her this way. “I’m so glad I met you.”

After a close embrace they reluctantly parted. Kali brushed away her tears and smiled. “I’ll speak to Edraele as soon as I can, Sarinia. You have my word.”

“I trust you,” Sarinia said softly, giving her a look filled with gratitude. “Thank you, Kali.”

“Will you come back to the arboretum tomorrow?” the House Loraleth matriarch asked hopefully.

“I’ll try... but mother intends to banish my sisters and me to our homeworld at the earliest opportunity. As soon as the first House Baeloran cruiser has finished the refit, we will be departing from Genthalas.”

“Perhaps the upgrades on that ship might encounter some difficulties?” Kali suggested with a mischievous grin.

Sarinia couldn’t help laughing at that. “My mother would have an absolute fit. That would be wonderful, thank you.”

Rising from the bench, the two noblewomen shared a smile and waved each other goodbye. They both left at once, heading for exits at opposite ends of the arboretum.

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“I’m trying very hard not to be a bonehead anymore,” John said with a wry smile. “What bone headedness are you referring to in particular?”

“This isn’t funny!” Jade protested angrily.

“I’m sorry, honey,” he said, beckoning her over. “Come over here and tell me what’s wrong.”

Alyssa slid off his lap to make way for the Nymph, who sat down and promptly threw her arms around John.

“I hate it when you think about dying, Master! Why do you do it when we can all hear you?!” she gasped in anguish, burying her face against his chest.

John shot a startled glance at Alyssa over Jade’s shoulder and saw at once the pain in her eyes. “Oh god... I’m so sorry!” He grasped the blonde’s hand and pulled her into the hug. “I forgot the three of you were listening to everything!”

\*I can’t stand it either, John,\* Edraele sobbed, breaking down in tears. \*Losing you is the worst possible thing I could ever imagine!\*

“Please... I’m begging you...” Jade whimpered. “There’s got to be some way you can guarantee your victory over your guide!”

He held two of his three matriarchs close, feeling them both tremble in his arms. Stroking their backs, he let out a heavy sigh. “I wish there was, honey, I really do... but I haven’t got any choice. I have to make preparations in case he wins; the alternative is too awful to even think about.”

“But...”

“Listen to me, Jade,” he said quietly but firmly. “I don’t want to die. I’ll do everything in my power to defeat my guide and make sure he never causes us problems again, but there’s always a chance, however small, that he might be the one that wins when I confront him. I know it’s painful for you to hear this, but if I die, I will not allow him to rape and murder any of you girls. I refuse to allow that to even be a possibility. If that bastard wins, his first breath will end with Sakura cutting his throat.”

“She’ll be devastated...” Jade whispered, gazing at him through tear-filled eyes. “Sakura will never survive that.”

“She can recover from grief... all of you can. There’s no way I’m ever going to risk all of you being subjected to an eternity of abuse; I’d sooner end it all right now than let that happen.”

Jade shook her head. “Don’t you understand? We love you as much as you love us... we’d never recover, none of us would.”

He looked up at Alyssa as a tear rolled down her cheek and felt his heart lurch in his chest when he saw how distraught she was.

“I couldn’t go on without you, John,” she said quietly. “You can’t ask me to do the impossible.”

John slumped in his chair and let out a forlorn sigh. “I’m sorry, girls... I don’t know what else to do.”

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Sarinia strode along the corridor, her mind abuzz with all the things she’d just learned from Kali Loraleth. In the last few months, everything had changed for the Maliri matriarchs, but it was painful to think that she’d been oblivious to it all. With the benefit of hindsight, it was no wonder that her mother had been acting so bizarrely. Gaenna had been facing an existential threat to her House with the civil war, then she’d discovered the possibility of a second chance at reliving her life over again.

The stakes of the game of succession had changed dramatically. So dramatically in fact, that Sarinia wasn’t sure there even was a game any more... the rules seemed to have been completely torn asunder. She couldn’t help smiling as she imagined how her sisters would react to hearing everything she’d just learned.

Approaching her mother’s quarters, she nodded politely to the bodyguards standing outside. One of them spoke into an commlink, then gestured for her to proceed as the door opened behind them. There were another brace of guards inside the suite, who stopped her to scan for concealed weapons. Sarinia waited patiently for them to complete the sensor sweep, then crossed the lounge towards her mother’s office.

“What do you want, Sarinia?” Gaenna snapped, when her eldest daughter walked inside.

“I apologise for disturbing you, mother,” Sarinia said, bowing her head in a gesture of contrition. “Might I speak with you for a moment?”

“Isn’t that what we’re already doing?” the House Baelora Matriarch tsked in irritation. “Alright, out with it. Why are you here?”

“You already know that I regret coming to Genthalas without your permission, so I won’t waste your time with another apology,” Sarinia said, meeting her mother’s curious gaze. “My sisters and I will be leaving the station in the next couple of days, and I have the distinct impression that you intend to stay on Genthalas for the foreseeable future?”

Gaenna gave her one of those infuriating sly smiles. “That is correct.”

This time Sarinia knew exactly what her mother was thinking and relished the feeling of superiority at having discovered Gaenna’s plans. “I thought we might all meet together this evening and eat a meal as a family before we depart.”

Snorting incredulously, Gaenna looked askance at her eldest daughter. “You can’t be serious. What possible reason would you have to make such a ludicrous suggestion? You’ve wasted enough of my time already, so don’t even try to deceive me.”

Sarinia grimaced as if her ploy had been uncovered. “Alright, I do have an ulterior motive. I wanted to travel to Genthalas alone to ask about your extended stay here, but Myrdina and the rest of those half-witted fools demanded that they accompany me. They’re as obstinate as they are stupid, so they refused all my attempts to convince them to wait on Baelora. Answer me this, mother: If I had appeared at Genthalas on my own, would you have been even half as angry?”

Gaenna leaned back in her chair and considered it for a moment, before shaking her head. “So now you hope to subject your sisters to my wrath for an evening, to get your revenge?”

“I can’t think of anyone better to give them what they deserve,” Sarinia replied with a cruel smile.

Her mother cackled at her daughter’s malicious plot and gestured towards the door. “Leave me, I have work to do.”

Sarinia turned to walk away and paused in the open doorway. “And the meal?”

“We’ll begin dinner at seven; you can prepare your own food in my kitchen.”

“Thank you, mother,” Sarinia said, bowing respectfully.

Gaenna watched her leave and smirked as the door slid shut behind her daughter. It seemed she’d done an excellent job of instilling fear and respect in her wayward offspring, enough to keep them in line for the foreseeable future during their banishment to Baelora. As much as it galled Gaenna to admit it, Sarinia in particular was a very capable administrator, and the efficient operation of the planetary systems under House Baelora’s control would suffer greatly without her oversight.

Putting that out of her mind, she focused on the holo-screens before her and reactivated the image she was studying before Sarinia’s arrival. The picture was taken 130 years ago, when Gaenna was still a relatively young woman of 106. She was standing in profile, her hand caressing her swollen belly, with her first daughter growing in her womb. Gaenna had sent that picture to Filarion to congratulate him on his virility, hoping to keep him interested enough to sire the rest of her noble line.

She gazed at her youthful features, captivated by the way she looked before time began to take its toll with wrinkles and crow’s feet. It was thrilling to think that in only a matter of weeks, she’d be able to roll back the remorseless onset of age, leaving her younger and more attractive than she had been over a century ago.

This time, the smile that illuminated Gaenna’s face was one of genuine happiness, an expression she hadn’t shared with a living soul in more decades than she could remember.

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John held out his hands and used the manoeuvring thrusters in his Paragon suit to push him away from the Invictus. Glancing upward, he activated the thruster on his back and soared past the concealed Tachyon Beam batteries built into the flank of the battlecruiser. Reaching the topdeck, he maintained the suit’s thrust, gaining more height until he was overlooking the length of the Invictus.

Gesturing towards the warship, he reached out with his will, manipulating the psychically reactive metal and drawing it away from the hull. Solid plating began to liquefy, turning into hundreds of glistening white streams that pooled together into a rapidly growing orb of Crystal Alyssium. He left the first 50 metres of plating covering the prow in place, but stripped away the rest of the armour from bow to stern, until the denuded superstructure was fully exposed.

“That’s the topdeck done,” he said to Alyssa via the suit’s comms interface, returning to the yawning door that led to the Primary Hangar. “How are you getting on?”

“I’ve just stripped the starboard flank,” she replied, sounding preoccupied. “I’ll move on to the underbelly next.”

“Okay, beautiful. I’ll see you inside.”

He soared over to the port side of the battlecruiser and repeated the same process, using telekinesis to draw away all the deca-shaped armour plates on the flank of the ship. The next step was to merge both spheres of liquid metal into one vast ponderous orb, which he guided down towards the hangar entrance. The white globe was too large to fit inside, so John reshaped the metal several times, counting each iteration to keep track . For the fourteenth shaping, he turned the orb into a long rectangular block and carefully slid it through the open doorway, before laying it to rest on the titanium deck plates.

Using his Paragon suit’s thrusters, John glided back into the Invictus and landed lightly on the floor. The Primary Hangar was over 200 metres long, with only 75 metres taken up with the Progenitor Shuttle, which loomed above him like a sinister black spectre. That meant there was still plenty of room for them to work in, while they reshaped the thousands of armoured plates they’d need to protect the Invictus’ hull.

He gestured to the immense block of Crystal Alyssium and streamed away more metal, channelling it into a dozen smaller tributaries. Each one formed a two-metre long section of starship armour plating, the shapes becoming rigid once they were the perfect height, length, and width. Those plates dropped to the deck with a clang and the next dozen began to form, repeating with monotonous regularity in a psychically powered assembly line. He studied one of the completed plates and once he was satisfied it was flawless, he looped the shaping task and left it running in his mind.

