Three Square Meals Ch. 128

Sakura watched the long lines of infested Trankarans, the stoic republic citizens waiting patiently in the docking collar that connected the Kirrix dreadnought to the Invictus. There were so many freed prisoners in need of treatment that the queue seemed to stretch for miles, snaking through the innards of the alien ship until they reached the point where she now stood.

“Are any of you wounded?” she called out as she crossed into the dreadnought, looking for anyone in need of emergency care.

One of the huge eight-foot males turned to look at her, his slab-like features twisted into concern. “My bond-mate, Bakhastra. She was shot when we were captured.”

Hurrying over to him, Sakura glanced around his bulky frame, noticing he bore the unmistakeable signs of egg infestation.

The shorter female Trankaran was still over six-feet-tall, standing straight-backed and resilient despite everything she’d endured. “I do not wish to receive special treatment, Galdrumlin,” she said, shaking her head. “I will wait my turn with my rock-brethren.”

Her mate put brawny his arm around Bakhastra to give her a reassuring hug, but she winced at his touch and looked unsteady on her feet.

Sakura gently took her hand. “Bakhastra... when the Maliri and Trankaran fleets arrive, we’ll be handing over the rescue operation to them. We’re able to quickly heal people who’ve been wounded, but anyone we don’t have time to see will have to be tended by conventional medics, who could be treating egg infestations instead. The best thing you could do for your people is to let us heal you now.”

The Trankaran woman looked alarmed. “Please forgive me, I did not know.”

“That’s okay. Let’s get those wounds healed,” Sakura said with an encouraging smile.

She helped Bakhastra step out of the queue and shook her head in disbelief when she saw the ugly pair of neutron blaster wounds on the woman’s back. A Terran would never have survived injuries that severe and she was amazed the Trankaran was still standing, let alone able to walk unaided.

Galdrumlin watched her leave with obvious relief. “I shall join you as soon as I am able, jewel of my heart.” He relaxed, shifting his weight to his right leg.

Sakura noticed his discomfort and raised an eyebrow. “You’re hurt too, aren’t you?”

“It’s nothing, just a minor flesh wound,” he replied, waving his huge paw dismissively.

She rolled her eyes and beckoned him to join her. “Come on. You need healing and Bakhastra needs your support.”

The two Trankarans limped after her as she led them along the corridor to the Invictus. Irillith and Tashana were standing guard at the broad hangar doors and they nodded to Sakura as she guided the wounded through to the treatment centre. Rachel was there, overseeing the maintenance bots, who were using Sonic Cannons to liquefy the nearly-hatched eggs inside their hosts. Although each of those Trankarans was only carrying a single egg, they were the grubs for higher-tier creatures, like hive lords and juggernauts, and therefore substantially larger.

Sakura handed over Bakhastra and Galdrumlin to Rachel, who immediately began healing their wounds, the Trankarans unable to stop themselves from gasping as their bodies regenerated. After waving them goodbye, Sakura returned to the docking collar to look for more stubborn Trankarans in need of aid.

Stopping beside the twins, she said quietly, “It looks like the sensor scans were right. I’ve done a bit of scouting and everywhere I’ve looked, the Kirrix on board the dreadnought are dead. I know Alyssa didn’t want to take any chances, but I don’t think we need you two on guard duty anymore.”

The Maliri had turned their Paragon helmets opaque to protect their identity, so Sakura wasn’t able to see their expressions.

“I’ve contacted the hive ships,” Irillith informed her fellow Lioness. “They confirmed that all the Kirrix crews are dead there too.”

“Did they all die at the exact same time?” Sakura asked, already suspecting the answer. “I’ve spoken to a lot of Trankarans and they said their eggs stopped moving an hour ago... right when all the guards keeled over.”

The Maliri hacker nodded. “Ample proof that John wiped them all out.”

There was no mistaking the wonder in Tashana’s voice as she murmured, “I knew Baen’thelas was powerful, but I never dreamed he was capable of doing anything like that.”

Sakura had a look of awestruck admiration in her eyes. “He saved thousands of Trankarans. Those eggs were already starting to hatch and we never would have been able to treat them all in time.”

The three women stood quietly together for a moment, all sharing that same sense of amazement. Those feelings were also accompanied by concern for the man they loved, who hadn’t stirred since they had brought him back to the Invictus.

\*He’ll be okay, girls,\* Alyssa said, her voice calm and reassuring. \*Rachel checked him over, remember? John’s just exhausted after channelling that much psychic energy in one go.\*

\*Will you tell me when he wakes up?\* Sakura asked anxiously.

\*Of course. I’ll let all of you know the moment anything changes,\* their matriarch replied. \*Now, Jade and Dana are about to dock with the first batches of injured from the hive ships. Tashana, Irillith, I’d like you to head to the forward airlocks and help unload the Trankarans from the Raptor and the Progenitor shuttle.\*

\*On our way,\* the twins said simultaneously.

“I’ll see you two later,” Sakura said, smiling at the Maliri.

They both reached out to touch her arms in a simple gesture of affection, then left to meet the docking spacecraft at the front of the Invictus. She watched them depart, before turning and heading back into the dreadnought to search for more injured prisoners.

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Fleet Commander Lilyana paced nervously on the Bridge of the Galaena Serine, darting occasional glances at the holographic starmap. The Maliri war fleet was racing across the sector, with Warden Brokurlun’s Trankaran forces trailing along in their wake. She could see the glowing yellow lines that marked the outer edge of her battleship’s sensor range, the arcs stretching out into space and pushing back the darkness... but so far, they had detected nothing.

“Are we definitely travelling at top speed?” she asked her Chief Engineer impatiently.

The Maliri officer nodded. “Affirmative, Fleet Commander. This is our maximum hyper-warp velocity.”

Lilyana grimaced, then turned to her Senior Navigator. “Check our course heading... I’m sure we should have seen them by now.”

“I verified it two minutes ago...” the crewwoman protested with a frown.

“Check it again!” Lilyana said indignantly.

The navigator ducked her head down and went to work. “Yes, Fleet Commander...”

Lilyana heard a peal of laughter echoing from the corridor approaching the Bridge and she bristled, whirling around and getting ready to chastise the jovial crewwomen. Her sharp retort died on her lips when she saw who it was, Almari and Ilyana flouncing onto the Command Deck with dazzling smiles on the two assassins’ faces.

“Hey!” Almari greeted her cheerfully, cobalt-blue eyes sparkling with excitement.

Ilyana skipped along at her side, her normally reserved composure nowhere to be seen. “Any sign of the Invictus yet?!”

The Fleet Commander sagged against her command chair. “No.”

Almari put her arm around the older woman and gave her a comforting hug. “It won’t be long now... don’t worry!”

\*There’s no need to fret, my dear,\* Edraele said softly. \*I’m very proud of the way you’ve served the Protectorate... and soon you’ll receive the reward you so richly deserve.\*

Biting her lower lip in anticipation, Lilyana let out a wistful sigh.

“Fleet Commander!” the Chief Engineer blurted out excitedly. “Look, sensor contacts!”

Lilyana’s head snapped around and she pushed herself off the Command Chair. “Enhance the view! I want to see more detail!”

The holographic projection shifted focus, centring on the sensor contacts and zooming in closer. The dozen red glyphs were soon joined by scores more, the number of contacts increasing until there were thousands sprawled across a vast area of space. As they drew closer, the glowing icons shifted into three-dimensional depictions of the shattered debris and forlorn wrecks that formed the immense starship graveyard.

“The Invictus did all that?” she breathed, gaping incredulously at the scale of the destruction.

Sure enough, a green glyph was replaced by the white battlecruiser, appearing in the middle of all the destruction. It was quite apparent that the Invictus hadn’t sustained so much as a dent in the ferocious combat, and the flawless hull sparkled brightly as it reflected the starlight.

“They’ve had some upgrades since the Battle of Terra,” Almari murmured, just as astounded by the carnage.

There was a chime from the Comms Station, which sounded deafeningly loud as it shattered the stunned silence on the Bridge, making every single crewwoman jump.

“We’re being hailed by the Invictus!” the comms officer called out, turning to look wide-eyed at her Fleet Commander.

“Put them through!” Lilyana said with a gleeful grin.

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“John... are you alright?” a female voice asked, penetrating his subconscious like a jackhammer.

He groaned at the stabbing pain in his eyes and fumbled for the duvet, pulling it over his aching head. “Too bright... too loud!”

A hand tentatively stroked his shoulder. “There... is that better?” the girl murmured.

John tentatively peeled back the covers, blinking slowly in the gloom. He could see a figure staring at him with concern, her jagged features slowly softening into Alyssa’s beautiful face.

“Feels like I was hit by a truck...” he mumbled, rubbing at his head. “What the hell happened?”

Alyssa shot a worried glance to her right and another face loomed over him, this time a lovely tawny-haired girl.

He didn’t immediately recognise the brunette and he squinted as he tried to place her. “Rachel...?”

“You’re obviously suffering from light sensitivity,” she whispered, her well-spoken voice soft and comforting. “Aside from a severe headache, are you experiencing any other symptoms?”

“Took a moment to know who you were... it’s like the worst hangover ever...” he muttered, rubbing at his temples. “Gimme a sec... I’ll fix it.”

“Wait!” Rachel called out sharply, making him wince with the loud noise.

“What?” he asked with a groan.

Alyssa leaned closer and pressing her lips up against his ear, she whispered, “You asked for as much power as we could give you. I think we gave you too much... you nearly died.”

Rachel lay down beside him opposite Alyssa and murmured, “I want you to rest. Don’t use any psychic abilities until we’re sure that you’re fully recovered.”

“Why’d you wake me?” he groaned. “You could’ve just let me sleep it off...”

“You’ve been unconscious for five hours already,” Alyssa whispered, her breath tickling his ear. “The Trankarans and Maliri fleets arrived an hour ago.”

“We can’t hang around!” he protested, trying to sit up and clutching at his pounding head. “Fuck!”

Both girls held him down, their beautiful faces darkening to angry scowls.

“Stop!” Alyssa barked, making him wince again. “You’ll hurt yourself even more!”

John gave up trying to fight them and sagged back on the bed with a groan. “Okay...”

Rachel cuddled up against him again. “I can try to ease your symptoms, but I want to do it very carefully,” she whispered in a hushed voice. “You were incapacitated by excessive psychic power usage and I don’t want to risk doing any more damage. Tell me immediately if you experience any discomfort.”

He decided against nodding and just stroked her hair instead, enjoying the silky feel of her tawny mane flowing across his fingers. Taking the gesture as acceptance, Rachel reached out with her misty aura, extending it to swathe his body. John had been healed by her before, but this time wasn’t like the tickling sensation that made him want to burst into laughter. He wasn’t sure anything was happening at first, then there was the slightest shift... like the crushing pressure on his head was been eased away.

“Feels good...” he murmured appreciatively.

Rachel relaxed, the tension in her back and shoulders easing. “There you go,” she crooned, brushing her lips against his cheek. “Let me take all the pain away...”

He reached for Alyssa and pulled her closer too. “Love you both... so much.”

With his eyes closed, John wasn’t aware of the joyful smile the two teenagers darted at each other. He held onto them, taking solace in the embrace as Rachel did her best to soothe his overloaded synapses. The blistering headache bled away, gradually freeing his tortured subconscious from the blanket of pain that had assailed him since he’d awoken.

Sighing with relief, John looked down at Rachel. “That was amazing... I can’t tell you how much better I feel. Thank you, honey.”

Touched by the sincerity of his gratitude, she gave him a shy smile. “I’m so glad you’re alright.”

Alyssa watched him with concern, her slender fingers stroking his hair. “John... do you remember exactly what happened when you confronted the Hive Queen?”

He smiled as he looked up at her, then suddenly froze, his pupils going wide in horror. “Oh God, no!”

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Dana squeezed past the line of Trankarans that were filing out of the Raptor, then bounded through the airlock into the Invictus.

She spotted Jade leaving the Progenitor shuttle and waved at the Nymph matriarch. “Hey! Alyssa’s being all secretive about why we’re meeting up; do you know what’s happening?”

The normally exuberant shapeshifter looked anxious as she replied, “You know that she woke John?”

Falling into step beside her as they walked into the Primary Hangar, Dana bobbed her head in confirmation. “Yeah, she said Rachel fixed him up and he’s fine now.”

Jade had a distant look in her troubled eyes. “Physically, yes... he’s fully recovered.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Dana hissed, feeling a surge of alarm. “What about mentally?!”

The Nymph steered the unsettled redhead away from the Trankarans that were walking towards the treatment centre. She nodded to Marika as they passed the closest catgirl, the four Nymphs in their nurse’s outfits as they aided the lines of patients.

“John’s upset, Dana,” Jade whispered to her companion. “With good reason to be.”

“About what?!” she demanded, walking quickly to keep up with the hurrying green-skinned girl.

Jade glanced around furtively and was about to reply, when she spotted Helene nearby, talking to a huge Trankaran warrior wearing imposing battle armour.

“You should be very proud of your people, Warden Brokurlun,” the aquatic girl said, looking up at him with respect. “They’ve been through so much... but they’re all incredibly brave.”

He stood a bit taller, towering over the teal-hued beauty. “I am very proud of my rock-brethren, Lioness Helene. Many citizens of Dun Hergrun have approached me with stories of your benevolence and the kindness you have shown them; I see that they have not exaggerated their claims.”

“I just tried to help ease their suffering. They refuse to show that they’ve been hurt, but I could still feel their pain,” she said softly. Reaching up to place a hand on his rune-embossed chest plate she added, “Just like yours...”

The Warden’s mouth fell open as he gaped at her in shock, then his slab-like features crumpled with overwhelming grief.

“I’m so sorry, Brokurlun,” Helene whispered, her compassionate blue-eyed gaze glowing with a soft light. “I know you loved your children very much...”

“I lost everyone... they have all been taken from me,” he rumbled, his expression one of insurmountable pain.

“Don’t give up hope,” she said, meeting his look of anguish. “We managed to save over a million Trankarans... there’s still a chance that your wife survived... and your parents.”

He dropped to one knee with a clang and gently embraced her. “I will do as you ask. I will continue to pray to the Great Protector for their salvation.”

Helene hugged him back. “I hope your prayers are answered, Brokurlun.”

The big Trankaran gave her a grateful look, then rose to his feet and bowed respectfully. He turned and walked away, a newfound purpose in his stride.

Jade had held back as the two spoke, but she hurried to join the aquatic girl when Brokurlun departed. “Helene, are you alright?” she asked, reaching out to stroke her shoulder.

“The Kirrix were so awful to these poor people,” Helene murmured, watching the big warrior leave. “Is it really true that John killed them all?”

The Nymph nodded. “He had to save the Trankarans from being torn apart by hatching eggs.”

“I suppose I should be horrified that so many Kirrix have died today, but I don’t feel that way at all,” Helene replied wearily, running a hand through her light-green hair. “How can the Kirrix be so cruel? The Trankarans are nice people... they never deserved any of this.”

“There are some truly evil creatures in the galaxy,” Jade replied, a sad edge to her voice as she studied the innocent girl.

Dana gave Helene a supportive hug. “John’s awake and wants to talk to us. Are you coming up to the meeting too?”

“I’d love to join you,” the aquatic girl said, smiling at her gratefully as they started walking towards the double doors at the end of the room.

\*Helene’s coming with us, Alyssa,\* Jade warned her fellow matriarch, looking at the young woman with concern.

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John stood beside the broad windows that flanked the Briefing Room, staring at the enormous Trankaran battleship that was docked with the Invictus. The Forge of Ukonlir was a dull rust-red, the armour plating a dozen-feet thick to protect the massive command vessel’s robust hull. The door opened behind him and he turned to see the girls filing into the room. There was a succession of hugs and kisses from each of them as they all expressed their relief that he was alright.

Dana was the last and she looked him in the eye when she pulled back from the hug. “You’re not alright, are you?”

He reluctantly shook his head. “Alyssa told you what I did? That I went into the Hive Queen’s head and overloaded her psychic network?”

“I’ve seen hundreds of Kirrix corpses,” Sakura said quietly. “They were bleeding from their eyes... from their mouths... You lobotomised them all.”

Alyssa reached over to squeeze his hand. “You nearly took yourself out too.”

There were shocked gasps from the girls at that announcement and John looked around at them apologetically. “That definitely wasn’t intentional. I tapped so much power from Alyssa, Jade, and Edraele that I was high as a kite. If Alyssa hadn’t snapped me out of it... I dread to think what might’ve happened.”

“You’ve drawn huge amounts of psychic energy from your matriarchs before,” Calara said, looking puzzled. “Why did you react so badly this time?”

John’s eyes flicked to Jade.

The Nymph nodded glumly, her expression chagrined. “With all the attention my sisters have received from John recently, they’ve grown strong... far stronger than I realised. When he asked me for as much power as possible, I obeyed without question.”

“It wasn’t your fault, you just caught me by surprise,” John said, putting an arm around his green matriarch and giving her a supportive hug.

“I love blowing your mind, Master... but not like that!” Jade exclaimed, hugging him back.

“Jade and her sisters are now packing as much psychic energy as Edraele and her entire network of Maliri wards,” Alyssa explained, smiling at the green-skinned girl in admiration. “And we’re not close to being finished with those sexy catgirls yet.”

“Isn’t upgrading them even further going to be dangerous?” Calara asked with concern.

John shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. The Nymphs are like very powerful psychic batteries; we’ll just have to be careful how much energy Jade gives me at any one time, especially if I’m drawing power from Alyssa and Edraele too.”

“Okay, it’s good we found that out, but why would you be upset about that?” Dana asked with a puzzled frown.

“You’re right, that’s not the problem,” John replied, his expression turning bleak. “When I obliterated the Hive Queen’s mind, I got snapshots of her memories.” His eyes flicked to Helene as he quietly continued, “Before they invaded the Trankaran Republic, this Kirrix fleet was stationed on the Brimorian border. They were there... to trade for slaves.”

It took a moment for the girls to realise what he was saying and they looked at him in horror.

“Rach warned us the Brimorians were going to start culling the Abandoned,” Dana whispered, her face twisted with revulsion. “But I never thought they’d actually do it!”

Rachel didn’t say a word, she just looked at John, then put her arms around Helene to console the shocked girl.

John shook his head, his eyes filled with tightly-suppressed fury. “No, you don’t understand. The Brimorians didn’t just start this recently... they’ve been trading the Abandoned to the Kirrix for decades. All the sick, wounded, or elderly... the Brimorians murdered millions of them!”

Calara leaned unsteadily against the briefing table, her face betraying the depths of her horror. “I always wondered how the Kirrix had so many drones... my God.”

“I think I’m going to be sick,” Helene murmured, holding a trembling hand to her mouth.

Alyssa opened the door with a flick of her fingers and Rachel helped the devastated Abandoned girl out of the room. Helene didn’t make it to the bathroom in time and they could hear her being violently sick on the Bridge until the door slid shut behind her.

“We can’t let this stand, John,” Sakura muttered, her jaw clenched. “The Brimorians have to be punished. They don’t deserve to live.”

He slumped in his chair at the head of the table, his expression conflicted between anger and trepidation. “I’m finding it very hard not to agree with you.”

Tashana looked troubled as she said quietly, “We’ve talked about how evil the Kirrix are for preying on other species... but they’re doing it just to survive. What’s the Brimorian’s excuse?”

“Greed...” John muttered, his eyes flashing dangerously. “Metals, minerals, precious gems... the Kirrix trade the Brimorians anything they want in exchange for a steady supply of Abandoned slaves.”

“Fuck it!” Dana snarled, slamming her fist down on the table. “I say we kill them all and hand the Brimorian Enclave over to the Abandoned!”