Removing his helmet, John glanced up at the closest security camera. “Little One? I don’t know if you can hear me, but please could you send the maintenance bots to help? I’d like them to stack the armour plates into neat piles.”

The camera made a slight bobbing motion, so John hoped that meant the robots were on their way. He turned to watch Alyssa flying into the hangar with two huge spheres floating behind her, the Crystal Alyssium orbs combining into an enormous rectangular block that she dropped on the deck with a weighty clang. She mimicked all the steps he’d performed and soon one of her stockpiles of metal was being shaped into a dozen pieces of starship armour.

“It’s crazy to think we’re pentadeca-shaping twelve plates of Crystal Alyssium armour at a time now,” John said as he approached the blonde. “Do you remember when you struggled to triple-shape a single piece of Invictium for the first time?”

She removed her own Paragon helmet and gave him a fond smile. “We’ve come a long way since then.”

John cupped her cheek and nodded, gently caressing her skin with his gauntleted thumb. “I’m sorry I hurt you earlier. I never meant to put the three of you through any of that.”

Alyssa let out a sad sigh and leaned into his hand. “I know, handsome. We all do.”

“Are Jade and Edraele feeling any better?” he asked, worried about the unsettled pair.

By mutual agreement, he’d blocked his matriarchs from his thoughts for the rest of the day, while he mulled over alternatives to his plan for Sakura.

“The heartrending agony doesn’t last long,” she replied, looking up at him with her bright blue eyes. “They’re both fully-recovered now.”

“Progenitors are such a bunch of assholes,” he fumed, angry at himself and his species for inadvertently hurting the women he loved. “I’ve got to find a way of getting rid of that... side effect. It’s horrendous seeing you suffering like that.”

“Maybe... but it doesn’t change the fact that we’ve got to prepare for your fight with your guide.” Alyssa inhaled deeply then let out her breath in a ragged sigh. “I hate myself for thinking it... but you’re right; Sakura is our only option.”

“I think it’s kinder to not tell her for as long as I possibly can,” John said, studying the blonde.

“I totally agree. The less time she has to spend dwelling on it the better. What are you going to say to her to explain all the training?”

“That I’m teaching her to assassinate Progenitors?” he suggested with a wry smile.

Alyssa let out a bitter laugh and nodded sadly. “I guess it’s the truth...” she said, looking away.

Wincing at seeing her in pain, John gently lifted her chin so she was gazing into his eyes. “Remember this is only a contingency plan. I’ve got a lot of rage saved up for that bastard... I’m actually looking forward to this fight.”

“He’s wronged you and I know you want to make him pay,” she said, studying him carefully. “If it wasn’t for him, you might have become closer to your parents...”

John shook his head. “As much as I want to blame my guide for deliberately wrecking that meeting with my father, a messy confrontation with Rahn’hagon was always inevitable. He was going to find out the truth eventually... and when he did, he would have been just as angry.”

Alyssa frowned with disapproval. “We want you pissed at your guide remember! Thinking about things calmly and rationally won’t do at all!”

“Sorry, what was I thinking,” John said with a smile. “My guide... what an asshole.”

“Damn right,” she agreed, leaning in for a kiss.

“Alright, let’s get out of this armour,” he said, turning to head for the express grav-tubes in the Secondary Hangar.

“This way!” Alyssa said, tugging his hand in the opposite direction. “The new armoury is ready; we can leave our gear there.”

“When did that get built?” John asked in surprise.

“While you were sleeping this morning,” she replied with a grin. “I think you were so distracted by Tashana, you didn’t even notice it was finished.”

“She’s a very distracting girl,” he agreed with a self-conscious smile.

They walked hand-in-hand towards the reinforced doors at the forward end of the Primary Hangar. As they approached, the doors opened and a pair of maintenance bots glided through.

“Thanks for helping out, guys,” John said, nodding to them appreciatively.

[+++ stated with humorous intent +++ [Begin quote] No problemo. [/End quote]]

Alyssa smiled at the pair as they approached. “Just let us know if you run into any problems.”

The other robot curled his six-digit hand into a thumbs up sign as they floated past. [+++ stated with humorous intent +++ [Begin quote] Hasta la vista, baby. [/End quote]]

John looked at Alyssa blankly when they’d left the hangar. “They say they’re joking, but I just don’t get it.”

She shrugged, not getting their synthetic sense of humour either. “Must be a robot thing.”

The pair entered the forward grav-tube and floated up through the levels until they reached Deck Three. Stepping out of the blue anti-gravity field, they walked through the Observatory and into the changing area. Forewarned this time, John noticed the closed door at the end of the walk-in wardrobe, which opened automatically as Alyssa strode up to it.

“Maliri tech... auto-sensors,” she explained, sauntering inside. “You’re over there at the end.”

The room was laid out in the same fashion as the seating arrangements, with John at the figurative head of the table. He walked up to the familiar frame and stood in place so that the robotic arms could remove his lion embossed Paragon suit. There was a weapon rack on the adjacent wall, with his sword hanging above a Tachyon rifle.

“I must have been dead to the world to miss all this,” he said to Alyssa as she stepped out of her Paragon boots.

“You don’t get to lie-in all that often... we didn’t want to disturb you, so we kept the noise down,” she explained, following him back to the clothes. She peeled off her jumpsuit and stood before him gloriously nude, her hand on her hip as she struck a coquettish pose. “I’m going to change outfits... unless you need to blow off some steam?”

John smiled and started stripping off his own jumpsuit.

“Really?” she exclaimed in delight, caught by surprise now that she couldn’t hear his every whim via telepathy.

Once he was just as naked as Alyssa, John picked her up in his arms and carried her through to the Observatory. He gently laid her down and began trailing kisses down her chest and across her tummy.

“No need for that, handsome,” she purred, spreading her muscular thighs. “I’m wet enough for you already.”

He lined himself up and pushed his way inside her steaming pussy, gazing into her eyes as she gasped with excitement.

John waited until she calmed, gently smoothing her golden locks away from her face. “I really am sorry I hurt you.”

Alyssa’s eyes softened and she curled her arms and legs around him in a loving hug. “Oh John...”

They moved slowly together, in no particular hurry to finish. Being unable to hear his thoughts made the experience very different for Alyssa and she gazed into his eyes, trying to guess what he was thinking. He smiled and kissed her, enjoying hearing her moan as she responded in kind.

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“Auralei, may I speak with you?”

The young Larathyran woman looked up from where she was changing the wriggling baby and gave the older man a strained smile. “Yes, Jonik, how can I help?”

Although the man approaching her was her senior by nearly a century and had been working in the neonatal ward for over fifty years, he still seemed to need her approval for every decision.

“Another 300 babies have been brought in from the Qinbanise district! What are we going to do?!”

She wiggled her slender green fingers at the cooing infant to keep it distracted. “What would you normally do if you found a child that had been abandoned?”

“Have the nursing team check their levels of dehydration and for the severest cases use an intravenous rehydration solution to stabilise their condition,” he replied without pause. “For the rest, introduce them to biomilk formula and watch for signs of distress.”

Auralei raised an eyebrow. “That sounds sensible to me.”

“Oh! Oh, yes, of course,” he mumbled, bowing to her graciously. “Thank you!”

She watched as he hurried away, wishing the men would take more initiative. It wasn’t just her in this position, the eldest of the surviving girls were all being deferred to by the survivors of the mysterious plague that had wiped out a huge swathe of the population. She was glad to be able to help the orphaned children, but being thrust into a position of leadership was an unpleasant surprise.

Auralei glanced out of the window and looked across the city, her eyes drawn to the Imperial Palace. She couldn’t help wondering how her mother’s carefully tended gardens were coping without her loving care. Her thoughts turned to Seldanna, and she let out a mournful sigh, wishing her mother were here right now. Feeling a wetness on her leg, she glanced down at the arc of urine coming from the naked baby that was soaking her dress.

“Oh, you little imp!” she playfully scolded the green hued boy on the changing station. “You got me again!”

He chortled, kicking his legs in the air.

She gave one last longing glance in the direction of the Imperial Gardens, then began cleaning up the baby. “You’re more important, aren’t you?”

The two-year-old didn’t answer, but she heard her name being called once more.

“Auralei? May I speak with you again?”

She looked up to see Jonik returning, but this time with two other flustered men in tow. With a sigh of resignation, Auralei realised she wasn’t going to get much peace that afternoon.

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Jade sat in the shallows of the Lagoon, the water lapping around her feet. The room echoed with the squeals and cries of her Lenarran sisters, who were trying to dunk each other under the water. She glanced across at the door leading to the Observatory, knowing that her master was currently in there entertaining Alyssa. Ever since Jade’s promotion to matriarch, she’d been able to listen to John’s inner voice and she desperately missed hearing him. Fortunately, the blonde Terran had been keeping her informed of his activities and state of mind.

Splashing water close by drew the Nymph’s attention back to the Lagoon and she saw her Jaguar-spotted sister wading her way. “Are you alright, Neysa?”

The catgirl nodded, concern evident in her hazel eyes. “You seemed to be troubled by something, Jade?”

Springing to her feet, Jade bounded through the water to join her fellow Nymph. “There’s nothing wrong, I was just thinking about our master.”

“Ah, I see,” Neysa replied, needing no further explanation. “I was wondering if you could teach me something new?”

“You’ve mastered gills and fins already?” Jade asked, looking quizzically at the brunette.

Neysa held up an arm and a set of rippling hazel-coloured fins sprouted from her limb. She concentrated, her brow furrowing, and they disappeared just as quickly.

“You might be ready to move on to full-body shifting,” Jade mused, studying her most adept pupil.

“Will you show this one how?”