Irillith nodded, her face grim. “I agree.”

“So do I,” Jade said, the vehemence in her voice surprising them all.

Alyssa stood beside John and stroked his shoulder, “What do you want to do, John?”

He glanced across the table at Calara, who had tears in her eyes as she shook her head.

“We can’t do anything...” the Latina said, her shoulders slumping. “Not now... not when there’s so much at stake. We have to get back to Genthalas as quickly as possible, rally the Maliri, then seize all of Larn’kelnar’s fleet. As much as I hate the Brimorians right now for what they’ve done, we can’t deal with them yet.”

“But they’re killing millions of people!” Dana exclaimed in shock. “We can’t just do nothing!”

“If we don’t get our hands on thrall ships for the Maliri, billions will die in a Progenitor invasion,” Calara said, her voice haunted. “We haven’t got any choice.”

Irillith sat down, her eyes blazing with a violet light.

“What are you doing?” John asked the Maliri hacker.

“Getting some answers from the dreadnought,” Irillith muttered, her angular eyes flicking from side to side as her spirit form swept over the Cyber Realm.

The rest of the crew watched in silence, waiting for whatever it was she was looking for.

It didn’t take long before Irillith relaxed, blinking as she adjusted to being back in the room. “We’ve got some time... but not long.”

“What do you mean?” John asked, leaning forward with interest.

“You were right... Irnaxxa’s fleet was stationed on the Brimorian border. They invaded Trankaran space a month ago, then were returning to a planet called Kirr-arlak to unload all the newly-hatched grubs. After that, the dreadnought was supposed to load on cargo and return to the Brimorians to collect the next shipment. The Kirrix captured so many Trankarans on Dun Hergrun, they were running late for the next border meeting.”

“But we just wiped out the fleet,” Calara said, looking at her quizzically. “So does that mean the Hive Mind will send out another?”

Irillith nodded. “Yes, but Hive Queens will only travel on dreadnoughts and the Kirrix only had three, two of which we’ve destroyed. The third is stationed at Kirr-Inax and it’ll take two weeks to travel to the border.”

“Won’t they just send the closest fleet of hive ships instead?” Calara asked, looking unconvinced.

John shook his head. “The Kirrix need the upper-tier creatures as well as just drones. There’s always been a Hive Queen present for the trade with the Brimorians.”

“The Kirrix are in the middle of a civil war now,” the Latina reminded them. “Will they still send out their last dreadnought if the two sides are fighting each other to the death? Surely whichever side controls the dreadnought will use it to help defeat the other first?”

“Maintaining a fresh supply of hosts is more important to the Kirrix than anything,” Alyssa said thoughtfully. “When I told the Kirrix to stop raiding neighbouring empires for hosts, one faction agreed while the other refused; that’s the sole reason for the civil war. Secretly trading with the Brimorians for Abandoned slaves is something else entirely... both Kirrix factions will still be in complete agreement on that.”

“Okay, so at least we’ve got two weeks then?” Dana asked, her face brightening. “We do all the shit we need to, then we can go wipe out the Brimorians and save the Abandoned!”

“We could always reposition Lilyana’s fleet to the Brimorian border,” Irillith suggested with a wicked grin. “Instead of the Kirrix turning up to collect slaves, Lilyana could meet the Brimorians instead.”

Calara looked torn, her fingers drumming on the table as she considered it. “We really need to recall her fleet to Genthalas. We must reallocate those crews to thrall ships as soon as possible.”

John shook his head. “We can always send a fleet of thrall ships with skeleton crews to meet her. If we can’t attack the Brimorians in time for any reason, Lilyana can be our backup plan to stop the slave trade. Dana’s right; we can’t just stand by and do nothing. I’ll do whatever I can to protect the Abandoned.”

“Thank you, John,” Helene said softly, hearing the end of the conversation as she re-entered the Briefing Room.

He rose from his chair and walked over to meet the distraught girl. “Are you alright?”

She looked pale and very sad, but nodded. “I just keep thinking about all the elders that disappeared from my village. They were good people... and it’s just so awful to think about what happened to them.”

“I’m so sorry, honey” he said, gathering her in his arms. “I promise you, we’re going to stop the Enclave and make sure the Abandoned are never mistreated again.”

“Are you going to kill all the Brimorians?” she asked very quietly, doubt and concern in her eyes.

John stroked Helene’s back soothingly as she lay her head against his chest. “I honestly don’t know...” he replied, his expression as conflicted as hers.

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Neysa padded across the docking collar that linked the Invictus to the Forge of Ukonlir, smiling at the hundreds of Trankaran civilians in the huge hangar that bowed to her respectfully. She approached a group of officers wearing battle armour, who were speaking to each other quietly, or as quietly as was possible with their deep rumbling voices.

“Warden Brokurlun?” she asked, her tone polite and respectful.

The leader turned to look at her, his sad expression lifting slightly. “Yes, Lioness? Can I be of assistance?”

She smiled at him and shook her head. “This one is just called Neysa. I believe you asked to speak with John? He asked me to inform you that he will meet with you shortly.”

He bowed to her. “Thank you for telling me, Neysa.”

“You’re welcome,” she replied, her smile softening. “I also wish to inform you that someone else wishes to see you.”

“Oh, of course. Who is it?”

“Brokurlun!” a Trankaran female called out, her voice ringing across the vast room.

He looked up in shock, then leapt forward, catching the rockwoman as she ran into his arms. “Helgruda!” he exclaimed, his craggy features lit up with joy.

As the Warden clung to his sobbing bond-mate, he felt a mixture of elation mixed with sorrow. While he was overjoyed to be reunited with Helgruda, he knew only too well what happened to the children captured by the Kirrix, and her heartbroken sobs echoed his own grief. Doing his best to console her, he glanced over her shoulder and his jaw dropped in shock. Neysa turned to watch as Irillith led two elderly Trankarans across the hangar to join their son.

“H-how did you find them?” he stammered, as he reverently embraced his parents.

“I hacked the Forge of Ukonlir’s security to find pictures of your relatives in your personal archives,” Irillith stated, her smile hidden behind her opaque mask. “Then I spoke to the Kirrix ships and asked them to search for your family members amongst all the prisoners.”

Brokurlun could only gape at her, not sure whether she was joking or actually being serious. “Thank you!”

“It was no trouble,” the Maliri said with sympathy. “I’m so sorry about the rest of your family.”

“Your condolences are greatly appreciated...” Recovering from his shock, he continued, “Is Helene with you? I wish to thank her too.”

Irillith hesitated, then shook her head. “I’m sorry, Warden. She’s resting at the moment.”

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John stroked Helene’s soft green hair, watching her breathing deepen as she fell fast asleep. He shared a look of concern with Jade, who was lying behind the exhausted Abandoned girl, then leaned over to give her a kiss.

\*Don’t worry, I’ll watch over Helene tonight, Master,\* she said, hugging the sleeping young woman.

\*Thanks, honey. Let me know if she wakes up with nightmares.\*

Jade nodded, then planted a loving kiss on Helene’s teal shoulder.

Rising to his feet, John glanced at Alyssa and the pair quietly left the room, the door to Jade’s quarters sliding shut behind them.

He stopped in the corridor and pulling the blonde into a hug. “That poor girl. She’s lost whole generations of her family to the Kirrix... it doesn’t even bear thinking about.”

“I always thought Abandoned families were messed up, sending their kids off to different villages and never seeing them again,” Alyssa said embracing him just as hard. “But I think in this case, it might actually be a blessing.”

“Shit!” John cursed, his eyes widening. “What about her parents?!”

Alyssa considered it for a moment, then her face fell. “I don’t know... but the odds aren’t good. Abandoned females start giving birth once a year from about sixteen and Helene had thirteen older siblings. That means Riva must have been at least 30 when she had Helene... and that was 22 years ago.”

“So her mother is 52, maybe older?” he asked, now looking just as bleak. “After Riva stopped being able to have children, how long would she last farming the kelp beds before she got sick or injured?”

“It’s back-breaking work... We could ask Helene but I’d prefer not to.”

“Yeah, she’s got enough to deal with already,” he agreed, nodding despondently.

Alyssa gave him a tender kiss on the cheek. “I’m really glad you decided to send Lilyana’s fleet to stop the slave trade. At least we’ll know that no more Abandoned are being murdered.”

“Yeah, me too.” He grimaced and continued, “I just wish I hadn’t slept for so long after the fight. I really wanted to see Lilyana and the assassins before we left and thank them personally for everything they’ve done.”

\*It will mean the world to them if you can visit their ship, even if only briefly,\* Edraele urged him. \*I was also hoping that you could address the crews of the Maliri fleet to thank them on my behalf.\*

“We can spare an hour,” Alyssa said, looking into his eyes. “There’s still huge numbers of Trankarans in need of treatment, so the girls can continue to help until we get back.”

“You’re right; an hour’s delay won’t make any real difference,” he conceded, turning towards the grav-tubes.

Alyssa wrinkled her nose as she studied him. “John... you can’t go like that!”

He glanced down at the wrinkled jumpsuit he’d been wearing since the battle. “Alright, let’s go change.”

She hooked her arm in his and walked with him towards the Captain’s Quarters at the end of the corridor. When they entered the bedroom, she steered him right into the bathroom.

“Shower first, then clean clothes,” she stated in a tone that brooked no argument.

He nodded, throwing a pensive glance at the high-backed leather chair as they passed it by.

“Faye’s just sleeping, remember?” Alyssa said with an optimistic smile as she stripped off her own jumpsuit. “We’ll rebuild her, it’s just a matter of time.”

John unfastened his own jumpsuit and followed her into the cubicle. “I really hope so.”

Alyssa activated the shower and they soaped each other down, which ended up with John holding his young fiancée in an intimate hug.

\*Do you want to talk about what else happened?\* she asked softly, using telepathy to be heard over the shower.

He was quiet for a long moment, just letting the streams of water wash over him and make him feel clean once more.

Alyssa kissed his cheek, looking up at him with sympathy.

\*I liked it...\* he finally admitted, having trouble meeting her eyes. \*A million Kirrix dead in an instant... and it felt good.\*

\*Of course it did; you just saved thousands of innocent Trankarans from being ripped apart by Kirrix grubs. Way to go, Lion!\*

He didn’t answer for a while, his thoughts conflicted. \*I could feel their life being snuffed out... I shouldn’t feel good about that.\*

\*The Kirrix are bad guys, John,\* she said earnestly. \*Fuck them. That’s been our motto for the last 8 months, right?\*

\*Yeah, but where do we draw the line?\* he asked, a troubled look in his eyes. \*Now we’re talking about wiping out the Brimorians? There’s billions of them, Alyssa... what kind of a monster would I be if I condoned that kind of slaughter?\*

\*There’s a billion Abandoned too,\* Alyssa reminded him. \*The Brimorians have killed god-knows how many already and they’ll keep doing it, selling them off by the millions to be slaughtered by the Kirrix. If bad guys do something that evil, I say all bets are off.\* She waited for a moment, then continued, \*Let me ask you something: If you had to choose between the Abandoned or the Brimorians to have a place in the galaxy, who would you pick?\*

\*The Abandoned,\* he replied without hesitation.

Her lips curved up in to a smile. \*Okay, so that’s decided then. If it comes down to a matter of survival between the two, we look after the good guys and fuck up the bad guys.\*

\*It’s not quite as simple as that,\* he said with a rueful frown.

\*I think it is,\* she said solemnly. \*Life is a struggle... a violent one a lot of the time. People fight over territory, resources... anything and everything, and have done throughout galactic history. This has been going on for millions of years, starting with Xar’aziuth and the Kyth’faren. Can we find some kind of peaceful solution between the Abandoned and the Brimorians? Yeah, probably. But at the end of the day, you have to pick a side and do what you think is right.\*

\*So you wouldn’t have any qualms about wiping out their entire species?\* he asked, looking into her eyes.

She shrugged nonchalantly. \*If it comes down to that, I’m not going to lose any sleep over it. The Brimorians were never going to just free the Abandoned from slavery, not without us killing a shitload of those cruel bastards... that’s been inevitable right from the start.\*

John considered that for a moment, then reluctantly nodded his agreement. \*I suppose that’s true, but killing on this scale... doesn’t that make us as bad as them?\*

\*Nope!\* she replied with conviction.

He looked at her in surprise. \*You’re that certain?\*

\*Yeah, absolutely!\* Alyssa said vehemently. \*It’s not like we’re running around looking for species to exploit, abuse, and murder! We’ve been forced to fight these shitbags, because if we don’t, they’ll keep on killing innocent people who are too weak to protect themselves. We’re nothing like the Kirrix, John. Where the fuck was their restraint when they exterminated the Mhoirad? Or what about the dozens of other species they’ve wiped out over the last 70,000 years?!\*

Startled by her outburst, he struggled to come up with a counter-argument.

\*Just think about all those Kirrix you lobotomised; would any of the drones have ever demanded a stop to the Kirrix preying on sentient species?\* she asked, looking deep into his eyes. \*How about the grubs? Would they have grown up to challenge the Hive Mind?\*

He knew the answer immediately. \*No. The Hive Queens make the decisions, but the rest of the Kirrix are happy to go along with their genocides. From what I’ve seen of Kirzuxa’s and Irnaxxa’s memories, there’s never been any dissent from the drones in thousands of years.\*

\*There’s your answer then,\* she said firmly. \*You basically took out a million murderers in one go. Nice job!\*

He smiled and hugged her tight. \*Why do I have a feeling you’d be supportive whatever I’d done?\*

Alyssa pulled back and shook her head. \*I’m not just telling you this to make you feel better. The Kirrix are evil... and so are the Brimorians. As long as they continue to be a threat to innocent people, we’re doing a good thing by killing as many of them as possible. I believe that 100%.\*

John felt a surge of relief, having been completely open with Alyssa about his feelings and not receiving any condemnation for it. Giving her a grateful smile, he shut off the shower. “Thanks for hearing me out. It was good to talk about it.”

“It’s what I’m here for,” she said, returning his smile with a warm one of her own. Her eyes twinkled as she added, “Among other things...”

He laughed and stepped out of the cubicle, using one of the auto-driers on himself before helping her to fluff out her long golden hair.

Alyssa held out her hand. “Come on, let’s go pick out something for you to wear.”

John followed her through to the walk-in-wardrobe, where she made a beeline for one of the dozen protective suit carriers that hung on the clothes rails.

“Here, try that on,” she suggested, before turning and strolling along her vast array of clothing to select her own outfit.

Unzipping the carrier, John found a white suit inside, the glint of gold from the trim reminding him of his Terran Federation Lion uniform. He pulled out the high-collared jacket to take a better look, then studied it curiously, the sharp design oddly familiar.

“I don’t remember seeing this in here before...” he murmured, turning the jacket to study the ornate golden scrollwork. Suddenly he knew exactly why it looked so familiar. “What the hell?! This is a copy of Mael’nerak’s outfit!”

Alyssa nodded as she trailed her finger across the row of long dresses. “Yes, from the video archives Tashana recovered... except it’s white rather than black.”

“I can see that! What’s it doing here?!” he balked.

“I made it for you weeks ago,” she replied conversationally, making her choice and picking out a flowing white garment. “I think you look fantastic in those colours.”

John let out an exasperated sigh. “Alyssa... why did you make this for me?” he asked, trying to remain as calm and patient with her as possible.

She turned and gave him a steady look. “Because you’re Baen’thelas, the leader of the Maliri Protectorate. When you’re interacting with the Maliri, you need to wear the appropriate attire.”

“But I’m not their leader!” he protested, shaking his head stubbornly. “Edraele is the Maliri Queen, I’m just their Protector.”

\*Actually, my Lord, that’s not entirely accurate,\* Edraele interjected, her voice soft and soothing. \*You agreed to lead the Maliri in times of war. We’re currently in a state of war with Xar’aziuth and every Progenitor in the galaxy... therefore, you are now the undisputed leader of the Maliri Protectorate.\*

His mouth fell open in shock.

\*I wanted to discuss this with you when you returned to Genthalas, but your unexpected rendezvous with Lilyana’s fleet prompted a change of plans,\* Edraele explained. \*Now is the perfect time for you to assume your rightful place as Lord and ruler of the Maliri.\*

Alyssa sauntered over to join him, a wry smile on her face. “Come on, John, it can’t be that much of a surprise. Edraele’s been obeying your every command for months.”

“But... I don’t want to rule,” he objected, looking at Alyssa in disbelief.

She gently cupped his cheek and gave him a sympathetic smile. “You already have been.”

He shook his head in denial. “How? I don’t know the first thing about running a galactic empire!”

\*You’ve made every meaningful decision for the Protectorate since its creation,\* Edraele said with an indulgent smile. \*The matriarchs have been supporting you with administration of the systems under your control and we will continue to do so unless you order us otherwise. The Protector title was always just a formality, giving you time to adjust to the fact that you lead the Maliri with absolute authority.\*

“Why are you telling me this now?” he muttered, reeling at the thought.

\*Addressing Lilyana’s fleet is an excellent opportunity for you to get used to your new role. When you return to Genthalas and start to meet with the new matriarchs, we can forgo the ruse that you are only in command of Maliri fleet assets. Sarinia has eliminated nearly all the older matriarchs and their replacements will be all too eager to embrace the new command structure within the Protectorate.\*

John stood there stunned, realising that he’d been deluding himself for the last several months. Edraele was unquestioningly loyal to him, so crowning her as Queen and placing her in charge of the Maliri, was simply making her the figurehead for all his decisions. When Edraele assassinated four of the most powerful matriarchs and replaced them with their daughters, the creation of the Young Matriarchs had conclusively established his power base. Finding a peaceful resolution to Tsarra’s rebellion and allying with those matriarchs was just the final step in rallying all the Maliri under his banner.

Alyssa stood on tiptoe and gave him a gentle kiss. “Don’t worry, handsome, everything will be fine. While I’m getting ready, why don’t you try on your new suit?”

He nodded distractedly, then started getting dressed in a daze. When he had finally finished putting on the clothes and boots, he turned to look for Alyssa and realised he was now standing alone in the wardrobe. Walking over to the sets of mirrors, he dreaded to think how ridiculous he looked in this new outfit.

John was startled to see that it fit him perfectly, accentuating his height and physique, while also being remarkably comfortable. The style was very similar to the dark suit Mael’nerak had worn in the video with Valada, but the dazzling white made a dramatic difference, projecting the same aura of benevolence as the Lion uniform. As John studied his reflection, he heard a sharp intake of breath from the doorway and when he turned to see who it was, found the twins gaping at him in awe.

“Oh my...” Irillith gasped, fanning herself with her hand.

“You look gorgeous...” Tashana whispered with a breathy sigh.

He couldn’t help feeling embarrassed at their open admiration, with both Maliri girls staring at him starry-eyed.

“I told you the white would look amazing!” Alyssa called out smugly from the bedroom.

“Wait... you two were in on this?” John asked the Valaden sisters with a suspicious frown.

They strolled over to join him, their slender blue fingers reverently caressing his chest.

“The design of the jacket is ancient Maliri,” Irillith murmured, biting her flushed lower lip. “You look ridiculously handsome, John.”

Tashana nodded, an indigo bloom in her cheeks. “It looks perfect, Baen’thelas.”

“I’m glad you approve,” he said, finally giving them a cautious smile. “Are you sure this is the right sort of outfit to wear when I’m speaking to the Maliri in Lilyana’s fleet?”

The twins nodded enthusiastically.

“It’s not going to make them think I’m like Mael’nerak?” he asked with a worried frown.

Tashana shook her head. “Definitely not. Only the two of us have seen the video footage of Mael’nerak from the Nexus files and Valada’s data archive. No other Maliri would make that connection.”

“But why copy Mael’nerak’s outfit?” he asked in confusion.

“Because you look like the Maliri equivalent of the proverbial handsome prince!” Irillith gushed. “Alyssa’s an absolute genius; you look perfect!”

“Why thank you, it’s nice to be appreciated,” Alyssa said in a sultry purr as she sashayed into the wardrobe.

John looked her way then did a double-take.

Alyssa was wearing a long white sheath dress that hugged her statuesque figure like a second skin. Cut in the style that Maliri nobility favoured, there were slashes down its length, revealing tantalising glimpses of her flawless bronzed skin. Her golden mane was piled up high in an elaborate hair style, a few stray tendrils framing her exquisitely beautiful face. Having her blonde hair drawn back emphasised Alyssa’s graceful neck and also revealed the pointed tips of her Kyth’faren ears.

“You look... magnificent,” he said in a hushed voice as she stood before him.

“And so do you,” she replied, a hint of satisfaction in her cerulean eyes.

John’s hand reached out to touch her stomach, his fingers trembling slightly as they brushed across her soft skin.

“You can give me a full tummy later,” she said with a knowing smile. “We’re short of time, remember?”

He swallowed then nodded, offering her his arm as they left the wardrobe. John glanced back over his shoulder to smile at the twins. “Thanks for your help, girls.”

The sisters waved goodbye, then started whispering furtively together, accompanied by a burst of excited giggles.

\*What was that about?\* he asked his matriarch as they walked along the corridor towards the grav-tube.

\*I think I know what you’ll be wearing for your little liaison with the twins in the Progenitor shuttle,\* she replied, a coy smile teasing her lips.

John couldn’t help laughing at that, easing the tension he was feeling. “Thanks for going to so much effort to make this suit,” he said gratefully. “You’re right, I should look the part when I’m dealing with the Maliri.”

“So you’ve finally accepted that you’re the head honcho?” she asked, raising an eyebrow in surprise.

He rubbed at his chin and sighed. “I guess I haven’t got much choice. Arguing semantics over who leads them is pointless... I claimed the Maliri and now I have a responsibility to keep them safe. If that means leading them in this war then I will... supported by invaluable advice from my Queen.”

\*I live to serve, my Lord,\* Edraele said, with a triumphant ring to her voice.

\*I couldn’t have asked for a more dedicated and loyal matriarch, Edraele,\* he said earnestly. \*I can’t even begin to repay you for everything you’ve done for me and the Maliri.\*

Shocked by his sincerity, the Maliri Queen murmured, \*I love you, John... and I’ll do anything I can to help you build a better future for my people.\*

\*For *our* people...\* he corrected her.

Alyssa smiled at him as they stepped into the red anti-grav field. “Just think... you’ll be seeing Edraele in just a few more days.”

“I know,” he replied, then proceeded to imagine all the things he’d like to do to his lovely Maliri matriarch.

\*John!\* Edraele gasped in surprise, then laughed in delight at the lewd imagery he’d conjured for her titillation.

John chuckled at her reaction as he led Alyssa out of the grav-tube on Deck Nine. They strolled through the Secondary Hangar, then entered the treatment area, where several hundred Trankarans were waiting to have their clutches of Kirrix eggs broken up by Sonic Cannons. Rachel was busy speaking to Warden Brokurlun and despite the huge Trankaran towering over her, it was easy to see by his body language how deferential he was towards the slender brunette.

Rachel caught the couple’s entrance out of the corner of her eye and looked at them in amazement, then grinned and patted Brokurlun on the arm. “Here he is, Warden.”

Brokurlun turned around, then marched purposefully towards John. “Forgive me, Great Protector!” he rumbled, dropping to his knees in supplication with a mighty clang. “I heard the Glowing Queen’s words foretelling your benevolence, but still had doubt in my heart. When Dun Hergrun fell to the Kirrix, I directed my prayers for my family’s salvation to the Great Maker... instead of placing my faith in you.” He hung his head in shame. “I was a fool...”

It took John a moment to recover from his astonishment at the Trankarans dramatic confession. “You have nothing to apologise for, Warden. I’m sorry we couldn’t liberate your home planet sooner. If there was any way I could have prevented the Kirrix invasion, I promise you, I would have done it.”

Astonished that the Great Protector was apologising to him, Brokurlun stared at him in awe. “Queen Niskera told the rock-brethren that we needed to be worthy of your aid. It was the disunity within the Republic that led to civil war... and left our worlds vulnerable to invasion.”

“At least all that’s over with now; all your senators are united behind the Glowing Queen,” John said, clapping him on the shoulder. “Come on, get up. You don’t need to kneel before me, Brokurlun.”

The Warden accepted a hand and rose to his feet, his eyes widening at the strength behind John’s grip.

John turned to look at the queuing Trankarans waiting patiently for treatment. “Did Rachel warn you that we need to depart soon?”

“She did,” Brokurlun rumbled in reply.

“I wish we could stay to help, but we’re needed urgently in Maliri Space,” John said, with a rueful frown. “I’ll ask Lilyana to offer as much aid as she can for the next couple of days, then I’m afraid I need to redirect her fleet to the Brimorian border. The Brimorians are selling slaves to the Kirrix... and they’ve got to be stopped.”

As Brokurlun listened, his slab-like features shifted from regret that the Maliri would be departing, to fury at the Brimorians. “Such a despicable act demands retribution! My fleet will accompany Fleet Commander Lilyana to smash this foul trade!”

John gave him a grateful smile. “Thanks for the offer, but your people have suffered enough... you need to get them back home. The Maliri will be able to handle the Kirrix and Brimorians.”

“They are valiant and powerful warriors,” Brokurlun reluctantly agreed. “The Trankaran Republic owes the Maliri... and you... a tremendous debt.”

“I hope the Trankarans consider us to be friends as well as allies,” John said earnestly. “And friends do whatever they can to help each other.”

Brokurlun nodded, his amber eyes shining with strong emotions. “You will always be able to count on our support, Great Protector. On behalf of all the citizens of Dun Hergrun you saved from the Kirrix... thank you.”

“I’m glad we were able to rescue your wife and parents, Brokurlun. Have a safe journey home.”

The Trankaran Warden bowed deeply, as did the rest of the Trankarans nearby who had overheard the conversation. “Farewell, Great Protector.”

Alyssa slipped her arm around John’s and accompanied him across the hangar as they walked towards the Invictus’ bow. \*I really like the Trankarans, their hearts are in the right place.\*

\*Yeah, I like them too,\* he agreed. \*We must visit Niskera when we get the chance; I want to check that she’s doing okay.\*

They walked in silence for a moment, with Alyssa obviously distracted.

\*I just told her we’d drop by sometime soon,\* she said, hugging John’s arm. \*Niskera was delighted.\*

\*How was she feeling before that?\* John asked, leading Alyssa through the reinforced doors at the far side of the room.

\*She’s been worrying a lot... but that’s understandable considering how many Trankaran planets were invaded by the Kirrix. All the local Comms Beacons had been destroyed, so Brokurlun’s fleet is out of communication range, but I’ve been keeping Niskera updated as the Maliri liberated each of her worlds.\*

\*I guess you can’t tell how she’s doing on a personal level?\* John asked, walking through the Raptor’s airlock and sealing the outer door behind them.

No longer at risk of being overheard, Alyssa switched back to regular speech. “No, I’m afraid not. I can sense her emotions, but there’s no context; she’s been feeling a bit isolated, but nothing too serious.”

John nodded, his expression conflicted. “I really hope she meets someone that makes her happy.”

Alyssa glanced at him and smiled. “Would it really be so terrible to have Niskera retire with us?”

“She’s a lovely woman,” John said, as he stepped into the grav-tube and ascended to the upper deck. “But I’d prefer it if Niskera makes a life for herself with her own people.”

“Because you prefer your girls under 300 pounds?” Alyssa teased him. “Don’t worry, a couple of weeks swallowing your cum would be the best rapid weight-loss diet ever!”

John rolled his eyes as he sat in the pilot’s chair and fired up the gunship’s engines. “You know that’s not the reason.”

“Yeah, but I’d still love to see what Niskera would look like with a thrall’s body...” Alyssa admitted with a wistful smile.

The Raptor eased away from the Invictus, retro-thrusters firing in short bursts to separate the two vessels. When John was satisfied that they were clear of the hull, he pushed the flight stick to the right and ramped up power to the engines. They left behind the sparkling white battlecruiser docked with the rust-coloured Trankaran battleship, then John made an abrupt turn, pointing the gunship towards the Maliri fleet.

The golden-hulled vessels were dispersed amongst the shattered remnants of the Kirrix armada, with cruisers and carriers leading the relief effort. There were also a trio of sleek battleships under Lilyana’s command, the deadly vessels waiting on the periphery of the starship graveyard. They floated motionless in space, like a trio of gilded baubles resting on a blanket of black velvet.

Glancing at the Tactical Map and checking the Maliri identification runes, John aimed the Raptor at the Galaena Serine. “I better hail them and ask permission to land.”

\*You no longer need ask permission to do anything, my Lord,\* Edraele gently reminded him.

Seconds after she’d spoken, the shuttle bay doors at the rear of the central Maliri capital ship split apart, a glowing flight path guiding the way inside. Several fighter wings raced over to flank them, the sleek Nievath interceptors spiralling around the Raptor as they formed an honour guard.

“Looks like they’re rolling out the red carpet...” Alyssa said airily. “I think someone’s looking forward to seeing you.”

He shot her an apprehensive glance. “Can you land the Raptor? You’re a better pilot then me.”

The blonde nodded, knowing he wanted to make a good impression. “Of course, handsome.”

Taking the co-pilot’s flight stick, she performed an elegant victory roll, one that was quickly copied by the dozen interceptors escorting them to the battleship. She laughed in delight, then followed the glowing navigation route into the shuttle bay, where she guided the gunship down to the precise centre of the landing pad. John peered through the cockpit window and saw that the hangar was packed full of Maliri, the uniformed crewwomen chattering excitedly together as they waited for him to make an appearance.

Rising from his chair, he couldn’t help but smile, feeling a rush of anticipation for the victory celebrations over the Kirrix. “We better not keep them waiting any longer.”

Alyssa’s hands flew over the console as she powered down the engines, then she grinned and took his arm. “Lead on, Baen’thelas.”

Leaving the cockpit, they descended in the grav-tube and entered the forward loading area, where the ramp had already lowered to the deck. John could see a trio of women at the forefront of the waiting crowd and immediately recognised Almari and Ilyana, the two assassins wearing black jumpsuits rather than Paragon armour. The third woman he’d only met once before, when Lilyana had been with a score of House Valaden senior officers, who were added to Edraele’s network of wards with Jade’s tentacular assistance. The Fleet Commander fidgeted with her short white hair and he could immediately see how eager she was to see him again.

\*Here we go,\* he thought to Alyssa, bracing himself for a wall of triumphant cheers from the excited crowd.

They walked over to the edge of the ramp, where they stood in plain sight of the waiting throng... and a stunned silence cut all chatter stone-dead. Thousands of dark-haired Maliri gaped at him in awe, their angular eyes dazzled with a look of wondrous disbelief. John froze, shocked by their extreme reaction to his mere presence, and darted an apprehensive glance at Alyssa.

\*Clothes maketh the man,\* Alyssa declared, with no small degree of satisfaction.

When John glanced down at his new suit in astonishment, he heard her stifle a giggle.

\*It’s you, John, not the outfit,\* Edraele explained with an indulgent smile. \*You claimed the Maliri... and we are yours to command.\*

He swallowed and started down the ramp with Alyssa at his side, well aware that every woman in the huge room was staring at him. As he approached the three Maliri waiting to greet him, he saw that Lilyana was nearly as awestruck as her fellow crewwomen, but thankfully the assassins had recovered from their initial surprise.

“John!” Ilyana cried out in delight, unable to hold herself back any longer. She ran to meet him, laughing joyfully when he caught her in his arms.

Almari was moments behind, throwing herself into his embrace and showering him with kisses. “I missed you so much, Baen’thelas!”

He hugged them both tight, any sense of reservation at being in front of the crowd forgotten. “I missed you too!” he exclaimed, kissing each assassin soundly. Pulling back, he looked at them with a serious expression. “Were you good girls? Did you do as I asked?”

They both nodded earnestly.

“I made sure she never got hurt!” Ilyana declared with a proud smile.

Almari darted an affectionate glance at the other assassin. “She didn’t get so much as a scratch.”

“I’ll need to check for myself later,” he said, brushing the backs off his fingers against their toned stomachs. “You know how important you both are to me.”

They both blushed a fetching dark-blue and there was no mistaking their glee at the prospect.

“We can’t take all the credit,” Almari gushed. “Lilyana did an amazing job commanding the fleet!”

John released the assassins and approached the star-struck naval officer. “Queen Edraele has been keeping me informed of your resounding victories against the Kirrix. I’m very proud of you, Lilyana... you’ve saved the lives of millions of Trankarans.” He reached out to cup her face and lightly stroked her cheek with his thumb. “I’ve had a very tough week, but knowing you were keeping all these women safe was a huge relief. I can’t thank you enough for that, Lilyana.”

She swooned in his arms, the blissful look on her beautiful face one of wonder. Lilyana’s awed expression only grew more pronounced when he leaned down to give her an appreciative kiss. When he pulled back, he saw the Fleet Commander was in a daze, her fingers touching her tingling lips.

“I’d like to address the fleet if that’s possible?” he asked the overwhelmed naval officer.

“I already arranged for your arrival to be broadcast to every Maliri ship in the fleet,” she replied, blinking at him owlishly. “They can all see and hear you.”

“Thank you,” he said with a grateful smile, trying not to think about a hundred-thousand Maliri watching him in a passionate lip-lock with the assassins.

Almari and Ilyana stepped forward and grinned as they supported the Fleet Commander, who wobbled on shaky legs, still reeling from the kiss.

Stepping away from the trio, John turned to face the stunned crowd who had been watching his every interaction with the three women in absolute fascination. “My name is Baen’thelas and with Queen Edraele serving at my side, I have claimed the mantle of leadership of the Maliri Protectorate.”

He braced himself for any indignant outcry, but the assembled Maliri accepted his declaration without so much as a frown. If anything, they seemed thrilled by the idea.

“Firstly, I would like to thank you for your exemplary performance in this war against the Kirrix. By breaking the siege of those Trankaran worlds, you’ve saved millions of innocent civilian lives from a brutal death, an act of compassion that has cemented the bonds of friendship between our two empires. I wish that I could spend the time thanking each of you in person for the invaluable contributions you’ve made to this liberation campaign, but sadly this is only a brief visit before I return to Genthalas.”

There was a quiet groan of disappointment from the crowd that seemed to echo from wall-to-wall.

“This campaign against the Kirrix might be over, but there will be more battles to come, with a ferocity you have never known. To prepare for this, I’ve been working closely with Queen Edraele, overseeing the refit of our fleets and preparing your ships for war. As you’ve seen, the upgrades have made a dramatic difference to your performance in battle, especially when coupled with your exceptional combat skills. I intend to continue rolling out increasingly advanced ships, equipping you with weapons of war that are worthy of crews of your calibre.”

“All of you represent the future of the Maliri Protectorate and it’s a bright future filled with promise. For too long, the Maliri have been segregated, the men exiled to the border stations while the nobility fight amongst themselves for breeding rights. My pledge to you, is that this elitist and self-destructive practice will soon come to an end. I am making sweeping changes to Maliri society that will impact all of you over the coming decades. The Maliri have been stagnating for thousands of years, your population on the decline... but no longer.”

“We have a long road ahead of us, with the dark shadow of war on the horizon. I wish that I could guarantee your safety in the conflict ahead, but the nature of war makes such a promise impossible to make. However, there will come a time when we’ve destroyed all the enemies that dared to raise their hand against us... and when that time comes, my dream is for each and every one of you to experience the joy of motherhood.”

The shocked gasps from every Maliri woman present sounding like a whistling tornado. They stared at him thunderstruck, barely able to believe their pointed ears. Their reaction was repeated in every Maliri ship in the fleet, over a hundred-thousand stunned personnel filled with wild hope for a future that they had always believed to be beyond their reach.

“You are all precious to me... and critically important to the future of our civilisation. I’ll be recalling your fleet to Maliri Space in just a few weeks, then over the subsequent months, I hope to speak to many of you individually. Until then, stay safe and protect each other... the future of the Maliri Protectorate depends on it!”

He offered an arm to Lilyana who gladly took it, then they walked through the astonished crowd as they left the hangar.

\*How many Maliri are you planning on seeing personally, John?\* Alyssa asked with a wry smile. \*That’s a lot of sexy blue tummies to fill.\*

\*When I get some free time, Jade and I need to continue recruitment, just like we did with the engineers,\* John replied, looking thoughtful. \*Those women are putting their lives on the line for me; the least I can do is find out their names and learn a bit about them.\*

She gave him an affectionate look, while following in his wake with the two assassins.

John turned to smile at the starstruck woman walking along at his side. “Lilyana, is there somewhere we can go for some privacy? If you can spare some time, I’d really like to show my appreciation for the incredible job you’ve done in commanding the fleet... as long as that’s something that sounds appealing?”

Lilyana had been unable to stop staring at him since his arrival and her lovely aquamarine eyes were now as wide as saucers. “We can retire to my quarters, Baen’thelas!” she gasped breathlessly.

Falling into step beside her, Alyssa purred, “Would you mind if we joined you too?”

“N-no,” the ecstatic Maliri stammered. “I don’t mind at all.”

They entered an elevator and rose up through the decks with a simmering air of sexual tension between the five of them. Lilyana led the group to her personal suite, desperately wishing that they could run to get there faster. She opened the door and walked inside, then turned to look at John like a deer caught in headlights, wanting to leap into his arms but afraid to offend him. He solved Lilyana’s predicament by striding over to take her in his arms, dipping the Maliri and giving her a deep kiss. In a state of bliss, she kissed him back, hardly able to believe what was happening.

John smiled at her when he straightened, holding the trembling woman close. “I wish I could make love to you, Lilyana, but I’m afraid that’ll have to wait until the next time we meet.”

Trying to not feel crushed with disappointment, she murmured dejectedly, “Why?”

Alyssa slipped her arms around the Maliri Fleet Commander and hugged her from behind. “Because John has a very big cock and he doesn’t want to hurt you.” As she kissed Lilyana on the nape of her neck, she gently caressed her trim stomach. “You’ve only had a small taste of him so far, but he needs to fill up that lovely tummy with his cum.” Her hand dipped lower, finding the cleft between the panting Maliri’s thighs. “Then your tight little pussy will be able to stretch to take him; there’ll be no pain, just lots and lots of mind-blowing pleasure...”

Lilyana groaned, her head lolling back as Alyssa caressed her with a skilful touch.

“Why don’t I look after you while we watch John take care of Almari and Ilyana?” the blonde purred in her ear. “Then when they can’t climax any more, we’ll make sure all his delicious cum ends up where it belongs... inside your lovely tummy.”

“Yes please...” Lilyana replied breathlessly, while looking up at John through eyes hooded with lust.

He smiled and gave her a tender kiss. “Good girl.”

“We’re ready, Baen’thelas!” Almari exclaimed from behind him.

He turned and saw the two assassins were waiting for him by the big bed, wearing nothing but enticing smiles. Walking over to join them, he took a moment to admire their spectacular physiques. They were lithe and muscular, their azure bodies honed to perfection with countless hours of training... then he’d enhanced them even further, making the two women stronger and faster than any other Maliri in the fleet.

“You’re both so beautiful,” he murmured, letting his fingertips follow the mouth-watering curves of their ripe breasts that sat high and firm on their chests.