“Of course. Now, I usually picture the new form I wish to shift into, then push my body to adapt to that shape,” Jade explained. “You’ll find it easier to go slowly at first, gradually getting used to an unfamiliar form. Here, I’ll show you; this is a dolphin.”

Her statuesque figure shimmered in a green haze and she tipped over, lengthening and growing broader as she shapeshifted into the sleek aquatic creature. Jade flicked her tail and raced off around the Lagoon, leaping out of the water and landing with a splash... that soaked the other three Nymphs.

Neysa laughed, clapping her hands in applause. “That was wonderful!”

Jade’s dolphin body was obscured by a verdant blur and it faded away to leave her floating there in her familiar humanoid shape. “There. Now you try.”

Brow furrowing with the effort, Neysa tried to follow Jade’s instructions, but wilfully breaking the limits that restricted her to humanoid forms proved too much of a challenge.

“It’s so difficult!” she panted, wilting from the effort. “How did you manage to shift into another creature for the first time?”

Thinking back to the Drakkar boarding action that had prompted Jade’s shift into a huge green tiger, she gave the catgirl a rueful smile. “I’m not sure we can recreate those circumstances. Calara was about to be killed by a Drakkar marine and I reacted by instinct to save our master’s mate.”

Neysa nodded, her expression thoughtful. She closed her eyes then concentrated again and this time the shape of her body shimmered in a greenish-brown haze. It only took a couple of seconds for her to shapeshift, growing slightly in size to a smaller-scale version of Jade’s dolphin. She thrashed her new tail and cut through the water like a knife, spinning and leaping with joy.

\*How did you do that?!\* Jade exclaimed, staring in shock at Neysa who flipped through the air, performing a somersault and drenching her squealing sisters again when she landed.

Neysa powered around the Lagoon and shifted back into her catgirl shape, throwing herself into Jade’s arms. “Oh, that was so much fun!”

“How, Neysa?!” her Nymph matriarch asked in astonishment. “There was no one in danger!”

The jaguar-spotted girl smiled and shook her head. “No, but you said you reacted by instinct to save Calara. I just imagined how pleased our master would be if I made progress changing shapes... and it worked!”

Jade blushed and hugged her sister back. “That’s brilliant! I wish I’d thought of that, it would’ve saved me so much hard work!”

\*Jade, we’re finished,\* Alyssa purred, her voice a sexually satiated drawl. \*John wants to save Marika for later, so pick one of your other sisters to get a full tummy.\*

Smiling fondly at the grinning Nymph embracing her, Jade whispered in Neysa’s ear, “Why don’t you head up to the Observatory? Alyssa wants to reward you for being such a clever girl.”

“Really?” Neysa gushed, her hazel eyes sparkling with joy.

Jade nodded eagerly, enjoying seeing the normally-dignified catgirl lose some of her composure in her excitement.

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John sat up and stretched, letting out a contented sigh. “I really needed that,” he said, placing a hand on Alyssa’s swollen belly.

“It was lovely, John... thank you,” she said softly, caressing his arm.

He kissed her then reluctantly started to dress. “I better not keep Dana waiting any longer.”

Alyssa laughed and reclined on the bed, cradling her midriff. “Don’t worry, she was glad to hear you were getting some stress relief and unloading your quad.”

“That wasn’t about stress relief, honey,” he said, turning to look in her eyes.

“I know,” she replied with an adoring smile.

He kissed the blissful teenager, then padded across the bed to tug on his boots. “I’ll help Sparks with your experiment first, then we’ll build the new sensor array.”

“Don’t do too much,” Alyssa said, snuggling under the covers. “Remember you’ve still got a lot of armour shaping to do this afternoon.”

“I’ll be careful not to burn myself out,” he promised, returning her wave goodbye and heading for the door.

It opened before he reached it and Neysa burst through, a twinkle in her cat-like eyes. “Master, I’m so glad you’re here! I managed to shapeshift into a dolphin!”

“Wow! That’s amazing, honey!” he exclaimed, wrapping her in his arms. He kissed the catgirl on top of her head, nuzzling into her light-brown hair. “I’m so proud of you, Neysa.”

She let out a sultry moan, pressing her trembling figure against him. “Oh my... that was even better than I imagined!”

John chuckled, then reluctantly released the ecstatic Nymph. He looked into her eyes and stroked her toned stomach. “Go ahead and enjoy your lunch. I’m looking forward to feeling even closer to you when you’ve got a full tummy.”

She beamed a dazzling smile at him and nodded, the gleam of total devotion in her hazel-eyed gaze.

He left Neysa in Alyssa’s tender care, then exited the Observatory to cross the bridge over the Lagoon. Jade and her sisters were playing in the water, the four nymphs transformed into a school of dolphins that were racing around the artificial lake. They were strong enough swimmers to leap over the bridge itself and he applauded as he watched their display.

Jade shifted mid-leap and landed lightly a few paces ahead of him. “Hi, Master!”

“Hi, honey,” he said, greeting her with a kiss. “Neysa told me the good news... and it looks like you’ve already trained her sisters.”

“She’s very clever, John,” Jade said with admiration. “Neysa worked out a way to subvert her limitations that I’d never thought of before. It makes things... considerably easier.”

“That’s great news,” he said, genuinely pleased. “I never thought your sisters would be able to teach you anything, but you working together to come up with something new is brilliant.”

Jade looked at him with a soft smile, then leaned in for a tender kiss. “We’re very lucky girls.”

“I’ve discussed the Sakura plan with Alyssa and we’ve made some decisions. Would you like me to let you back into my mind? I promise I won’t upset you again.”

“Yes please! I’m thrilled about Neysa, but that’s the best news I’ve heard all day!”

He released the blocks on his mental fortress, readmitting Jade. Deciding it was safe for the other matriarchs too, he also let Alyssa and Edraele back into his mind.

\*Sorry, ladies. Just happy thoughts from now on,\* he said, greeting them with an apologetic smile.

The trio didn’t have to say anything, he could feel their elation across their empathic bond. Jade waved goodbye and dove back into the water to play with her sisters, leaving John free to cross the bridge to the other side. He travelled down in the grav-tube to Deck Seven, then made his way along the corridor to the Engineering Bay.

When the door opened, he strode inside, spotting Dana and Rachel up on the Engineering Podium. They were both so engrossed in their research, that neither seemed to have noticed his arrival, their focused gaze flicking between the holo screens arrayed above their consoles. John watched them in fascination, curious to know what they were working on that could keep them that captivated. Rachel was studying a series of DNA helixes, four separate strands appearing on individual screens. Dana had three screens floating in front of her, the first couple obviously Progenitor schematics, while on the third screen he recognised the spidery text from the Vulkat tech archive.

“That looks complicated,” he said to the girls, making them both jump.

Dana flashed him a grin. “You bastard! I’ll have to redraw that bit now.”

“John!” Rachel protested, her hand on her chest. “You scared the hell out of me!”

He moved behind her and wrapped the brunette in his arms, placing a hand over her thumping heart. “Shh...” he whispered in her ear. “You’re safe now.”

Rachel melted in his embrace, letting out a breathy sigh as she relaxed. “Mmm... you’re forgiven.”

“Hey! Where’s my hug?” Dana asked indignantly.

He winked at the redhead. “Just a moment, Sparks. I need to make sure Rach isn’t scared anymore.”

“It might be a while before I’m feeling brave enough for you to let go,” the doctor said with a smile, leaning up to kiss him.

“That’s no problem. Why don’t you tell me what you’re working on while we wait?”

She turned to look at the screens again. “I felt particularly inspired this morning, so I decided to delve into my cures for incurable diseases research.”

“How’s that going so far?”

“I’ve been working through the list based on lethality versus frequency of outbreaks. Risley’s Fever is highly contagious and has a 90% fatality rate, but fortunately it’s very rare. Staunton’s Syndrome crops up regularly in the Outer Rim; the fatality rate is comparatively low at 10% but it’s a big killer due to the number of cases.”

“Hey, I know someone who died of Staunton’s Syndrome!” John exclaimed, looking at the brunette with newfound respect. “You really managed to cure it?”

“I have... and I’m sorry I was too late to save your friend.”

He gave her a reassuring squeeze. “Don’t worry, he wasn’t a friend. We went through the academy together and he got his jollies tormenting new recruits. He got posted to a garrison out in the ass end of nowhere and caught Staunton’s from the locals.”

“It’s a nasty way to go, bleeding to death from seeping pustules,” Rachel noted with clinical detachment.

“Jesus!” Dana exclaimed, shuddering with revulsion. “Let’s skip the details please!”

The brunette rolled her eyes at Dana’s outburst. “Sorry, I forgot how squeamish you are.”

“Is that Staunton’s Syndrome up there?” John asked, pointing to the holo-screens.

Rachel shook her head. “As I was on a roll, I decided to tackle one of the most debilitating diseases in the Terran Federation medical databases.”

He looked at the screen with trepidation. “What is it?”

“Man Flu. I looked into it, but developing a cure far exceeds my meagre capabilities.”

John laughed as he realised she was joking and started tickling her. “Work harder! You need to cure that one, damnit!”

She giggled, writhing in his arms. “I can’t! The symptoms are mostly psychosomatic!”

After he eventually let her go, John shook his head in mock disappointment. “Your reputation just took a big hit, Angel of Terra.”

Rachel pouted, then gave him a sheepish smile. “The influenza virus actually does effect men and women differently, but that’s not what I’m looking at up there. I was studying some of the more difficult cancers to treat and I had a theory that you could generate a template for a person based on a genetic sample... in a similar way to you resetting us every time we ingest your cum.”

“Kind of like a cloning template?” Dana asked, listening with interest.

“Yes, essentially,” she agreed. “You could potentially grow replacement body parts for any that had become cancerous.”