The assassins watched him as he explored their bodies, their eyes sparkling with anticipation. His fingers circled their dark nipples, making them erect and firm as they responded to his loving touch.

“I wish we had time for me to give you all the attention you deserve,” he said with regret, his fingers moving lower to stroke their chiselled stomachs. “I was sorely tempted to take you home with me to Genthalas... but I need you to stay with Lilyana for a few more weeks.”

“Edraele told us about the Abandoned and why we need to stop the Brimorians,” Almari said, giving him an understanding look. “I’d love to go with you... but we know that we’re needed here, to maintain contact with the fleet.”

Ilyana nodded, biting her lip as she leaned into his caress. “We won’t let you down, John. We’ll save those poor people from the Kirrix.”

“So brave and loyal, but kind and caring too,” he murmured, reaching up to cup their faces. “I’m so glad I chose you to join my family...”

“Oh, John...” Ilyana moaned, unable to resist him any longer.

The two assassins lunged towards him, hastily unfastening his suit and casting aside his jacket. They quickly stripped him naked, then jumped into his arms and wrapped their legs around him, kissing John frantically as he carried the pair to bed.

“It won’t be long until that’s you wrapped around him,” Alyssa said to Lilyana with a knowing smile. She peeled off the Maliri’s uniform jacket and kissed her exposed shoulder. “John’s incredible in bed... so gentle and considerate... but he can pound your pussy until you scream in ecstasy.”

The fleet commander whimpered, trembling with excitement as she watched Almari spread her long, shapely legs for John. His cock looked huge, throbbing with lust as Ilyana lined him up with her friend’s gushing slit. Lilyana watch in open-mouthed astonishment as they fed inch after inch of that thick shaft into Almari, the assassin arching her back as she keened out her climax before he was even hilted inside her.

“He’s so big because he needs to pump all that lovely cum right where it’s needed,” Alyssa whispered in Lilyana’s ear. “Directly into fertile wombs...”

“Is he going to make them pregnant?!” Lilyana gasped, staring at John as he stroked into the climaxing Maliri writhing beneath him.

“Not today,” Alyssa replied, removing more of the shocked woman’s clothing. “But he has chosen Almari and Ilyana to be mothers of his children.”

\*John’s very selective about the women who will give him heirs,\* Edraele explained to Lilyana, her voice soft and alluring. \*He wants the best and brightest, but also those who can show kindness and compassion... women who have proven they will make wonderful mothers to his children.\*

Once Alyssa had removed the last of Lilyana’s clothing, she slipped off her own dress, then moved to stand before the trembling Maliri.

Lilyana stared at the blonde in fascination, enthralled by her flawless bronzed skin and long golden hair that tumbled down her back. “You’re so exotic... I’ve never seen anyone so beautiful.”

Alyssa stepped closer, so that her full breasts pressed against Lilyana’s, the firm flesh swelling outwards with the contact. “I’m like John...” she said in a husky voice. “I can’t get enough of you gorgeous Maliri girls...”

Leaning forward, Alyssa brushed her lips against Lilyana’s, her mouth curling into a smile when the older woman moaned with desire. \*Have you ever been with another woman before?\* she asked as her tongue slipped into Lilyana’s mouth.

Lilyana’s eyes widened in surprise as she heard the blonde’s telepathic voice sweeping through her mind. Hesitantly she shook her head, but didn’t stop kissing Alyssa back.

\*I’m your matriarch, but Alyssa is mine,\* Edraele explained. \*She is able to speak to you telepathically just like I can. While I look after all the Maliri connected to Baen’thelas, Alyssa-\*

\*Encourages him to breed the sexiest, most deserving girls...\* the Terran teenager interjected with a wicked grin.

Pulling back, Lilyana looked at her in disbelief. “What are you hinting at? Is there really a chance?!”

\*You just relax and watch John fuck those horny girls senseless,\* Alyssa replied with a playful twinkle in her eyes. She guided Lilyana over to sit in a chair with an excellent view of the bed. \*I’ll take care of you and let Edraele explain...\*

The blonde gently spread Lilyana’s thighs as she knelt before her, watching the Maliri blush a deep shade of indigo at being so exposed. The fleet commander’s embarrassment evaporated when Alyssa started to lap at her slick labia, the intimate contact at so sensitive a spot sending bursts of pleasure through her body.

\*You’re in a unique position, Lilyana,\* Edraele said, as the naval officer crested her first climax. \*John worries constantly about all the Maliri he’s sending into battle... women who are following your orders. You saw how delighted he was that you’d suffered no casualties against the Kirrix... keep up that excellent work and we’ll make sure you’re rewarded.\*

Alyssa nuzzled deeper, her lips surrounding Lilyana’s clit and giving it a gentle suck. The recipient of that attention arched her back, overwhelmed by a spectacular orgasm that left her reeling. The blonde reached up to run her slender fingers across Lilyana’s rippling stomach, the Maliri’s body trembling after her climax.

\*I’d love to see John start swelling your gorgeous blue tummy with his babies,\* she crooned, her tongue probing deeper.

\*We both would,\* Edraele agreed.

\*Take good care of all the women under your command and keep them safe,\* Alyssa urged her. \*And I promise... one day, you’ll be looking up into John’s eyes, cumming harder than you ever have before, as he pumps a baby into your womb...\*

Lilyana interlaced her fingers behind Alyssa’s head and writhed on her tongue, feeling another huge orgasm building. She stared at the bed as John draped Ilyana over Almari, then plunged deep into the second girl’s tightly-stretched channel, the two assassins kissing passionately. It was so easy to imagine herself being impaled on his cock, this magnificent fantasy male who exceeded all her wildest dreams, driving her to new heights of ecstasy. Lilyana decided right then and there, that she would do whatever it took to have his baby.

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John cupped Almari’s head in his hands, her body covered in a sheen of perspiration after been coaxed through so many climaxes.

“I’m done...” she panted, with a disbelieving laugh. “I can’t cum again... you’ve worn me out.”

He glanced to his left where Ilyana lay sprawled unconscious, a dopey smile splashed across her beautiful face.

“She was done ten minutes ago,” Almari murmured, gazing up at him as she revelled in the afterglow.

John smiled with satisfaction then leaned down to kiss the exhausted assassin. “I really did miss you, Almari. Not just for sex... but you personally.”

“I know,” she whispered, stroking his temple. “Edraele let me know whenever you were thinking about us. It made me feel so much closer to you.”

He eased himself out of her trembling depths, then collapsed on the bed beside her with a groan. “I think it might have been a mistake trying to wear you two out. I forgot how much stamina you’ve got.”

Almari rolled onto her side and sleepily traced a finger across his chest. “You still managed it, mighty Baen’thelas.”

“Get some rest, honey. You earned it,” he said, pulling her in for a hug.

Her eyes welled up and she shook her head. “When I wake up, you’ll be gone.”

“Just for a few more weeks,” he said, his deep voice comforting the forlorn girl. “Then I’ll be based at Genthalas and you’ll see me all the time.”

“I can’t wait,” she murmured, her eyelids growing heavy.

“When we retire, we’ll always be together. I’ll be driving you mad, fussing over you when you’re pregnant.”

“That sounds wonderful...” she whispered, a wistful smile teasing her lips.

Almari’s breathing deepened and soon she was fast asleep, gently lulled into blissful dreams.

John carefully extricated himself from her embrace, then used telekinesis to guide the two comatose assassins into each other’s arms. He got up from the bed and stretched, easing the aches in his tired muscles. Looking across the room, he couldn’t help laughing when he saw Lilyana sprawled insensate in the chair, Alyssa kneeling between those splayed legs with her head resting against a blue thigh.

“You weren’t meant to knock her out,” he said, stroking Alyssa’s hair.

“Lilyana got very excited,” the Terran girl replied with an impish grin. “I think she liked what I was saying.”

“What was that exactly?” he asked, offering her a hand.

Alyssa accepted and rose to her feet. “That if she did a good job and looked after all these lovely blue girls for me, I’d convince you to get her pregnant.”

“What?!” John blurted out in surprise. He switched to telepathy so Lilyana wouldn’t overhear. \*I’ve already promised to have children with over 20 women! Why the hell did you tell her that?\*

\*You’re going to live for a very long time, handsome,\* she said with a seductive smile. \*And so will Lilyana. You don’t have to knock her up right now, but maybe in 50 years’ time you’ll get bored of getting me pregnant and want to see some fresh tummies swelling up with your babies...\*

Edraele chimed in too, a hint of eagerness to her own voice. \*I know you’ve fantasised about getting all the Maliri matriarchs pregnant at the same time. Perhaps we can mark the centennial of your rule by impregnating the entire Council?\*

\*You can still be a caring father to your children... and breed an awful lot of women when you’re immortal,\* Alyssa said, reaching down to stroke his thickening shaft. \*Oh look... somebody likes that idea!\*

He looked at her in surprise, then grinned. \*Actually, I really do; it solves an awful lot of problems. When did you think this up?\*

\*Edraele’s a very clever girl,\* Alyssa crooned, using her second hand to caress his quad. \*And she really likes the thought of nineteen matriarchs with swollen bellies.\*

\*Is that right?\* he asked the Maliri Queen, closing his eyes in bliss.

\*I’m not sure if it’s the visual that turns me on so much, or knowing that for you to willingly impregnate all the matriarchs, they’d have to be good girls who were absolutely devoted to you. The thought that one day we might have eighteen adoring Young Matriarchs, all of them assisting me in helping you rule the Maliri Protectorate is extremely arousing.\*

John found the idea very appealing too. When he opened his eyes, he saw Lilyana watching him, her half-lidded eyes glazed with lust.

Alyssa crooked a finger at the Fleet Commander. “On your knees, gorgeous. John’s poor balls desperately need emptying into a deserving girl’s tummy.”

Lilyana lurched out of the chair, but John caught her before she could drop to the floor. “Alyssa told me what she promised you. Fight hard for me, but always do your best to protect the women under your command... and I’ll make good on that promise.”

Her breath caught, then she nodded eagerly. “Oh, I will, Baen’thelas! I swear it!”

Alyssa nodded towards the chair. “Take a seat, John... let’s get this lovely girl topped up.”

John did as she asked, relaxing in the comfortable chair. He pulled Lilyana closer and kissed her svelte stomach as she stood before him, looking up into her eyes while she stared down at him in awe. The connection between them was thrilling, both thinking exactly the same thing in that moment. Alyssa guided the Maliri to the floor, then knelt behind her, hugging the woman who was quivering with excitement.

\*I’d really like to try something to make this better for John,\* she thought to the eager Maliri. \*It’s perfectly safe, but I’ll need you to relax and open up your mind for me.\*

Lilyana glanced at her then nodded, before turning her attention back to John. She wrapped her slender blue fingers around his shaft, then opened her flushed lips to tentatively lick the head. When she heard his approving groan, she parted her mouth and enveloped the head of his cock. As soon as she started sucking, Alyssa delved into Lilyana’s mind, slipping effortlessly past the Maliri’s lowered defences. Once she was inside, Alyssa erected a powerful psychic barrier to protect the woman’s fragile subconscious.

John was already very turned on, after riding the two assassins into orgasmic oblivion. His pre-cum filled Lilyana’s mouth and she moaned wantonly as she swallowed it down, the sweet aftertaste tantalising her taste buds. Alyssa had been waiting for that precise moment, but she wasn’t prepared for the immense weight of psychic strength that crashed into her mental barrier. Lilyana hummed in delight, her cheeks hollowing as she sucked eagerly, maintaining eye contact with John as she silently begged him to fill her hungry stomach.

The look of eager submission tipped him over the edge and John climaxed hard, filling Lilyana’s mouth with cum. She gulped it down and her eyes glazed over, John bulldozing Alyssa’s mental barrier aside with almost contemptuous ease. Lilyana was in the suckling trance now and she eased forward, sliding his cock down her throat until her lips were circling the base of his shaft. He gently held her in place as he climaxed, pumping long spurts of cum down her clenching throat. Alyssa pouted in frustration, then hugged Lilyana, stroking her swelling stomach as it grew rounded with pints of spunk.

“That’s a good girl,” she whispered in her ear. “When you wake up, you’ll have lovely long hair, just like all the rest of us who are going to have his babies...”

Lilyana groaned, her eyelashes fluttering as Alyssa’s words penetrated her dazed state. Her hands cradled her growing belly and she hummed in contentment, her throat bobbing as she swallowed down every last drop of cum from his four balls. By the time John had finished climaxing and slid his deflating cock from her lips, Lilyana was in a state of rapture, her blue stomach hugely curved with his prodigious load.

John let out a shuddering sigh, then sagged in his chair. “Damn... I needed that.”

Alyssa pouted as she stroked Lilyana’s rounded tummy.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, surprised by her reaction.

“I tried to shield her mind from you, so you wouldn’t leave her dazed,” she explained with a rueful frown.

“Why would you do that?” he asked in confusion.

“Because you hate seeing the girls like this?” Alyssa replied, nodding towards the comatose Maliri. “I wanted Lilyana to tell you how much she loved emptying your quad, but as soon as you started filling her up with cum, trying to keep you out of her mind was impossible. I had no idea you were so strong!”

John scooped up the drowsy fleet commander and glanced at her swollen belly. “Rachel did say my cum was a psychic catalyst; that’s probably why you found it so difficult.”

He carried Lilyana to the bed, where he gently separated the two assassins and placed her between them. The sleeping Maliri embraced her instinctively, snuggling up together as John covered them with a silken sheet.

“I think it’s fair to say they all had a good time,” he said, smiling fondly at the three slumbering women.

\*They’re not the only ones...\* Edraele murmured, lost in thought.

John smiled as he started gathering up his clothes. “Yeah, I really did. It was wonderful seeing Almari and Ilyana again... I’d missed them a lot. I’m glad we were able to give Lilyana some extra motivation too.”

\*The assassins adore you and now so does Lilyana,\* the Maliri Queen agreed. \*But I wasn’t actually referring to you either. I was so focused on all of you that I only just noticed this now, but all my wards in Lilyana’s fleet are shining with psychic energy... far brighter than ever before.\*

“It sounds like you made a good impression, Baen’thelas,” Alyssa said with a teasing smile. “Maybe you really are meant to be their boss.”

“Addressing the fleet like that felt right,” he agreed, nodding with satisfaction. “I’m glad I told them about my plans for the Maliri; it sounds like I gave them hope for a better life in the future.”

Alyssa looked at him in astonishment. “How come you’re not freaking out about this whole leadership thing?!” She narrowed her eyes, pretending to glare at him with suspicion. “You’re not your guide, are you?”

He laughed and shook his head. “No, I don’t think so.” Starting to dress in his new suit, he continued, “Let’s go take a shower back on the Invictus. I prefer Terran ones to Maliri.”

“Wait...” Alyssa said, placing her hand on his chest to stop him. “You really aren’t upset about leading the Maliri, are you?”

“No, I’m actually okay with it,” he stated calmly, meeting her quizzical gaze. “Edraele was right; I have been making all the big decisions for the Protectorate, so this doesn’t change anything. I might have to take a more prominent role in leading the Council of Matriarchs, but I’ll leave administering the Maliri star systems in their capable hands. My brilliant queen has been doing an incredible job with everything I delegated to her, so as long as Edraele is comfortable with the status quo, then I’m happy too.”

\*I would be delighted to continue supporting you in this fashion,\* Edraele gushed, sounding elated. \*Do you really not have any doubts, John?\*

He thought about it, then shook his head. \*I care about the Maliri very much. I think at this point, I’ve got used to the idea that protecting all of you is my responsibility. We’re at war with scores of Progenitors, who are each leading a legion of thralls... I have no intention of letting you face that onslaught alone.\*

Edraele laughed, her tension easing. \*That’s such a relief... you have no idea how much!\*

“We weren’t sure if you were ready,” Alyssa admitted, looking equally relieved. “With everything you’re dealing with at the moment, the last thing we wanted to do is pile more responsibilities on your shoulders.”

“This doesn’t feel like a burden,” he said, breathing deep before letting it out. “It feels... right.”

Alyssa grinned and kissed him on the tip of his nose. “Aren’t you full of surprises!”

John laughed and resumed dressing, sharing the occasional smile with Alyssa as she slipped on her dress and pulled on her high-heeled shoes. He leaned over the bed to kiss each of the three sleeping Maliri goodbye, then opened the door to Lilyana’s quarters and followed his blonde matriarch outside. They strolled back down to the shuttle bay, passing dozens of startled Maliri on the way, the beautiful aliens gaping at John when he greeted them with a friendly smile.

\*Is it exciting knowing that you could bed every woman in this fleet?\* Alyssa asked, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

\*I’ve already got a harem of insatiable girls and I just slept with Lilyana and the assassins. I’ll also be seeing Edraele and the Young Matriarchs in just a few days’ time... so why would I be fantasising about bedding random Maliri?\* he asked, genuinely curious.

She gave him an indignant frown. \*Hey, I’m the one asking the questions!\*

John chuckled and hugged her as they walked along. \*I’m just surprised you haven’t cashed in your favour. I was expecting you to ask for a complement of Maliri to help crew the Invictus.\*

Alyssa stared at him incredulously. \*You’d actually agree to that?!\*

\*I said I’d agree to one favour,\* he replied, nodding to a passing navigation officer who nearly tripped over her own feet in shock. \*Why? Is that what you want?\*

\*What are you up to, Mr. Blake?\* she asked, narrowing her eyes in suspicion.

He held his hands up defensively. \*Nothing! I was just curious.\*

\*Well... no, I think that’d be a waste,\* she replied after a moment’s hesitation. \*We’ll be based in Genthalas soon and then you’ll be surrounded by gorgeous blue babes. I’ll leave seducing them in Edraele’s capable hands... she’s already done a fine job of convincing you to knock up Maliri girls.\*

\*Okay, fair enough,\* he said with an amiable shrug.

\*Seriously though... if I had asked, you wouldn’t have vetoed it?\* Alyssa asked, looking intrigued.

John led her through the doors into the shuttle bay, where the Raptor was waiting for them. \*I’ll only say no if you ask me to recruit a girl who’s already attached... but you know that already.\*

\*So I can’t tempt you with Maria then?\* she asked with a grin.

\*Hmm... we’d have to do something about Jack,\* he mused, rubbing his chin. \*Maybe we could set him up with a blonde half his age?\*

Alyssa couldn’t believe her ears for a moment, then she realised he was joking and her melodic laughter echoed around the hangar.

She bounded up the ramp into the gunship with an extra spring in her step. \*Leading the Maliri suits you, handsome. You’re way more fun!\*

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The Forge of Ukonlir had disengaged from the Invictus by the time they returned, allowing Alyssa to land the Raptor in the Secondary Hangar. As John shut down the gunship’s systems, Alyssa waved at Calara, who was waiting for them outside.

When they strode down the ramp to join her, the Latina shook her head in feigned disapproval. “Look at you two doing the walk of shame...”

John glanced down at his rumpled suit and couldn’t help blushing.

“He has *nothing* to be ashamed of,” Alyssa gushed, giving John a kiss on the cheek. “He pounded Almari and Ilyana through at least a dozen orgasms, then stuffed Lilyana full of cum. We left behind three very satisfied Maliri girls. Oh, and he impressed the hell out of the entire fleet, boosting their morale through the roof!”

“I had no idea you were such an exhibitionist, Admiral,” Calara joked, arching an eyebrow.

He shrugged. “Nor did Almari and Ilyana, but we got down to business right there in the hangar. The crowd loved it!”

Calara burst into a fit of giggles. “Alyssa gave me a running commentary while you were over there, but now I don’t know what to believe!”

He broke into a smile and gave her a hug. “If I didn’t need to recuperate, I’d give you a demonstration right here and now.”