“So you could make a copy of any of us?” John asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I know what you’re thinking, but a fully grown clone would have a brain that lacked the synapses and neurons formed by the memories of that person’s lifetime,” Rachel explained patiently. “You’d need to grow a fully viable clone, then find a way to update the brain with everything that made the original person... them.”

“Damn... so I can’t just insert a coin and get another life?” Dana asked, grinning at her girlfriend.

“I’m afraid not,” the brunette replied, with a sympathetic smile.

John kissed her on the cheek. “That was interesting, thanks for the explanation. Oh and well done on coming up with those cures... you’re going to save a lot of lives.”

“Thanks, John. I’ll transmit the data to the T-Fed Medical Administration when we reach T-Fed territory.”

“Now me!” Dana exclaimed, turning around and glancing over her shoulder at John. “Where’s my hug?”

John gave Rachel a final squeeze, then moved behind the redhead to wrap his arms around her. “So what’ve you been working on, Sparks?”

“I felt like Rach this morning; really fired up and ready to go!” she replied, snuggling into his embrace. “I’ve nearly built all the parts for the Hyper-Pulse generator and when I spoke to Little One earlier, she said the maintenance bots would help put it together for me. I’ve also just about finished rewriting the schematics for the sensor array so that we can use Crystal Alyssium instead. I’ll start cranking out what I can with the Mass Fabricators, but I could use your help making the rest.”

“Of course. It sounds like you’ve been doing a fantastic job,” John said, impressed by her hard work. He nodded towards the holo-screen that was rapidly cycling through Vulkat schematics. “What about the tech archive? Found anything else interesting?”

“Not really. There’s just so much irrelevant junk in there, it’s hard to find the gems in all the trash. It doesn’t help that the Vulkat indexes aren’t ordered alphabetically, or in any logical order I can figure out. I’ve tried searching for about a hundred different variations of ‘Psychic Communications System’, but got nowhere.”

John paused, a frown on his face. “Didn’t Alyssa say something about Nkkrrit’s psychic connection? Wasn’t it called the Vulkat’s song?”

\*Nkkrrit called it: ‘The Hymn of the Vulkat’,\* Alyssa informed them a moment later.

“Maybe try checking for something along those lines?” John suggested with a shrug.

Dana nodded eagerly, turning her attention back to the Vulkat archives. “I’ll run some search filters, see what I can find...” she said, tapping away at the glowing keyboard.

John kissed her on the cheek, then rested his chin on her shoulder as he watched her work. “Do you still need my help for Alyssa’s gravity well test?”

She nodded, turning away from the holo-screen to return the kiss. “If you can shape some Crystal Alyssium twenty times for me, we can start the test as soon as you’re finished.”

“Sure,” He released her and pulled away, then headed down the steps towards the ore crates.

“Holy shit!” Dana blurted out, after he’d barely gone five steps. “You’re a fricking genius! You found it!”

“Already?!” he asked in surprise, whirling around to see what she’d discovered.

“See! There it is!” the redhead exclaimed doing a celebratory dance.

John stared at the image, which showed an expanded view of the long trailing legs of a massive Vulkat warship. The legs contained intricate vanes, connected together in an elaborate web-like structure.

He studied them curiously, then read the title on the schematic out loud, “Voices raised in exultation.”

Dana rolled her eyes in exasperation. “I know, right? Who names their tech stupid shit like that? No wonder I couldn’t find the damn thing!”

“They remind me of those devices we saw on the hull of that Kirrix dreadnought,” he muttered, recalling the vanes on the ugly insectoid ship.

“It looks as though it’s some kind of psychic enhancer,” Dana mused, tapping a finger on her chin. “This system must be compatible with the Kirrix version, because Nkkrrit traded tech with them.”

John stood beside his Chief Engineer and glanced her way. “Are you able to reverse engineer it?”

“Should be easy enough...” she murmured, her eyes flicking from side to side as she memorised the schematic. “But the Invictus would look like some crazy-ass spider if we stuck those legs on our butt. Give me some time to think about it and I’ll see if I can make a few tweaks.”

“Then we can just transmit the schematics for the psychic enhancer over the T-Fed comms network to the Maliri and the Ashanath,” John said, smiling with satisfaction. “Instantly sharing classified tech with our allies will make life so much easier.”

“Yeah, definitely,” Dana agreed, before turning and skipping down the steps from the engineering podium. “Okay, go grab some Crystal Alyssium, I need you to make a protective shell around a sensor I put together.”

John did as she asked and siphoned off some of the psychically responsive metal, then wasted no time in shaping it repeatedly to make it as resilient as possible.

Walking over to join him, Dana held a device the size of her fist in the palm of her hand. “Remember, when you get to the twentieth shaping, make something to protect this.”

He nodded, watching the malleable substance as it repeatedly shifted from cubes to spheres. When he had reshaped it enough, he pictured an image in his mind, then gestured at the sensor and levitated it off Dana’s hand. The Crystal Alyssium enveloped the device, then gradually expanded to form a very familiar shape.

“Okay that really is perfect,” Dana said with a grin, gleefully patting him on the back as she stared at the miniaturised model of the Invictus. “Hold it steady and I’ll create a gravity well.”

John kept the model in the air, then watched as the redhead’s eyes began to glow. A black orb sprang into existence with a low groan, the circumference shrouded in a golden aura.

“Alright, let me just ramp up the force a bit...” she muttered, her face set in a mask of concentration.

The model began to tremble violently, but John held it in place with a robust telekinetic net, preventing it from being pulled into the singularity. The pull got greater and greater, then there was a high-pitched cracking sound and the model’s hull splintered, the miniaturised Invictus folding inwards like a crushed tin can.

Dana winced and shot John a worried look. “Uh oh...”

“Damn, we wrecked that sensor too,” John said with a frown. “I guess we’ll have to do another test.”

She dismissed her black hole and shook her head. “No, we’re fine; the data was being uploaded remotely. I’ll just forward the results to Alyssa and we’re finished.”

“It looks like it’s back to the drawing board with her theory,” he said, trying not to feel too disappointed.

“Not necessarily... remember that model didn’t have a Null Inertia Gyroscope to protect it.”

“True,” he conceded with a smile. “Okay, so what’s next?”

“Now you get to help me be the first non-Thrall, to build a Quantum Omni-phase Scan Array in thousands of years!” she said with a theatrical flourish. “Be warned, there’s a shitload to do and it’s incredibly complicated... we’ve basically got a real bitch of an afternoon ahead of us.”

“I’ll help,” Rachel volunteered, walking down the steps to join them.

“Thanks, babes,” the redhead said, kissing her gratefully.

“Engineering Assistant Blake reporting for duty,” John said, slipping an arm around her waist. “I’m all yours.”

She crinkled her nose at him, followed by an affectionate kiss. Pulling back, she then clapped her hands together imperiously. “Enough slacking, minions! Let’s get to work!”

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Kali Loraleth smiled at the House Valaden guards standing outside Edraele’s suite, then walked inside, looking for the Maliri Queen. Breezing through the foyer, she was pleased to find her mentor reclining on a chaise longue in the middle of the next room. Luna was there too, the assassin gently massaging her lover’s temples.

“Oh, is this a bad time?” Kali asked, faltering in the entrance to the living room when she saw the Queen’s personal bodyguard in attendance.

Edraele sat up and waved the young woman over to join her. “No, this is perfect; Luna was just helping me ease away a tension headache. I’ve actually been meaning to speak with you, Kali.”

“I’ll give you some privacy,” Luna murmured, stepping away.

“You don’t have to leave because of me,” Kali was quick to protest. “Feel free to stay if you want.”

Edraele patted the seat beside her and smiled at the assassin. “Please stay, my love.”

Luna slid onto the seat, then turned to pull the Queen back so she was resting against her chest. When Edraele was settled with her head nestled in the assassin’s cleavage, Luna continued massaging her temples.

“What happened? Are you alright?” Kali asked with concern, sitting on the other side of the sofa.

Edraele nodded, reaching out to clasp her hand. “I’m fine now, it’s almost passed. The afternoon was... stressful... so Luna insisted on doing whatever she could to make me feel better.”

Kali suddenly looked anxious. “I hope it wasn’t stressful because of me?”

“No, darling girl... it was nothing to do with you,” Edraele reassured her. “The discussion between John and his crew took all of my attention. I must confess that I heard very little of your conversation with Sarinia... did I miss anything important?”

“I wondered why you never said a word!” Kali blurted out, her eyes widening. “Oh, I hope I didn’t say something I shouldn’t have...”

Edraele looked at her with concern. “What did you discuss exactly?”

“Ah... all sorts of things,” Kali admitted, nibbling her lip nervously. “The civil war, John, the Young Matriarchs, them being pregnant, the war with the Progenitor and the Brimorians...”

Edraele let out an exasperated sigh. “Kali...”

“I only told her things the other matriarchs already know!” the young woman quickly replied. “We didn’t discuss psychic powers, or John’s girls, or anything that might cause trouble if Gaenna found out about it.”

“You really only discussed events that the Council of Matriarchs are already aware of?” the Maliri Queen pressed, looking at her intently.

“I promise!” Kali gasped, nodding her head. “When you didn’t say anything, I still wasn’t comfortable talking too freely. I was very careful to only discuss things that the matriarchs know.”

“It sounds like you handled the situation exceptionally well,” Edraele said, stroking Kali’s hand. “Did you manage to find out what Sarinia’s doing here by any chance?”

“She’d grown suspicious of her mother’s strange behaviour and was desperate to find out what was happening outside House Baelora territory. As Gaenna had ensconced herself here at Genthalas, Sarinia decided to come here to meet with her in person and get some answers.”

“What of her sisters?” Edraele asked, relaxing again in Luna’s embrace.

Kali shrugged apologetically. “We didn’t really discuss them.”