“Thanks for the offer, but I think I prefer a nice soft bed to titanium deck plates,” she replied, hugging him back.

“Talking of bed, why don’t you two head up to the Observatory?” Alyssa suggested, smiling affectionately at them both. “I’ll go up to the Bridge and lay in a course for the Terran border fleet. I should be done in a couple of minutes.”

John stifled a yawn and nodded. “Sounds good to me. What’s the time now anyway? About 6:00 am?”

“Six-thirty,” Calara corrected him, slipping her hand into his as they walked towards the exit. “All the girls are in bed already apart from Leylira. She’s on first watch.”

“We should arrive at the fleet late this evening, around nine,” Alyssa said, quickly planning out a flight path as they stepped into the grav-tube.

“How long will it take us to get from there to Jericho?” John asked, as they floated upwards.

“Roughly 24 hours,” the blonde replied. “I’ll have to be very careful plotting our course when we get close to the Core Worlds. There’s a lot of hyper-warp traffic around those systems and hitting a ship with the bow wave wouldn’t be good.”

John looked at her quizzically. “What would happen?”

“This is theoretical because it’s never happened before, but I’m guessing that the gravimetric forces would rip their hull apart like a sardine can,” she replied with a wry smile.

“Yeah, we should probably try to avoid that,” Calara said, hugging her girlfriend.

“That’s the plan,” Alyssa agreed. “Unfortunately, it means making a bunch of diversions to fly through quieter star systems, or just slowing down to normal hyper-warp speeds. Alternatively, I could stay on the Bridge and make course corrections as needed, but I’ll be stuck there for the whole day.”

“I’ll leave it at your discretion,” John said, before pulling Calara with him onto Deck Three.

Alyssa waved goodbye as she continued up to the Command Deck. “See you soon!”

John put his arm around the brunette. “Any problems while we were away?”

“No, everything went smoothly. Rachel had time to treat another thousand Trankarans infested with higher-tier eggs, then we transferred them to the Republic battleship.”

“You saved a lot of lives today, honey,” he said, stroking her back.

“So did you,” she replied, looking up at him with admiration. “If you hadn’t wiped out the Kirrix, it would have taken us hours to eliminate all the drones on the dreadnought, let alone board and clear 54 hive ships. Then we would’ve had to triage a million Trankarans, decide who we couldn’t save in time, then treat the rest in the order they’d been infested. It would’ve been heartbreaking and so many would have died before we could get to them. I asked Rachel for an estimate; she thought at least 17,000 Trankarans would have been killed if you hadn’t neutralised the Kirrix like that.”

“It’s a strange thing... having to kill to save lives,” John said in a subdued voice, looking away into the distance.

Calara gave him a sympathetic hug. “I made peace with it months ago; I think I would’ve gone mad otherwise. I mean, how many bad guys have I killed since we started? There’s ten thousand Kirrix aboard each drone carrier and I’ve destroyed well over a hundred of those alone.”

John paused as they entered the Lagoon. “I’m sorry I put that burden on you. I never even imagined we’d be fighting battles on this scale when I took you on as my Tactical Officer.”

“It’s okay,” she said with a shrug. “As I said, I’ve come to terms with it. I know we’re always fighting for what’s right... so I just have to remind myself that everyone I kill is a bad guy and deserves death for their crimes. I guess I’m either going to be welcomed into heaven as a glorious champion of good, or roasted for eternity as one of the most brutal killers in Terran history.”

He shook his head. “I disagree.”

Calara looked worried, a shadow of doubt in her dark-brown eyes. “You do?”

John ran his fingers through her long dark hair, then cupped her head in his hand. “You can’t go on to an afterlife if you’re immortal.”

She laughed and relaxed, smiling at him in relief. “You had me worried for a moment there.”

“We’d all be left absolutely devastated if anything did happen to you, but that goes without saying,” he said, drawing her into a hug. “I know you’d be fine though. Fluffy clouds and angels with harps await.”

“You really think so?” she asked, pulling back to gaze up at him, a look of vulnerability in her eyes.

He placed a hand on the left side of her chest. “You’ve got a good heart, Calara. In the battles we’ve fought, you were always trying to protect innocent people from the bastards that prey on them. Pirates, slavers, the Drakkar, the Kintark, the Kirrix, the Brimorians... the list seems endless.”

“And now we’re facing Progenitors,” she said with resignation, drawing comfort from his embrace. “Larn’kelnar caused so much death and destruction... and he didn’t even have his thrall fleets with him.”

“We’ll deal with the rest of them and do it with a clear conscience,” John said firmly.

Calara rested her head against his chest and listened to his heartbeat. “John... I don’t think we can wipe out the Brimorians and still claim to be the good guys. If we cross that line, it’ll compromise who we are.”

He was quiet for a moment and found himself in agreement. “Yeah... you’re right. As much as the Brimorians deserve retribution for what they’ve done to the Abandoned, we can’t sink to their level.” He gave her a reassuring pat on the back. “Don’t worry, I’ll figure out some way of punishing them that doesn’t involve genocide.”

She gave him a grateful squeeze. “I knew you would.”

They separated then continued over the bridge towards the Observatory. “Have you made any plans for when Mateo and Jack are staying here?”

Calara nodded. “I have... but I hadn’t planned on throwing a young blonde at my dad. Were you and Alyssa hoping to find one on the Terran fleet?”

John blushed furiously. “I can’t believe she told you that!”

She giggled and bumped hips with him. “Really? This is Alyssa we’re talking about.”

“I was only joking, honey... I swear,” John said earnestly. “I’ve got nothing but respect for your family. I would never dream of doing anything to damage your parents’ marriage.”

Calara stopped outside the Observatory door and gave him a fond smile. “I know. Alyssa was wrong, you haven’t really changed.”

He hesitated, then looked into her eyes. “Does my attraction to Maria make you feel uncomfortable?”

She immediately shook her head. “It’s actually kind of flattering. She is my mother and I suppose we’re alike in many ways.” John was about to continue speaking, but she silenced him with a kiss. “I know you’d never do anything inappropriate, which makes your crush on her quite sweet. My mom flirts with you because she knows it’s only innocent and that you would never try anything... otherwise she would’ve shut it down from the start.”

John smiled with relief. “I’m glad she sees me as harmless.”

Calara gave him a coy smile. “Oh, I wouldn’t say that... I’ve never seen my mother act this way around anyone else. She definitely likes you too.”

He swallowed, not sure how to respond to that.

She giggled and tapped the button to open the door. “Time for bed.” As she sauntered into the bedroom, she glanced at him over her shoulder, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. “You can spoon me if you want? I know you like the way I look from behind...”

“You’re getting as bad as Alyssa,” he whispered, trying not to wake the sleeping girls. He grasped her hand, pulling her into the bathroom. “Join me in the shower, I need to freshen up.”

Calara eagerly followed him inside, the two of them stripping off and entering the shower cubicle together. When the water started to run, she gave him a flirtatious smile then turned around, giving him a spectacular view of her shapely back and deliciously round bottom. John knew exactly what she was doing, teasing him with her glorious olive-hued body like that, knowing it would be easy for him to imagine she was Maria.

He wrapped her up in his arms and kissed her cheek. “You’ll have to try a lot harder than that to tease me. I’ve already turned down Jade when she was an exact replica of your mother.”

“What?!” Calara blurted out, turning around to look at him in surprise.

His face fell and he couldn’t help look guilty. “I thought you knew about that...”

She giggled, her shocked expression vanishing.

“You little minx!” he exclaimed with a good-natured chuckle. Pulling her into his arms, he continued, “I freely admit that Maria is a lovely woman... but if it came down to a choice, I’d pick you every time.”

“Really?” she asked, genuinely curious.

“Of course, honey!” he said emphatically, looking deep into her eyes. “I respect your mother and I am attracted to her, but I’m only in love with you.”

Calara let out a happy sigh, then gave him a tender kiss, showing him that his feelings were very much reciprocated. They shared a smile, then started washing each other in the splashing water.

“I’m really glad we had a chance to talk tonight,” she said, soaping up his chest.

“Yeah, me too,” he agreed. “But I don’t know how I’m going to face your dad tomorrow after this conversation.”

The brunette burst into another fit of giggles. “Sorry, that was bad timing.”

Alyssa slipped into the shower with them and hugged Calara from behind. “Having fun tormenting John?” she asked, kissing her girlfriend on the cheek.

“It is funny seeing the only recipient of two Stellar Clusters in Terran Federation history get flustered,” the Latina admitted, smiling at him affectionately. “But you don’t mind a bit of teasing, do you, Admiral Blake?”

“Under the circumstances, I guess I can’t complain,” he conceded, returning her smile.

“I’m a very understanding fiancée,” she declared with a bright smile.

“You’ll make a very lovely wife to some lucky guy,” he said to the brunette, giving her a kiss. He smiled at Alyssa next and kissed her over Calara’s shoulder. “You will too, beautiful.”

They both pretended to swoon, then laughed as they gave him a three-way hug. After they’d finished freshening up in the shower, they dried off then crept out of the bathroom. Despite all the giggling, they’d managed to avoid waking the rest of the girls, who lay snuggled up together in pairs or triples. Padding across the oval bed, they took their usual spot, with Alyssa and Calara lying on either side of John. He pulled up the covers, then put his arms around both girls, who draped themselves across him possessively.

“This feels amazing,” he whispered, stroking their backs.

Alyssa snuggled in closer. “I couldn’t agree more.”

“I love sleeping with you two,” Calara agreed with a contented sigh.

John hesitated, then quietly added, “I really needed this after the day we’ve had. Everything always feels okay again when I’ve got you two in my arms.”

The blonde and brunette exchanged a glance, then leaned up to both kiss him on the cheek.

“Night night, Lion,” Calara said in a hushed voice. “You were incredible today. Thanks for reminding me why you’re my hero.”

Touched by her sincerity, John kissed the top of her head as she nuzzled into him.

\*I’m very proud of you too, John,\* Edraele said quietly. \*I’ve been worrying for months about weighing you down with the burden of leadership, but you took it all in your stride and exceeded all my expectations. The way you inspired hope in all those women was so wonderful to see... you even managed to revitalise my own belief in the future we’re building for the Maliri.\*

\*Thank you, Edraele,\* he murmured. \*I’m glad I didn’t let you down.\*

He realised Alyssa was staring at him, her piercing cerulean gaze filled with a host of strong emotions.

\*You surprised me too, handsome,\* she whispered, her loving telepathic caress swirling through his subconscious. \*I thought I had you all figured out... but I love the new side of you I saw today.\*

John smiled at her fondly. \*Maybe I should bet favours with you more often?\*

\*Maybe so,\* she agreed, her eyes twinkling... but they both knew that wasn’t what she was referring to.

The Invictus began to tremble, vibrations rolling through their bodies. John glanced at Alyssa, who nodded, confirming his unspoken question.

\*We’re hitting the first system on the flight path to pick up extra speed. There’s another star three minutes away and slingshotting around that will push us up to maximum hyper-warp.\*

He kissed her on the forehead and smiled. \*Clever girl.\*

She couldn’t disguise the look of pride in her eyes as she revelled in his praise, reminding John of that brash young girl that fate had thrown in his path 8 months earlier. With a contented sigh, Alyssa snuggled closer, following Calara’s example and falling asleep with her head resting on his shoulder. He stroked their backs and felt his eyelids growing heavy, but tried to fight off sleep for a few minutes longer. By the time the Invictus entered the second gravity well, John was already in Athena’s loving embrace, Alyssa’s guide welcoming him to her Astral sanctuary.

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Lilyana’s long eyelashes fluttered as she woke, then she let out a wistful sigh. The Maliri Fleet Commander couldn’t remember feeling so well rested before, but she still would have given anything to return to that blissful dream. It had felt so real and even thinking about it now was thrilling; she could picture herself holding a beautiful baby in her arms, proudly showing Baen’thelas their child.

“Good morning,” Almari said softly from her left.

“How are you feeling?” Ilyana asked, the second assassin stroking her shoulder on the right.

Shocked to be in bed with both women, Lilyana sat bolt upright... or at least she tried to. She glanced down at her curved midriff, her stomach heavy and rounded as if she’d gorged herself on a huge meal. Something about that thought seemed oddly familiar and snippets of the previous evening flashed through her subconscious.

“Easy now...” Almari murmured, putting an arm around the Fleet Commander to help her sit up. “Just give yourself a moment to get orientated.”

Lilyana stared incredulously at her stomach. “Did I...? Is that...?”

\*Yes, your tummy is still full of John’s cum,\* Edraele said soothingly. \*Last night you enjoyed over a dozen climaxes with Alyssa, then you took wonderful care of him. Baen’thelas was so proud of you for your victories over the Kirrix... and yes, he promised to father a child with you someday.\*

“Oh... it was all real...” Lilyana said with a breathy sigh.

Almari gently stroked her swollen belly. “You look so beautiful. Would you like to see?”

Lilyana gave her a tentative nod and the two assassins helped her out of bed. The three of them were completely naked, but that no longer seemed so important any longer, neither of her companions remotely self-conscious about their nudity. They walked over to a full-length mirror near her closet and Lilyana held her breath as she stepped in front of it.

Even expecting the changes to her reflection, they still came as a shock. A beautiful snowy-white mane now flowed over her shoulders and down her back, a brilliant contrast to her azure skin. Mouth open in awe, Lilyana twisted either way, fascinated by her flowing locks that she’d never dared to grow this long. The few scars and imperfections on her skin had been wiped away, her body a flawless masterpiece that any nubile thirty-year-old would be proud of. Making those turns let her see herself in profile and she paused, lovingly cradling the bump in her normally trim stomach.

\*Ilyana says you look absolutely gorgeous,\* Edraele said, her voice kind and caring. \*A stunning preview of your bright future with Baen’thelas.\*

The Fleet Commander blushed and darted a grateful smile to the younger woman standing beside her. Ilyana’s slender fingers were idly stroking a circle around her own toned navel, a wistful look in the assassin’s turquoise eyes.

“Oh no! You didn’t get any!” Lilyana suddenly exclaimed in surprise, remembering that John had fed her exclusively. “I’m so sorry... both of you!”

Both women embraced the distraught officer, touched by her sympathy and guilt.

“There’s no need to get upset,” Almari said, smiling at her affectionately. She caressed Lilyana’s curves. “We remember how wonderful it was getting a full tummy from Baen’thelas for the first time and wanted you to experience that for yourself.”

\*Take care of your fleet and protect those women under your command,\* Edraele urged her. \*And I can guarantee this won’t be the last time. Do you remember John’s promise to you?\*

Lilyana nodded, a fierce determination in her eyes. “I do.”

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“So what do you reckon?” Dana asked, jerking a thumb at the holo-screen. “Pretty cool, right?”

Little One studied the three-dimensional image, watching the stylised female form slowly rotate in front of her. “It is beautiful... but this project seems like a waste of your valuable time and resources, Dana. My present chassis is quite adequate to perform my functions within the Invictus.”

The redhead squatted down beside the cleaning robot and shook her head. “C’mon... you know me pretty well by now. When have I ever been satisfied with ‘quite adequate’?”

The small automaton glanced down at her titanium body and pivoted at her waist, her tracks clicking as she rolled forward and back again. “So my present configuration insults your professional pride?”

“Yeah, exactly!” Dana said nodding exuberantly. She rapped her knuckles against Little One’s titanium chassis. “You’re way too vulnerable at the moment. I won’t be satisfied until you can shrug off a hit from a Laser Cannon!”

“But my primary role is to clean dirty laundry. Your bras and panties are not usually equipped with Laser Cannons,” the dubious robot replied.

Dana’s eyes lit up at the idea.

“No, don’t even think about it!” Rachel said, smirking at the redhead.

“We just want to make sure you’re safe, Little One,” Irillith said with an encouraging smile. “Faye went to a lot of effort to upgrade your software and we’d be letting her down if we didn’t do our best to protect you.”

“I would not want to disappoint Meta\_Faye,” Little One said, her voice wavering with concern.

Rachel stroked her domed metallic head. “After everything we learned from Faye’s VI, I do think she would have encouraged this. Faye asked for an anthropomorphised physical body to improve her relationships with the crew, because she knew having an expressive face would make her more relatable.”

Little One considered that for a moment. “If you believe that this is what she would have wanted, I will agree to the upgrade.”

“Awesome!” Dana exclaimed with a triumphant grin. “I can start the Mass Fabricators cranking out parts right now. I’ll ask John to shape the limbs and torso when he’s got a minute.”

Irillith raised an eyebrow as she studied the image. “Perhaps you should ask Alyssa instead...”

With a quiet whir, Little One tilted her head. “John, Alyssa, and Calara have awoken. Should we make that request now?”

Dana shook her head and grinned. “Nah, let’s give them a little while first...”

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The tawny tiger lashed her tail, sapphire eyes shining with excitement as she waited for the moment to strike. Betrixa’s taut muscles uncoiled, launching her across the Raptor’s swept wing to pounce on Marika, just as the huge tabby-coloured feline tried to leap up onto the gunship. She caught her sister as Marika landed above the cockpit, playfully batting Marika with huge paws that were powerful enough to crush a man’s skull. The swift blows knocked the startled Nymph backwards, sending her tumbling to the deck with a mewling cry of surprise.

Betrixa’s toothy maw peeled back into a feral grin, rumbling giggles erupting from deep in her chest as she stood triumphant atop the Raptor. Before she had a chance to really savour her victory, a 900 lb tigress leaped on her from behind, Leylira growling ferociously as she sprung her ambush. While Betrixa had been pre-occupied with Marika, the skilled huntress had sprung up onto the big engines at the rear, then silently stalked closer in her sister’s blind spot.

Despite Betrixa’s frantic attempt to dig her claws into the Raptor’s armoured deck plates, she was unable to stop herself from scrabbling over the edge of the wing. She twisted around, bending her flexible spine back on itself and wrapped both weighty forepaws around Leylira’s neck. Now it was the orange-and-black tigress’ turn to yelp in surprise as her grinning sister dragged her off the gunship, where they crashed to the deck with a heavy thump. They rolled around, raking each other with their rear claws and snapping playful bites as they fought for supremacy.

Temporarily forgotten about, Marika wiggled her bottom as she lined up another jump, but the brief movement drew the attention of her fighting sisters. They rolled apart, then pounced on her together, the three Nymphs tumbling across the deck in a ball of lashing tails and swinging paws. When one of them was knocked clear of the melee, they regained their footing then growled and leapt back into the fray.

Jade laughed and clapped her hands. “Well done, Neysa!”

The three squabbling tigers looked back to see the fourth Nymph lying on top of the Raptor, the jaguar-spotted tigress nonchalantly licking her paw. Neysa had waited until they were all distracted, before taking advantage of that opportunity to leap up to the high vantage point unopposed.

 Betrixa shimmered in a blue blur, then reappeared in her catgirl form. “Hey, she cheated!”

“To win, you just had to be up there alone for thirty seconds,” Jade said with a shrug. “This was a good lesson in situational awareness. If you’re piloting the Invictus or the Raptor in a massive space battle, you always need to keep an eye on what the rest of us are doing; we might need your help.”

The tawny coloured catgirl pouted, then glanced up at her preening sister. “Don’t get too comfortable up there! I’ll be watching you next time... and I’m going to kick your spotty butt!”

Neysa yawned as she feigned casual disinterest in her sister’s threat and rested her muzzle on her paws, pretending to settle down for a nap. Betrixa bristled indignantly and shape-shifted into tiger form, then bounded around the back of the Raptor, looking for another way up.

Jade smiled at their antics, before turning to look at Helene, who sat quietly on one of the storage crates. “Are you alright?” she asked softly, walking over to join the aquatic girl and putting an arm around her shoulders.

Helene nodded, but there was a sadness in her baby-blue eyes that hadn’t been there before. They watched in silence as the four tiger-shaped Nymphs fought for supremacy, feral roars and snarls echoing across the hangar.

“Do you think they knew?” Helene finally asked, a melancholy note to her voice.

“Did who know, little kitten?” Jade replied, stroking Helene’s arm to comfort her.

“The Elders of my village...” the forlorn girl murmured. “Did they know what was happening to the people the Brimorians took away? Would they have sent me to be... defiled... by the Kirrix?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know the answer to that,” Jade said softly. “But when John destroys the Brimorians, we can return to Neptra village and find out. I hope for their sake, they’re innocent.”

There was an ominous undertone to her reply that made Helene turn to look at her. “Will you kill them if they were involved?”

“If you ask me to, I will,” Jade stated, before tilting her head to one side as she further considered the question. “If Alyssa discovers that the Abandoned Elders are guilty of betraying your people, I imagine she’ll want to punish them herself. Making them feel what it’s like to be torn apart by Kirrix grubs and reliving the deaths of every single person they betrayed would be a fitting form of Karmic justice.”

Helene shuddered at the thought. “What if the Elders were threatened with the whole village being killed if they didn’t cooperate with the Brimorians? Would they still deserve madness and death then?”

“It’s not my place to judge them,” Jade replied, looking into the distance. “My only concern is John... and all the girls who are part of our family, which very much includes you. If seeking vengeance against those that wronged you brings some measure of comfort, then I will gladly do whatever it takes to bring you peace. We all love you, Helene... and your happiness is what matters to me.”

“I just can’t help wondering... does everything we do have to end in death and destruction?” she asked, looking troubled.

Jade turned to smile at her. “This is why John doesn’t want to turn you into another merciless thrall. This is why they need you.”

“What do you mean?” Helene asked in confusion.

“He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster; when you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss also gazes into you,” the Nymph quietly replied. “A Terran philosopher said that 900 years ago... and I know it’s been preying on John’s mind.”

Helene looked at her in alarm. “He’s worried that I’ll become a monster?!”

“No, not you,” the Nymph murmured. “You’re not the one who stared into the abyss.”

“Oh...” Helene said, still confused. Suddenly her eyes widened in distress. “Oh no!”

Jade nodded and hugged her closer.

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Sakura drummed her fingers on the console and glanced up at the Sector Map floating in the middle of the Bridge. The Invictus had departed from the Maliri fleet near the outer reaches of the Trankaran Republic, and after the morning travelling through Kirrix Space, was now approaching Terran Federation territory. When the white battlecruiser raced across the border, Sakura’s almond-shaped eyes flicked to her holographic browser and she frowned when it still displayed the error message: “No Connection”.

“I wonder how long it’ll be before we get a signal?” she asked Tashana, who was studying ancient video footage taken from the Nexus archives.

“Hmm?” the distracted Maliri hummed.

“The T-Fed fleet must be replacing the Comms Beacons the Kirrix destroyed,” Sakura explained, before gesturing towards the holo-screen. “But we’re still out of connection range.”

“The fleet probably hasn’t left Tasmaris Prime yet; there were a lot of colonists in need of treatment for egg infestation.”

“I guess it’ll be another couple of hours until we’re in range then,” Sakura said with a grimace.

Tashana looked up from her work. “What’s the matter? Did you need to make an urgent call?”

The Asian girl shook her head. “I wanted to access the holo-net to buy a present for Maria. After what she’s just been through, I thought it might be a nice way of letting her know we were all thinking about her.”

“Oh, that’s a lovely idea,” the Maliri said with an approving smile. “What are you thinking about buying her? I’m sure she’d appreciate some flowers or chocolates... or perhaps you had something more extravagant in mind?”

Before Sakura could reply, Alyssa’s telepathic voice cut through their minds. \*Hello, ladies. Could you come back to bed? John wants to do a quick team debrief after the battle.\*

\*We need someone to cover the Bridge, Alyssa,\* Sakura said, turning to look at Tashana. \*Do you want me to stay up here?\*

\*No, both of you come down. Jade’s sending up the Nymphs to keep an eye on things.\*

 A few seconds later, Leylira and Marika rose up in the grav-tube and stepped onto the Command Deck.

“Hello,” the tabby catgirl said, greeting them with a friendly smile.

Leylira flashed a grin at Sakura as she passed by, then the tiger-striped girl bounded down the ramp and sat in the Pilot’s chair. She grasped the flightstick at the same time that Marika took hold of weapon controls, both Nymphs tapping buttons on the console.

Sakura and Tashana exchanged a worried glance, but before they could interrupt the eager catgirls, Alyssa contacted them telepathically. \*It’s okay, they’re not getting up to mischief. Irillith disabled weapon and flight control up there on the Command Deck, as well as down on the Combat Bridge. The Nymphs are going to be running piloting and gunnery simulators for the next few hours to get some practice.\*

“Phew...” Sakura whispered, flashing a relieved grin at Tashana as they descended in the red anti-gravity field.

They hurried to the Observatory, excited to see John again, and found the rest of the crew waiting for them on the oval bed.

“Hey, girls,” John said, smiling at them both. “Take a seat.”

After greeting him with a kiss, they took their places, completing the circle.

John glanced at the chronometer at the wall and shook his head when he saw it was 1:07 pm. “It’ll be nice to get back to regular hours; my body clock’s all over the place at the moment.”

His stomach grumbled, voicing its own protest.

“Okay, let’s keep this brief,” he said with a wry smile, eliciting laughter from the girls. “First of all, I just wanted to say thank you and well done for your incredible efforts against the Kirrix. We broke the back of their invasion and saved the lives of millions of Terrans and Trankarans.”

The girls celebrated with cheers and whoops, making John’s smile widen.

He waited for them to calm down before continuing. “When I broke into Irnaxxa’s mind, I saw snippets of her memories... fragments of telepathic conversations she had with the rest of the Hive Queens. Everything we’d guessed about their civil war was true; both factions have formed rival Hive Minds and are now fighting over the future of their species.”

“Her side can’t seriously be considering another invasion?” Calara protested incredulously. “We’ve destroyed thousands of ships... killed millions of drones; they’d be insane to even think about trying it again!”

“All the Kirrix care about is the continued survival of their species,” Alyssa said, a resigned expression on her face. “Now that we’ve taken steps to stop the Brimorian slave trade, they won’t have any source of new hosts.”

“That’s true, but they do fear us,” John interjected. “Both factions are painfully aware of the horrific losses they’ve sustained in this war. Irnaxxa’s side wanted to retreat with as many captured colonists as they could, then gather their strength and launch another massive invasion a few decades from now. The ‘not-quite-as-evil’ Hive Mind basically agrees, but they’re terrified of Alyssa and convinced that we would have obliterated their homeworld if they didn’t leave the colonists behind.”

“So both factions are still a bunch of evil assholes?” Dana asked with a grimace.

He nodded. “They’re bound to attack again, but at least for now, we can consider the Kirrix threat neutralised.”

“Thank goodness for that,” Sakura said, her expression grim rather than celebratory. “If I never see another of those vile hive ships again, it’ll be too soon.”

“At least now we can focus on the conflict with the Progenitors,” Calara said, sounding equally relieved. She glanced at Helene and quickly added, “I haven’t forgotten about the Brimorians, we still have to deal with them too.”

Helene gave her a sympathetic smile. “I understand you need to concentrate on the biggest threat. While I want to see my people freed, I’m not in any rush to confront the Brimorians.”

John looked at her in surprise. “Don’t you want to see them punished for what they’ve done to the Abandoned?”

“I don’t want to burden you with their punishment,” she quietly replied. “I’d prefer to forgive the Brimorians than see you suffer with doubt and regret.”

“The Enclave won’t give up their slaves without a fight, honey,” he said, beckoning her over. When Helene crossed the bed to join him, he wrapped her up in his arms. “I’m not exactly eager to wipe out the Brimorians, but I am going to free your people. If that means destroying all the Brimorian fleets and bombarding their planets back to the stone age, then I’ll do whatever it takes to convince them.”

“What if the Brimorians start killing my people to make you stop?” she asked, worry in her eyes. “Will you blame yourself for their deaths? What lengths would you go to then?”

He mulled that over for a moment.

Sakura ground her teeth in anger and interjected, “The Enclave is already guilty of horrific crimes against all the Terran colonists they raped and murdered! They then spent the last century continuing to abuse and murder the Abandoned on a massive scale! I’m convinced the Brimorian public knows exactly what’s going on with the Abandoned... how could the Deep Pool keep it a secret if there’s billions of slaves throughout their empire? I won’t shed a tear over the Brimorians being removed from the galaxy... they’re long due a reckoning.”

“When we visit Brimor, I’ll find out the truth,” Alyssa said with a shrug. “Then we can deal with them accordingly...”

Helene shot a worried glance at Jade, recalling their earlier conversation.

Alyssa knew her thoughts and reached out to hold the aquatic girls hand. \*Trust me, Helene. I’m not going to let John tear himself apart with guilt over the Brimorians.\*

“We won’t make any definite plans now,” John said to Helene, unaware of their conversation. “Not until we know exactly what’s been happening. When we’ve got all the facts, then we can discuss the best way of handling the situation. Like I said before; my main goal is freeing the Abandoned... it’ll be up to the Brimorians how far they’re willing to go to keep their slaves. I won’t feel guilty if the Enclave forces my hand.”

Mollified by his answer, Helene kissed him on the cheek and gave him a grateful hug.

He rubbed her back, then turned his attention to the girls. “Other than that, there wasn’t much else I wanted to discuss. Our plan to distract the Kirrix defenders worked remarkably well, drawing away their forces and allowing me and Sakura a clear run to the nest.” He made eye-contact with the Asian girl and continued, “I had been considering a melee battle with the Hive Queen, but with her linked to the Hive Mind it was too dangerous to mess around. You did exactly the right thing taking her out so fast.”

She smiled at his praise, then turned to look at Dana. “Those Tachyon rifles are incredible! The Hive Queen looked stunned when your runic penetrators tore her hex shield to pieces.”

“You really outdid yourself there, Sparks,” John agreed. ”The fight was ridiculously one-sided.”

“I was amazed how effective the tachyon beams were against juggernauts too,” Irillith said with a wry smile. “Can you imagine what the ground battle on Khalgron would have been like with a couple of those rifles?”

“Imagine what the fight with Larn’kelnar would’ve been like if we had our gear,” Tashana said with a wistful smile.

“Definitely a double thumbs up for the Tachyon rifles, babes,” Rachel said, doing exactly that.

Dana grinned in delight at their enthusiastic reaction. “That’s awesome! I’m really glad they did the job.”

“I can’t wait to see what you come up with next,” John said, with an encouraging smile.

“I’m focusing on the Invictus,” the Grand Engineering Overlord replied. “If I can crack that black metal, it’ll unlock everything... and then I’ll start working on upgrading all the Progenitor designs.”

“Now that I’m looking forward to!” Calara exclaimed, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

John nodded his agreement. “Yeah, me too.” He glanced around the group, then continued, “Okay, so we should be meeting the Terran fleet in about-”

“Whoa, hold on a second!” Alyssa interrupted. “We’re not done with the combat debrief yet.”

“Oh, sorry,” John said with an apologetic frown to Calara. “Of course you did a phenomenal job dismantling the Kirrix fleet... same applies to you Irillith.”

Alyssa rolled her eyes. “They know... and you already congratulated Calara this morning. No, I want to talk about the man of the hour, who pulled off a stunning move to take out all the Kirrix and save the Trankarans!”

“Yeah, you really kicked some ass!” Dana exclaimed, beaming at him in awe.

The girls broke out into a spontaneous round of applause, whooping and cheering for John.

He couldn’t help blushing at their effusive praise. “Okay, okay, that’s enough... it wasn’t that big a deal.”

“Actually, it really was,” Rachel disagreed. “So many Trankarans were infested with eggs that we could never have got to them all in time.”

“Calara told me that you’d estimated around 17,000 Trankarans would’ve been killed.”

The brunette gave him an indulgent smile. “That’s such a huge understatement of what you managed to accomplish. There were approximately 900,000 infested prisoners, split between 54 hive ships and the dreadnought. It would have taken hours to clear all those vessels with boarding actions, then triaging so many Trankarans to evaluate how close their eggs were to hatching would have been a nightmare. It would’ve taken nearly two weeks for the Trankaran and Maliri medical teams to treat all those prisoners, with thousands still dying because it’d be impossible to accurately prioritise that many people.”

Helene looked up at him and said quietly, “The Trankarans are very brave, but that would be terrifying even for them.”

“Exactly,” Rachel agreed. “After we triaged everyone and prioritised them by the date they were infested, they’d have to wait until the final day before hatching to be treated. Imagine being forced to wait to have your death sentence lifted, knowing that you’d be ripped apart in agony if the medics couldn’t get to you in time. The Trankarans wouldn’t complain or plead for help, because their rock-brethren were all in the same predicament... but people would be dying in front of them on a daily basis. You managed to save a million Trankarans from a fortnight of horror, which would have pushed many of them to breaking point.”

“See... it really was a big deal,” Alyssa said, kissing him gently on the cheek.

“The Trankarans we treated all wanted to know why their eggs stopped moving,” Rachel said, her grey-eyes sparkling. “The Kirrix invaded before Niskera became the Glowing Queen, so no one from Dun Hergrun had heard of you before. I was happy to explain that the Great Protector had vowed to pick up the mantle of the Great Maker and saved them all from death.”

“The Trankarans were so thrilled, it was wonderful to see,” Helene agreed, smiling at John.

 “Oh, great...” he said with a groan. “I was trying to downplay all that religious stuff.”

Alyssa shook her head, her lips lifting into a wry smile. “Good luck with that. Queen Niskera was already a true believer and I’m sure she’s been doing a marvellous job of spreading the word.”

“Having faith can be a great comfort to people,” Calara said quietly. “I don’t think there’s any harm in the Trankarans looking to you for protection... we’ll be doing whatever we can to help defend the Republic in the future anyway.”

“There’s also a certain amount of pragmatism to the Trankarans’ belief system,” Rachel interjected, looking thoughtful. “They revere Mael’nerak as their creator and they also feel a great sense of gratitude towards him for everything he did to establish their civilisation. The Trankarans won’t be expecting you to perform miracles.”

“At least until today,” Alyssa teased him.

“That’s true,” Rachel conceded. “You did set quite an impressive precedent.”

“Wonderful,” he said with a sigh of resignation. “Well they survived... that’s the main thing.”

Sensing that discussion had run its course, Sakura cleared her throat, drawing everyone’s attention. “John... I was thinking about buying a present for Maria. I just wondered if you wanted to contribute?”

“Oh? What did you have in mind?” he asked curiously.

Sakura explained what she planned on purchasing and by the time she’d finished, John had a broad smile back on his face again.

“That’s a fantastic idea!” he said, nodding enthusiastically. “Just tell me what you need and I’ll help however I can.”

“Will do!” she replied with a cheerful grin, her almond-eyes flicking to Dana.

“Like you even have to ask...” the redhead said, rolling her eyes.

Calara smiled warmly at her friends, touched by their thoughtfulness. “Thank you, everyone. This really means a lot.”

“We all love your mom,” Alyssa said, hugging her girlfriend.

John put his arm around the brunette and gave her a supportive squeeze. They shared a kiss, then he looked back at the group. “So we should be arriving at the Terran fleet at 9pm tonight. What have you ladies got planned for this afternoon?”

“I’ll make you some brunch in a moment,” Calara said with a fond smile. “After that, I’m going to start gunnery training for Neysa and Marika.”

Jade was the next to speak up. “I’ll be teaching Leylira and Betrixa how to pilot the Invictus. When they’re comfortable with the fundamentals of flying, I’ll train them to specialise with the Invictus and Raptor.”

“I still have a few millennia of AI research to keep me occupied,“ Irillith said, her lips quirking into a wry smile.

“I’ll be researching too,” Tashana chimed in. “I’m going back through the video archives looking for anything related to Mael’nerak building Nexus.”

“I need to contact the Terran Federation Medical Administration and send them the formulas I’ve developed that will cure all those supposedly incurable diseases,” Rachel said with satisfaction. “I’m sure they’ll drag their heels over comprehensive testing with clinical trials, but I think I might have a solution to circumvent their protests if necessary...”

“Are you quite certain there won’t be any side-effects?” John asked, listening with interest.

Alyssa frowned and poked him in the ribs. “That’s like asking Dana if a prototype gun’s going to blow up in your face!”

He winced and gave the tawny-haired doctor a look of contrition. “Sorry, honey. I didn’t mean to sound like I don’t trust your medical expertise.”

Rachel waved away his apology. “It’s okay, it’s a perfectly reasonable concern considering the risks involved. If Dana made a mistake and blew your hand off with a malfunctioning gun, I could regenerate a new limb for you in five minutes. If I miscalculated my formulas for the serums to counter those diseases, the results could be catastrophic.”

“Hey!” Dana protested indignantly. “My guns don’t blow up!”

“Wait... what do you mean by catastrophic?” John asked, looking perturbed.

The brunette shrugged. “If a cure accidentally mutated those pathogens with an increase in lethality or rate of infection, potentially billions of civilian lives could be at stake. They are extremely dangerous diseases and critical mistakes could lead to a super-plague that would wipe out humanity.”

Dana went pale and looked at her in alarm. “Err... maybe extensive clinical trials might be sensible after all?”

“Oh, ye of little faith...” Rachel sighed theatrically, placing a hand over her heart as if wounded by Dana’s comment.

John swallowed and gave her a reassuring smile. “I do trust you, Rachel. If you need me to use my rank to cut through the red tape, just let me know.”

“Thank you,” she said, with a look of gratitude.

“I won’t be doing anything quite so dramatic,” Sakura said, winking at Rachel. “As soon as we’re in range of the holo-net, I’ll start shopping for Maria’s present.”

Dana grinned as she said, “That reminds me... I came up with a design for-”

Alyssa shot her a sharp glance and the redhead froze mid-sentence. “I’ll head down to your workshop after we wrap this up, Sparks. I can help with that project.”

“Actually, I need you here,” John said, leaning over to run his hand over her cum-filled stomach. “I want to take advantage of you being topped up and teach you as much as I can about Progenitor runes. If you’re missing any necessary abilities, I can give you whatever you need.”

She arched her back and closed her eyes, savouring his loving touch. “Mmm... alright, you convinced me.”

As his hand caressed Alyssa’s impressive curves, John glanced at Dana. “We’ve only got about four hours until she’s absorbed this load. Alyssa can help you out then.”

Opening her eyes, the blonde nodded. “I’ve got some business to take care of myself on the holo-net. I can look into that while I’m doing any shaping Dana needs.”

“Business?” John asked curiously. “What kind of business?”

 “Land purchases for the Lion Orphanage foundation, stock trades to grow your portfolio, and a few other odds and ends I’ve been neglecting for the last couple of weeks.”

“In that case, why don’t you let me do the shaping for Dana instead?” John offered. “Then you’ll be free to concentrate on everything you’re working on this evening.”

Alyssa’s cerulean gaze flicked to the twins. “I believe you’ve already lined up some important business of your own.”

Irillith tried to look haughty and disdainful, but couldn’t help grinning at the prospect. Tashana made no attempt to hide the beaming smile lighting up her beautiful face. The rest of the girls broke out into laughter at their expressions, the giggling intensifying when they saw John flush with embarrassment.

“It’s not all fun and games,” he protested over a flurry of ribald comments. “Tashana wants to join me and Alyssa when we visit the Kyth’faren fortress. I need to enhance her so that she can Spirit Walk.”