The Queen smiled at her young companion. “There I was, hoping for some exciting bit of intrigue, but it sounds more like idle curiosity that brought Gaenna’s daughters here.”

“I think so too,” Kali agreed, suddenly looking pensive. “Edraele... I spoke to Sarinia about her mother flouting the ban on neural whips. Now that she’s aware that you rule the Maliri Protectorate on John’s behalf, Sarinia was eager for you to chastise Gaenna for blatantly flaunting the rules. Her only request was that you keep her identity a secret.”

“I’m sure something can be arranged...” Edraele said, her smile broadening into a wicked grin. “I’ve been waiting a long time to put Gaenna in her place.”

“Oh, thank you, Edraele!” Kali gushed, giving her a hug. “I really like Sarinia and her mother’s been horrible to her!”

Edraele kissed the worried young noblewoman on the forehead and said soothingly, “Don’t worry about a thing, darling girl. You can leave this with me now.”

Kali sat up, a smile of relief lighting up her face. “I knew I could count on you. Just let me know if you want me to help with anything!”

“I will, Kali... and thank you for answering this mystery for me.”

The House Loraleth Matriarch rose to her feet, then glided out of the room, pausing only to wave goodbye to Edraele and Luna.

Edraele got up from the chair and stretched, a look of anticipation on her face. “Would you be so kind as to summon Matriarch Gaenna Baelora to my quarters, Luna? I think it’s time I had a little word...”

Luna laughed and nodded. “As you command, my Queen.”

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\*Okay get ready, this is the last piece,\* John said, gesturing towards the three-metre section of the new sensor array.

The ship component floated over to the chevron-marked hole on the far side of the Workshop and he started easing it through the gap. The lift that was usually occupying that spot had been lowered to the deck in the Cargo Bay, giving him plenty of room to manoeuvre.

\*I’ve got it. You can let go now, handsome,\* Alyssa replied, waiting in the cavernous room below.

John relinquished his telekinetic grip on the bulky device, dropping it through the hole into the blonde’s psychic embrace. When he walked over to the gap in the floor, he glanced down and saw that Alyssa had already moved the component out of the way. He activated flight mode on his Paragon suit, then dropped down into the elevator shaft, descending into the Cargo Bay supported by golden-flamed thrusters.

Alyssa moved the final piece of the new sensor system into position, forming a thirty-metre long metallic arc. Dana had her multi-tool in hand and she began locking the last section of the new Quantum Omni-Phase Scan Array together, making sure it was ready for installation.

John had spent the last several hours shaping thousands of pentadeca Crystal Alyssium plates for the Invictus and the constant psychic activity had started to take its toll. Shaping the psychically responsive metal fifteen times was well within his capabilities, but shaping it to that degree for the entire afternoon, a dozen armour plates at a time, was a far trickier prospect. He stifled a yawn and landed beside Alyssa to check how she was holding up.

“I’m tired, but I’ll be okay,” she said, answering his unspoken question.

“Are you feeling strong enough to reinforce the prow?” he asked, knowing the hardest task was still ahead of them.

“I hope so. This will have all been a gigantic waste of time if I flake out,” she replied with a grin.

He chuckled and pulled on his Paragon helmet. \*You can’t be that tired if you’re making jokes.\*

She donned her own protective headwear and accompanied him towards the Cargo Bay door. \*Jade dropped us out of hyper-warp. We can make a start whenever you’re ready.\*

\*I’ll begin with the armour plating; join me when you’re finished installing the sensors.\*

\*Will do,\* she agreed, watching as the colossal door began to open.

John waved goodbye, then ducked under the door and kicked away from the ship, launching himself out into space. He activated flight mode and swept along the Invictus’ flank, heading towards the bow. The massive door to the Primary Hangar had opened as well and the first of the maintenance bots began to float outside, their white armour glimmering as they reflected the starlight.

Amongst the two-dozen hovering robots, several of the girls launched themselves out of the hull, ready to assist with bolting the hardened armour plates into position. John could identify them by the colours of the holographic lionesses projected from their shoulderpads and he spotted a new light-green amongst the dark-brown, white, and tawny coloured felines. Helene turned to wave at him, the brightness of her smile visible even over a hundred metres away.

There was a crackle over the HUD, then Helene’s teal-hued face appeared, her eyes darting around as if not sure where to look. “Hello? John, can you hear me? Is this thing on?”

He smiled and said, “Just look straight ahead for the camera, honey. You’ll see me appear in the top right.”

Helene looked his way, then spotted him in the GUI and relaxed. “Hi! I wanted to help too... is that okay?”

“Sure, do you know what you’re doing?”

She nodded eagerly. “I’ve got this ‘multi-tool’ to push bolts into holes so the armour doesn’t fall off.”

\*Don’t worry, Dana showed her what to do,\* Alyssa informed him.

“Sounds like you’ve got this. Thanks for helping out,” he said gratefully to the aquatic girl.

Movement near the bow caught his attention and John spotted the Valkyrie jetting out of the Mech Launch Bay. Sakura twisted the huge robot and it looked like it was kicking off a wall as the agile machine shifted directions and raced below him.

“I’ll install the Hyper-Pulse generator then help with the plating,” the Asian girl said, rolling so that he could see her through the cockpit as she flew underneath him. “See you soon!”

John returned the mech’s wave, watching Sakura bring the mech to a halt by the Cargo Bay. The Valkyrie reached inside and picked up the newly-built comms system, all ready to replace the one they’d given to the colonists of Valia Gate. He felt a push to his right and his view shifted wildly as he spun in place.

\*Hey, you’re keeping everyone waiting!\* Alyssa teased him, letting John know who was responsible for the playful shove.

He regained control of the spin and looked over at the Cargo Bay, where two Lionesses stood beside the new piece of reverse-engineered Progenitor technology. He didn’t need to see the red and gold lionesses on their shoulders to know who they were, with Dana accompanying Alyssa as the psychic blonde levitated the sensor array out into space.

\*I was just checking everyone was okay,\* he replied, flushing as he realised the rest of the girls and two-dozen robots were waiting on him before they could start work.

Behind his waiting helpers, glistening white plating was stacked from floor to ceiling inside the Primary Hangar, the armour pieces numbering in the thousands. He sucked in his breath as he realised the scale of the task ahead, then gestured towards the closest pile, beckoning it out of the Invictus. Peeling off the armour plates like a croupier dealing out a pack of cards, he used telekinesis to push them into position against the warship’s hull.

He started above the entrance to the hangar, placing the armour against the superstructure for the robots to bolt into place. Although he started slowly, he was able to pick up speed, carefully lining up half-a dozen plates at a time. John soon outpaced his helpers, who needed to bolt all four corners to the Invictus, and he fell into a steady rhythm as he worked. Stack after stack floated out of the hangar, with John attaching the plates to the flank, before returning for the next pile. It felt relaxing to be working in this methodical way and he activated psychic speed, ramping up the pace he was armouring the hull.

Ten minutes later, Alyssa’s voice disturbed his zen-like focus. \*You’re taking ages! You haven’t even finished the starboard side yet!\*

He spotted Alyssa flying towards him from the topdeck. \*You think you could do it faster?\*

She held up her hands, using flight mode to arrest her speed and coasted to a stop beside him. \*Is that a challenge, Mr. Blake?\*

\*Consider yourself challenged, Miss Marant,\* he replied, a grin spreading across his face.

John was quite proud of the progress he’d made so far and although Alyssa was exceptionally good with telekinesis, he was sure she couldn’t match his psychically accelerated pace.

\*What do I get if I win?\* she asked, looking intrigued.

\*I don’t know... what do you want?\*

\*You can owe me a favour,\* she replied without hesitation. \*With no take backs!\*

\*Hmm... and what do I get if I win?\* he asked, raising an eyebrow.

\*I’ll be your devoted love slave?\* she suggested hopefully.

He held onto her waist and pulled her close. \*I thought you already were?\*

Alyssa faked a pout. \*Okay, what do you want in return?\*

\*No teasing of any kind... for a week!\*

\*Are you out of your mind?!\* she blurted out incredulously. \*No way!\*

\*Ah, not so confident after all...\* he taunted her. \*Alright, how about this: I’ll owe you a favour... and I’ll go along with whatever you ask, without any arguments.\*

\*Done!\* she exclaimed, a triumphant gleam in her eyes.

John suddenly felt a dark sense of foreboding and realised she’d played him into raising the stakes.

Alyssa winked and turned to face the Invictus. “Dana, can you set up some magnetic fields for me please?” she asked, using the comms interface, so he could overhear their discussion.

“Sure thing!” the redhead replied, failing to stifle a giggle.

“Hey!” he protested. “That’s cheating!”

“No it isn’t,” Alyssa said calmly, turning to grin at him over her shoulder. “You just challenged me to armour the ship faster... it’s not my fault you didn’t take advantage of the girls’ abilities.”

John watched Dana touch the Invictus’ hull and golden lines rippled into place, appearing like a glowing topographic map a dozen metres above the hull.

“Okay, all set!” Dana exclaimed, giving her friend a thumbs up.

Alyssa beckoned several stacks of armour plating from the hull, then peeled off the top layer and pointed at the Invictus. Like rounds from the Singularity Driver, the plates rocketed towards the hull, before dramatically slowing when they reached the glowing magnetic field. Each had just enough momentum to push through Dana’s magnetised barrier, where a second magnetic field slotted them into place on the hull.

John groaned and slapped Alyssa on her armoured rump. \*Alright you win... I owe you one.\*

She turned around and crossed her wrists behind his neck. \*That’s right Mr. Blake. Just once, you’ll go along with whatever I want... with no complaints or arguments.\*

\*Oh god...\* he protested with a groan. \*What have I done?\*

\*Made me very happy!\* she replied brightly, with a beaming smile. \*Now, let’s plate up the ship and get moving. I want to test my theory on hypervelocity bow waves.\*

John nodded then glanced at her rapidly-diminished stack of armour plates. \*Wait a second... I just thought of a way to speed things up even faster.\*

\*Nice!\* she agreed, listening to his thoughts.

Alyssa moved further down the hull away from the hangar, leaving John floating in place outside the gaping entrance to the ship. When she was in position, he started beckoning out stacks and fired a stream of plates towards Alyssa, making sure they were aimed just in front of her. She caught them in a telekinetic scoop that arced them around towards the Invictus, where Dana’s magnetic fields ensured they were fitted in perfect alignment against the hull.

She moved up above the topdeck and replated the top of the Invictus, then they switched sides to armour the port flank and finally the underbelly. John kept beckoning out piles of armour plating until he was shocked to realise that they’d raced through all the stacks. He glanced at his HUD and could hardly believe that it had only taken them twenty minutes to fully re-plate the Invictus.

By this time, Sakura had repaired the comms system and docked the Valkyrie. She was now working with the rest of the crew, using her psychic speed to bolt all the plates against the hull at an incredible rate. John and Alyssa left the girls and the bots to continue securing the armour, and the pair soared along the length of the Invictus towards the bow. This front section of the ship needed to be substantially reinforced, which meant reshaping the plates from deca-shaped to icosa-shaped.

\*I can’t believe we’re considering twenty-shaping this much plating...\* John said with more than a little trepidation.

\*Tell me about it,\* Alyssa muttered. \*I’m going to be having nightmares about this for weeks.\*

\*I’ll take the topdeck and the starboard side,\* John volunteered, gesturing towards the metal plating.

She nodded, too preoccupied for any more light-hearted banter. \*Alright, I’ll do the rest. Call on Edraele for more energy... I’ll tap into Jade.\*

\*Alright, let’s do this,\* he agreed, stripping the armour from the hull.

He worked in silence, melting the existing armour plating into a huge sphere, before forcing it into different shaped multiple times. When the metal had been reshaped a total of eighteen times, John realised he was grimacing against the strain as he psychically forged the incredibly tough armour for a nineteenth time. Alyssa hadn’t said a word either, and when he glanced in her direction, he saw she was labouring her way through her own orb of Crystal Alyssium. Her shoulders were stooped and she looked like she was carrying a leaden weight on her back.

\*I’m fine,\* she said, not sounding very convincing.

\*I’m going to need some help, Edraele,\* John said, as sweat pricked his brow.

\*Of course, my Lord,\* she said softly, her gentle words accompanied by a soothing wave of psychic energy.

He closed his eyes to savour the sensation for a moment, then continued on feeling refreshed and renewed. As he was about to dart another worried glance in Alyssa’s direction, he heard his third matriarch’s voice unbidden in his mind.

\*Don’t worry, Master,\* Jade said, her voice calm and reassuring. \*I’m supplying power to Alyssa.\*

John could see the effect it had on his blonde XO and together they manufactured a swathe of armour plates with renewed vigour.

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Sarinia sat at the desk in her quarters, reviewing the notes she’d spent the afternoon compiling. Rereading its contents for the third time, she finally nodded with satisfaction, pleased that she had covered everything she’d learned on her trip to Genthalas. She opened the data archive that her operative aboard Genthalas had sent her, then searched for four specific images.

The first showed the five Young Matriarchs conversing together as they left Edraele’s quarters, the long-haired women spectacular in their beauty. The second showed the thirteen matriarchs of the other Noble Houses, the older Maliri women also possessing white hair, although theirs was still kept respectably short. The third showed Queen Edraele Valaden, the majestic nineteenth member of the Council of Matriarchs, and the woman Sarinia now knew ruled at Baen’thelas’ behest.

After reviewing the first three images, her hand trembled as she hovered over the fourth. She glanced at the chronometer on the holographic interface and grimaced as she fought against temptation. She couldn’t afford to lose another thirty minutes staring enthralled at his picture, but despite knowing that, her finger still wavered unsteadily. One more look wouldn’t hurt...

The door chime echoed through her quarters, the sudden noise making Sarinia jump. With her previous thoughts scattered, she quickly closed down the holographic interface.

“Enter!” she called out to the door, while rising from her chair.

Myrdina blustered inside, her fraught expression marring her otherwise pretty face. “Why aren’t you ready yet?!”

“Good evening to you too, dear sister,” Sarinia replied, gliding across her quarters to the small but functional kitchen. “I was simply preoccupied and didn’t realise the time.”

“We better not be late,” Myrdina grumbled sourly. “How long will it take you to-”

Sarinia reached into the refrigeration unit and withdrew several containers. “Calm yourself, Myrdina. I prepared my dinner earlier.”

The second eldest daughter relaxed briefly, then tension crossed her features again. “So what else did you find out?”

“I’ll tell you everything later,” Sarinia replied, walking towards the door. “We really don’t have time at the moment.”

“I don’t want to wait, tell me now!” Myrdina snapped impatiently.

Sarinia shook her head. “I’ll speak to you and our sisters together; I’d rather not repeat myself.”

The door chimed again and Myrdina gave her eldest sibling a sly smile as she opened it. Lieralia, Rosanae, and Tehlariene were all waiting there, each carrying their pre-prepared meals.

“Quick, come in!” Myrdina said, pulling her youngest sister inside.

The other two sisters followed with a bemused frown, the door sliding shut behind them.

“We’re all here now,” Myrdina declared with a smug smirk. “So what did you find out from Kali Loraleth?”

Sarinia sighed and rolled her eyes. “Alright, you win. I discovered a whole host of fascinating things, but we really don’t have time to discuss everything in detail.” She raised her hands placatingly when Myrdina started to protest. “Do you want to be late for the meal with our mother?”

Myrdina scowled and shook her head. “Of course not,” she replied sullenly.

“You have to tell us something!” Lieralia pleaded, her curiosity piqued.

“I will, but don’t blame me if you have trouble accepting when I tell you...” Their eldest sister looked around at her siblings, making eye contact with each in turn. “Mael’nerak really did exist; he ruled the Maliri for many thousands of years.”

Rosanae wrinkled her nose and scoffed with derision. “The Mael’nerak?! Have you taken leave of your senses, Sarinia? You expect us to believe a childhood fairy story is real?!”

“I don’t expect you to believe anything,” Sarinia replied with a nonchalant shrug. “But Kali Loraleth believes it to be true... just as she believes that Baen’thelas is one of his kind.”

The four sisters all reacted to the mention of that name, goosebumps prickling their skin.

“Be a good girl or the Mael’nerak will get you...” Tehlareine whispered, her eyes going wide with fright.

The sneers had been wiped off the faces of the other Baeloran noblewomen and they now looked unsettled as they stared at Sarinia. They had definitely not been good girls.

Myrdina tossed her head, as if trying to shake away the eerie sense of unease. “This is ludicrous! Sarinia starts spouting nonsense and we all believe everything she says!”

“You’re welcome to discuss it with mother at dinner tonight,” Sarinia suggested, raising an eyebrow. “I’m sure Gaenna will be quite happy to confirm what I’ve told you... after all, she has met Baen’thelas on several occasions.”

Lieralia and Rosanae shared a worried glance, and the bluster had been knocked out of Myrdina. Tehlareine didn’t say another word and just looked terrified.

Sarinia softened her voice and said sympathetically, “I know what you’re all thinking; it was a shock for me to hear it too. Unfortunately, we don’t have the time to discuss it now, but we can talk about everything after dinner tonight. We must depart immediately or we really will run late... and I have no desire to anger mother this evening if I can help it.”

The sisters nodded and accompanied Sarinia in leaving her quarters, the quintet heading for Gaenna Baelora’s suite. They didn’t say a word as they walked, the sisters not quite sure if they should believe their eldest sibling or not. As much as they wanted to think she was lying, there was something very strange about the eerie effect Baen’thelas’ name had on each of them.

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Edraele studied the neural lash that hummed in her hand, the microscopic barbs making the cruel edge to the sadistic device shimmer in the light.

“For decades, I considered myself something of an artist with the neural lash,” she murmured, an unsettling note to her voice. “Most novices flail away, spraying blood all over the place... but that’s the worst possible thing you can do. You see, the blood loss eventually makes the subject lose consciousness. A gentle flick of the wrist is the key. If you’re careful, you can make their nerves sing out in agony and keep them in that state for hours.”

Gaenna Baelora sat frozen on the sofa, horrified by Edraele’s fascination with the vicious torture implement.

“Do you hear that?” the Queen crooned, uncurling the weapon and whipping it out with a well-practiced motion of her wrist.

All Gaenna could hear was the ominous humming from the pain amplifiers. “N-no... I didn’t hear anything.”

“Exactly,” Edraele murmured. “That’s why I preferred to gag my victims to stifle their screams. Then they could hear the sound of their flesh being flayed from their bones...”

“Edraele... I-”

“I hear that you also have a fondness for the Neural Lash,” Edraele interrupted, flicking out the weapon again, the tip curling with a sharp snap to punctuate her words. “So much so, that you decided to flout my edict banning their use. Did I mistakenly give you the impression that the ban was optional?”

Gaenna swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry. “It was an internal House disciplinary matter; I didn’t think the ban applied...”

Turning chilling-cold purple eyes on the older matriarch, the Queen looked at her curiously. “Have you forgotten who you’re speaking to, Gaenna?”

The House Baelora matriarch shuddered with fear. Edraele’s reputation for barbaric sadism was only matched by her pyromaniac mother. “N-no, Queen Edraele...”

Edraele tossed aside the buzzing weapon and her eyes began to glow with an eerie purple light. “I think you must have, if you’re flagrantly disobeying me in such a manner. You see, I gave up the neural lash years ago, when I discovered I could inflict far worse suffering using only my mind. Imagine being able to leave someone in a state of perpetual agony on a mere whim. There’s no respite, no salvation in death... just a new life filled with nothing but pain... until the mind finally snaps, unable to endure such torment.”