Dana smirked at his indignant reply. “I’m sure you’ll shove those new abilities really deep... into her mind.”

“I know I always enjoy being thoroughly stuffed... with new knowledge,” Calara agreed.

“John, I must admit I’m curious about something,” Rachel mused aloud. “How does buggering Irillith help you give new psychic powers to Tashana?”

“That’s the fun and games part,” Alyssa explained helpfully. “It’s a very important part of the process...”

“Yes, you’re all very funny,” John said, with a good-natured smile. “Everyone missed their vocation as a comedienne...”

“John?” Helene asked, looking up at him.

“You’re not going to tease me too, are you?” he enquired playfully. “I thought I had at least one nice girl on the team...”

“No... I just wondered if I could stay with you for the rest of the day?” she asked tentatively.

“Of course, honey,” he agreed, giving her a reassuring kiss. “I’d love to have you keep me company.”

Helene relaxed in his arms, already looking much happier.

“Alright, that’s it I think,” John said, glancing at each of the girls in case they wanted to add anything. When they each shook their heads, he locked eyes with Jade. “I’ll get back to feeding your sisters after Tashana.”

“They’ll be delighted to hear it,” the Nymph said rising to her feet. “They’re making excellent progress already... as I’m sure you’re aware.”

“Actually, I’m not,” he admitted. “I’ve been trying to make them stronger and tougher, but that’s as much direction as I’ve given their enhancements. Everything worked out perfectly with you, so I didn’t want to stray from a winning formula.”

Her emerald eyes softened and she leaned down to kiss him. “I think you’re perfect too, Master.”

They shared a smile, then Jade accompanied the rest of the girls who were filing out of the Observatory. After they’d gone, John, Alyssa, and Helene were left sitting on the oval bed, with the aquatic girl still in his arms.

“Okay, where do you want me?” the blonde asked, raising an eyebrow.

John hesitated, glancing down at Helene.

“Don’t worry, I’ll move,” she said, slipping out of his embrace. Helene sat beside him with a teal-hued knee touching his thigh. “Am I in the way here?”

“No, that’s perfect,” he replied, patting her leg as Alyssa replaced the aquatic girl and sat in front of him. Encircling the blonde in his arms, he added, “Comfy, beautiful?”

Alyssa leaned back against his chest. “I couldn’t be happier,” she murmured, sighing with contentment as he stroked her swollen belly.

“It’s wonderful seeing you with the girls...” Helene murmured, caressing John’s arm. “I can feel the love practically pouring off you.”

He smiled at her then kissed Alyssa’s bare shoulder. “As lovely as this is, we’ve got work to do and the clock’s ticking.”

“Alright, I’m all ears,” the teenager said, grinning at him as she copied one of his catchphrases.

He ran a finger across the pointed tip, making her tingle at his touch. “You certainly are. Okay... I know you’ve picked up a few things already, but I think we should start with the basics.”

John held up a finger in front of her and started tracing a glowing shape in the air, the intricate pattern as big as his hand.

“This is the primary letter at the centre of the Kyth’faren eldritch alphabet,” John explained, carefully forming the precise pattern. “It combines with many of the others, adding power to runic phrases.”

“I know that one!” Alyssa exclaimed, watching in fascination. “I inscribed it on Sakura’s ninjato.”

“I saw... you did a nice job,” he said, gesturing towards the floating rune and shrinking it so that it was only an inch tall.

Next John drew six more large runes, positioning them in a circle around the primary, then added another twelve around those.

“These are the inner and outer secondary rings,” he explained, reducing them to the same height as the primary. “They control size, shape, and the direction of whatever you’re trying to accomplish.”

She nodded her understanding, committing each of the glowing runes to memory.

“Finally, there are the inner and outer tertiary rings,” he explained, drawing 18 more runes, then another band of 24 outside on the largest circle. “Combining those together add context and meaning to whatever eldritch power you’re creating.”

“Like the elements?” Alyssa murmured, her hand reaching out to touch one of the runes on the periphery. “That represents air, doesn’t it?”

“That’s right,” he replied, looking at her in surprise. “That wasn’t just a lucky guess was it?”

Alyssa shook her head, looking at the runes in fascination. “Some of them look very familiar. I know that one means spirit... and that one represents travel...”

“Combined with the Power and Self runes, they enable Astral Projection... or Spirit Walking as we call it,” he confirmed with a nod. “When you use that ability, your mind forms these runes instinctively. Athena is a strong believer in the results being all that matters and skipping over the details... but for you to really understand and grow your abilities, you need to learn this.”

“61 runes...” Alyssa murmured, tracing golden hexagons around each in turn until they formed an interlocking pattern. “One primary in the centre, then expanding rings in multiples of six, forming a precise geometric shape.”

“I hadn’t noticed that before,” John admitted, leaning closer to study the pattern she had just highlighted.

“The numbers in each ring tipped me off,” she replied with a shrug. “So what’s next?”

“Once you’ve learned the alphabet, then you can combine the runes into phrases... like the one I mentioned for Spirit Walking. Some are relatively simple... like casting a lightning bolt. Others I can’t figure out at all. Irillith’s ability to jump into the Cyber Realm is a perfect example; I’m sure it’s a variation of Spirit Walking, but there’s not exactly a rune for computers.”

“I feel drawn to this one...” Alyssa murmured, gesturing to a rune made up of concentric squares, before touching another next to it that looked like ephemeral waves. “And this one.”

“Those runes represent Force and the Mind. The first is the key rune for Telekinesis, the second is used for-”

“Telepathy!” she interjected excitedly, before turning to look at him. “Am I right?”

“Almost as if you read my mind,” he replied with an affectionate smile.

Alyssa laughed and turned to examine the runic alphabet again. “Amazing... this makes so much more sense now. Do you remember Edraele telling us about people having an instinctive affinity for different powers?”

“Yes, I remember. Her mother was drawn to fire, as was Tashana, and Irillith to electricity...”

“Exactly! Well I find both Telekinesis and Telepathy easy to use... and look!” she pointed to the adjacent runic hexagons. “They’re right next to each other!”

\*I have a similar affinity; those abilities have always come naturally to me,\* Edraele said quietly, lost in thought. \*Decades ago I tried experimenting with conjuring eldritch fire, but all my efforts were an abject failure.\*

“Oh, wait a sec, I just thought of something! Valada was like us too!” Alyssa exclaimed, her eyes lighting up as she twisted to look at John. “I remember she floated a cup over to herself in that video!”

\*Perhaps I inherited that affinity from my great grandmother?\* Edraele suggested. \*Valada must have already been capable of Telepathy after being Mael’nerak’s matriarch. Expanding her abilities to also include Telekinesis for physical protection would be a logical step.\*

“Shouldn’t that mean Tashana and Irillith would be drawn to them too if they were inherited?” John asked his matriarchs. “That’s not the case though; they were actually attuned to fire and electricity... I just enhanced their natural talents.”

“Maybe it just skipped a generation, like with Edraele’s pyromaniac mother?” Alyssa suggested.

“Maybe,” he agreed, having no way of proving the theory. “They certainly fit the same pattern of being attuned to a particular Kyth’faren rune.”

Alyssa stared at the collection of runes, then eagerly pointed to two more. “Look, cold and air are both connected too!”

“Sakura...” John said at the same time as the blonde, both thinking about her abilities.

“Where are the runes for all the crazy shit Dana can do?” she asked eagerly, her curiosity piqued.

John hesitated, then shook his head. “There aren’t any...”

“What do you mean?” Alyssa asked with a frown.

He gave her a helpless shrug. “They don’t exist. She shouldn’t be able to just form singularities like that... I haven’t got a clue how she does it.”

“But you gave her the ability!”

“Yeah... back when Athena was telling me to just make it up as I went along. I honestly have no idea what rune Dana might be attuned with... nothing fits.”

Alyssa thought about it for a moment. “I suppose it doesn’t really matter how she can use those abilities, the important thing is that she can.”

\*John... why are you so strong with Telekinesis, but struggle with Telepathy?\* Edraele asked, sounding just as intrigued.

“Unfortunately, I don’t know the answer to that either,” he replied, frowning with frustration.

“I think I know!” Alyssa blurted out, her eyes wide. “I bet your guide locked you out from certain runes!”

John grimaced. “That sounds like just the kind of thing that bastard would do.”

“Yeah... but you’ve been steadily unlocking them as you reclaim more of your mind,” she insisted, a triumphant gleam in her eyes. “You should try experimenting with as many as you can and see what’s still missing!”

“That’s actually a great idea,” he said, rubbing his chin as he considered it. Turning his attention back to the eager blonde, he stroked her cum-packed stomach. “But for now, let’s focus on you. First of all, I want you to memorise the runic alphabet and practice forming each rune, so you can-”

Alyssa waved her hand and a hexagonal pattern popped into existence... showing an exact copy of the entire Kyth’faren runic alphabet he’d laboriously created. “Done! Okay, what next?”

He looked at it in surprise then shook his head in admiration. “Alright, smarty pants. I’ll show you some runic phrases I’ve learned and we can test what comes naturally to you.”

“Bring it on!” she gushed, cracking her knuckles.

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Valeria stood on the Bridge, studying the holographic System Map, which displayed the four freighters that were docked with her master’s dreadnought. The huge freight-haulers had begun the docking operation four hours ago, transferring across their priceless cargo to the terrifying warship. She drummed her fingers impatiently on the console beside her, then glanced across to the other side of the map as a flash of movement caught her eye.

Several more freighters jumped into the system, dropping out of hyper-warp on the edge of the gravity well. The new arrivals joined a long procession of merchant shipping all flying directly towards the homeworld, delivering the raw materials necessary to mount the latest invasion. Each vessel carried hundreds of tonnes of black ore in their cargo holds, mined in the far-flung reaches of the Empire and brought to Gahl’kalgor’s Throne World, where it would replace the Imperial Palace’s exhausted mineral reserves.

As the minutes ticked by, the docked haulage ships began to peel away from the dreadnought, their cargo transfer complete. Eventually there was just one solitary vessel left, the blocky freighter like an ugly eyesore attached to the sleek and sinister Galkiran command ship. Valeria’s slender fingers tapped out a grim beat, anger and frustration rising in equal measure.

She glowered at the freighter and snapped, “Hail those sluggards!”

“Yes, Matriarch,” the thrall at the Comms Station replied obediently.

The call went through within seconds, almost as if the freighter expected to be contacted. The holographic face of the red-skinned thrall captain appeared, the woman cringing in fear.

“Tell me, Captain Bayre...” Valeria said in an unnaturally calm voice. “Do you grow weary of having skin? Because you are moments away from having it flayed from every inch of your body.”

“Please forgive me, Matriarch,” Bayre begged, terror in her eyes. “One of the pallet operators made a mistake and accidentally reversed into a wall. The anti-grav motor was damaged and we had to transfer the cargo onto-”

“A mistake?!” Valeria snarled incredulously, cutting off the frightened thrall. “What’s the name of this cretin?”

“She’s just a trainee cargo operator. It was a simple accident and the cargo transfer is nearly complete...”

“Give me her name, Bayre,” Valeria demanded, her tone turning glacial. “And the name of the imbecile that allowed a trainee anywhere near cargo personally ordered by Gahl’kalgor.”

Bayre’s shoulders slumped and she said in a hushed voice, “Lierina... and Sionia.”

Valeria closed her eyes, seeking out the Galkiran females in her vast network of thralls. It took a split-second to find them, now that she knew their names, and the matriarch could sense the fear pouring off both of the petrified fools. Reaching forth with her will, she drained them of every last mote of psychic energy, snuffing their lives out in a flare of agony.

“I should hold you personally responsible for their incompetence,” Valeria said, glaring at the cowed captain. “Another mistake like that will be your last, Bayre.”

“I-I understand,” the freighter captain stammered with relief. “Thank you for your mercy, Matriarch!”

“You have ten minutes to complete the cargo transfer. For your own sake, don’t be late.”

Before Captain Bayre could reply, Valeria shut down the communication channel, an unsettled quiet descending on the Bridge. She stared at the freighter, silently urging them to hurry up and not delay their departure any further. Seven minutes and thirteen seconds later, the Galkiran freighter disengaged docking clamps and separated from the dreadnought’s hull, retro-thrusters burning bright to put as much distance between them as possible.

Now that the cargo vessels were clear of the dreadnought, a formation of four Subjugator-class cruisers manoeuvred into position. Dwarfed by the sheer scale of the enormous Progenitor command vessel, the quartet of 500-metre-long warships were nearly swallowed up by the vast black superstructure as they nestled into alcoves in the hull. Docking clamps extended, locking the thrall cruisers in place and preparing them for their imminent departure.

\*My Lord... the cargo transfer is complete,\* Valeria quietly informed her master.

\*Order the jump,\* Gahl’kalgor demanded, his tone cold and impersonal.

Valeria turned to the Chief Engineer. “Initiate the Wormhole Generator.”

The thrall gave her a curt nod and activated the primed device. A shimmering black portal crackled into existence beyond the dreadnought’s bow, terrifying amounts of power harnessed to rip a tear in the fabric of space. Swirling around the ship, the wormhole yawned over the bow and progressed along the length of the vessel until it enveloped the stern, catapulting them across the galaxy.

Clenching onto her station, Valeria fought down waves of debilitating nausea, determined not to show any weakness in front of the crew. She breathed through her nose until she had her roiling stomach under control, the disorientation slowly fading. It was nearly a thousand years since her first journey through an artificial wormhole and Valeria still found it just as unpleasant as ever.

Glancing at the Tactical Map, she saw that they had emerged in the same spot they had left only a day before, a short distance from the construction site. Thousands of thralls in spacesuits laboured over the black object, the small arc of a gigantic wheel starting to take shape as the engineers connected the interlocking pieces. A huge support vessel was overseeing the work, providing a base of operations for the Galkiran women who would be assembling the Hyper-Warp Gate. The construction teams were also protected by a garrison of cruisers, the four new arrivals disengaging from the dreadnought to add to their ranks.

Valeria tore her gaze away from the frenetic activity on the holographic map. “Hail the tugs, unload the next set of gate fragments.”

The Bridge crew hurried to follow her orders, opening the dreadnought’s cargo bay doors and summoning the attending tugs. A dozen of the squat spacecraft were soon on their way, ready to retrieve the precious cargo of components newly built in the Galkiran Soulforge.

\*Attend me, Matriarch,\* Gahl’kalgor ordered imperiously.

Valeria started towards the reinforced doors leading from the Bridge before she even thought to ask where he was located. \*My Lord...\* she began, careful not to antagonise him. \*Where are you presently?\*

\*The Trophy Room...\*

Suppressing a shudder, Valeria left the Command Deck behind, the rapid click of her heeled boots echoing down the corridor. Joining one of the dreadnought’s main access ways, she saw a dozen thralls hurrying about their duties, all of whom bowed to her deferentially as she strode past. The Galkiran matriarch allowed herself a smile of satisfaction despite her urgency. Making an example of Jilatha had been a stark reminder to the crew that Valeria could extinguish them on a whim... a brutal lesson in respect that would keep Gahl’kalgor’s minions in line. Of all the indignities she was forced to endure, disrespect from the chattel was not one she would ever tolerate.

Distracted as she was, the journey to the Trophy Room seemed to be over in the blink of an eye, and Valeria paused outside the forbidding black door to collect herself. Taking a deep breath, she tapped the rune on the wall, the portal before her splitting apart into serrated segments that peeled back into the frame. The crimson light that pervaded the dreadnought took on an even more sinister hue in this dreadful place, casting its scarlet pall over a row of cryogenic chambers.

Gahl’kalgor was there, standing tall and imposing, his handsome features still taking her breath away after all these years. He didn’t acknowledge her presence, his attention focused on the macabre trophies lining the wall. Unlike the billions of Galkirans he ruled over with an iron fist, her master did not share their distinctive crimson skin and coal-black hair. His noble features had a far lighter, bronzed complexion, and his hair was the colour of a beautiful sandy beach, making him all the more exotic and alluring.

“Ah, Fahl’barhak... you really were a thorn in my side,” he said, studying the ravaged corpse that stared back at him with one lifeless, bloodshot eye. A gloating grin twisted Gahl’kalgor’s handsome features into an unpleasant expression. “Gutting you was so satisfying...”

“It was a glorious victory, my Lord,” Valeria gushed, slowly walking towards him.

“I know,” her master responded, his tone smug and condescending. He stood silently for a long moment, remembering every cut and slash in that brutal duel. “Two centuries of constant warfare to grind him down... then to see him weakened and broken at the end like that, a pathetic shadow of the proud and arrogant fool that dared to attack me. Glorious indeed...”

Valeria tried not to look at the hideous row of dismembered cadavers. Each and every one was a Progenitor that Gahl’kalgor had bested in his long and bloody career, trophies taken during a millennia of constant warfare. It was not their horrific disfiguring injuries that left her so unsettled... but the fact that each and every one looked so like her beloved master.

“Would you like me to pleasure you while you savour your victories, my Lord?” she whispered, her tone soft and seductive.

Aside from the obvious enjoyment servicing her master would bring, facing away from the grisly trophies would be a very welcome relief.

Gahl’kalgor turned to look at her, an unfamiliar expression on his face. If Valeria didn’t know better, she could have sworn she might have seen a flicker of appreciation in his eyes.

“Our next victim is called Baen’thelas,” he declared, his lips curling up into a wicked smile.

“He will soon be another trophy for your collection, my Lord,” she purred, responding without a second thought. Valeria suddenly paused and looked at him in confusion, the name of their adversary disturbingly different from the titles promising destruction and woe. “The Righter of Wrongs? What kind of peculiar name is that?”

“I know... hilarious, isn’t it?”

Her master chuckled, the sound of his deep baritone laughter like music to Valeria’s pointed ears... all the more precious for its extreme rarity. She looked at him in astonishment, then broke out into delighted laughter of her own, Gahl’kalgor’s mirth proving quite contagious. Her joy was euphoric and left her breathless, being able to share this moment with her master the highlight of over nine centuries of servitude.

The row of silent corpses looked on, their faces twisted and mangled, mouths open as if also reacting with equal amusement. Valeria turned and smiled at them, their ghastly visages no longer quite so horrifying. As they stared back with long-dead eyes, the laughter died on her lips.

Baen’thelas... there was something strangely unsettling about that name.

Valeria had the sudden disquieting feeling that if those butchered Progenitors were still alive, they really would be laughing... but for very different reasons. She felt a shiver run down her spine and quickly turned away from them, unable to shake the eerie sensation that they were mocking her with their unblinking gaze.

“Come, Valeria,” Gahl’kalgor said, grasping her by the hand. “I feel like celebrating my upcoming victory.”

She nodded her acquiescence and followed him from the Trophy Room, but couldn’t help throwing a pensive glance over her shoulder as they departed.

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Alyssa sagged backwards and slumped in John’s arms, rubbing at her weary eyes. “That’s it... I’m done. I think I’m going cross-eyed!”

He eased back himself, repositioning them so that the blonde was lying beside him on the oval bed. “I’m not surprised. Four hours of non-stop rune summoning would be enough to give anyone a migraine.”

She had her eyes closed now, protecting them from the glare of the overhead lights. “I’m going to just rest here for a bit. I’ll go and see Sparks later...”

“I’m proud of you, beautiful,” he said with admiration, propping himself up with one elbow and looking down on her. “You worked incredibly hard today. We covered far more than I ever expected we would.”

“We still didn’t get to the really good stuff,” she complained, massaging her temples. “There’s all sorts of abilities I wanted to analyse and study; like my energy beam... how does that work?”

“Shh... get some rest now,” he said with an indulgent smile. “We’ll schedule another lesson when we have some more free time.”

“When you’re not busy topping up sexy catgirls you mean?” she asked with a grin.