“Please, Edraele... it was just a simple misunderstanding,” Gaenna pleaded, never having felt so scared in all her life.

“Are you sure?” Edraele murmured, walking behind the sofa and trailing a finger across Gaenna’s shoulders. “Because we can go back to the old ways if you like?”

Gaenna cringed away from her touch, the gentle caress feeling like a burn on her skin. “I swear to you, I will never touch a Neural Lash again!”

“How amusing... I don’t know whether to feel pleased or disappointed,” Edraele said quietly, her lips curling up into a humourless smile. “I’d advise you to be very careful in the future, Gaenna. You’ve proven that you have no respect for a benevolent monarch, so the next time I find myself having this conversation with you... I’ll be forced to use a sterner approach. Am I understood?”

“Y-yes, my Queen,” Gaenna stammered, desperate to never see this terrifying side to Edraele again.

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John followed Alyssa out of the grav-tube, leaving the blue anti-gravity field behind as they walked onto the Bridge. Jade was waiting for them, a look of anticipation in her emerald eyes.

“We’re following your flight path, Alyssa,” the Nymph informed them as they walked up the steps to the Command Podium.

Alyssa put a hand over her mouth as she yawned, then nodded gratefully to their pilot as she sat in the XO chair. “Thanks, Jade. It’ll take us a while to pick up speed.”

John placed a hand on her shoulder and looked at her with concern. “Are you sure you’re not too tired for this?”

“I am, but I did all my calculations earlier when I could still think straight,” she replied with a weary smile.

Dana jogged down the ramp to the Engineering Station, her eyes locked on the Sector Map floating in the middle of the Bridge. “Holy shit... will you take a look at that! The range on that scan array is fucking crazy!”

John glanced at the holographic map and did a double-take when he realised just how much further they could see with the long-range sensors. “Is that five times the range of the old ones?”

“Six!” the redhead exclaimed, her sky-blue eyes alight with excitement. “And check out how fast it’s analysing sensor contacts!”

He remembered the old days aboard the Invictus before it had been upgraded, when it seemed to take forever to analyse the transponder codes of approaching ships. There were plenty of Terran wrecks in Kirrix Space, remnants of the last ill-fated attempt to purge them from the galaxy, and many of those decades old devices were still functional. He watched as the lifeless hulks were quickly tracked and identified on the map, in a truly huge circumference around the Invictus.

“That really is amazing,” he said with an appreciative nod to his Chief Engineer. “Nice work, Sparks. We’ll have no trouble tracking down the Kirrix fleet now.”

She tipped an imaginary hat in his direction, making him laugh.

“How’s the new gyroscope performing?” he asked, slumping into his comfy Command Chair.

Dana turned back to her console and activated a holo-panel, the image of the jet-black Null-Inertia Gyroscope appearing above her station. “I’m seeing nothing but green. Power flow, rotational stress factors, inertia stabilisation field... everything’s working perfectly.”

“We’re about to put it to the test,” Alyssa said, pointing towards the yellow star directly ahead of them.

She zoomed into the system view and displayed the flight path through the star’s gravity well. The course was a dog-leg to the left, curving around on the right-hand-side of the enormous supergiant star. John was relieved to see that for this initial test, they were racing around the outer-edge of the system, not travelling too deep inside the gravity well.

“I decided to play it safe for our first test,” she explained, never taking her eyes off her calculations.

“Very wise.” John fought the urge to let out a sigh of relief, earning himself a smirk from the blonde.

He watched the Invictus rush towards the star, feeling his heart in his mouth as they neared the edge of the system. Travelling at maximum hyper-warp speed, the battlecruiser barrelled into the gravity well, setting off automated warning klaxons on the Bridge.

“Everything’s okay!” Alyssa yelled over the din. “They’re set to trigger automatically if you get this close to a star!”

John was about to comment, when the Invictus began to vibrate, setting his teeth on edge. “Alyssa?”

“We’re not going fast enough to create a bow wave yet,” she explained, not looking particularly worried. “We’ll have to wait until the next system.”

The Invictus charged through the star system, the vibrations increasing as they reached the apex of the curve. Rocketing away from the fiery golden orb, the shaking began to ease as suddenly as it had started.

“It’s working!” Dana blurted out, pointing excitedly at the velocity readings. “Holy fuck... 40% faster already!”

John glanced at Alyssa, who grinned back at him.

“Just wait until the next system, handsome,” she said, her eyes flicking back to the Sector Map. “Eight minutes... if you still want to go ahead with it?”

“I want to say yes, but I keep picturing the model of the Invictus getting crushed like a tin can,” he admitted, frowning as he followed her gaze towards the upcoming star.

“I’d never put you in danger,” she said softly. “Do you trust me?”

He nodded and let out his breath. “Okay, go ahead.”

Alyssa blew him a kiss, then she went back to reviewing the flight data they’d just gathered. “Sparks, what shape is the hull in? Any buckling?”

Dana turned to look at her console and shook her head. “Hull integrity seems to be intact.”

She hesitated, then knelt beside her station and closed her eyes. Psychic energy began to swirl around her arms and she pushed it into the deck plates, where it could spread out to envelop the Invictus’ hull in golden waves.

“Hold on, Sparks!” he called out in warning. “We don’t have enough energy for psychically repairing the hull!”

“This is just a diagnostic,” the redhead muttered, keeping her eyes closed. “Not like before.”

“It’s okay,” Alyssa said, reaching over to clasp his hand. “She’s only using a fraction of the energy she used last time.”

He nodded his understanding, then watched his Chief Engineer at work.

Dana eventually reopened her eyes and gave them a relieved smile. “We’re good... the hull seems to be holding up under the strain.”

After she retook her seat, they watched the holographic representation of the Invictus rush towards the next system. The minutes counted down and John realised he was clenching the armrests in anticipation. The warning klaxon blared again, only to be cut off into a warbling gurgle a second later.

“That was getting annoying,” Alyssa said with a smile, leaning back from her console.

The Invictus ploughed into the next system at breakneck speed, causing the ship to quake violently in response.

“Alyssa?” John yelled over the noisy juddering. “What’s happening?”

“There it is!” Dana exclaimed, pointing excitedly at the rippling vortex that was forming on the bow.

“Three... Two... One...” Alyssa whispered, staring at the System Map. “Boom.”

The vortex reared up into a curved wave that towered above the prow and abruptly all the noise and shaking went still. John turned his shocked gaze towards the map and saw they were charging around the star, like a sailing ship hurtling around the edge of a whirlpool. The Invictus flickered on the holographic map, leaping forward in skipping jumps.

“The Navigation computer can’t handle it,” she said with glee, nodding towards the map. “It was never designed to track this kind of speed!”

John turned his attention to his console, and brought up the ship’s navigation data. Instead of displaying the FTL velocity of hyper-warp, the reading had glitched, showing nonsensical characters. The Invictus roared out of the system, moving quicker than anything John had ever seen.

“107% faster than a standard Progenitor Tachyon Drive,” Alyssa said, sagging back in her chair with a triumphant smile.

“Goddamn...” he muttered, shaking his head in awe.

“Oh yeah!” Dana crowed, a jubilant grin lighting up her face. “Fastest ship in the galaxy!”

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“I think that’s done, Tehlariene,” Sarinia warned her, nodding towards the food bubbling in the re-heater.

“Oh, thank you!” the youngest sister gasped, darting forward to turn off the device before her dinner burned.

Rosanae sneered at her younger sibling and was about to make a snide comment until she caught Sarinia’s warning glance. “That looks delicious...” she muttered between clenched teeth.

“Where could mother be?” Myrdina asked nervously, glancing at the chronometer. “Dinner is supposed to start in two minutes!”

“Are you sure we shouldn’t keep waiting for her?” Lieralia asked, looking equally anxious. “Will she be upset that we started preparing our food without her?”

“I sincerely doubt she’d want us loitering around her quarters all evening,” Sarinia said as she carried a stack of plates over to the table. “We’ll get everything ready, then we can start as soon as she arrives.”

Her four sisters nodded their reluctant agreement.

Myrdina glanced furtively towards the door to check if there was any sign of her mother or her bodyguards. “So, what else did you find out, Sarinia?”

“Well, I discovered the reason that mother has set up residence here,” Sarinia replied, placing the plates on the table.

“What is it?” Rosanae asked in a hushed whisper.

“The leaders of all the ruling Houses have been meeting for a ‘Council of Matriarchs’, held right here at Genthalas. The Council has been temporarily suspended, allowing the matriarchs time to return to their respective homeworlds and resolve any outstanding House business. They will reconvene when Baen’thelas returns in two weeks time.”

Myrdina looked at her eldest sister sceptically. “Kali had to be lying to you; there’s no way all nineteen matriarchs could sit around a table without clawing each other’s eyes out. I find this harder to believe than the Mael’nerak being real!”

Sarinia shook her head. “I would have been able to tell if Kali were lying. She’s not deceitful enough to be able to trick me into believing something so preposterous. I am quite certain she was telling me the truth.”

“So why is mother still here?” Rosanae asked in confusion.

“She’s been brokering a trade deal with Edraele Valaden,” Sarinia quietly replied. “One that she is determined to see concluded.”

“Oh, that explains the Vrysandral Spice!” Lieralia blurted out, leaping to the obvious conclusion. “What’s she been offered for it?”

Sarinia held up her hand. “Before I answer that, let me ask all of you a question: what do you remember about the Mael’nerak legend?”

The sisters exchanged perplexed looks, until Tehlariene tentatively replied, “I can still remember it... I think.”

Rosanae’s lip curled with disgust. “Of course she wou-”

Myrdina elbowed her in the ribs, “Be silent and let her talk.”

“Go ahead, Tehlariene,” Sarinia said gently, putting down the last plate on the table. “Tell us what you can remember.”

Their youngest sister launched into the story, receiving rapt attention from her siblings. Tales of a tyrannical warlord abducting any women who had misbehaved suddenly sounded far more frightening when they knew that Mael’nerak actually existed in the distant past. Sarinia watched her sisters, who were thoroughly spellbound by the story. Despite her attention being elsewhere, she still felt a shiver run down her spine when she heard Tehlariene say that any girls that had been bad were punished. Perhaps they had justifiable reasons for their misdeeds?

As Tehlariene finished her tale, Myrdina shuddered involuntarily. “And you’re saying Baen’thelas is the same as the Mael’nerak?” she asked in a tremulous voice.

“Actually, Kali told me that that he’s kind rather than cruel,” Sarinia replied. “She also said that-”

Her voice trailed off abruptly as the doors slid open and Gaenna Baelora marched into the quarters, her face purple with fury. She opened her mouth to unleash her rage on her daughters, but her bodyguards following her inside made her choke on her words. She had no wish to reveal to her underlings the humiliation she had been forced to endure.

Turning to the bodyguards she snapped, “Leave us!”

“Yes, Matriarch,” they obediently replied, bowing to her and leaving the suite.

As soon as the doors had closed behind them, Gaenna whirled on her daughters and hissed, “Which of you craven little bitches was it?!”

The five sisters gaped at their mother, stunned by her accusation. Sarinia knew full well what had Gaenna so irate, but over a century spent tiptoeing around her volatile mother had taught her to be a magnificent actress.

“Don’t play innocent with me!” their matriarch shrieked, stalking across the room towards them. “I’ve just spent the last two hours being threatened and humiliated by Edraele Valaden! Do you have any idea what you’ve done? What you might have cost me?!”

Her daughters darted shocked, uncomprehending glances at one another.

“I know it was one of you!” Gaenna sneered, glaring at each of them turn. “Well? Speak up!”

The younger daughters stood in terrified silence, but Sarinia knew that as the eldest, it would fall to her to say something. “I don’t understand, mother... Why would you put up with any humiliation from Edraele?”

Gaenna stared unblinking at Sarinia, her face twisted into a sceptical scowl. “Oh, ‘I don’t understand’... is it? Of course you have no idea what I’m talking about?”

Sarinia’s golden eyes widened in alarm. “I-I don’t! I’ve never even met Edraele Valaden, let alone spoken to her!”

Her mother prowled around the table, glowering at each of the others in turn. She stopped by Tehlariene and narrowed her eyes. “You’ve always been weak and pathetic. It was you that went crying to her, wasn’t it?!”

Plainly terrified, her youngest daughter shook her head frantically. “No, never!”

“I will find out who it was, mark my words,” Gaenna snarled, continuing around the table.

She grabbed a bottle of wine from the nearby rack and ripped off the seal. Taking a seat at the head of the table, she poured some into her glass and gulped it down. Refilling the glass in silence, she did the same again.

“I’ve had no time to prepare anything,” she snapped, turning her furious eyes on Sarinia. “The others can’t cook to save their lives. Serve me some of yours...”

“Yes, mother,” Sarinia said quietly, using serving tongs to place samples of each of the dishes she’d prepared on her mother’s plate.

Narrowing her eyes suspiciously, she locked eyes with Rosanae. “Eat some of each.”

Rosanae shot a worried glance at her eldest sister.

“The food is safe, Rosanae,” Sarinia said, making eye-contact with her. “I promise.”

With a shaking hand, the Maliri noblewoman got a fork and tried little bites from each dish. Despite the pleasant taste, she wasn’t able to enjoy the food. With the fraught atmosphere around the dining table, she expected to keel over dead at any moment. There was deathly silence as the House Baelora family members stared at Rosanae with trepidation, but a minute later she showed no signs of ill-effects from the food. Slow-acting poisons were far from uncommon, so everyone still remained tense.

Sarinia sighed and served herself, then sat down and made a point of trying small portions of each dish. “This is ridiculous... why would I poison my own food? Nobody else was supposed to be sharing it,” she said in exasperation.

Rosanae sagged with relief and returned to her seat. After a grudging nod from their mother, the rest of the daughters served themselves from the dishes they’d each prepared earlier. Gaenna took a swill of wine, then stabbed a piece of succulent Trabella and chewed it angrily.

“Does anyone else want to try my dinner?” Sarinia asked with a faint smile. “If I’d known I was catering for everyone, I would have made larger portions...”

Her sisters laughed nervously and even Gaenna couldn’t help chuckling at that.

With the tension eased, they all began to eat, the daughters darting nervous glances at their mother. Gaenna ate in silence, her beady eyes flicking from one to the other as she looked for any sign of who might have betrayed her to the Queen. Myrdina coughed and took a drink of wine, quickly followed by Lieralia, who cleared her throat noisily before coughing again.

What started as a scratchy tickle turned into a tortured hacking, and Rosanae whimpered in horror as she began to cough as well. Tehlariene brought both hands to her throat as she desperately fought to breathe, her eyes bulging in terror. She knocked over her plate and drink as she toppled off her chair, the glass shattering when it hit the floor.

Gaenna’s mouth fell open in shock as she stared at her daughters, each of them foaming at the lips, their faces turning purple as they began to convulse. She whipped her head around to look at Sarinia, who sat calmly to her right, idly toying with a fork as she sipped from her wine glass.

“Contact poison on their plates,” her eldest daughter said conversationally. “It was easy to apply it while they were distracted by talk of Mael’nerak and Baen’thelas...”

The matriarch’s horrified gaze dropped to her own plate.

“No mother, poison would be far too quick an end for you...” Sarinia said, her golden eyes glinting with malevolent glee.

Gasping with fear, Gaenna reached for the concealed laser pistol in her belt. Although Maliri responded rapidly to an infusion of John’s cum, Gaenna Baelora had not ingested nearly enough to restore reflexes that had slowed with age. Sarinia was still in the prime of her life and she lashed out with her fork, stabbing her mother’s hand to the table and making Gaenna scream with pain.

Reaching for the pistol herself, Sarinia drew the sleek, deadly weapon from its holster. Gaenna tried to scrabble for it with her left hand, smashing her glass as they grappled. Sarinia whirled around and viciously slapped her mother, the blow powerful enough to knock her from her chair, a tortured yelp forced from Gaenna’s lips as her impaled hand tore free from the table.

The landing knocked the air from her lungs and Gaenna scrabbled across the tiles, desperate to grab the pistol that had skittered across the floor. Sarinia got there first, kneeling down to pick up the laser weapon, then pointed it at her mother’s frightened face.

“Stop, Sarinia!” Gaenna begged between panted breaths, holding up her hands defensively. “Listen to me...”

“I was nine-years-old when I first wished you dead,” Sarinia said, her lip curling up into a wry smile. “That was the first time you whipped me, for waking you too early in the morning. Do you remember, mother?”

Gaenna swallowed and reluctantly shook her head.

“Ah, I don’t blame you for not remembering,” Sarinia said with a amiable shrug. “What’s one beating in 120 years of torment?” She leaned forward and added, “But just to clarify, this has nothing to do with over a century of abuse... after all that’s just the game of succession, isn’t it, mother? A matriarch tortures her daughters, they torment each other, and everyone picks on the youngest... then the cycle continues with the next matriarch.”

“Sarinia... I’m sorry...” Gaenna muttered, doing her best to sound sincere.

Her daughter giggled, genuinely amused. “That was pathetic! Don’t bother apologising, I know you enjoyed brutalising all of us... after all, that was your right as matriarch. As I said, I couldn’t care less about that... it was expected.”

“What then?” Gaenna asked, nursing her wounded hand and looking at her daughter in confusion.

The smile suddenly disappeared from Sarinia’s face. “Did you think I wouldn’t find out about your deal with Edraele? Baen’thelas restoring your youth... your hope of immortality? For 120 years I’ve been patiently waiting for you to die, mother. Did you think I was going to just stand by and let you rule forever?”

Gaenna gasped, her face showing real fear now. “Wait, Sarinia... I can explain!”

Her daughter calmly put down the laser pistol and drew a carving knife from the block in the kitchen. “No explanations are needed, mother. It’s time you fulfilled your part in the game of succession...”

With a shriek of terror, Gaenna lurched to her feet and tried to run for the door. Sarinia ran after her and kicked out her legs, making the older woman crash to the floor. She leapt on top of her and with a manic gleam in her eyes plunged the knife into her mother’s chest.

“Just fucking die, you vicious old hag!” she screamed.

A gout of blue blood splashed across Sarinia’s face as Gaenna gasped in agony. The House Baelora matriarch tried to block the slashing blade, but Sarinia was younger, stronger, and quicker, making it easy for her to overpower her mother. The knife rose and fell, Sarinia stabbing her again and again in a brutal frenzy, fulfilling her century-long fondest wish.

By the time Sarinia’s rage had been quelled, she was doused from head to toe in sticky blood. She panted for breath over her mother’s lacerated corpse, then rose to her feet on shaky legs. Tossing aside the blood-drenched knife, she staggered into her mother’s office and sat behind her desk. A swipe across the runic interface opened up the comms system and she navigated to the files stored in the computer in her quarters.

Copying everything she’d learned at Genthalas into the message, she attached the four images she’d selected of the matriarchs and Baen’thelas. Addressing the message to every noble daughter in the Maliri Protectorate, Sarinia looked directly at the holo-camera and began to record.

“This is Matriarch Sarinia Baelora,” she said with a ghastly smile, blood slowly dripping from her face. “See you at the next Council meeting, Matriarchs...”