He stroked her now-svelte stomach and nodded. “Did it help, being loaded up beforehand?”

Her blue eyes flicked open and she looked up at him. “It made a huge difference. As soon as I’d finished absorbing all your cum, it felt like my mind was being dragged down by an impossibly heavy weight.”

“Probably a combination of physical exhaustion and mental fatigue after so much power usage,” he said, nodding thoughtfully. “We’ll make sure you’re properly prepared again before the next session.”

“Thanks for taking the time to teach me,” she said softly. “You were really patient and I learned so much.”

“Me too,” he admitted with a wry smile. “You’ve got a truly exceptional mind, honey. You were able to notice things that I’d missed or just taken for granted.”

“We’re a good team,” she murmured, cuddling into him. “Always have been...”

John gave her a tender kiss and enjoyed watching her relax in his arms. It was lovely to see how completely Alyssa trusted him, the young woman knowing she was perfectly safe with him there to watch over her.

“I’m not going to get much rest with you mooning over me. Your thoughts are way too distracting,” she grumbled, cracking open an eye. “Go get dressed, then give the twins the fucking they deserve.”

“Delightfully put as usual,” he said with a chuckle. He pulled the covers up and tucked her in. “Get some rest, beautiful... you really earned it.”

Alyssa blew him a kiss, then sagged back on the bed, drowsiness claiming her almost immediately.

John turned to check on Helene, who sat up, blinking owlishly at him.

“I’m awake!” she blurted out, rubbing the sleep from her eyes after being telepathically prodded by Alyssa.

He put a finger to his lips and glanced at the snoozing blonde. Helene nodded her understanding, then accepted his hand and accompanied him into the walk-in-wardrobe.

“Sorry if that was boring,” he apologised, leading her over to his section of the massive closet.

“No, it was interesting,” Helene insisted. “I’m just sorry I fell asleep. Did I miss much after you were talking about the Kyth’faren primary rune?”

John tried not to laugh. “No, not much. Did you enjoy your nap?” he asked kindly, stroking her wavy light-green hair.

She stifled a yawn and nodded. “I always sleep so wonderfully when I’m next to you. I’m very grateful to Jade for looking after me last night, but I didn’t get much rest... I had too much on my mind.”

He paused and looked at her with concern. “That must have been horrific, finding out what the Brimorians had done to your people. I’m sorry I didn’t break it to you easier... I was in shock myself.”

Helene cupped his cheek with her hand and stroked him tenderly. “Always so ready to apologise and shoulder any burden... even when you’re not to blame.”

John looked at her in surprise, but anything he was about to say was muffled by her soft lips pressing against his. He wisely stayed silent and concentrated on returning the kiss with equal affection.

Pulling back, she gave him a warm smile. “Thank you for caring... I know I can face anything with your love and support.”

“I’ll be there for you whenever you need me,” he said earnestly. “Are you sure there’s nothing I can do for you now?”

She shook her head. “Just being with you is more than enough. I feel so sad for all the people that were sacrificed to the Kirrix... but they weren’t my family, not really. I’m closer to you and the girls than I ever was to anyone in Neptra village.”

John hesitated, then asked quietly, “Helene... what about your mother and father?”

“I was sent away from my parents when I was eight-years-old,” she reminded him, a wistful note to her voice. “Riva and Bruinen are faint memories now; I can only remember fragments of my childhood with them. They were kind and loving... good people... I just hope nothing bad has happened to them.”

“I swear I’ll do everything I can to save them... and the rest of the Abandoned,” he said fervently. “Your people have suffered horribly under the Brimorians and I will end it.”

“John... why are you so determined to make this your responsibility?” she asked with concern.

“Because I’m strong enough to actually do something about it. There’s no way I could sit back and do nothing while the Brimorians continue to commit atrocities against the Abandoned.” He looked at her curiously. “It almost sounds like you don’t want me to help them?”

“I do!” she insisted, conflict in her baby-blue eyes. “I just... don’t want you to end up doing something to the Brimorians that you’ll regret. I’ve seen the burdens of guilt you force yourself to bear... and I don’t want to add to that crushing weight.”

“You’re a good person, Helene,” he said quietly, looking into her eyes. “You’re kind and loving with a big heart.”

“So are you!” she insisted.

“I try my best...” he murmured, struggling to meet her worried gaze. “But I’m starting to realise that I have other... gifts... to share.”

“Like death and destruction?” she asked bleakly.

“Yes,” he admitted, lifting his head to look her in the eye. “I can’t deny I have an instinctive urge to annihilate my enemies... I always have.”

“But you’ve always fought against those urges!” she pleaded with him, shaking her head. “Why give up now?”

“I’m not giving up,” he said, tilting his head to one side. “I think I’m finally starting to accept that it’s part of my nature... and that’s not necessarily a bad thing.”

Helene looked shocked. “How can you say that?”

“I killed that fleet of Kirrix in a heartbeat. You heard the girls... it saved tens-of-thousands of Trankarans from death and a million more from horrible trauma. I wanted to stun the Kirrix at first, putting them into hibernation so that Rachel could save the colonists from the eggs hatching... but I had no idea how to do it. When I followed my instincts, I found a lethal solution instead... which protected all the innocent Trankarans.”

“That’s true...” Helene conceded, remembering the girls praising him in the Observatory.

He took a deep breath, then held her hand. “The Brimorians are responsible for this entire invasion. They’ve murdered millions of innocent people, trading them as slaves to the Kirrix to be hosts to their eggs. Those newly-hatched grubs grew into a vast army of drones, some of which the hive queens sent into Terran and Trankaran territory to capture and kill even more people. The rest of the drones mined minerals to trade with the Brimorians for even more slaves. It’s a monstrous cycle of carnage that has killed countless innocents... and I can finally put a stop to it all.”

“By wiping out the Brimorians?” she asked, a pained look in her eyes.

“Yes... or at least killing enough of them to make them end the slave trade,” he replied. “The blood of all those Abandoned, Terrans, and Trankarans is on Brimorian hands; is it really a bad thing to kill some truly evil people to save many more innocent lives?”

She faltered, suddenly looking unsure. “I... I don’t know.”

“I don’t know either,” he admitted. “But it feels right; just like wiping out every last Progenitor will save billions of lives. I’m not looking forward to it... but I’d gladly shoulder any burdens of guilt and regret to make the galaxy a much safer place.”

Helene was quiet for a long moment. “I understand what you’re saying, but please don’t lose yourself in this war. You are a good person, John... and I worry that if you face too much darkness, it will change you forever.”

“Luckily for me, I’ve got you and the rest of the girls making sure I don’t get into too much trouble,” he said with a reassuring smile.

“I’m serious,” she said, looking up at him with her big blue eyes. “Please be careful.”

Surprised by her earnest request, he nodded. “I will.”

Helene relaxed, the worry that had plagued her fading away. “Thank you.”

John stroked her back and smiled. “I better get ready to see the twins.”

They separated and he started thumbing through the clothes hanging on the rails. John wasn’t sure if his new Maliri suit was actually up in the old wardrobe, but he figured Alyssa would have told him if it wasn’t right there. Sure enough, he found the same suit cover as before, and when he opened it, the new clothes were freshly cleaned and pressed.

As he got dressed, Helene watched him with a look of curiosity in her eyes. “John, why are you putting on that suit to meet the twins, when you’re just going to take it off again?”

He smiled at her as he fastened the shirt. “Because they like it. They want to do a bit of roleplaying.”

“What’s that?” the aquatic girl asked him innocently.

John blushed, regretting mentioning it to the naive young woman. “Err... they want to pretend to be naughty matriarchs that need a stern Progenitor to make them behave.”

“Oh... So how will you make them behave?” she asked, listening in fascination.

He swallowed awkwardly, feeling even more embarrassed. As he was struggling how to reply, he noticed a playful gleam in Helene’s eyes. “You minx! You’re just teasing me!”

She giggled, which turned into a peal of laughter as he started tickling her.

“And I thought you were the nice girl,” John said, grinning as he released her.

“Am I going to get a smacked bottom too?” she asked flirtatiously, turning around and wiggling her hips at him.

He laughed and shook his head. “Not unless you’ve been very naughty.” As he pulled on his trousers, he added, “I didn’t know you were into that?”

“I’m not really, but the flirting and teasing is fun... I can see why Alyssa does it all the time.”

John groaned and shook his head. “Don’t remind me.”

Helene watched him slip on his jacket, then said quietly, “Sometimes, the things she says... it makes me think she doesn’t really want to be that way.”

“This is Alyssa we’re talking about, right?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. “She’s been a relentless tease for almost as long as I’ve known her.”

“I’m probably wrong; I’ve only known her for a few weeks,” Helene conceded.

After stepping into his shoes, John paused and smiled at her fondly. “It’s bizarre to think that I haven’t even known you a month. You’ve made a huge impact on my life in such a short time.”

“Oh, I know exactly how you feel,” she replied, giving him a lovely smile. Stepping closer, she tucked his collar behind the lapel of his jacket. “The twins are right... you look very handsome wearing this.”

“Thank you,” he said, giving her a kiss. “Now, we better not keep them waiting any longer.”

Helene suddenly looked unsure of herself. “John... if you’d prefer privacy with the twins, I can stay here with Alyssa?”

“What would you like to do?” John asked, looking into her eyes.

“I’d like to stay with you... as long as you don’t mind?”

He held out his hand. “Let’s go then!”

She smiled at John gratefully, taking his hand and following him out through the Observatory. Alyssa was still fast asleep, so they crept out silently to avoid waking her.

“It seems strange not seeing all the Nymphs playing in the Lagoon,” Helene noted as they walked across the bridge to the door opposite. “They kept me company here a lot during my first few weeks aboard the ship.”

John frowned and looked at her with concern. “I hope you aren’t upset with me about training the Nymphs as pilots and gunners. I promise it’s not because I had any doubts in your capabilities.”

She touched his arm with her free hand and smiled. “It’s okay, I understand. You’ve been very firm about trying to keep me out of combat from the start... but the Nymphs aren’t quite like the rest of us, are they?”

Looking relieved, he nodded. “Yes, exactly. They think differently from the rest of you girls... and I don’t think we ever need to worry about them suffering from combat fatigue. Jade has never shown the slightest hint of stress from any of the fighting she’s been involved in.”

They stepped inside the grav-tubes and Helene turned to face him. “I was just speaking to Jade this morning. She loves you and she loves your girls... everything else just isn’t that important to her.”

“She’s incredibly loyal,” John said with a fond smile. “Despite everything I’ve done to try to give her as much freedom as possible, she’s still my devoted little Nymph.”

“I think you’re just as devoted to her,” Helene said, her eyes lighting up with happiness.

“I think you might be right,” he willingly agreed, squeezing her hand as they continued their descent in the red anti-gravity field.

When they reached the bottom, they walked out onto Deck Nine, then through the Secondary Hangar to the huge Primary Hangar beyond. The Progenitor shuttle was parked there, the sleek black vessel looming over them like some malignant spectre. John tapped the rune beside the airlock and the door split apart, the jagged edges peeling apart like the fanged maw of some vicious beast.

Helene eyed the door warily as she stepped through. “This is a strange place to have a romantic tryst.”

“I’m not sure Irillith is looking for romance this evening,” John said with a wry smile.

They walked along the corridor, stopping beside a set of elevator doors. The black portal opened in a similar fashion to the airlock, serrated edges looking like they could slam shut and rip the unwary in half.

“You can really tell that whoever designed this ship wasn’t a nice person,” Helene observed, hurrying into the elevator.

“I think that’s putting it mildly, honey,” John agreed, tapping the rune that would take them up to the highest deck. “All the Progenitor ships seem to be identical, so it was probably Xar’aziuth himself that designed them.”

The elevator opened again on the upper deck, revealing a gloomily-lit corridor that led to the shuttle’s bedroom. They walked up to the door and John took a moment to get in character. He glanced at Helene, who beamed at him with excitement, her buoyant cheerfulness wreaking havoc with his attempt to masquerade as a cold-hearted Progenitor. He tried not to laugh as he tapped the rune to open the door, which split apart, revealing the sinister bedroom.

Tashana and Irillith were waiting for him there, both wearing long elegant dresses, Crystal Alyssium collars, and matching looks of disdain.

“Don’t think us so easily cowed, Progenitor!” Irillith snapped, baring her teeth as she practically hissed at him.

“We’ll never submit to you!” Tashana declared, a look of fierce defiance in her blazing violet eyes.

Helene stepped quietly into the room, then moved aside to keep out of the way.

John studied the two gorgeous Maliri women, admiring their spectacular figures, beautiful blue faces, and their resplendent manes of long white hair. Something inside him just clicked; a dazzling moment of epiphany that made everything crystal clear. He walked towards the twins, noting their reaction as they became aware of his sudden change in demeanour. They watched him in fascination, all further declarations of defiance dying on their lips.

“I claimed the Maliri,” John said as he slowly approached, taking his time so as to appear unthreatening. “I’m finally starting to understand what that really means.”

The twins stared at him wide-eyed, not saying a word.

He raised his hands, gently cupping their flawless faces. “You belong to me... body and soul.”

Tashana sucked in her breath, her pupils flaring. Irillith just stared at him enraptured.

“I never asked for this and neither did you,” John continued, caressing their beautiful azure skin. “But it’s something we can’t change... it’s who we are.”

“I belong to you...” Tashana whispered.

“Body and soul...” Irillith echoed, trembling at his touch.

He trailed his fingers down their throats until he reached their collars, making the deft movements that unclasped the metal band from around their necks. “How could I ever abuse such beautiful girls, when you’ve given me such a wonderful gift?” he asked, letting the collars clatter to the ground. “I need to take care of you, nurture you, protect you... love you.”

His fingers trailed lower, down across their luscious blue cleavage, then across the flat planes of their stomachs. He stroked their lower bellies above their wombs, both Maliri gasping at the intimate touch.

“Then you’ll give me what I really want... not taken by force, but because you crave it... need it desperately.”

“You’ve changed...” Tashana murmured, looking at him in wonder.

“I like it...” Irillith said in a hushed voice. “I like it a lot...”

“We’re destined to be together,” John said firmly, drawing both women into his arms and pulling them closer. He kissed each of them in turn, leaving the sisters staring at him starry-eyed. “My perfect Maliri princesses... just waiting until I give you what you really want...”

“Oh John...” Irillith sighed breathlessly, her eyes alight with desire.

“I need you, Baen’thelas...” Tashana begged him, panting with lust. “Please...”

He slipped the straps of their dresses off their shoulders, leaving them standing before him in all their naked glory. “I’m going to make love to you,” he informed Tashana, gently caressing her trembling breast. Turning to Irillith, he let his hand slip lower from her waist to cup a deliciously pert ass cheek, making her groan. “Then I’m going to drive you insane...”

The twins were spellbound now, captivated by his every word and action.

“And then I’m going to feed that lovely tummy of yours,” he said, focusing on Tashana again.

She whimpered with desire, fighting the urge to throw herself at him.

“Now, on to the bed and show me how much you love each other while I get ready,” he said firmly, slipping his jacket from his shoulders.

Kicking off their shoes, the two Maliri girls crawled across the bed and into each other’s arms, where they began to kiss passionately. Their sky-blue skin and dazzling white hair made for a striking contrast against the jet-black bed frame with its dark silken sheets.

John glanced at Helene and smiled. “Care to help me undress, honey?”

She bounded over, her eyes sparkling. “I love this!” she whispered in his ear, as she started unbuttoning his shirt. “Can you be like this with me sometime?”

“That depends...” he replied, stroking her back. “Do I own you body and soul too?”

Helene nodded enthusiastically. “Oh yes!” she gushed, her fingers fumbling with the buttons in her excitement.

Seeing her difficulty, John ripped his shirt off, sending the buttons flying and leaving Helene staring at him open-mouthed.

Stripping off the rest of his clothes, he offered the shocked teal-hued beauty a hand. “Would you like to join us, Helene?”

She bit her flushed lower lip and nodded, tearing off her dress in her haste to accept his proposal. They joined the writhing twins on the bed, with John parting Tashana’s thighs and burying himself up to the quad in her steaming pussy. She screamed in ecstasy, climaxing before he’d even fully sheathed himself inside her, the first in what was to be a relentless chain of climaxes.

John held himself up above her, his hips driving the orgasming Maliri into the mattress with powerful thrusts. Irillith and Helene each had one of her breasts in their mouths, sucking and biting her painfully erect nipples, while Irillith’s nimble fingers stroked her sister’s clit. Tashana was helpless under their sensual onslaught, writhing and moaning before crying out John’s name as he drove her to new peaks of pleasure.

Helene gave Tashana’s nipple one more hard suck, then released her to look up at John. “Can I share what she’s feeling? It’s so beautiful...”

He nodded to grant his permission, too focused on making Tashana squeal with his pistoning thrusts to form an articulate reply. Then he was consumed by Helene’s empathic aura, waves of bliss rolling over them as they shared in the Maliri girl’s ecstasy. Unnoticed by the intertwined figures on the bed, thin streaks began to appear in the sinister black bed frame. They fanned outwards from the undulating bodies in the centre, inching across the practically indestructible metal. Each gentle kiss and loving caress sent more stark-white lines snaking across the bed, creating a spiderweb of hairline threads through the glistening onyx surface.

The lovers switched positions, with John lying down now, Irillith resting atop him in reverse cowgirl. She groaned in rapture as he parted her quivering cheeks and pushed deep into her ass, her snug anal ring sliding down inch after inch of his shaft until she’d taken everything he could give her. Tashana lay on top of her sister as Irillith lolled back across John’s chest, the twins kissing sensually as her fingers matched the tempo of John’s pistoning strokes. Helene focused her attention on Irillith’s breasts now, while psychically sharing the Maliri’s euphoria with her lovers. More jagged lines split the black metallic surface, every keening wail from Irillith marking her climax as well as the next fissure rippling across the frame.

By the time they’d shifted position again, with Irillith lapping at John’s taut quad as her sister deep-throated him in a sixty-nine, more of the bed frame was white than black. Helene alternated between kissing John and licking Tashana’s sopping pussy, making the twin convulse with pleasure. John’s hips rolled up again and again as he tried to push his cock deeper, but he was already buried to the hilt inside the Maliri’s throat. Irillith leaned forward to kiss Tashana’s widely stretched lips, their tongues lapping both sides of his shaft in perfect synchronisation.

It was all too much stimulation for John and he exploded down Tashana’s throat, his hands cupping her head as he allowed her to pull back to taste him but not withdraw completely. Both twins reacted with delirium the first time he pumped a huge mouthful into Tashana, their eyes rolling back as John ballooned out her cheeks with his load. She had just enough presence of mind to quickly swallow it down, before his cock surged again, filling her mouth for a second time.

With a splintered crack, the bed frame shattered, unceremoniously dumping the mattress and its occupants to the floor. The impact sheathed John’s cock up to the hilt inside Tashana’s throat, and she submissively accepted him holding her in place, enjoying the feel of his throbbing shaft as he packed her swelling stomach with pints of rich cum. By the time he was finished, John and the twins were sprawled insensate on the bed, his hand placed possessively over Tashana’s cum-stuffed belly.

Helene brushed the tangled mop of green hair from her eyes and grinned in delight at the exhausted tangle of lovers. She was so immersed in the passion of their coupling that she’d been completely oblivious to her surroundings. That soon changed as she looked up, her eyes widening as she stared at the sparkling-white fragments of broken bed frame that lay strewn across the floor.

“Err... John?” she murmured, touching his shoulder to get his attention.

“You three are amazing...” he muttered with a blissful sigh. “You literally rocked my world.”

She shook her head and looked around in amazement. “Actually, I think we broke the bed...”